

Easterly on the SDGs: utopian and worthless

By Ashlee Betteridge
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If you were made slightly nauseous by all the hashtag activism, popstar proselytising and earnest [world leader speeches](#) beaming out of New York this past weekend as the SDGs were adopted, never fear: Easterly is here.

In [a lengthy piece in Foreign Policy](#) [paywalled, but you get a few free articles a month], noted aid-skeptic William Easterly slams the goals for being utopian, unmeasurable, unactionable, unattainable and unfinanced, having “both too many items and too little content for each one”.

From his opening sentence: “Nothing better reflects the decline and fall of hopes for Western foreign aid than the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030”, to the part where he argues that “the SDGs are so encyclopedic that everything is top priority, which means nothing is a priority”, it’s a pretty scathing assessment.

He particularly notes that they lack any kind of mention of the foreign aid that is supposed to fund the SDGs.

“A surge in foreign aid had been at the heart of the MDGs, but the SDGs just change the subject as fast as possible... Nothing better exemplifies the decline and fall of the millennium goals’ transformational hopes for foreign aid than this no-show for the SDGs.”

He argues that the only SDG that will likely be met will be eradicating poverty using the \$1.25 a day measure, precisely because it is a questionable measure and the number of people below this poverty line has been on a downward trend for some time ([ODI’s recent report](#) also shows this is one of the goals most likely to be met).

But it is not all pessimism. Easterly argues that the SDGs might work as “idealistic rhetoric that will motivate more people in the rich and free countries to care about the world’s poor and shackled”, and writes that they might offer increasing recognition of poor people’s rights to self-determination, and of their homegrown development success.

[Read it yourself](#)-then feel free to jump back here and have your say. We’ve had many varied opinions on the goals in our [SDG analysis](#), so be sure to check those out too-most of them are far more positive!

About the author/s

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Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now has her own consultancy, Better Things Consulting, and works across several large projects with managing contractors.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/easterly-on-the-sdgs-utopian-and-worthless-20151002/>

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