

## South Korea's Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the "Better Life for Girls" Initiative

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In January 2016, the world began a new initiative to end poverty by 2030 and to bring about economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable development through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) announced at the UN in 2015. The SDGs include seventeen goals which were developed in a truly global and democratic process. Since about 2012, the world was engaged in discussing new global challenges in preparation for the post-Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) era.<sup>1</sup> At the 2012 Rio + 20 Meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the world leaders, UN and other international organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and others gathered to discuss how the world had changed since the first Rio meeting in 1992 to discuss the early phases of climate change (UN 2012). By 2012, the world was faced with greater challenges compared to 1992 due to fast-progressing climate change, degradation of the environment and increases in pollution, and depletion of natural resources. And the ongoing challenges in social development were reported in the *MDGs Report* (UN 2015), which pointed to the need to work harmoniously for socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable development. These three pillars of development needed to be integrated in a way which reflected how the world thought about global challenges and, more importantly, how the world envisioned creative solutions which should be inclusive of every person and every nation. Thus, the world embarked on one of the most ambitious and democratic processes to bring together

the voices of all citizens of the world. The UN process included an eminent persons groups led by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and many regional and national processes that took place around the world. Civil society organizations and individuals participated in this process, and many on-line votes and dialogues were happening all around the world. Finally, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was formally adopted at the UN General Assembly along with seventeen ambitious global goals as embodied in the SDGs. The world agreed to "Leave No One Behind" by 2030 (UN 2016).

The 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial High-Level Meeting of Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) took place at the UN headquarters in New York on July 21-22, 2016 as part of the High-level Segment of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The President of ECOSOC is Ambassador Oh Joon of South Korea,

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who is serving a one-year term which began in July 2015. It is noteworthy that the South Korean government and its officials are increasingly playing a greater role in the UN arena. ECOSOC is a forum for discussing major global economic and social issues, and is one of the six principal organs of the UN. An important mission of ECOSOC is to monitor the implementation of SDGs around the world.

The SDGs, which include a much more ambitious and inclusive agenda compared to the MDGs, present some challenges for monitoring. First, the SDGs were developed with a keen concern about growing economic inequality in the world. Compared to the era of MDGs, inequality was not only significant among countries, but within countries as well. While MDGs were focused on the inequality between the developed and developing countries, and the former were to provide support for the latter, the SDGs recognize that there is serious inequality within a country regardless of whether it is developed or developing. Thus, in the SDGs, developed countries are encouraged to address their domestic problems in conjunction with the support they are providing developing countries in the form of development cooperation (i.e., official development assistance (ODA)). This also means that developed countries should have domestic/internal processes to implement the SDGs. Second, the SDGs include a much more comprehensive set of goals compared to the MDGs' social development goals: economic development goals focusing on providing decent work for all, promoting sustainable economic growth, building sustainable infrastructure, and making cities and human settlements inclusive. While the MDGs focused on providing basic education and healthcare, the SDGs will now make sure that educated and healthy people can work and participate fully in the economy. The environmental goals deal with climate change and the ramifications of development on the environment and natural resources. Of the seventeen goals of the SDGs, environment-related goals are quite extensive and specialized which

attest to the urgency and seriousness of environmental problems.

With such a wide range of issues and both domestic and global problems to tackle, monitoring implementation of the SDGs at the global, bi-lateral, multi-lateral, and domestic levels is quite challenging. The work of ECOSOC and DCF will have to deal with these challenges and identify workable mechanisms.

### **South Korea's Contributions to Implementing the SDGs**

The South Korean government has promised to focus on several initiatives in an effort to fulfill the SDGs. It has committed within its various development cooperation policies and implementation plans that it would implement SDGs to the fullest. The South Korean government volunteered to share its experience of working on the SDGs in the international and domestic processes at the 2016 UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development in July 2016.

In advance of the SDG era which began in 2016, President Park Geun-hye announced at the UN Sustainable Development Summit on September 26, 2015 several initiatives the South Korean government would implement to support the SDGs including *Saemaul Undong* (New Village Movement), support for education and global citizenship education, and global health security. Many of the initiatives have come from South Korea's own experience of poverty reduction and social-economic development. It was particularly meaningful that President Park announced the "Better Life for Girls" initiative in order to promote healthcare and education for girls in developing countries from 2016 to 2020 with a total of 200 million USD in grant aid. This is based on the findings from *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* (UN 2015), which showed that goals 4 and 5 of the MDGs were the farthest from reaching their targets of reducing infant mortality and improv-



ing maternal health, respectively. The two goals represent the key in maternal and child healthcare (MCH). And the SDGs promised to continue with the unfinished business from the MDGs' era which most importantly included the MCH goals. Unlike some of the other initiatives that have been borne out of South Korea's own experience, the Better Life for Girls was a global agenda which was developed from a careful examination of the critical need in global public health.

Research has shown that an important missing link in improving MCH lies in the age we intervene to provide support for MDGs' goals 4 and 5 (Kim et al. 2015). MDGs and other global and local efforts to improve MCH tended to focus on adult women over the age of 18. However, many developing countries had high rates of pregnancy and childbirth by girls younger than 18, and in the worst cases, girls as young as 9 were pregnant and giving birth. Statistics show that one-eighth of all births in developing countries are from young mothers, girls actually, between the ages of 15 and 19 (UN 2009; WHO 2011). In forty-two developing countries, over 2.5 million girls give birth under the age of 16, and about 50% of these births are from young mothers who are younger than 15 (Neal et al. 2012, UN 2009). And, nearly half of all deaths of women between the ages of 10 and 24 are due in large part to maternal and pregnancy-related complications (Patton et al. 2009).

Thus, the missing link in the MDGs for MCH is the age we intervene to offer help. We need to target young girls before they reach adulthood in order to fix this problem. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international organizations have different definitions for the age of girls. Of these different definitions, it is important to take one of WHO's recommendations to provide the HPV vaccine to girls starting at the age of 9 in order to prevent cervical cancer, and to target most girls before menarche (WHO 2016).

Going beyond reducing the age of intervention for MCH to 9 years old, we address the social issue of whether young girls should be forced into early mar-

riage, pregnancy and childbirth, and child-rearing responsibilities, which prevent them from having a life as a young girl with all the privileges of youth, education, and health rather than simply providing medical care so that mothers can have healthy pregnancy and have childbirth assisted by medical doctors and nurses, or trained midwives. In particular, research has shown that young girls need education to be healthy, and to be free from unwanted early marriage, pregnancy and child-birth, which in some cases come from forced marriages due to poverty and other causes, as well as sexual violence (UNESCO 2012). Thus, intervention for MCH for girls at the age of 9 to 18 should include not only good healthcare, but provision of a life that respects the basic human rights of girls to live a life free from fear and free from force.

Research findings show that focusing on and improving girls' comprehensive health could help improve infant mortality and maternal health. At present, young girls around the world are exposed to unwanted early marriage, pregnancy, and child-rearing. According to UNICEF (2014), early marriage (i.e., marriage before 18) is concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The percentage of women getting married before age 18 was 56% in South Asia, while India alone represents one third of the early marriages worldwide. In West and Central Africa, the percentage was 46% while it was 38% in Eastern and Southern Africa. The top ten countries with the highest percentage of early marriage were located in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The share was highest in Niger at 77%, followed by 74% in Bangladesh, 69% in Chad, 61% in Mali and 60% in Central African Republic. The number of girls who married before the age of 18 is expected to be more than 700 million around the world. More importantly, girls facing severe levels of poverty are more likely to be exposed to early marriage regardless of region and nation. UNICEF (2014) estimates that females in the poorest quintile are 2.5 times more likely to face child marriage than those in the wealthiest quintile.



The issue of girls' health is not limited to girls themselves. Girls that experience early marriage often face limited opportunities for education, health, and employment. They also have a harder time protecting themselves against unwanted and unsafe sex as well as sexually transmitted diseases, and it is difficult for them to have safe pregnancies and deliveries. Girls who marry at a young age tend to have more children to look after than those who marry as adults (UNICEF 2014). In addition, girls' health is directly related to that of their babies and family members. The younger the mother's age, the more health problems children may experience such as mortality, underweight, stunting, and diarrhea (CGD 2009). Yet, girls are discriminated and excluded from medical services and global public health projects. Not only is there lack of youth-friendly health services, but girls are often excluded from the teen-targeted development projects as well.

Therefore, it is important that girls' health becomes the focus of global development assistance for assuring better lives for not only girls, but for all. As we move into the SDG era, it is important to focus on comprehensive health for girls as a catalyst to improve goals 4 and 5 of the MDGs that failed to meet their targets, and to reach the SDGs including the SDGs' goal 3 of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all people at all ages and the SDGs' goal 5 of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

## Conclusion

South Korea is an emerging donor of official development assistance (ODA), which has itself transformed from a major recipient of ODA from the end of the Second World War and through the Korean War and in the post-war reconstruction and development period. As one of a handful of recipient nations that has effectively and efficiently used aid for poverty reduction and economic development, it has become a

poster child for foreign aid. Although South Korea's experience of rapid poverty reduction and economic development occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developing countries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to look to South Korea for secret recipes of success and for help through ODA since there are not many other countries with such success stories.

As an emerging donor, South Korea has carved out an important niche in the global development cooperation community. It has been much more vocal in SDGs and other development cooperation arenas compared to other emerging donors, and has begun to share its development experience as an alternative to what international organizations and other Western and/or traditional donors have provided. The "Better Life for Girls" initiative is an example of what the South Korean government is willing to do to lead in the world's development, so that no one is left behind by 2030. ■

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<sup>1</sup> The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were announced at the UN in 2001 with eight goals to reduce extreme poverty and bring social development in the developing world had a timeline to end at 2015. The term “Post-MDGs” was used to refer to what the world should collectively work on for global development after the MDGs. Since the SDGs were not formally adopted and announced at the UN until September 2015, the term Post-MDGs was used until the SDGs were announced.

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