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UN SDG progress reports: how statistics play favorites

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As key instruments to assess implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the UN secretariat has published The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018 and a report on Progress Towards Sustainable Development Goals that should inform the ministers attending the High Level Political Forum of ECOSOC to be held mid-July in New York. Both publications aim to "provide a global overview of the current situation" of the SDGs, "based on the latest available data for indicators in the global indicator framework" and they include the same set of numbers and indicators, only differing in their presentation, the latter being more wordy and text-only and the former a collection of bullet points with ample use of graphs.

While reiterating that "the availability of quality, accessible, open, timely and disaggregated data is vital for evidence-based decision-making and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda" the emphasis on some indicators while ignoring others, an arbitrary management of disaggregation and an inconsistent use or disregard of trends results in a message that fails to convey the "sense of urgency" that UN Secretary-General António Guterres speaks about in his foreword. Even worse, the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" of all countries is absent, and the report systematically ignores or downplays evidence of developed countries' contribution to the present un-sustainability of the planet or unfair appropriation of its resources.

A "note to the reader" explains that the reporting "is based on the latest available data as of May 2018 on selected indicators of the global SDG framework" (developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators) and that "the indicators presented are those for which sufficient data are available to provide an overview at the regional and global levels".

The elaboration of this framework has been a cumbersome process (see "The Ups and Downs of Tiers: Measuring SDG Progress" and "SDG indicators: The forest is missing") with over 200 indicators being classified in three tiers. Tier I includes those with "internationally established methodology" and data regularly produced for at least half of the countries. Tier II indicators meet the same methodological requirements but lack enough data coverage and Tier III groups those whose methodology and standards are still being discussed.

Corporate contribution: reporting but not investing

While the small print of the note to the reader seems to suggest that only Tier I indicators are included, in fact many Tier II indicators have been selected (without any explanation of the criteria) and even some Tier III indicators are used. For example, SDG target 12.6 seeks to "encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices". While both indicators to measure this target remain at Tier III owing to lack of established methodology, the SDG Report quotes the private auditing firm KPMG to inform readers that "93 percent of the world's 250 largest companies are now reporting on sustainability".

This positive achievement is the only mention of corporations in the whole report, which is remarkable, considering the high expectations placed on the private sector for SDG implementation and the hopes that they can help mobilize "trillions" in foreign investment for the SDGs.

In fact, UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2018 states: "Global flows of foreign direct investment fell by 23 percent in 2017. Cross-border investment in developed and transition economies dropped sharply, while growth was near zero in developing economies. With only a very modest recovery predicted for 2018, this negative trend is a long-term concern for policymakers worldwide, especially for developing countries."

Secretary-General Guterres has commended this UNCTAD report as "a timely contribution to an important debate" but these numbers on foreign investment, produced by a UN agency and available for a majority of countries are not included in the SDG report, even when explicitly demanded by implementation targets (see targets 10.b, 17.3, 17.5, etc.).

While an effort is made to find something positive to say about big corporations, noted as a challenge is "the lack of expertise and resources for reporting by small and medium-sized enterprises, which play a key role in some economies, especially in developing countries." SDG target 9.3 promises to "increase the access of small-scale industrial and other enterprises, in particular in developing countries, to financial services (...) and their integration into value chains and markets". But the indicators for that target are not included, even when they were upgraded from Tier III to Tier II after a long debate, not about the data but about the definition of "small-scale industries".

If a business source like KPMG can be validated to report on a target for which the indicators are officially classified as Tier III, on the relatively minor issue of corporate self-reporting, why leave out a vital indicator for any sustainability analysis like fossil fuel subsidies? Target 12.c seeks to "rationalize" those subsidies "that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions". Extensive databases on fossil fuels subsidies are being kept by the OECD, by the International Energy Agency and by the fiscal affairs department of the IMF. Nevertheless these numbers are not included in the report.

Another major unexplained exclusion can be found on the first of the SDGs, the one on poverty. The report celebrates that "the rate of extreme poverty has fallen rapidly: in 2013 it was a third of the 1990 value". But it only considers the World Bank poverty rate of $1.90 a day for that conclusion, ignoring the fact that the World Bank itself has set higher poverty lines for middle income countries and that target 1.2 of the SDGs explicitly seeks to reduce poverty in all countries "in all its dimensions according to national definitions". The numbers and definitions for poverty in rich countries are easy to obtain, Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, made international headlines with his recent finding that "40 million Americans live in poverty; 18.5 million live in extreme poverty; and 5.3 million Americans live in Third World conditions of absolute poverty", with children comprising one-third of the people living in poverty in the United States. Yet none of this finds an echo in the official SDG report.

Food and broadband: To have or not to have

"Absolute poverty" (now relabelled "extreme poverty") was defined by then World Bank president Robert McNamara in 1973 as "a condition of life so degraded by disease, illiteracy, malnutrition, and squalor as to deny its victims basic human necessities". Half a century later, how can we celebrate poverty reduction in SDG 1 (based on a narrow income-based definition of poverty) and then report on SDG 2 that "world hunger appears to be on the rise again"? The report does not comment on the apparent contradiction of an estimate of malnourished people (815 million in 2016) that is higher than the supposedly decreasing number of those under the extreme poverty line (783 million in 2013), forgetting that the World Bank itself considers that "malnutrition not only perpetuates income poverty, it is itself an indicator of poverty".

"Conflict, drought and disasters linked to climate change" are listed by the SDG Report as "among the key factors" of the rise in malnutrition. Yet, no link is made to the finding of the same report that "one-fifth of the Earth's land surface covered by vegetation showed persistent and declining trends in productivity from 1999 to 2013, threatening the livelihoods of over one billion people", which is an indicator listed for SDG 15. Similarly, the high death rate by "unintentional poisonings" in low-income countries is reported under SDG 3 on health (target 3.9) but without linking it to excessive use of pesticides, which is its direct cause. The targets mandating countries to "ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices" (target 2.4) and to "double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers" (target 2.3) are not even mentioned.

To make matters more difficult, some indicators seem to contradict each other. Indicator 9.c.1, for example, states that "by 2016, the proportion of population covered by a 3G mobile broadband network (which allows for Internet access) stood at 61 percent in the LDCs and 84 percent globally. If this trend continues, LDCs are on track to reach over 90 percent mobile broadband coverage by 2020".

Yet, further down, in the Means of Implementation chapter, indicator 17.6.2 tells us that "high-speed fixed broadband Internet connection remains largely inaccessible across the developing world" since "in 2016, only 6 percent of the population in these countries had access to high-speed fixed broadband Internet, compared to 24 percent in the developed regions."

This contradiction is not explained in the report, even when the ITU has already observed that "this paradox of connectivity versus use suggests that connectivity remains only one of the barriers to Internet use; it is important to take into account the affordability of services, but also socio-economic factors", which lead to the debate on poverty and inequalities...

Suicidal or children beater?

Developed countries are praised in the analysis of the Climate Goal (SDG 13) because they "continue to make progress towards reaching the goal of jointly mobilizing US$100 billion annually by 2020". Indicator 13.a.1 of the statistical framework tries to measure, precisely, how much money has actually been mobilized towards that commitment. But this indicator is classified as Tier III (no agreed methodology) and with good reason, because developed and developing countries cannot agree on many details of the accounting. The *Financial Times*, for example, recently quoted China's top climate change negotiator, Xie Zhenhua stating that "developed countries have not met their commitments. In their reports a lot of their commitment is in the form of development aid. That doesn't meet the commitment to contribute new funds." Oxfam's "Climate Finance Shadow Report concludes that "estimated net climate-specific assistance is far lower than reported climate finance: "Aggregated reported donor numbers for public climate finance in 2015–16 amount to an estimated $48bn per year. However, these numbers cannot be taken at face value: Oxfam estimates net climate-specific assistance may be just $16–21bn."

Since the SDG Report doesn't even dare quote a global figure, knowing how controversial those indicators are, it could have spared the praise for developed countries on an issue where the jury is still out.

That benevolence towards the richest countries contrasts with some cases of what seems to be a bias against developing countries emerging from the data: On indicator 16.2.1, for example, the report says the following:

> "Despite their detrimental and long-lasting impact, violent forms of discipline against children are widespread. Nearly 8 in 10 children aged 1-14 years were subjected to some form of psychological aggression and/or physical punishment at home on a regular basis in 81 countries (primarily developing countries) with available data from 2005 to 2017."

Any reasonable reader concludes from that statement that children in developing countries are being beaten on a massive scale, presumably in a much greater proportion than those in developed countries, for which no information is given. In fact, the UNICEF database from which this information is extracted, ONLY has data for 81 developing countries, it has no information whatsoever on any developed country and therefore no implicit or explicit comparisons can be made. The indicator doesn't have a minimum coverage to claim global representativeness and should not have been included at all, even less so in a formulation that seems to stigmatize developing countries.

In contrast, the report on the suicide mortality rate, which is used to illustrate target 3.4 on mental health, only states that "nearly 800,000 suicide deaths occurred in 2016, unchanged from the previous year". The only regional discrimination provided is to inform readers that Europe has the largest rate of male to female suicides, but nowhere is it mentioned what the WHO database clearly shows: In 2016 the suicide rate for both sexes in developed regions was 16.5 per 100, 000 population, which is 75 percent higher than the 9.4 rate in developing countries. Why was the better mental health performance of developing countries not deemed worth a mention? No reason is given.

Wages or ATMs?

SDG 10, promising to reduce inequalities within and among countries, is frequently quoted as one of the transformative innovations of the 2030 Agenda. Yet, in spite of the abundant literature and rich academic discussion on inequalities the report does not even mention inequalities among countries, it fails to use well-established methodological tools such as the Gini index or the Palma ratio (between the incomes of top 10 and the bottom 40% of the population) and instead quite optimistically reports that "between 2010 and 2016, in 60 of 94 countries with data, the incomes of the bottom 40 percent of the population grew faster than that of the entire population". Lacking any other information to balance or complement this indicator, the reader is led to believe that, therefore, inequalities are indeed somehow being reduced.

This is not what every other international study says. The OECD, for example, reports that "Income inequality in OECD countries is at its highest level for the past half century. The average income of the richest 10% of the population is about nine times that of the poorest 10% across the OECD, up from seven times 25 years ago." It adds that "in emerging economies, such as China and India, a sustained period of strong economic growth has helped lift millions of people out of absolute poverty. But the benefits of growth have not been evenly distributed and high levels of income inequality have risen further. Among the dynamic emerging economies, only Brazil managed to strongly reduce inequality, but the gap between rich and poor is still about five times that in the OECD countries."

Target 10.4 of the inequalities SDG, promotes fiscal, wage and social protection policies to "progressively achieve greater equality." The suggested indicator is the labour share of GDP, an issue on which both the ILO and the IMF have abundant information. Yet the indicator has this year been re classified as Tier II, down from Tier I (apparently for newly found lack of data availability) and not mentioned in the report (while other Tier II indicators are).

In a recent study titled "Why is Labor Receiving a Smaller Share of Global Income?" the IMF explains that "the labor share of income—the share of national income paid in wages, including benefits, to workers—has been on a downward trend in many countries. In advanced economies, labor income shares began trending down in the 1980s, reaching their lowest level of the past half century just prior to the global financial crisis of 2008–09, and have not recovered materially since. Data are more limited for emerging market and developing economies, but in more than half of them—and especially the larger economies in this group—labor shares have also declined since the early 1990s."

While this information is not included in the SDG Report, its inequalities chapter does inform us that "from 2010 to 2016, the number of Automated Teller Machines per 100,000 adults increased from 39 to 59 worldwide" with Asia leading that growth. This is excellent news, of course, and choosing to publish how ATMs multiply and not how labour income diminishes should not imply any distorted priorities on the part of the authors. After all, as the small print of the report explains "all Goals, targets and indicators are equally important."

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