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Goals worth sharing

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Opinion Column

As the UN sets new, sustainable goals for international development, Canadians should ask about their government's efforts

Goals worth sharing

Erika Simpson, Special to Postmedia Network
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The human species is good at setting goals and achieving them. We have walked on the moon, sent a rover to roam Mars — and 15 years ago the United Nations General Assembly agreed to pursue an ambitious set of Millennium Development Goals.

Good progress on the goals since 2000 has meant the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has been halved from 15 years ago, more than two billion people have gained access to improved sources of drinking water, and remarkable gains have been made in the fights against malaria and tuberculosis. As well, the UN's target for reducing hunger is within reach and the proportion of slum dwellers in the metropolises of the developing world is declining.

Now the international community is thinking about a set of goals for the next 15 years with a final decision slated for Sept. 25 — just a few weeks before Canada's federal election. On the table are no less than 169 objectives and 17 "Sustainable Development Goals."

Sustainable development has become a common global ethic since 1987 when the Brundtland Commission's report, *Our Common Future*, drew links among poverty, the environment and peace. Back then, the importance of "meeting the needs of today's generation without compromising future generations" — as the report said — was not well understood. Now, a new motto — "No one should be left behind" — is matched with the enthusiasm from a growing sense of global citizenship, fostered in an increasingly connected world.

The proposed goals range from "ending poverty in all its forms everywhere" to "opposing unsustainable consumption" to tackling "gender inequality."

The hefty budget to achieve all 17 goals is estimated at more than \$1 trillion US a year — although to put this in perspective, that's less than the \$1.7 trillion spent annually on militarism.

Canada tends to be a good global citizen in these sorts of negotiation. Back in 1992, it played a positive role when heads of states met in Brazil and agreed on 21 global priorities. "Agenda 21," as it was called, was based on lessons learned about poverty and conflict during the Cold War and on an emerging awareness about the environment and limits to growth. Since then, many treaties have been ratified extolling lofty goals such as biodiversity, disarmament, sustainable development and people's equality.

Canadians need to be reminded of humankind's shared aspirations as we consider the new and expensive sustainable development goals.

And we need to keep that outlook in mind as we think about the factors that should determine where and how Canada distributes its development aid.

Until 2013, the Canadian International Development Agency was the federal government organization that administered the budget for Canada's official development assistance. Then it was merged into the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. The department is now a complicated hydra with four cabinet ministers — the ministers of foreign affairs, the minister of international trade, the minister of international development, and the minister of state (foreign affairs and consular) — at its head.

Although foreign aid is one of the instruments of Canada's foreign policy, voters seldom contemplate foreign aid priorities

when they decide how to vote.

But for those who do take an interest, questions are swirling about whether Canada's foreign aid should be "tied" to the purchase of Canadian goods and services. This practice requires aid funds provided by the Canadian government to developing countries — some of the world's poorest countries — be used to procure only Canadian goods and services.

The OECD and various UN studies estimate that donor money with these kind of strings attached cuts the value of aid to recipient countries by 30 to 40 per cent because they cannot search the international market for the best price. Usually only four countries — Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom — are singled out as donors breaking away from the concept of tied aid.

The Canadian government announced it would untie all its aid by 2012, but it is unclear whether it succeeded. In the meantime, critics see larger objectives of neoliberalization, private sector development, and mining in the Harper government's approach to aid.

As well, the United Nations urges each donor country to contribute 0.7 per cent of its gross national income to official development assistance. But in Canada, successive federal governments — Liberal and Conservative — have consistently eroded the official development aid budget until today it is a paltry 0.24 per cent and still declining. The 0.7-per-cent target was originally set by Prime Minister Lester Pearson in the 1960s. Famously, U2 lead singer and global poverty activist Bono reminded Prime Minister Paul Martin of that pledge, to no avail.

Canada is not alone in falling short. Only five countries have achieved the goal: Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. But this spring, a historic debate and vote in Britain's parliament committed its current and future governments to spend at least 0.7 per cent of its national wealth on development aid, currently around \$23 billion Cdn. It joins Belgium, Finland, France and Spain in making a commitment to a timetable to reach the target.

As a wealthy, resource-rich country, with the world's longest coast lines and the most fresh water, Canada could also afford to give more.

This summer, civil society leaders are calling on Canada to align its development agenda with the proposed sustainable development goals, tackle inequality, integrate environmental concerns into decision-making and take a more holistic approach to development. This means tackling these issues not only abroad but also at home, where we will one day have to answer for the poverty endured among First Nations communities.

To reach the next 15-year goals by 2030, we will need politicians with the courage to keep their promises and we will need to keep watch on whether those promises are delivered.

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