

The Long Term

In 2000, the United Nations issued a Millennium Declaration and set down eight Millennium Development Goals, agreed to by all the world's countries and major institutions. The goals and the targets to be met by 2015 represent an unprecedented international effort to improve the lot of the world's poor. The goals and targets are:

- *Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty* – Reduce by half the number of people living on less than \$1 per day and reduce by half the number of people who suffer from hunger;
- *Achieve universal primary education* – Ensure that all boys and all girls complete a full course of primary education;
- *Promote gender equality and empower women* – Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015;
- *Reduce child mortality* – Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate of children under five.
- *Improve maternal health* – Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality rate;
- *Combat HIV/AIDS*. Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases;
- *Ensure environmental sustainability* - Integrate the principle of sustainable development into all countries' policies and programs; reduce by half the number of people without safe drinking water; and significantly improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020;
- *Develop a global partnership for development* – Develop further an open trading system; address the least developed countries special needs; address the needs of landlocked countries; deal uncompromisingly with developing countries' debt problems; develop productive work for youth; provide affordable access to essential medical drugs; and make available the benefits of new technologies in developing countries.

A complementary group of studies have been carried out cataloguing and setting targets related to global environmental threats. The International Geosphere-Biosphere Program (IGBP) is studying the way human actions are affecting land, oceans and the atmosphere and the great biogeochemical cycles of the planet. (*This term describes the way that chemical elements cycle through the earth's crust, the oceans and the atmosphere. The most significant elements are carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorous and sulfur.*) In its report *Global Change and the Earth System* the IGBP noted that "global change is more than climate change. It is real, it is happening now and in many ways it is accelerating." The *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* report, also released in 2005, examined the state of global ecosystems and ecosystem services. (*Ecosystem services are the benefits that natural ecosystems provide for humankind. They include the provision of food, water and fibre, the decomposition of wastes and control of disease, the maintenance of nutrient cycles for crop pollination and the protection of biological diversity for future ecological stability.*) The study found that 15 out of the 24 ecosystems examined were being degraded or used unsustainably, that the changes now happening are increasing the chances of abrupt and possibly irreversible damage to ecosystems and that the greatest human burdens related to these changes are being carried by the poor.

A further major international reporting system of great significance is that related to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This work of the IPCC is fully described in four Australian Collaboration Fact and Issue Sheets. Under the Kyoto Protocol, of which Australia is now a signatory, each participating country has been given a target for the reduction of greenhouse gases.

Some of the goals described above, the Millennium Development Goals for example, are very ambitious and several may not be met. Others such as those related to the Kyoto Protocol are clearly inadequate to deal with the

problem, although many countries have found them difficult to meet. But because goals have been set and there is regular monitoring of progress towards their achievement, the international community has been put on notice. Even where there is failure, there will be much to learn about the measures needed to meet goals of this kind in the future. Without the goals and targets none of this would be possible.

Issues facing Australia

There are long-term issues that cry out for sustained attention in Australia. A far from comprehensive list would need to include:

- Environmental problems such as loss of biodiversity, water and land degradation because of their social and economic as well as environmental impacts;
- The health, development and well-being of children and young people as the foundation for their future lives and as an investment for the nation;
- Preventative health measures to promote well-being and reduce the cost of medical care for the whole population and especially for specific groups such as the mentally ill;
- The elimination of poverty and the reduction of inequality;
- An education system that significantly increases the skills and capacities of the whole population as a means of giving more people the opportunity to find meaningful work, of enriching their lives and of increasing the economic prosperity of the nation;
- The plight of Indigenous people;
- Australia's future relationships to Asia and its region, including better and more comprehensive teaching of Asian Studies and Asian languages;
- Adequate investment in infrastructure; and
- A genuine commitment to the solution of global social and environmental problems.

Australia should make a much greater commitment to the resolution of such issues. Australia has, however, no equivalent to the UN Millennium Development Goals and no medium term targets for meeting them.

Identifying the long-term issues and setting the targets

In an ideal world, our governments and elected representatives would take the initiative to enter into a dialogue with Australian people about the long-term issues facing the country and the approaches that might be needed to respond to them. Individual governments do not, however, do this; their focus is typically adversarial, short term and significantly concerned with electoral advantage. It is promising that before coming to office Prime Minister Rudd made much of the need for long term planning. It is also promising that through his April 2008 2020 Summit and its follow-up activities and responses he is attempting to draw people widely into debate about key issues facing Australia. We will have to wait to see in what way the Rudd Government will respond to the ideas generated at the Summit and to what degree it will maintain a debate with Australian citizens about the future of the nation. It is likely that it will become harder and harder to do this as the electoral term draws closer to the next election. Other action is therefore needed.

A national conversation is needed that engages the media, the parliament, universities, the business community, the non-government sector and Australian citizens on a continuing basis, leading eventually to purposeful action. While there are many ways in which this conversation can be carried on, it is unlikely that it will be sustained and continue to attract the attention of the media unless it is drawn into the heart of the political system. The parliament, therefore, has a key role to play. There is scope to use parliamentary committees, especially Senate committees, to explore and debate long term issues across party lines, thereby to give weight to these discussions, to better inform the electorate and to prepare it for changes that may be needed in response to emerging contingencies. This is standard practice in many countries. The Finnish Parliament has, for example, a Standing Committee for the Future with a formal mandate, among its other roles, to review the government's long-term plans. The German Parliament (Bundestag) has Study Commissions, made up of equal numbers of parliamentarians and outside experts. They investigate matters of significance to the German nation and publish their findings widely. To do the same in Australia there are barriers to be overcome including the absence of standing committees with long

term mandates, control of funding for the parliament by the Treasurer, inadequate resources for inquiries, lack of opportunity to involve outside experts and inadequate arrangements for the propagation of findings. None is, however, insurmountable.

The need for greatly improved capabilities for dealing with long term problems

Once the issues have been identified and thoroughly debated and some agreement about their significance to the nation has been broadly reached, focus needs to shift to the essential mechanisms for action and implementation. One key requirement is collaboration between federal, state and local government.

In Australia's federal system of government significant powers and responsibilities rest with the states. Effective long-term strategic issues therefore require collaboration between the Australian government and the states and territories. Ministerial councils are the principal vehicles for developing wide-ranging collaborative national policies. The peak ministerial council is the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), established in May 1992. It comprises the prime minister, premiers, territory chief ministers and the president of the Australian Local Government Association. The prime minister of the day chairs COAG. The role of COAG is described as to 'initiate, develop and monitor the implementation of policy reforms which are of national significance and which require cooperative action by Australian governments'.

Through COAG, 'mutual recognition', the agreement by the states and Commonwealth to recognise each other's regulatory standards, came to be adopted. National Competition Policy was a direct outcome of the policy of 'mutual recognition'. Competition reform led to the establishment of the National Competition Council, an independent statutory body under the Trade Practices Act 1974 (Cth). The Agreement reached at COAG on water policy and the partial restoration of environmental flows in the Murray Darling Basin in June 2004, together with ongoing negotiations between the Commonwealth and States about the management of the Basin, is another example. At the February 2006 meeting, federal, state and territory governments determined that all children should be equally provided with opportunities to enhance their life chances.

These are hopeful signs but much more could be done. Many of the other long term issues listed above could and should be tackled in a similar way. A prime example is climate change given its huge implications for Australia and the world. A COAG National Climate Change Policy could be agreed and an independent National Climate Change Council established, similar to the National Competition Council.

Needed actions for the longer term

In sum, the needed actions to prepare Australia better for the longer term are:

- To develop a wide ranging national conversation about longer term issues (persistent trends and emerging contingencies);
- To determine priority areas for urgent action today;
- To set multi-partisan medium term targets for their solution;
- To convince political parties of the great benefits of parliamentary committees as vehicles for non-partisan investigation of longer term problems, of the value of strengthening their capacities and of the benefits of including outside experts as in other countries;
- To strengthen the role of all collaborative mechanisms for tackling long-term problems, especially the role of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).
- To make more transparent the long term work of central government agencies as in the UK.

Useful sources

International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGPB)
<http://www.igbp.net/>

This site describes the work of the IGPB.

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment
<http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx>

This site describes the Assessment and its reports.

Australia 21 <www.australia21.org.au> Australia 21 is a non-profit body devoted to longer-term research. See especially its current research projects.

Council of Australian Governments (COAG) <www.coag.gov.au>. This site explains the role and work of COAG.

T H E A U S T R A L I A N C O L L A B O R A T I O N

Marsh I., and Yencken D., 2004, *Into the Future: The neglect of the long term in Australian politics*, Australian Collaboration and Black Inc., Melbourne. This book discusses recent changes in political structures, the proliferation of interest groups, attitudes to politicians and, in the light of these changes, means of strengthening long-term capabilities in the parliament and government.

United Nations Millennium Development Goals www.un.org/millenniumgoals/ This site lists the UN goals and provides background information, fact sheets on progress and country-by-country reports.

Author

David Yencken, Professor Emeritus The University of Melbourne and Chair of the Australian Collaboration.
June 2008.