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2030 Agenda and the SDGs: Indicator framework, monitoring and reporting

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On 11 March 2016 the UN Statistical Commission agreed "as a practical starting point" with the proposed global indicator framework by which to measure progress towards the 17 goals and 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It recognized that the development of a robust and high quality indicator framework is a process that will need to continue over time and authorized the Interagency and Expert Group for Sustainable Development Goals (IAEG-SDGs) to continue its work, including:

- to take into account the specific proposals for refinements of the global indicators made by Member States;
- to report on progress made on developing and improving the global indicators, and provide its proposals and a plan for regular reviews of the indicator framework, including mechanisms for approval;
- to report on plans to develop methodologies for those indicators for which definitions and standards have yet to be developed.

The Global Indicator Framework

Taking the global framework as a whole, several of the indicators stretch the envelope, especially from the perspective of rights. The indicators to measure progress on gender equality and on decent work for all are cross-cutting throughout the goals, and include those to measure the right to paid employment and to rights at work; to equal pay for work of equal value; to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work; to reduce inequalities in income and social protection coverage; to measure the right to economic resources and ownership and control of land and property. Target 10.3 focuses not only on equality of opportunity but also of outcome, offering scope for civil society monitoring. The selection of the indicator on people's experiences of discrimination and harassment to measure this target may be a starting point through which to capture the promise of "no one will be left behind".

However, looking at the global framework against the stated priorities of the 2030 Agenda shows a number of gaps, notably with regard to common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and extra-territorial obligations as well as reducing inequalities.

Inequalities

While the targets and indicators under Goals 5 and 8 go some way to measuring inequalities within countries, including developed countries, there is currently nothing to measure inequality between countries—or the policies that help to perpetuate these.

Within countries, there is no measure (Gini coefficient/Palma ratio) of inequality, despite the inclusion of this indicator as one of two alternatives in the original (February 2015) list submitted by the IAEG-SDGs and that second alternative—change in real disposable income and consumption by quintiles—is revised to look only at per capita income among the bottom 40 percent. If the target itself addresses only the bottom 40 percent of the population, how can the goal of reducing income inequalities at least be achieved without focusing on the richest quintile, particularly the top 1 percent?

With regard to policy measures, under target 17.9, to implement effective and targeted capacity building to support national plans for sustainable development, the proposed measure to "implement a policy mix" to achieve the goals that includes the elements of reducing inequality has been omitted to focus only on the dollar value of financial and technical assistance.

In addition, given that neglected groups and areas tend to disappear in national averages, the fact that the framework now includes less data disaggregation rather than more, is a failure to conform to the ambition of the 2030 Agenda, particularly regarding its overarching commitment to leave no one behind. How reach "the furthest behind first" if don't know who they are?

Given Member State commitment "to developing broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product" and the inclusion of a specific target (#17.19) to meet this, it is alarming that there are no indicators by which to measure progress and that the proposal for an Inclusive Wealth Index was abandoned.

Thus despite its universal framing, the responsibilities of the rich, including extraterritorial responsibilities, remain largely outside the framework. How is it possible to measure vulnerability to global power dynamics vs. power to shape them? Some countries are extremely vulnerable to the consequences of rules on debt or trade for example with little or no power to shape these rules. The same is true of global tax rules. How can we measure progress towards achieving the SDGs by middle-income countries without addressing this dynamic? Is there scope to correct this at national and regional levels?

*From * to final: what changed?*

The global indicator framework was developed through successive rounds of consultations and revisions, from February until December 31, 2015. Indicators were classified and reclassified via color coding into agreed indicators, those for which there was readily available and comparable data, and those on which there was no agreement or needed further development.

While most of the proposed global indicators were agreed by late 2015, 80 were marked with an asterisk as lacking agreement or needing further development. In the final round of revision, most of the asterisked indicators had been either accepted as proposed or only slightly revised. In addition, 10 indicators were added; 5 deleted, and 8 flagged for alignment with the Sendai framework, due later this year. The revisions include a mix, some positive, others alarming. For example, positive changes include:

- Under Target 1.4, "ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources", etc.: While the *indicator, #1.4.1, proportion of population living in households with access to basic services was retained, a new indicator, #1.4.2 will measure the proportion of the adult population with secure tenure rights to land, with legally recognized documentation and who perceive their rights to land as secure, by sex and by type of tenure.
- Under Target 17.13, "enhance global macroeconomic stability, including through policy coordination and policy coherence": The proposed indicator #17.13.1 was changed from "GDP" to "Macroeconomic dashboard."
- Under Target 8.8, protect labour rights and promote safe and security working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, especially women, and those in precarious employment: The proposed indicator on the total number of ILO conventions ratified by type is revised to emphasize "compliance with labour rights, and specify "freedom of association and collective bargaining, based on ILO textural sources and national legislation, by sex and migrant status".
- Under Target 12.2, to achieve sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources: Indicator #12.2.2 is "Domestic material consumption, and domestic material consumption per capita, per GDP".
- Under Target 12.8 on information and awareness for sustainable development: "Climate change education" is added to indicator #12.8.1 on the extent to which "education for sustainable development is mainstreamed in education policies, curricula, teacher education and student assessment".
- Under Target 16.10, to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms: Indicator #16.10.2 now reads "Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information." And some revisions have added to already identified policy actions, the extent to which they are communicated.
- There are also some changes that serve to limit and at times distort, the intention of the targets:
- Under Target 10.5, to improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets, the proposed indicator #10.5.1: "Adoption of global financial transaction tax (Tobin tax)" is changed to "Financial Soundness Indicators", which have been developed by the IMF.
- Under Target 14.2, to sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems, the indicator on the use of "an ecosystem approach" was revised to omit the specification that such an approach "builds resilient human communities" and "provides for equitable benefit sharing and decent work".
- Under Target 16.5, to reduce corruption and bribery, the need to disaggregate data by "age group, sex, region and population group" was omitted from proposed indicator #16.5.1 on

the proportion of persons who paid or were asked for or paid a bribe by an official.

- And while the adoption of indicator #16.7.2, “the proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age and disability is welcome, it replaces an indicator on “the proportion of countries that address young people’s multi-sectoral needs in national development plans and poverty reduction strategies”, which is not captured elsewhere.
- Under a target to enhance policy coherence, proposed indicator #17.15.1, “Numbers of constraints that are embodied in official development assistance or loan agreements, international investment agreements, regional trade agreements” etc., is revised to omit reference to constraints and read: “extent of use of country owned results frameworks and planning tools by providers of development cooperation”.
- Under the target to enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, proposed indicator #17.16.1 , “mutual accountability among development cooperation actors strengthened through inclusive reviews”, which was proposed by civil society and included in the *indicator framework, is changed to “number of countries reporting progress in multi-stakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks”.
- Under a target on investment promotion regimes for LDCs, proposed indicator #17.5.1: “Number of national and investment policy reforms adopted that incorporate sustainable development objectives or safeguards by country”, is revised to “number of countries that adopt & implement investment promotion regimes for LDCs”. Arguably this is closer to the intention of the target but nevertheless a lost opportunity.

Moreover, in a number of cases, proposed indicators are revised to eliminate key measures:

- Under a target on international support for capacity building, indicator #17.9.1 is simplified to omit reference to “implementing a holistic policy mix that aims at sustainable development in 3 dimensions (including reducing inequality within a country and governance)”.
- Under a target to enhance policy coherence, the single indicator #17.14.1 was simplified to omit references to “countries ratifying fundamental ILO conventions and recommendations & adopting carbon pricing mechanisms to say number of countries with “mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development”. A proposal by civil society to expand the ILO list was not taken on board.
- Under a target to develop progress measures that complement GDP, indicator #17.19.2: “Inclusive wealth index”, which might have focused on inequalities at the top as well as the bottom, is removed. The new indicator is “countries conducting population and housing census and achieving 100% birth and 80% death registration”. As this is basic to measuring progress across the targets, it could be included as an indicator under capacity building. While important to GDP in terms of accuracy the purpose of the target is to assess progress on complementary measures, and the removal of the indicator for an Inclusive Wealth Index is a loss.

The tyranny of comparability?

The Statistical Commission charge to the IAEG-SDGs to develop and improve the global indicators emphasizes the importance of “guaranteeing international comparability”. However, the UN Statistics Division (UNSD) has repeatedly stated that the global indicators are intended for global follow up and review and are not necessarily applicable to all national and regional contexts. This reflects the recognition that there is widespread distrust on part of many developing countries that, notwithstanding assurances that the framework is global, the emphasis on comparability will pressure countries to use the global framework as the starting point, thereby running the risk of multiplying its weaknesses (without securing its strengths).

Follow-up and Review

The 2030 Agenda states that the primary responsibility for follow-up and review lies with Governments, and that at the global level the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) will have the central role in overseeing the process, and will also “promote system-wide coherence and coordination of sustainable development policies. It should ensure that the Agenda remains relevant and ambitious and should focus on the assessment of progress, achievements and challenges faced by developed and developing countries as well as new and emerging issues.”

It is also “mandated to conduct national reviews and thematic reviews of the implementation of the Agenda, with inputs from other intergovernmental bodies and forums, relevant UN entities, regional processes, major groups and other stakeholders”.

The 2030 Agenda rejected the concept of "accountability" in favour of "follow-up and review". Could the failure of Member States to agree on a universal reporting and accountability process be somewhat mitigated by the continuing work of the IAEG-SDGs? It will be essential to assess all of the indicators in terms of who benefits and who is accountable. The Statistical Commission has requested the IAEG-SDGs to take into account the specific proposals by Member States on refining the indicators, many of which address the need to capture disparities at the top of the income spectrum and not just the bottom. Will this be an opportunity to adopt an indicator to measure or monitor reducing extreme wealth?

"There are enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power…"

The 2030 Agenda could further development, peace, and sustainability to the extent that it can address the root causes of multi-dimensional violence and reach the most marginalized. The addition of an indicator for many of the targets that measures disparities within countries along income, residential location, gender or ethnic lines could be a step forward. This figure should be included alongside the average measure to support efforts not only to increase or decrease the national average but also to decrease the gaps. The data is available, and was utilized in several of the last MDG reports, to measure disparities in income and/or location for some indicators, such as working poverty, hunger, education, health, and access to clean drinking water.

Goals for the Rich

Will the IAEG-SDGs' ongoing review and refinement process revisit the indicators under Goal 17 proposed by several civil society organizations in a joint statement during the consultation process including those focused on "goals for the rich"?

Several of these seek to assess constraints to policy coherence, including trade and investment treaties and loan agreements as well corporate tax avoidance and drains on the public purse through outsourcing development to the corporate sector. While target 3.b specifically refers to the TRIPS provisions that allow developing countries to produce generic medicines, bilateral, and regional trade agreements typically include binding arbitration provisions that make that impossible. An indicator that should be added to assess the impact of trade on sustainable development would be the number of disputes brought against countries through trade and investment dispute settlement processes. Another indicator, #17.15.1, number of constraints embodied in ODA or loan agreements, was actually in the previous framework, albeit marked with an asterisk, but removed in the final one.

For target 17.3—to mobilize additional financial resources—a suggested indicator on the percentage of tax paid by multi-national corporations within host countries was not adopted in the final framework.

Target 17.17 on public, public-private, and civil society partnerships is another case where indicators need improving. Even the OECD has pointed out that "indicators proposed so far only deal with public-private partnerships (PPPs), and focus on specific projects and investments. The wording of target 17.17 suggests a broader coverage of partnerships may be intended."

There are ways to do this, as the joint civil society statement made clear. While questioning the inclusion of PPPs in the delivery of any essential services, the group proposed one indicator to measure the existence of binding human rights/environmental protection frameworks to regulate these partnerships, including periodic impact assessments. In addition to proposing an indicator on contributions to PPPs by source, they also advocated indicators to assess the value of public-private partnerships in terms of their contribution to sustainable development. These include:

- the number of public-(for profit) private partnerships that deliver greater value for achieving the SDGs than public or private finance alone;
- the number of public-(for profit) private partnerships that include full transparency of contracts, terms, and assessment results, and subject to the highest international environmental and social safeguards.

Including these indicators would do much to capture the universal nature of the Agenda, as would restoring such indicators as the Palma ratio, or at least the (UN standard) Gini coefficient, to measure inequality and the Tobin tax on financial transactions.

Despite the addition of a measure of domestic material consumption in the current framework, the global indicator set shows limited attention to consumption and production patterns, particularly those relevant for the rich.

One option that could be explored is combining the Human Development Index with the Global Footprint Network's Ecological Footprint in order to show where countries are positioned in terms of the ecological sustainability of their development. Such a comparison, as the joint civil society statement proposed, could illustrate the continued relevance of the CBDR principle, and point out that while countries pursue universal SDGs their pathway and priorities to reach them will be different.

Reverse the slippery slope

The fact that the framework has been sent back for refinement is an opportunity for the statisticians to take these and other recommendations from Member States and civil society on board. While much is made of the distinction between the technical work of the IAEG-SDGs and the political decisions by Member States, it is clear that the border is more fluid.

Acknowledging this, the UN Statistical Commission also set up the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for post-2015 monitoring, partnership and coordination (HLG). The HLG's most recent report notes that it "can help shape the interaction between the technical and political aspects of the work on indicators, and that it will define mechanisms to make recommendations to the IAEG-SDGs on strategic issues at the country level, including the use and interpretation of indicators and means of implementation." The UNSD also emphasizes that the HLG can help to make connections among issues, such as setting SDG indicators, the data revolution and the transformative agenda for official statistics. Does this open space for better indicators over time?

The January 2016 HLG report states that "data and information from existing reporting mechanisms should be used where possible". Does this open an opportunity for other reports, including shadow reports? This has become an accepted part of the reporting process for treaty bodies such as UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESRC), and allows for the broader representation of views from civil society organizations. While the number of reporting countries will not be automatic or comprehensive, such a development could lead to a mechanism for NGO reporting as part of the official process.

Looking at the overall process of elaborating the goals, targets, and indicators, the progression reveals a downward trend: with some exceptions, the set of goals are more ambitious than the targets, and the targets are more ambitious the indicators.

The HLPF must face its responsibility to reverse this slippery slope.

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