In September 2015, the United Nations adopted a new set of goals. The “Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs) replaced the “Millennium Development Goals” (MDGs), which until 2015 were the world’s most prominent attempt to date to fight poverty and reduce human suffering. Even though the exact makeup of the SDGs was not resolved when this issue of TIP went to press, up-to-date details on the SDGs and how they relate to the field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology can be found by going to www.siop.org/Prosocial/UN.aspx. What was clear well in advance of the launch of the SDGs was that despite notable progress, the world had neglected to fully meet its previous set of goals. Although the United Nations (2015a) reported that “unprecedented efforts have resulted in profound achievements” (p. 4), many of the world’s foremost goals and subsidiary targets set at the turn of the millennium have not been reached. For example, whereas Target A of MDG 1 was reached—namely to “halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than $1 a day,” — Target A of MDG 3, namely to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education,” remains elusive with continuing disparities in primary, secondary, and tertiary education (United Nations, 2015a, p. 14, 28). As the United Nations (2015a) summarized, “despite many successes, the poorest and most vulnerable people are being left behind” (p. 8). Table 1 provides ...
an overview of the MDGs and a short summary of progress made, and not made, toward each goal.

The historic transition from the MDGs to the SDGs provides an opportunity for reflection on many of the world’s most pressing problems. To assist in seizing this opportunity, this article asks, and proposes answers to, three interrelated questions:

1. What role, if any, should I-O psychologists play in meeting global international development goals?

Historically, the international development agenda has revolved around the importance of reducing poverty across the globe. According to a recent report by the United Nations Development Programme (2014), “poverty has been defined and redefined to mean many things—from the deprivation of well-being or basic human needs, to a lack of fundamental freedoms of action and choice” (p. 2). Following the perspective most often taken by the United Nations (e.g., Alkire, 2010), we define poverty as a multidimensional form of deprivation of opportunity often measured by financial (e.g., income), educational (e.g., literacy rates), and health (e.g., life

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Table 1
Overview of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

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<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Remaining challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger</td>
<td>The proportion of people living in extreme poverty (&lt;$1.25 a day) in lower-income countries fell from 50% in 1990 to 14% in 2015</td>
<td>The employment to population ratio in lower-income countries fell 3.3 percentage points from 1991 to 2015</td>
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<td>2. Achieve universal primary education</td>
<td>Number of out-of-school children fell from 100 million in 2000 to 57 million in 2015</td>
<td>Children in the poorest households are 4x more likely to be out of school compared to children in the richest households</td>
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<td>3. Promote gender equality and empower women</td>
<td>90% of countries have more women in parliament since 1995</td>
<td>Women earn 24% less than men globally</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Reduce child mortality</td>
<td>Deaths of children under five sank from 12.7 million in 1990 to 6 million in 2015</td>
<td>Infant mortality rates are 2x as high for children in the poorest versus the richest households</td>
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<td>5. Improve maternal health</td>
<td>% of births assisted by skilled health personnel rose from 59% in 1990 to 71% in 2014</td>
<td>In rural areas, only 56% of births are attended by skilled health personnel</td>
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<td>6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases</td>
<td>Between 2000 and 2013, new HIV infections fell by 40%</td>
<td>Only 36% of people living with HIV in lower-income countries were receiving anti-retroviral therapy in 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Ensure environmental sustainability</td>
<td>Since 1990, 98% of ozone-depleting substances have been eliminated</td>
<td>Global emissions of carbon dioxide have increased by 50% since 1990</td>
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<td>8. Develop a global partnership for development</td>
<td>Internet penetration grew from 6 to 43 percent of the world’s population between 2000 and 2015</td>
<td>Only 33% of people in lower-income countries use the Internet - compared to 82% in higher-income countries</td>
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Note. All statistics are from UN (2015).
expectancy) indicators. By defining poverty to include forms of educational and health deprivation, it becomes evident that poverty is brought about by more than just a lack of money; it is caused by everything from environmental degradation to a lack of education and training opportunities. Even though I-O psychology is intimately related to global development in a large number of ways, we argue that our discipline is particularly important to the global development agenda in three ways.

First, in its focus on improving both the welfare and performance of workers and organizations, I-O psychology can assist the world’s largest engine for sustainable economic growth: productivity in the private sector. According to the World Bank (2012), “the private sector is the main engine of job creation and the source of almost 9 of every 10 jobs in the world” (p. 7). By supporting productivity in the private sector, I-O psychology interventions relating to issues from recruitment and selection to training and organizational development can have important individual and organizational benefits that aggregate to widespread societal benefits. As highlighted by Aguinis and Kraiger (2009), core I-O psychology topics like training and development can be understood to have benefits not only on individual, team, and organizational levels of analysis but also on national/societal levels of analysis. However, I-O psychology interventions have the potential to benefit society through greater private-sector productivity, they can also be used in ways that might (often unintentionally) harm individual and community well-being. For example, interventions to reduce expected labor surpluses in organizations in impoverished regions can be carried out in ways that might mitigate human suffering within the community (e.g., transitioning more people to part-time work in lieu of layoffs). As we argue later in this article, whether or not I-O interventions have a positive social and/or environmental impact is likely to depend on I-O psychologists’ adherence to the tripartite scientist–practitioner–humanist (S–P–H) model that requires researchers and practitioners to operate in full cognizance of and deference to the moral and societal implications of their work (see Lefkowitz, 2012).

Second, through its focus on improving worker welfare, I-O psychology explicitly focuses on the health and well-being of the world’s workforce. As argued by international development scholars, the ability to “exert control over one’s environment” and to engage in “meaningful relationships of mutual recognition” by gainful employment are fundamental human rights (see Nussbaum, 2003, p. 42). This insight tracks well with self-determination theory, which stresses that human beings, across cultural regions, have deep needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2015). Whereas the role of work in people’s broad quality of life is of central concern to research and applied work in I-O psychology, much of this work has focused on populations in relatively high-income settings where poverty is often a less prominent concern. Yet as summarized by the World Bank (2012), active employment and the characteristics of jobs are important determinants of happiness, health, and
overall life satisfaction both in high-income and low-income countries. Moreover, as discussed by De Neve, Diener, Tay, and Xuereb in the 2013 World Happiness Report, subjective well-being has a reciprocal benefit for productivity and performance at the individual and organizational levels.

Third, I-O psychology has an important role to play in assisting international development goals because work explicitly devoted to these global priorities, from reducing disease to promoting the empowerment of women, is carried out by individuals working together in organizations. I-O psychologists work with a broad array of organizations outside of the private sector that support global development priorities as their chief mission, from intergovernmental and multilateral organizations like the United Nations to nonprofit and civil society organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). Moreover, as discussed by the United Nations Development Programme (2014), the private sector is increasingly engaging in poverty reduction through an array of hybrid business models that mix not-for-profit and for-profit concerns, including social enterprises and inclusive business. Prominent examples of such hybrid models include the Grameen Bank, founded in Bangladesh by the Nobel Laureate Mohammad Yunus, which provides microcredit loans and banking services to people affected by poverty (UNDP, 2014). This shift toward hybrid business models perhaps reflects a growing focus on organizational responsibility (Aguinis, 2011) and corporate social responsibility (Jones & Rupp, in press; Rupp & Mallory, 2015).

In summary, via its attention to public- and private-sector productivity, human well-being in and through work, and the social and environmental missions of not-for-profit and hybrid organizations, I-O psychology focuses on issues that are central to global poverty reduction. Thus, I-O psychology does play a part in global poverty reduction; yet, the question still remains: Should it? Put a different way, should I-O psychology attempt to frame and galvanize its efforts in light of salient global priorities or should it pursue research and practice largely independent of them? Even though debate is likely to continue on this question, we argue for the importance of both framing and motivating research and practice in light of broader global priorities—again for three principal reasons.

First, by engaging with developmental priorities, I-O psychology can help to ensure that it stays relevant to the concerns of the vast majority of the world’s population that lives, and works, in lower-income societies. For example, a greater focus on poverty reduction is likely to lead to more research on forms of work in the informal economy that are prevalent within lower-income societies (see Saxena et al., 2015). Second, by addressing global goals for poverty reduction, I-O psychology can build stronger relationships with different disciplines and sectors that are looking for greater insight into human behavior in the workplace. Indeed, there have been moves to bring research-based insight into the design and pursuit of the SDGs (see www.unsdsn.org) and to develop better indicators and approaches for measuring global development progress. Third, and
perhaps most importantly, by framing and catalyzing its research and practice in light of global priorities for poverty reduction, I-Os can more directly address their charge as psychologists to support justice, fairness, human dignity, and self-determination (American Psychological Association, 2010). Supporting these ideals is perhaps most fully undertaken, and pursued, through the adoption of the S–P–H model mentioned earlier (Lefkowitz, 2012); indeed, it is difficult to see how adopting the S–P–H model could be effectively done without a good understanding of global development realities and priorities.

2. Are there any lessons to be learned from how I-O psychologists have engaged, or not engaged, with the MDGs?

For the past 15 years, the world’s efforts to reduce poverty have been guided by a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (see Table 1). Although not all of the targets associated with these goals were met, the experience of working toward them has benefitted a diverse set of international stakeholders, I-O psychologists included. A diverse array of efforts to combat poverty by I-O psychologists around the world was recently documented in an edited book by McWha-Hermann, Maynard, and O’Neill Berry (2015) entitled Humanitarian Work Psychology and the Global Development Agenda: Case Studies and Interventions. The book includes chapters by I-O researchers and practitioners that describe research and applied projects from Sierra Leone to South Asia. Collectively, these chapters deal with the entire set of goals, from maternal and child health (MDGs 4 and 5) to supporting educational achievement (MDG 2).

McWha-Hermann and colleagues (2015) reflect on the 17 chapters in their book that focus on how I-O psychology has engaged with the MDGs. First and foremost, the book’s editors argue that an understanding and appreciation of work, though easy to overlook, is fundamental to furthering international development priorities. The connection between I-O psychology and the MDGs was perhaps most obvious when it came to the issue of “decent work,” a topic covered by Target B of MDG 1 that sets the goal to “Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people” (United Nations, 2015b, p. 3). Yet, the connection between I-O psychology and other MDG targets, such as Target C of MDG 7, which calls to “halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation,” might be less obvious (United Nations, 2015b, p. 42). Many topics in international development and humanitarian work (including basic sanitation) might conjure up thoughts of complex, opaque, and distant phenomena to some, but it is important to remember that international development and humanitarian work is still carried through by the productivity and well-being of leaders, teams, organizations, and organizational alliances. Even in higher-income settings, global development priorities from women’s empowerment to environmental sustainability are keenly relevant to everyone and to all forms of work.
McWha-Hermann and colleagues (2015) also consider the nature of the work featured in their book’s chapters and reflect on what this might say about the nature of I-O psychology’s engagement with the global developmental agenda. Notably, I-O psychologists considered forms of work that cross not only cultural lines but socioeconomic gradients. For example, I-O psychologists have worked to support mentorship initiatives meant to reduce intergenerational poverty (see Ng, Lai, Lau, & Chan, 2015) and CSR efforts that send teams from high-income settings to low-income settings (see Osicki, 2015). I-O psychologists working to support global development goals have often had to prominently consider the importance of both outcomes and procedural justice (see Furnham, 2015).

Moreover, much of international development work is just that, developmental in nature, and requires adherence to best practices in personal and organizational growth and development. It is clear from the topics considered in the edited volume by McWha-Hermann and colleagues (2015) that global developmental goals have stretched I-O psychology to contemplate and incorporate nontraditional priorities, perspectives, and populations. As an example of nontraditional priorities, I-O psychologists interfacing with global development have often had to move beyond considerations of financial productivity to prioritize physical health and basic education as key outcomes. These outcomes closely mirror the tripartite components of the United Nations Human Development Index of income, health, and education. In terms of nontraditional perspectives, forms of work shaped by global development priorities often must admit to a broad diversity of cultural and situational factors (e.g., traditional community structures and high rates of poverty) that might often differ from the high-income and Western contexts that have featured prominently in I-O psychology research and practice. Moreover, I-O psychologists have had to utilize multiple research methods (e.g., ethnographic methods), have had to engage with multiple disciplinary perspectives (e.g., economics and public health), and have had to consider work phenomena on different levels of analysis (e.g., national and communal). As an example of nontraditional populations considered, unpaid volunteers are often a critically important part of humanitarian and international development work, and they present a range of challenges and considerations that differ from salaried employees (see Law & Hui, 2015).

McWha-Hermann and colleagues (2015) also note that I-O psychology has at least two unique strengths that are badly needed within the international development community. First, I-O psychologists have strong expertise in both for- and nonprofit organizational models and cultures—expertise that is critical in efforts, like the United Nations Global Compact, which endeavor to integrate the efforts of the private sector, public sector, and civil society in order to benefit global development priorities (see Cruse, 2015). Second, I-O psychologists have strong expertise in both the human-level of individual psychology and the system-level of teams, social groups, and organizations (see Yiu & Saner,
Such bridging perspectives can be important contributions to those of the disciplines that often dominate research and practice in international development (e.g., economics).

3. How can I-O psychologists support the SDGs in the future?

With the rise of the Sustainable Development Goals, goals that supersede the Millennium Development Goals, I-O psychology has a unique opportunity to learn from past lessons and to engage more effectively in support of global development priorities. We have thus far presented a case for why I-O psychologists have an important role to play in supporting international development priorities and highlighted lessons learned in pursuit of the MDGs; we now turn to you, the broader I-O psychology community, to help us to answer the question of how I-O psychology can and should support the SDGs.

As part of its mission to organize action within the I-O psychology community, SIOP’s team of representatives to the United Nations sponsored a roundtable discussion/conversation hour at the SIOP’s Annual Conference in 2015 in Philadelphia entitled Industrial-Organizational Psychology and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. One of the purposes of this session was to kick-start a conversation within the discipline about how I-O psychologists can and should support the SDGs. For example, one of the themes that emerged from that session was the difficulty that many I-O psychologists have in navigating and practically engaging with the diversity of actors in the international development system, including but not limited to various United Nations agencies, international nonprofits, and government agencies. To continue that conversation and to further support I-O psychology’s engagement with the SDGs, SIOP’s UN team has constructed a matrix that provides ideas, resources, and opportunities that synthesize I-O psychology topics with the SDGs. Examples of other ways in which the SIOP UN team is working to assist the integration of I-O psychology with the SDGs include sponsoring an initiative to have companies, departments, schools, and universities join the UN Global Compact. Moreover, the SIOP UN team continues to directly source the expertise and volunteered labor of I-O psychologists to assist the work of UN agencies (e.g., the United Nations Children’s Fund or UNICEF). For further examples and explanation, and to begin or continue your engagement with the SDGs, visit: www.siop.org/Prosocial/UN.aspx.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have argued that I-O psychology is closely linked to global development goals because (a) through the scientist–practitioner–humanist model, it can greatly assist the world’s greatest engine for economic growth and prosperity—the productivity and well-being of workers in the private sector; (b) it overtly considers the health and well-being of the world’s workforce; and (c) it has helped to assist the diversity of private-, public-, and civil-society organizations that explicitly support international developmental goals. We also argued that I-O psychology
should both galvanize and focus its efforts in light of the international developmental agenda because this will help to keep the discipline relevant to the vast majority of the world’s population, it will build bridges to other disciplines and sectors that are looking for I-O psychology’s expertise, and it will help I-O psychologists to effectively, collaboratively, and sustainably pursue their charge as I-O psychologists to support justice, fairness, human dignity, and self-determination.

The history of I-O psychology is replete with examples of how our research and practice has interfaced with the world’s greatest problems. The recent book by McWha-Hermann and colleagues (2015) is an important addition to that history, and it provides a wealth of lessons learned from the 15-year history of the MDGs. Moving forward, SIOP’s UN team remains devoted to assisting and accelerating I-O psychology’s integration with the global development agenda. As the world evolves from the MDGs, we call on all I-O psychologists to seriously consider how their work could contribute to the SDGs.

**References**


