

ANNUAL LETTER 2013

Highlights from Bill Gates' Annual Letter:

"The lives of the poorest have improved more rapidly in the last 15 years than ever before."

The power of measurement: "You can achieve amazing progress if you set a clear goal and find a measure that will drive progress toward that goal."

"The process I have described—setting clear goals, picking the right approach, and then measuring results to get feedback and refine the approach continually—helps us to deliver tools and services to everybody who will benefit."

"From time to time we should step back and celebrate the achievements that come with having the right goals—combined with political will, generous aid, and innovation in tools and their delivery."

"Given a goal, you decide on what key variable you need to change to achieve it—the same way a business picks objectives for inside the company like customer satisfaction—and develop a plan for change and a way of measuring the change. You use the measurement as feedback to make adjustments. I think a lot of efforts fail because they don't focus on the right measure or they don't invest enough in doing it accurately."

Innovation in measurement: "Thanks to cell phones, satellites, and cheap sensors, we can gather and organize data with increasing speed and accuracy."

Measurement and government spending: "Given how tight budgets are around the world, governments are rightfully demanding effectiveness in the programs they pay for."

"Targeting an explicit goal focused political will and opened purse strings to pay for large-scale immunization campaigns that led to very rapid progress."

"However, since the goals were clear and concrete, they brought focus to the highest priorities. The UN agencies, donor countries, and developing countries looked at which programs would achieve the goals at the lowest cost. They saw that many programs were not delivering interventions in an effective way. They started demanding more rigorous evaluation to measure effectiveness. In some cases, the goals were used to persuade countries to pursue pro-poor policies."

"This is one of the benefits of measurement—the ability it gives government leaders to make comparisons across countries, find who's doing well, and then learn from the best."

"A decade ago, there was no official record of a child's birth or death in rural Ethiopia. At the Germana Gale post, I saw charts of immunizations, malaria cases, and other health data plastered to walls. Each indicator had an annual target and a quarterly target. All this data goes into a government information system to generate regular reports. Government officials meet every two months to go over the reports to see where things are working and take action in places where they aren't."

Bill on Aid:

“Historically, aid was discussed largely in terms of the total amount of money invested. But now that we’re more precisely measuring indicators like child mortality, people are able to see the impact aid has in stark terms—that it’s the difference between putting people on HIV treatment or letting them die.”

“The good news on resources is that many developing countries have growing economies that allowed them to devote more resources to helping their poorest people.”

“Still, aid is critical. It helps meet the basic needs of people in the poorest countries. It funds innovation—in the creation of new tools and services and in their delivery. Unfortunately, aid generosity is threatened by big deficits in almost all of the rich countries. Unless voters hear about the positive impact their generosity is having, they’ll inevitably focus on issues closer to home. A single story, true or not, about a small amount of aid being misused can cloud the entire field. Imagine how you would feel about investing if every article you read was only about stocks that did poorly and not about the big successes.”

Bill on the Tragic Death of Polio Vaccinators:

“The insecurity in Pakistan and Afghanistan represents another challenge for the campaign. In December nine polio vaccinators in Pakistan were murdered. It is unimaginable to me why health workers, whose only goal was to improve children’s health and end polio, were targeted. In my eyes the victims are heroes, and the best way to respect their memory is to finish the job they gave their lives for. The polio program will continue, with additional efforts to improve the safety of workers and to increase the support of community leaders. The global polio community is now finalizing a detailed plan that I believe should allow us to finish the job of polio eradication within the next six years.”

Bill on the MDGs:

“The concrete MDG goal of reducing child mortality by two-thirds created a clear target for success or failure. Ethiopia’s commitment to the MDGs attracted unprecedented amounts of donor money to help improve its primary health care services.”

“The MDG target of reducing extreme poverty by half has been reached ahead of the deadline, as has the goal of halving the proportion of people who lack access to safe drinking water.”

“The success of the MDGs means that there is a lot of interest in expanding them to include a broader set of issues. But many of the potential new goals don’t have unanimous support, and adding many new goals, or goals that are not easily measurable, may sap momentum.”

“The MDGs were coherent because they focused on helping the poorest people in the world. The groups that needed to work together on the MDGs were easy to identify, and they could be held accountable for cooperation and progress. When the UN reaches agreement on other important goals like mitigating climate change they should consider whether a different set of actors and a separate process might be best for those efforts.”