The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) were adopted with great fanfare by every nation, including Japan, in 2015. These goals promised to achieve almost every imaginable good thing by 2030, including eradicating [poverty](#), [gender discrimination](#) and [hunger](#), tackling [corruption](#), [climate change](#), [chronic diseases](#) and [war](#), [ending](#) AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, ensuring everyone gets [energy](#), [education](#) and [jobs](#), while also boosting [artisanal fisheries](#), [sustainable tourism](#), [urban green spaces](#) and [organic produce](#).

Reading through the very long list shows there is no shortage of ways to do good – but it will leave the reader exhausted. Politicians wanted the goals to be all things to everyone, so they failed to focus, prioritize, or leave anything out. But saying everything is important means that nothing is.

Therefore, when we hit the half-way mark of the Goals late last year, the world found itself [far off track](#). Even the United Nation's own secretary general, Antonio Guterres admits the promises are failing. In September, at the conference to mark the mid-point of the Sustainable Development Goals, he said, "today, only 15 percent of the targets are on track and many are going in reverse. Instead of leaving no one behind, we risk leaving the SDGs behind."

Make no mistake—on most measures, the world is becoming better off. There could be no better time to be alive, thanks to the inroads we have made against extreme poverty, hunger, and illness. But while the world is getting better, we are failing badly at delivering on this agenda that – in the collective view of the governments of the world – would make things better still.

On recent progress, even ignoring the impacts of Covid, the promises will on average be achieved [half a century late](#). Many will take far longer: there has been no momentum at all on one-third of the promises, and some important indicators have even regressed. The [UN](#) estimates, for example, that on current progress it will take 286 years to close gender gaps in legal protection.

Promising everything was supposed to create a groundswell of public support and investment. That never happened. Resources have remained tight, and the adoption of the Goals did not speed up global progress on the key development indicators.

The UN is unwilling to reconsider its sprawling 169 promises; instead, it simply hopes for more money. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres wants governments to deliver an additional stimulus package of [$500 billion annually](#). Taxpayers will be reluctant to give even a fraction of that amount.

Moreover, asking for more money doesn't address the underlying problem of allocation, since even a massive increase would still be [20-times short](#) of the estimated full cost of delivering all promises. Who gets to decide where the half-trillion goes: the same officials who failed to focus in the first place?

What's needed is prioritization. The world can't achieve everything by 2030. Instead, we should try to achieve the most efficient things first.

My think-tank, the Copenhagen Consensus, has worked with more than a hundred of the world's top economists to identify [the most efficient policies](#) across all 169 promises for the world's poorer half — the 4.1 billion people in low- and lower-middle-income countries. We examined the social, environmental, and economic components of both benefits and costs.

Our new, peer-reviewed research—published in my latest book, "Best Things First", identifies 12 policies that deliver phenomenal returns worth more than $15 of social benefits for each dollar spent. Prioritizing these investments first would transform the sluggish delivery of the world's goals: For about $35 billion per year, we could save 4.2 million lives annually and make the poorer half of the world more than $1 trillion better off every year. A dollar invested would deliver an astounding $52 average of social benefits.

As one example: we should end the tuberculosis epidemic for good. Tuberculosis has been treatable for more than half a century, yet it still kills more than 1.4 million people annually. An additional $6.2 billion annually could enable much broader diagnosis and ensure most TB patients stay on their medication, reducing deaths by 90 percent by 2030. This would deliver benefits worth $46 for each dollar spent.

To address hunger, the most efficient policy is a second Green Revolution to enable farmers in poor countries to feed more people for less. Spending $5.5 billion per year on agricultural R&D to boost yields of casava, sorghum and other crops that have been overlooked by researchers in recent decades will improve productivity and climate change resilience, increase yields for farmers, reduce prices for consumers, and rescue more than 100 million more people from hunger each year. In total, each dollar will deliver an astounding $33 of social benefits.

Maternal and child health slipped during the COVID pandemic as resources and attention went elsewhere. Our research shows a simple package of policies could save the lives of 166,000 mothers and 1.2 million newborns annually, by incentivizing women to give birth in healthcare facilities, improving basic obstetric emergency care and expanding family planning access. At a cost of less than $5 billion annually, the package delivers an astounding $87 back on the dollar.

Proven educational policies like learning at the right level and structured pedagogy can increase learning outcomes 2-3-fold. The cost of these policies is almost $10 billion. But better-educated school children become more productive when they enter the workforce, which will raise their future discounted, lifetime incomes by more than $600 billion.

One unfortunate reality that emerges when we look at this analysis is that many of the world's biggest development organizations such as the World Bank focus much attention and firepower on projects that aren't the most effective, such as on climate or clean drinking water and sanitation. The research doesn't suggest these are necessarily all bad investments—but they are certainly not the most effective place to spend scarce resources first.

In contrast, the 12 policies highlighted in "Best Things First" are cost-effective and transformative. All twelve policies focus on the poorer half of the world because that is where a limited amount of money can achieve the most good first.

Across the 12 policies, philanthropists, development agencies, and politicians can achieve enormous benefits at low cost. Crucially, we should all push our politicians to stop promising everything and urge them to start focusing on the best things first. When a donor country is doing a bit of everything, it forgoes the opportunity to do the best things first. We need to start demanding that our politicians and development institutions, in Japan and across the world, put the most money where it does the most good.

Overview of annual costs and benefits of the 12 policies, in no particular order, in 2023$, averaged over 2023-30. Costs are separated into financial costs and non-financial costs (like time costs for mothers getting their child immunized). The total cost for all 12 policies is $41 billion annually, but since $6 billion is non-financial, world leaders only need to come up with $35 billion per year. Take Agricultural R&D: It delivers $184 billion in benefits per year at a cost of $5.5 billion annually, meaning the Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) is $33 in benefits per dollar spent (or similarly in any other currency, so ¥33 back on each yen).

	Lives saved	Economic benefits	Total cost	Whereof non-financial cost	BCR
Tuberculosis	0.6 million		$6.2 billion	$1.0 billion enabler cost	46
Maternal and newborn health	1.4 million	$40 billion higher growth from the demographic dividend	$4.9 billion	$2.1 billion time cost	87
Malaria	0.2 million	$10 billion avoided productivity losses and health expenditure	$1.1 billion		48
Nutrition	about 18,000	$19 billion boost to lifetime income and saved expenditure	$1.4 billion	$0.2 billion time cost	18
Chronic diseases	1.5 million		$4.4 billion	$0.2 billion consumer loss	23
Childhood immunization	0.5 million		$1.7 billion	$0.2 billion time cost	101
Education		$604 billion annual boost to lifetime income	$9.8 billion		65
Agricultural R&D		$184 billion consumer and producer surplus	$5.5 billion		33
e-Procurement		$10 billion saved expenditure	$76 million		125
Land tenure security		$37 billion higher farm productivity and urban land value	$1.8 billion		21
Trade		$166 billion income increase	$1.7 billion		95
Skilled migration		$49 billion higher productivity, $6 billion demographic gain	$2.8 billion	$2.6 billion demographic loss	20
Total saved lives	4.2 million				
Total $	**$1 trillion**	**$1.1 trillion**	**$41 billion**	**$6 billion**	**52**