

Transformation in Human Well-Being for Sustainable Development

Jaime C. Montoya

National Academy of Science and Technology Philippines and
Philippine Council for Health Research and Development,
Department of Science and Technology

Correspondence:

Jaime C. Montoya
jmontoya204@gmail.com

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ORCID

Jaime C. Montoya
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0631-6298>

ABSTRACT

The current assessment by scientists and experts suggests that no country will be able to reach the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 due to various challenges each state faces. The Global Sustainable Development Report 2023 proposes strategic and effective approaches based on scientific evidence for member states to address the barriers impeding attaining such goals. This report builds on the organizing framework of six entry points for transformation and describes key shifts across the different entry points to accelerate progress toward the SDGs. One of these transformations is health and well-being, in which interventions include universal health care, healthy behaviors, and social determinants. The intermediate output of this transformation is universal health coverage, which requires a publicly financed health system that integrates prevention, therapeutic, and palliative services, integrated information systems, and disease surveillance and control. A whole-of-nation and whole-of-society approach is critical to achieving significant gains and transformation in health, which will eventually contribute to economic and social development

Keywords: Sustainable Development, human well-being transformation, universal health coverage

About the Author: *Dr. Jaime C. Montoya is a member of the National Academy of Science and Technology Philippines (NAST PHL). Academician Montoya is recognized for his significant contributions to various aspects of tuberculosis— its epidemiology and pathophysiology, its diagnosis through new molecular diagnostic methods, immunology, drug-susceptibility and drug-re-*

sistant TB, which impact on TB management and public health policies. He is the current president of NAST PHL and the Executive Director of the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development. Academician Montoya is a member of the Independent Group of Scientists (IGS) appointed by the United Nations Secretary General which prepared the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023.

Abbreviations: ESCAP, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; IGS, Independent Group of Scientists; ODA, Official Development Assistance; SDGs, Strategic Development Goals; UHC, Universal Health Coverage.

Introduction

We are now at the halfway point in our journey towards the aspired attainment of the United Nations Strategic Development Goals (SDGs) (Figure 1) as agreed upon by the member states by 2030. In 2015, countries declared their commitment to exert all efforts to achieving these goals. However, hopeful or optimistic the members states may be, then and now, the current assessment by scientists and experts, is that no country will be able to reach these goals by 2030 (Miranda et al. 2023).

Currently, almost all countries are still grappling with multiple crises: inflation and the rising cost of living, wars and conflicts, natural disasters, and biodiversity loss brought about by human activities and global warming, not to mention COVID 19 that affected all aspects of human life and society.

Looking at the Philippine situation based on the United Nations Philippines Annual Report 2023 which described the Philippine government initiatives in cooperation with the United Nations, the country ranked ninety eighth out of 166 countries on progress towards achieving the SDGs. Using ESCAP’s SDG Progress Assessment Methodology, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported progress on Goals 1, 3, 4, and 14 compared to the year 2000 baseline data but improvements fell short of expectations for 2022. Goals 2, 8, 11, and 13 have regressed since 2000, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), SDG Watch Philippines. <https://psa.gov.ph/sdg/node/1684059922>. This means that significant work has yet to be done for the Philippines for it to even meet some of the targets set by the UN SDGs by 2030.



Figure 1. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). (<https://iucn.org/our-work/informing-policy/international-policy/un-sustainable-development-goals>)

The Independent Group of Scientists (IGS) is appointed on a quadrennial basis by the UN Secretary General to do the “assessments of assessments” to answer the following questions with regards to the UN SDGs: Where are we now? Where are we heading? What needs to be done? And how these can be done?

The latest IGS was tasked to prepare the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023 to propose strategic and effective approaches, based on the best available scientific evidence, that member states may implement, to address the issues and barriers that impede the attainment of the SDGs with the end in mind of realizing the targets and goals of the UN SDGs. The said report has been aptly titled — Times of Crisis, Times of Change: Science for Accelerating Transformations to Sustainable Development (Miranda et al. 2023).

Illustrative examples of possible transformations that can be adopted by countries are described in the paper employing innovative and locally contextualized programs and strategies in a number of countries that have resulted in accelerated strides towards the UN SDGs.

The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) of 2023:

Entry points for and levers to bring about transformation

We have to act now, with utmost urgency if we are to stem the tide of adversity that threaten the very survival of humanity.

This report builds on the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report that formulated the organizing **framework of six entry points for transformation**, namely: human well-being and capabilities, sustainable and just economies, sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns, energy decarbonization with universal access, urban and peri-urban development, and the global environmental commons (GSDR 2019).

In addition, to achieve the goals, the report suggested deploying **four “levers” to bring about transformation** in these entry points: governance, economy, and finance, science and technology, and individual and collective action with a fifth lever proposed by the current report —

capacity building, as this is crucial for the transformation process to occur.

Based on the GSDR 2023, which was launched in September of 2023, key shifts have been described across the different entry points to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals through integrated and transformative actions.

These transformations comprise key SDG interventions that together generate intermediate outputs, which serve as inputs into achieving the SDGs.

Health and well-being and demography are considered as one of the six transformations by Sachs et al. (2019) and one of the six entry points (Human well-being and capabilities) in the 2019 GSDR (2019).

The SDG interventions include universal health care and healthy behaviors and social determinants of health and well-being. These would require significant investments. These transformations are synergistic without any major trade-offs, provided the Leave-
No-One-Behind Principle is applied. Interventions under other transformations, particularly relating to environmental health and healthy behaviors, reinforce health outcomes and well-being (GBD 2016; Graham et al. 2018; WHO 2018; Helliwel et al. 2019). It is becoming more apparent that working on health SDGs will not only benefit the health sector but will also impact the other SDGs through optimal interlinkages and synergies.

The principal intermediate output is universal health coverage (UHC). It requires a publicly financed health system that integrates prevention, therapeutic, and palliative services, integrated information systems, and disease surveillance and control (WHO 2018). Health systems need to focus on primary healthcare and offer interventions for maternal, newborn, and child health; effective prevention and treatment of infectious diseases; and noncommunicable disease control, including mental health and basic surgery (WHO 2018).

In combination with improved girls’ education and gender equality, investments in child health and sexual and reproductive health will accelerate the voluntary transition towards low fertility rates (Lutz et al. 2008; Glasier et al. 2006). Community health programs can also improve health outcomes significantly (WHO 2018).

There are other health interventions outside the health sector that improve the social determinants of

health. They include policies and metrics to raise human well-being and quality of life. Changes to social norms and behaviors promote healthy lifestyles through better hygiene; lower consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and other harmful substances; avoidance of and abstaining from risky behavior (for example, practice of safe sex prevents the spread of sexually transmitted diseases); improved product design and labor standards to reduce accidents and road safety campaigns to lower traffic deaths (WHO 2018).

Lastly, healthy diets, as promoted through sustainable land-use and food systems are a critical determinant of health outcomes (GBD 2015; WHO 2018; Willet et al. 2019; Afshin et al. 2019).

Alongside energy decarbonization, sustainable land use and food systems are a key input for climate change mitigation, which is necessary to prevent critical threats to health outcomes (Whitmee et al. 2015; Watts et al. 2013). Moreover, sustainable livestock management practices can help curb zoonotic diseases, which are a major driver of global disease pandemics (Herrero and Thornton 2013). Measures to curb the pollution of water and air (Transformation 3) are a fourth set of interventions that directly targets SDG 3 (IGS 2019; WHO 2018).

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

For the Philippines, whereas global initiatives may translate to local strategies and programs, these still need to be contextualized into the existing socio-economic and cultural environ for them to be truly effective, impactful and sustainable.

Transformations need basic changes of norms, beliefs, and value systems. These cannot solely be implemented by government but also need the participation of stakeholders through dialogue and learning processes. Often, societal change to a large extent is achieved first in the hearts and minds of the people, and only afterward accepted in legislation and economic policies.

Transformations require greatly increased development financing including official development assistance (ODA) to close SDG financing gaps in low-income countries (Gaspar et al. 2019). Transformations

cannot be designed and imposed from the top down. Broad public support and buy-in are needed for each transformation, and their implementation must draw on a broad range of communities and sectors (Williams et al. 2012; Leach et al. 2018).

A whole-of-nation and a whole-of-society approach is, therefore, critical if we are to achieve significant gains in health that will also eventually redound to economic and social development.

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