The United Nations is vowing to end extreme poverty within our lifetimes. Here’s why that might actually be realistic.

BY JOHN NORRIS  |  MAY 30, 2013

The U.N. high-level panel charged with coming up with what amounts to a first draft of the next Millennium Development Goals submitted its report to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon this week. So what’s different than the original MDGs? A great deal, as it turns out.

As most will recall, the MDGs were created in 2000 as a set of global poverty targets to be achieved by 2015. The goals were remarkably clear, concise, and direct for a U.N. agreement, and included targets such as halving the global proportion of people living on less than $1 per day, ensuring that all children had access to primary school, reducing the rate of child mortality by two-thirds, reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, and halving the number of people without access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Although progress was highly uneven, the MDGs were widely hailed as a success in mobilizing not only resources, but national and global policies, to address some of the
most blatant manifestations of extreme poverty.

With the MDGs concluding in 2015, the international community has been trying to envision what a similar set of goals -- properly updated to reflect a dramatically different world -- should look like. That is where the new U.N. panel -- chaired by Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and British Prime Minister David Cameron, and comprised of 27 "eminent persons" with diverse backgrounds from around the globe -- came in. (Full disclosure: I served as the senior advisor to one of the panel members, former White House Chief of Staff John Podesta.)

Several major forces shaped the panel's work and influenced the report it eventually produced. First and foremost, the panel wanted to embrace a far more universal approach than the original MDGs, one that could be applied to countries across the full development continuum. Equally important, members recognized that they needed to shape an agenda that addresses both extreme poverty and pressing environmental challenges, including climate change, simultaneously.

A significant part of the panel's approach was also driven by an understanding that the original MDGs were least effective in reaching populations that are traditionally excluded from economic life by dint of their ethnicity, caste, geographic location, gender, or other factors. New goals would have to go directly to populations that had always been left behind. Dealing with the issue of inclusion, not surprisingly, also led the panel to embrace an approach that not only addresses the symptoms of extreme poverty, but many of its root causes, and can help spark meaningful jobs growth, particularly for young people.

The report that emerged retains or expands key parts of the original MDGs -- including efforts to end preventable childhood mortality, curb maternal mortality, and end hunger -- but also commits to ending extreme poverty by 2030, with no one on the planet living on less than $1.25 per day. Although some panel members would have preferred a $2 target, the international community has its work cut out for it: Lifting the 1.2 billion people who live on less than $1.25 a day out of extreme poverty by 2030 will require momentous effort by local and national governments, multilateral institutions, philanthropy, bilateral donors, and the private sector working in partnership.

What is perhaps most revolutionary about the panel's report is its effort to foster a far more inclusive environment that connects all citizens to the economic and political lives of their countries. The report includes specific targets on things like increasing the security of land tenure, improving government budget transparency, and ensuring the right of every person on the planet to have a
legal identity. As pedestrian as they sound, these are the sorts of obstacles that keep hundreds of millions of people from improving their lives.

The report is also unusually outspoken in making the case for peace and effective institutions as cornerstones of the post-2015 agenda. With more than 40 percent of the world's poorest people living in conflict-affected and fragile states, it is clear that none of the global anti-poverty targets will be met by 2030 if we don't do a better job helping states transition out of war. The report targets a drop in violent deaths by 2030, while calling for measurable progress in access to the kinds of effective judicial institutions that so often undergird peaceful societies.

The report also spells out specific targets for the public's right to information and efforts to tackle corruption. Many of these issues will be subject to fierce debate as U.N. member countries try to finalize an agreement on the post-2015 agenda.

There are clearly some countries that would prefer that governance and peace issues be omitted from the next set of global development goals. But desire to including these factors was not only strong among the panel's members. It reflected the passionate opinions expressed by representatives of global civil society in intensive consultations with the panel. The poorest of the poor know that sound, transparent institutions and freedom from conflict are absolutely central to their aspirations for healthier, better educated, and more prosperous futures. Member states that ignore that wisdom imperil the success of the overall agenda.

The last area of the report that deserves special mention concerns the issues of climate change and energy. The panel rightly recognized that a set of global development goals was no substitute for a negotiated global agreement on climate change -- something all parties hope will happen by 2015. Instead, the panel tried to craft goals that will generate momentum toward those inter-governmental negotiations, while setting clear and achievable environmental and energy targets that make sense for developed and developing countries alike. Such targets will both encourage job growth and push patterns of consumption and production in a far more sustainable direction. The report calls for an end to fossil-fuel subsidies (some $600 billion to $1 trillion per year worldwide, very little of which is actually targeted at the poor), doubling the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix, and sharply reducing post-harvest food waste.

None of this is to say the panel's report is perfect. There are probably more goals (12) and targets (54) than there should be, and there will need to be refinement in some of the new areas added to the agenda to ensure that targets can clearly be measured and tracked at the global level. The report
should be viewed as the first act of the play -- an initial step in the process of negotiating a deal on a final text of the next round of global development goals, to be approved by the General Assembly in 2015.

Nonetheless, the report reflects a renewed spirit of multilateral cooperation as well as a genuine appreciation that shared vision can produce historic change. Ending extreme poverty has long been popular rhetoric. Now it is a goal that is within our reach.

John Norris is executive director of the Sustainable Security program at the Center for American Progress.

Save big when you subscribe to FP