



## EDITORIAL

## UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A time to act.

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As we head into a new year, it's worth reflecting on some of the anniversaries celebrated in 2015. These commemorations are important because they enable us to mark the passage of time, celebrate our triumphs and honour our losses<sup>1</sup>. While we celebrated several notable anniversaries in 2015 the most popular was surely the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 2015; the date set by Marty McFly and Emmett Brown to travel to the unimaginable future in *Back to the Future, Part II*. Large HD screens or drones anyone?

Moving away from science fiction we also commemorated the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release from prison, German Reunification; and closer to home, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chile's return to democracy. 2015 also marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, following which, the United Nations (UN) officially came into existence.

Importantly, 2015 was 15 years since the UN established the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were eight international development goals which, in 2000, all UN member states committed to achieving by 2015. The goals included: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving primary education for all; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; fighting epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and malaria; improving quality of life and ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development.

Globally, many efforts were made to reduce disparities, improve the quality of life of the population and achieve other 2015 MDGs. Much was achieved, yet despite this progress- and the fact that many people have moved out of poverty- poverty has not ended for all, and inequalities continue to persist across the globe. Women and minorities are still downtrodden in many places and are fighting for equality. Millions of women continue to die in childbirth. Nonetheless, enormous advancement was made. From an oral health perspective, evidence demonstrates that achieving these goals

will, directly or indirectly, impact oral health outcomes<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, even though oral health is an integral part of these goals as it has a profound effect on everybody's life daily in a variety of ways- oral health has not yet been part of the MDGs to the fullest capacity. Benzian and his collaborators highlighted how oral health relates to each of the eight MDGs<sup>3</sup>. Nonetheless, they concluded that there had been a crucially missed opportunity to position oral health within international development agendas and public policies. For example, most oral health indicators were not connected to the indicators applied to monitor progress towards the MDGs<sup>2</sup>. Benzian and his collaborators urged the profession not to miss such opportunities again as it would enable a much-needed global evaluation of progress in the field<sup>3</sup>.

We now have such an opportunity. In 2015, at the UN Sustainable Development Summit, world leaders evaluated MDG's achievements and adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This includes a set of 17 interrelated and interdependent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty; fight inequality and injustice; and tackle climate change, whilst maintaining sustainable development and prosperity. The 17 goals are associated with 169 targets and hundreds of indicators. The SDGs became official on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2016 and the deadline set for achievement is 2030.

The new SDGs are broader in scope- some are specific and some are vaguer- but they are intended to be inclusive of people in all countries, with sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) being at their core. The SDGs are less health-oriented than the MDGs although health does have a central place in SDG 3: "*Ensure healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages.*" Additionally, almost all of the other 16 non-health goals are directly related to health or will contribute to health indirectly. The health goal is framed in deliberately broad terms that are relevant to all countries and all populations<sup>4</sup>. Priorities and actions are outlined for



countries and the international community in order to achieve the new targets in the set time frame (The full report can be viewed: <http://www.who.int/gho/publications/mdgs-sdgs/en>)<sup>4</sup>. Thus, at a basic level, this makes oral health part of the SDGs, as there cannot be health without oral health.

It is not difficult to be overwhelmed by the news that we come across daily about natural disasters and human –made conflicts, and to doubt the UN’s effectiveness; but the achievements of the 2015 MDGs proves that the world is a better place and change is possible in a short time frame. However, this does require utilisation of the vast expanse of resources that many of us have at our disposal. As individuals and professionals, the challenge is to equip ourselves to be part of the successful achievement of SDGs. A starting point would be to become familiar with each individual SDG and the targets. Their successful implementation heavily relies upon each and every one of us advocating for this agenda. Select which of the SDG’s goals and targets you feel most passionate about and get involved- this is possible on a multitude of levels. Tell everyone. Engage them. Get them actively involved in any steps you take towards attempting to achieve the goals. The more people who know about the SDGs, the more successful they will be.

Academic institutions have a role in training oral health professionals to develop an educational strategy on SDG training and education for health professional trainees. However, in order to meet global societal needs, it is vital that as well as educating competent oral health professionals, our institutions also instil values in them that enable them to understand their role in wider society. Thus allowing them

to see a bigger picture in which they help the world on a variety of levels. More fundamentally, we need to modify the way oral health is currently thought about within the whole of society<sup>5</sup>.

As in any other year, 2016 will bring new anniversaries, but 2016 is a year like no other. It positions a major challenge upon us that can affect the health of the world’s population for the next fifteen years. We can start working to make sure that the world will be a better place by 2030. Oral health programs are in enabling countries to maximize the impact of the health sector in reaching national health objectives and/or priorities, and meeting health and social challenges. It is hoped that this editorial serves as an incentive to further discuss the role of Oral health professionals in reaching the SDGs objectives. Therefore presenting the challenge to us, that in our daily work as oral health professionals and as members of the community; we are all part of the successful achievement of the SDGs. As a profession, we are a powerful body that can have a vital role in global health, as has been demonstrated in the past (e.g., community’s exposure to fluorides). The time to make change is now. The time to act is now.

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