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briefing paper

The Sustainable Development Goals in the United States

A Call for Comprehensive, Collective Action to End Hunger and Poverty by 2030

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Joseph Molieri/Bread for the World

Half (51 percent) of U.S. public school students come from low-income families. School meal programs help them focus on learning and help their parents make ends meet.

Key Points

- In the United States, hunger is unnecessary and preventable. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) give our country a new opportunity and framework to ensure that all have sufficient nutritious food.
- Between 2000 and 2015, unprecedented progress against hunger in developing countries was spurred by the SDG's predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals. The proportion of people who are malnourished was cut nearly in half. The mere fact that measurable goals had been set mobilized the global community, national leaders, and communities to do more.
- Ending U.S. hunger will require collective engagement—the active participation of all sectors of society. Government, community and faith groups, academia, the private sector, charitable organizations, and foundations all have critical roles.
- The next steps for the SDGs in the United States include developing messaging that emphasizes the shared values and aspirations of the new global goals and the American people, identifying the measurements that are most meaningful, and developing an outreach plan to encourage stakeholders to take action on the SDGs.

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In Brief

In 2015, the United States and 192 other countries agreed to work toward a set of goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by 2030. The SDGs build on the significant progress made during the 2000-2015 Millennium Development Goals effort. The SDGs apply to all countries and include ending hunger and extreme poverty.

The SDGs are an opportunity for advocates and organizations to work together to achieve maximum impact. Many are already engaged. For example, leaders of all major U.S. faith traditions, as well as five U.S. cities and one state (California), have committed to the SDGs.

Several years after the official end of the Great Recession, the economy is improving and the unemployment rate is dropping. Yet poverty and hunger rates are not falling. In 2014, more than 46 million Americans, nearly 15 percent of the population, lived in poverty.

Poverty robs a child of opportunities right from the beginning. Childhood hunger, especially before age 2, can prevent children from growing properly. It can rewire the brain, affecting behavioral, educational, economic, and health outcomes for decades.

The financial costs stemming from childhood poverty are staggering, with one study calculating a total cost of half a trillion dollars every year.

Economic inequality is a major barrier to ending hunger and poverty. The richest 10 percent of Americans average nearly nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent. Such significant inequality can stifle economic growth, increase political inequality, and erode trust and community life.

Background

National and international goal-setting is not new, but it has recently proven to be highly successful in mobilizing nations to take action. The 2000-2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for developing countries spurred governmental and non-governmental efforts that moved more than 1 billion people out of extreme poverty, made inroads against hunger, enabled more girls to attend school than ever before, and took steps to protect the planet.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[1], adopted in September 2015, build on the success of the MDGs. The SDGs are more ambitious, and they apply to both developing and developed countries—193 in all, including the United States. The new global goals are comprehensive, inter-connected, and universal. There are 17 goals, which address social, economic, and environmental issues from poverty and hunger, to education and jobs, to health, climate change, inequality, and gender equity.

The SDGs aim to create a sustainable world without poverty and with opportunity for all. The SDG vision is one of a world where no one, from those in war-torn Syria to those on the streets of Ferguson or in the homes of Flint, is left behind.

Collective engagement—the active participation of all sectors of society—will be necessary to ensure that progress continues. There will be a set of global indicators for measuring progress on the goals, and countries will develop their own sets of measurements. Each country's progress will be made public in annual reports.

Collective Action

The SDGs present an opportunity for advocates and organizations focused on domestic policy to work together to achieve maximum impact. Many are already engaged. Some examples:

- In September 2015, 100 leaders from all major U.S. faith traditions committed to pray and work to end hunger in the United States and worldwide by 2030 and, as a step in that direction, to help shift U.S. national priorities by 2017.
- Feeding America and other co-founders of the Food Waste Reduction Alliance got a head start on Goal 12-Responsible Consumption and Production by working to reduce food waste, increase the amount of donated food, and divert unavoidable food waste from landfills. Feeding America also has adopted its own goals of achieving nutritious food and progress toward economic security for all by 2025.

Richard Lord

Ending hunger for good means ending its root causes. One of these is domestic violence, which can force women to leave home with their children and very little else.

- The Council on Foundations is encouraging U.S. foundations to use the SDGs as a framework to inform and coordinate their domestic grants.
- Five cities—New York City, Minneapolis, New Orleans, San Jose, Santa Monica—and one state—California—have committed to achieve the SDGs in their own jurisdictions.

It will take the collaborative work of many—anti-poverty and anti-hunger advocates and organizations, the faith and charitable communities, think tanks, philanthropies, the private sector, individual citizens, and all levels of government—to reach the SDGs. We will need to break down policy silos, let go of ineffective programs, create cross-cutting initiatives, and support higher levels of investment in the development of people and neighborhoods. Collectively, we will need to generate new ideas, new approaches, and new partnerships to build the public support and political will required to eliminate poverty and hunger in the United States by 2030.

Next Steps

To build a solid foundation for all of this new thinking and collaborative action, the following steps should be taken in 2016:

1. Create a domestic SDG coalition of multiple stakeholders to guide the work on the SDGs in the United States.
2. Design a mechanism for nongovernmental stakeholders to provide the administration's interagency task force with input and support. The task force is charged with coordinating current actions on the SDGs and embedding the U.S. commitment to the goals in the work of the next administration.
3. Develop messaging that emphasizes the shared values and aspirations of the new global goals and the American people. Promote the "power of positivity" by highlighting global successes under the MDGs as well as progress made in the United States. Emphasize the essential role that organizations outside government played and must continue to play to reach the SDGs.
4. Identify the most meaningful measurements to be used for the United States, drawing on data that is already being collected.
5. Develop an outreach plan, in cooperation with the administration, to encourage members of Congress, governors, mayors, interested individuals, and other stakeholders to engage with and take action on the SDGs.
6. Identify projects and programs that align with the goals, and develop the plans and actions necessary to

expand their reach and effectiveness. This will require engaging public and private partners critical to success.

Where We Stand

Poverty and hunger remain unconscionably high in the United States. The Great Recession officially ended in June 2009, but as the economy has improved, poverty and hunger rates have not. The number of people living in poverty and with food insecurity increased during the recession, as would be expected. What was not expected is that the rates of poverty and hunger are not falling as the economy improves and the unemployment rate drops. Poverty and hunger rates have remained relatively unchanged for the past five years.

In 2014, the latest year with comprehensive data, more than 46 million Americans, nearly 15 percent of the U.S. population, lived in poverty[2] and more than 48 million people, 14 percent of households, wondered where their next meal was coming from.[3]

Families with children suffer disproportionately from poverty and food insecurity. More than 15 million children--one in five–live in food-insecure households.[4] About 1.5 million households, with approximately 3 million children, are living in extreme poverty—on less than $2 per person per day.[5]

The United States has the dubious distinction of having the second highest relative child poverty rate among 35 industrialized nations. Only Romania's rate is higher—and by only 0.5 percent.[6]

But progress is possible. Programs created as part of the War on Poverty, and for several years afterward, have cut poverty in the United States by 40 percent since the mid-1960s.

Rick Reinhard for Bread for the World

Good nutrition for pregnant women, babies, and toddlers is particularly important, both for children themselves and for society as a whole.

The Costs of Inaction

Poverty and hunger costs individuals

Poverty robs a child of opportunities right from the beginning. Low birthweights closely track poverty rates and are associated with long-term disabilities. Researchers also found that low birthweights have noticeable effects on educational outcomes.[7]

Food insecurity and malnutrition contribute to a "failure to thrive," meaning that young children fail to grow properly and fail to gain weight at the same rate as healthy children.[8] Perhaps even worse, childhood hunger, especially early childhood hunger, can rewire the brain, affecting behavioral, educational, economic, and health outcomes for decades.[9] Such "adverse childhood experiences" are associated with the early onset of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other health problems.[10]

Longitudinal research suggests, however, that low-income children can make dramatic and lasting educational gains through early childhood programs. The Carolina Abecedarian Project has followed the same people since the 1970s. The children who participated in a quality care and instruction program until age 5

did far better as adults than peers who did not. For example, they were four times as likely to have earned a college degree by age 30.[11]

There are still too many schools where such opportunities are rarely available. In some schools, a 40 percent dropout rate is considered typical[12] rather than alarming. Yet most people without high school diplomas will be consigned to jobs at poverty-level wages. Hunger rates are higher for high school dropouts than for those who graduate. Sixty percent of the nation's correctional inmates do not have a high school diploma or GED.[13]

Poverty and hunger costs us all

Recent statistics on economic inequality show that the richest 10 percent of Americans average nearly nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent[14] and the wealthiest 160,000 families have as much accumulated wealth and assets as the poorest 145 million families.[15]

According to the majority of studies, that level of economic inequality stifles economic growth, increases crime, damages health, increases political inequality, and decreases educational achievement. Gross income inequality also has been found to erode trust and community life.[16]

The effects of economic inequality endanger the quality of life for everyone. Too often individual achievement is jeopardized and, as a result, the world is robbed of possible future innovations and inventions. Individuals and families on the lower rungs of the economic ladder may need to access public benefits. Studies show that, by age 60, 45 percent of Americans will participate in a need-based program, such as Medicaid or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and 54 percent will experience at least one year of poverty.

And there are other costs. One study calculated the costs stemming from childhood poverty at roughly half a trillion dollars a year from three causes—lost productivity ($170 billion), extra health care ($160 billion), and additional crime ($170 billion). That is 3.8 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP—the total value of goods and services produced in the United States).[17]

As with poverty, the overall costs of hunger and food insecurity to society may well be incalculable, but according to an updated study commissioned by Bread for the World Institute for its 2016 Hunger Report, *The Nourishing Effect*, the increase in health-related costs alone in 2014 was more than $160 billion.[18]

Endnotes

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