

Why we have to ask the question “who cares?”

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With the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)¹ in 2015, national leaders not only set extremely ambitious targets but also created theoretical pressure for themselves to take action and measure progress over the following 15 years. That’s the good news. The bad news is that just setting such goals did not impact countries’ priorities since governments keep on doing business as usual. SDGs are basically unknown outside of the UN insider circles. With the exception of climate change, governments and politicians focus their time and resources on pressing issues they seem to consider being more important, e.g., terrorism, economic growth, refugee crises, and continued presence in power (with global SDGs as a priority on a political platform one can’t win elections).

Recent and upcoming elections in a number of countries strongly support the notion that voters definitely care most about themselves and their own country. The extreme is the “America First” campaign in the US, but in other countries the platforms of political parties also show a natural strong focus on benefits for its own citizens, businesses, and institutions. “No poverty” and “zero hunger” are mostly seen as 3rd world problems, thus not an action item for governments of developed countries².

Therefore, we have to ask the question “who cares?” about the SDGs. Unfortunately, the answer is “not many people”. As a result, governments of the developed world will only provide lip service to the Sustainable Development Goals. Governments of less developed countries fall into two categories. On one side the ones who really struggle with current developments and try their best to get something moving on the world stage, but they have no resources to implement any of their ideas. On the other side the ones who are mainly busy with internal problems and are haunted by corruption, conflicts, and wars; thus, even outside help would not help a lot.

In the Leaders’ Declaration of the G20 conference in Hamburg, Germany, the priority for the SDGs, or the lack of it, becomes visible. Although the Agenda 2030 is mentioned, it is not part of any of the top 10 issues world leaders seem to worry about³. There are simply too many other highly important issues to deal with on the priority list. If the G20 countries, representing 2/3 of the world’s population, don’t put a high priority on the SDGs, who does?

¹ Often also referred to as the “Global Goals”

² Although relative poverty exists to some extent also in developed countries, it is not the focus of political action of governments either. Everyone talks about helping the “middle class”, and that excludes people on the lowest end of the income spectrum. That’s not a surprise because those unfortunate people seem often not to vote.

³ G20 Leaders Declaration (see G20 2017)

Although most people would probably intellectually support the 17 SDGs, if they'd know about them, they will not be willing to pay for their implementation. People see higher priorities for use of resources in their respective countries (e.g., safety, fighting terrorism, personal benefits, tax reduction, ...). These are all focused on the "now" and therefore contradict the SDGs "future", which makes a 2030 target automatically too optimistic. The only exception is goal 13 climate change, but it took more than 30 years and incredible efforts of many scientists, organizations, and countries to make climate policy a priority. Even then, recent developments in the US show that it is so easy to boycott such a worldwide initiative. Not to mention that the Paris accord is really more a minimalistic agreement, and each country can easily get out of its voluntary commitments.

Now, what does that mean for our planet? Most countries will of course perform their duties on reporting how they are doing in reaching the Global Goals. They will present numbers and continue their commitment to the Global Goals. These reports come with a few caveats though, because some targets (i) simply can't be measured, (ii) are utopian, (iii) are not concrete enough, and (iv) have to rely on estimated or even missing data. Developing yet another set of indicators/indices instead of trying to use existing ones (economic and social, e.g., GDP, SPI, OECD, HDI) will not increase progress, as the issues above are not addressed. It just seems a huge additional undertaking costing a lot of resources with little added value. Many governments prioritize GDP growth over all other socioeconomic indicators, which is on one side somewhat short-sighted. On the other side, however, the importance of economic growth is significantly underrepresented in discussions about implementing the SDGs.

Even if statistics show progress, such progress is often due to regular economic development, for example, the Millennium Goal "Reduce Poverty" was probably mainly achieved due to economic growth in China and India. Ongoing activities that countries do anyway, and not because of the world leaders have agreed on 17 SDGs, are likely main reasons for such progress. It's a simple formula, and achieving 100% of any goal or target has three components:

- X% due to activities a country does anyway
- Y% due to extra efforts because SDGs are seen as worth investing in⁴
- Z% the rest; probably a very big percentage representing unresolved issues

Is there a chance to close the "Z-gap"? Missing resources and people's reluctance to support use of significant resources for other people's problems are a big hurdle. History suggests that only incentives and/or market mechanisms can achieve results beyond common trajectories. Incentives are driven by positive or negative causes:

- Positive causes are developing aid coming from various sources. The downside is that this cost a lot of money, which is actually not enough available. Even the rich countries have severe budget constraints so that it is extremely unlikely that extra funding for SDGs would be considered. Minimizing climate change is already such a major fiscal undertaking that won't leave resources for other major goals. Even fighting climate change will likely not receive the resources needed in order to have a significant impact on the climate.

⁴ These resources are likely very small. Given estimates that extra \$3-7 trillion are needed every year (which may still be underestimated) this could very well be less than 1%.

- Negative causes are major catastrophes, which we do not hope for. Big catastrophes (e.g., world wars, terrorism attacks, deadly epidemics, flooding, fires, earthquakes, storms, ...) brought people together in the past in order to make changes, but the cost and suffering are always much higher compared to taking action before the catastrophe. As an example, it is no surprise that specifically Germany tried to put a new Africa initiative on the G20 agenda. It has been the negative cause of too many refugees entering the country that led the German government to think about if or how a new refugee crisis like 2015 can be avoided in the future. Another example is the nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima, Japan. It did lead to some countries rethinking their energy strategy and safety.

Market mechanisms, however, use intrinsic motivators of market players, like manufacturers and consumers, thus need much less financial resources and governmental regulations. Therefore, results can be an order of magnitude higher (more details on page 4).

What can be done to close the Z-gap?

As outlined above, at this point the 17 SDGs are more dream goals and cannot be achieved by 2030, not even close⁵. There are simply too many goals/targets with too little resources. Most governments and people around the world have other priorities, and the fight for resources, fiscal and natural, will dominate the next decades. Governments will not contribute significant resources to solve other countries' problems.

In order to exit this dead-end, the community has to come up with new and innovative ideas that unleash market dynamics and natural/biological processes to solve the world's problems. Few key developments and/or initiatives are paramount for achieving progress through this path:

1. Worldwide economic growth has to continue at minimum of current level.
2. Developed countries to re-purpose existing funding to ignite new processes.
3. Market dynamics as the base to achieve 10x results compared with direct funding.
4. Biological processes to be more researched and used to achieve 10x results.
5. Engage more people but with their personal and emotional interests in mind.

Details to these five areas could fill pages and books, which is not the purpose of this paper. The focus is on a short discussion about opportunities, examples, and challenges. It is up to the community and people in general to be creative and find the opportunities in which market dynamics as well as biological processes can be used to receive extraordinary results. We should always aim for 10x results compared to what could be achieved otherwise with the same amount of resources in the traditional aid process.

1. Worldwide economic growth has to continue at current level or more.

Without economic growth, the human race cannot sustain the number of people living on Earth. Zero growth would mean that some areas grow and others decline. Sooner or later that will lead

⁵ For example, the World Food Program already stated "zero chances for zero hunger in 2030" (see Beasley 2017).

to even more conflicts and disastrous wars. As economic growth is a no-brainer for human development the challenge is how growth can be achieved while reducing negative side effects like climate change, environmental degradation, too much waste, depletion of natural resources, to mention just a few. As in the past, only technological advances can address that to the fullest extent.

Furthermore, economic growth is based, for the most part, on productivity gains. Unfortunately, productivity gains have been slowing since about a decade, at least in the developed world. The reasons for that are not well understood. There is no shortage on hypotheses though, but they are, as often, driven by ideology and not by scientific approaches.

We may never fully understand why productivity gains are slowing at this point, as we still do not even fully understand how our economy really works as a whole. On top of that there are currently broadly discussed concerns about technology developments. Further automatization, artificial intelligence, and more efficient processes seem to create more concerns among people than hope for economic growth and a better future. Productivity gains do create winners and losers, so it is up to each society to make sure that losers don't lose, i.e. find other areas in which individuals who lose their job can continue to contribute.

Globalization and free trade are under attack for quite some time, and now even from the most capitalistic country in the world - USA, the country that actually started modern globalization and benefited big time as a country; what an irony. Free trade and globalization increase global GDP. It is not the fault of globalization that some people in some countries lose income because of job losses, it is the fault of each society that the gains of globalization are not distributed appropriately and fairly among the members of each society.

2. Developed countries to re-purpose existing funding to ignite new processes.

It has been known for a long time that the developing aid provided by the developed countries is not enough to address the many problems in the 3rd world. And it always has been further complicated by corruption and constraints how, and in particular with whom, the funding can be used. One of the statements by German Chancellor Merkel at the G20 press conference sounded almost like admitting that this process doesn't work⁶. Sadly enough, she may be right.

But if the developed world admits that it doesn't work, maybe there is a better way to use the existing resources? Of course, any re-purposing of funding will create winners and losers in the short term, like any change of funding processes. But if the funding could be used to trigger new processes with 10x results then there do not have to be losers in the long term.

3. Market dynamics as the base to achieve 10x results compared with direct funding.

Market dynamics has been around much longer before the term "market economy" was coined. It can lead to exponential growth as well as destruction. History is full of examples, which do not have to be repeated here. Even the youngest among us know from recent history the dynamic forces markets can unleash, for the good and for the bad.

⁶ G20 Leaders Declaration (see G20 2017; discussion at press conference)

But if we better learn from what actually works positively⁷ then we can apply this in a more directed way. This can be best seen in two examples that solved environmental problems with basically no extra long-term cost:

a) Elimination of excess packaging

A new law in Germany in the early 1990's addressed many aspects of how to deal with trash and how to reduce it. Although not all of plans provided for good results, there is one part that was truly significantly successful. It had been discussed for years how to reduce excess packaging in consumer products. The typical ideas of extra taxes, penalties, etc. were on the table, which, if implemented, would have only resulted in higher prices for consumers with no additional benefit.

Instead, a simple approach was chosen that used market dynamics and changed consumer products packaging within months. Consumers simply got the right to leave any excess packaging at the point of purchase. This little consumer right seemed to be not fully understood by retailers and manufacturers what it really meant (they were certainly not prepared for what happened). As consumers were quite environmentally adept, they started on the first day unpacking products (e.g., tooth paste in a carton) at the cashiers, at which within hours mountains of trash collected. Store managers were overwhelmed and yelled for help. Within days large, temporary containers were placed inside and outside the stores to collect all that trash. This whole new process of collecting and getting rid of trash created obviously a new, inconvenient, and expensive process for every retailer.

Therefore, it didn't take long that large retailers and grocery stores pressured manufactures to change the way they provide their products. And within month's products started to show up in a new form, without excess packaging. At the end, there were only transition cost and no long-term cost with these changes. It is a beautiful example how consumer power combined with market dynamics can create positive and ever-lasting change.

b) Reduction of noxious fumes in rural India

This example is about using market dynamics, in this case creative distribution channels, to provide significant added value for people living in poverty in rural India. A Californian company, d.light⁸, manufacturer of portable solar lamps implemented an out-of-the-box distribution strategy to reach consumers in rural India.

The primary source of lighting for this market was kerosene lanterns, which produced noxious fumes – bad for the environment and creating many health problems. By using post offices and governmental common service centers, both with over 100,000 locations in rural India, as distributors, they reached individual consumers much easier. As a result, solar lamps replaced many kerosene lanterns with significant positive effects – less pollution, better health, and better student performance, because now children could actually learn longer even when it got dark.

⁷ Some inspiration can be found at the What Works 2017 conference web site (see WHAT 2017)

⁸ see DLIGHT 2017

4. Biological processes to be more researched and used to achieve 10x results.

This seems to be an area in which significant progress is being made as we speak. Nature and evolution have created an abundance of biological processes for millions to billions of years. Such biological processes can lead the way into a more sustainable world. Newest research seems to unleash such processes to make use in a variety of applications. One of them is the re-purposing of carbon dioxide. A very promising approach if it can be done in industrial volumes⁹.

This technology is being developed by BRAIN AG (all four quotes from same source¹⁰):

- "BRAIN is one of Europe's leading technology companies in the field of 'white' biotechnology."
- "Ever since its inception in 1993, BRAIN has set the pace in the field of white biotechnology, which the EU Commission considers one of the key technologies of the 21st century."
- "Our mission: aligning economic and political policy"
- "The bioeconomy is the driver and core element of a sustainable growth strategy. Merging biology and technology offers an opportunity to meet global challenges. Inspired by the vision of a bio-based economy that is geared to natural material cycles, BRAIN is one of the creative players in this global transformation process."

After speaking with experts, it seems there are many more such processes in development worldwide, mostly in developed countries.

5. Engage more people but with their personal and emotional interests in mind.

If the answer to the question "Who cares" is simply "not many" then the next question to address should be how more people can be engaged in the processes to address the world's biggest problems. There are already a big number of professionals and volunteers who are indeed engaged in a variety of ways, but this is not enough. In order to have 1000x more people worry about the need to make progress in achieving the SDGs new ways of engagement have to be found. This can only go via the own, personal, and emotional interests of people, which, in its own way, is another way of using market dynamics. Yet another challenge to our creativity.

⁹ BRAIN AG press release (see BRAIN 2017)

¹⁰ About BRAIN (see BRAIN 2017-2)

Call for creativity

The intent of this paper is to call for more creativity by applying market dynamics, technology, science, and people's individual interests to address the big world problems. Just asking for more money does not work because there is simply not much more money available to give. This creative use of market forces and biological processes is meant to be on top of, and not instead of, existing and planned activities to achieve the Global Goals at some point.

As admirable as the Sustainable Development Goals are, the achievement of these goals cannot happen within our worldwide system of priorities. They can only be a side effect of continuous economic growth and many creative ideas for new processes using market dynamics, technology, science, and with the help of more people. Thus we can ensure that that Global Goals 2030 wasn't just a top in time, and we do not have to wait until 3020.

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