Global Policy Watch

Promoting transparency and accountability in the Post-2015 and Financing for Development processes

#9

23 November 2015

SDG Indicators and Data: Who collects? Who reports? Who benefits?

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As part of its mandate to develop an indicator framework by which to monitor the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda, the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDGs (IAEG-SDGs) held its second meeting in Bangkok, 26-28 October 2015. The objective was to seek agreement on the proposed indicators for each target—keeping in mind that indicators alone can never be sufficient to fully measure progress on the goals. More specifically, it was to move provisional indicators marked yellow—needing further agreement—to either green—agreed by all parties—or grey—no agreement possible. As a result, there are now 159 green indicators (including 52 moved from yellow and 9 new ones), and 62 greys (including 28 moved from yellow plus 5 new ones).

While there is now a proposed indicator (either green or grey) for every target, as required by the IAEG-SDGs' commitment to "no indicator left behind", many of the agreed indicators remain inadequate, and 62 require "more in-depth discussion and/or methodological development." What will happen to these grey indicators if there is no agreement before March 2016 when the framework is to be presented to the UN Statistical Commission? Will they be shoved into an Annex, or dropped altogether? Either way, they risk becoming orphans as the framework is implemented.

Among these orphan targets are two related to poverty, including:

Target 1.4. By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.

Target 1.b. Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions.

The inability to agree on an indicator on how to measure these targets, which go to the issue of implementation, means that global poverty is to be measured primarily by the World Bank's new International Poverty Line, US$1.90/day—but that the causes of poverty, and efforts to address them, are not. Poverty at the national level will be measured by the proportion of men, women and children living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions, as required by Target 1.2, to reduce this share by half.

The failure to identify structural problems and means to address them—which the world's governments working together in the UN Open Working Group (OWG) succeeded in getting into many of the targets—is repeated throughout the framework, notably under Chapter 10: Reduce inequalities within and among countries and Chapter 17: means of implementation. Although a number of (weak) indicators are agreed to measure inequality within countries, there is nothing even proposed to measure inequalities between countries—including the trade and financial policies that continue to fuel their rise.

This absence was noted repeatedly by civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangkok, who also proposed indicators to address it. These included the number of disputes brought against countries through dispute settlement processes (by companies, arbitrators, other countries) in areas such as trade, investment, technology; and the number of conditionalities or constraints embodied in Official Development Assistance (ODA) or international loan agreements.

Other proposals addressed the inadequacy of indicators under Goal 17, means of implementation. While questioning the inclusion of Public-Private-Partnerships in the delivery of any essential resources, services, etc. CSOs suggested that the value of such partnerships should be measured in terms of their contribution to sustainable development, specifically by measuring the percentage of public-private (for profit) partnerships that deliver greater value for achieving the SDGs than public or private finance alone. Is there any evidence that outsourcing development delivers on its promises? (GPW, "Fit for Whose Purpose," July 2015)

Green doesn't mean go

Identifying a meaningful indicator for every target is a formidable task, considering the reality of what the existing data lets countries do. But having one relevant indicator does not mean the target is covered—let alone the goal. It can be easily agreed, for example, that the percentage of resources allocated by governments to poverty reduction programmes or essential services are valuable indicators. But are these "green" indicators appropriate to measure, as proposed, Target 1.a, aiming to "ensure significant mobilization of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means […] to implement programmes and policies to end poverty"? It is not good enough to say, well that's just how it is. How will this problem be addressed? To meaningfully measure progress towards the ambitious SDG agenda much more needs to be done.

Let us not forget that the goals and targets apply to all countries, not just developing countries, and that they require reporting at the UN level, not only at the national level or in preferred forums like the OECD. Developed countries cannot be let off the hook on the basis of lack of comparability or willingness to be held to the same standards.

Further it is essential to address the issue of capacity and resources, across the board, including that of all member states: some cannot collect data, others collect incorrect data; still others cannot analyse the data they do collect; while still others lack systems to report on it. What will enable member states to address this problem, which they are all required to do, in a way that gives meaning to 'nationally owned development'?

In this regard, a number of the CSO proposals indicated a need to go beyond a single indicator and include periodic impact assessments—an approach reportedly under discussion by the UN Statistical Division—but, so far, this is not reflected in the framework.

One way the UN Statistical Commission has taken up this challenge is by setting up the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for post-2015 Monitoring in March 2015, at the same time that it established the IAEG-SDGs. Composed of 15-20 representatives of national statistical offices, and including regional and international agencies as observers, the Group is specifically charged with "promoting national ownership of the post-2015 monitoring process" and fostering "capacity-building, partnership and coordination" to make it possible. It will also seek to mobilize resources, including those of the private sector; and advise on "how the opportunities of the data revolution can be harnessed to support the SDG implementation process, taking into account the levels of development of the countries."

Demand up, resources down

In spite of widespread agreement on the need for data to monitor the new agenda, the OECD-based Partnership on Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), designed precisely to support "the better use and production of statistics throughout the developing world," reports that support to capacity-building on statistics reached a mere US$448 million in 2013, US$120 million less than in previous years, even though 2013 was a record year for ODA.

Less funding seems to correlate inversely with the proliferating number of initiatives seeking to capture data to monitor and measure the SDG targets. Recognizing the pitfalls as well as the potential of the new data, in 2014 the Statistical Commission set up the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics, focusing on "training, skills and capacity-building; linking big data and the sustainable development goals […]" and exploring "specific big data sources for official statistics, namely, mobile phone and social media data and satellite imagery."

However, this effort to link to big data is driven in part by a desire to get around the time and expense involved in conducting national surveys (re income, employment, DHS, etc.); to what extent will national statistical bureaus will be able to prioritize and control what they measure? How will the new initiative align with the World Bank's trust fund for statistical capacity building, established before the launch of the target-driven MDGs (April 1999) in order to strengthen the capacity of statistical bureaus to generate and analyse statistics? Will the training be limited to measuring specific targets, or mastering data science?

New players, new platforms, new interests

These questions also apply to the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, a multi-stakeholder initiative, launched in September 2015 on the recommendation of the Secretary-General's Data Revolution Group in order to "strengthen data-driven decision-making" to achieve the SDGs. It comprises over 70 governments, civil society groups, companies, international organizations (including UN agencies, UN regional commissions, regional development banks), and expert networks.

Champions of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data

Governments: Colombia, France, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Philippines, Senegal, United Kingdom, United States of America

Civil Society Organizations: CIVICUS, CEPEI, Datakind, Development Initiatives, International Budget Partnership (IBP), ONE Campaign, Open Data Institute, Open Data Watch, Overseas Development Institute, Oxfam International, Publish What You Fund (PWYF), World Wide Web Foundation, World Resources Institute (WRI)

Private Sector: Barclays, Digital Globe, ESRI, Facebook, IBM, Mastercard, McKinsey, Nielsen, Orange Group, Planet Labs, Premise, RealImpactAnalytics, SAP, Telefonica

International Agencies: African Development Bank (ADB), Asian Development Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD), UN Development Program (UNDP), UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), UN Global Pulse, UNFPA, UNICEF, World Bank Group

Research Organizations & Partnerships: AidData, Brookings Institution, Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Data2X/UN Foundation, Data-Pop Alliance, Group on Earth Observations (GEO), Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN), Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), International Statistical Institute (ISI), Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Knowledge Systems for Sustainability (KSS), Open Data for Development (OD4D), PARIS 21: Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN)

Foundations/Donors: Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), UN Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

How were members recruited and selected? Is it a self-selected group, involving any institution or business that can make a commitment of some sort?

The partnership's "primary governance body" is currently an Interim Steering Group of Anchor Partners set up in September 2015 "which will also "make the ultimate decisions regarding strategy development […]" The group identified a Host Selection Committee, made up of seven members, five of them non-state members, who agreed to locate the partnership secretariat in the UN Foundation, which operates more or less independently of the UN.

Already the partnership includes a dizzying array of commitments, ranging from staffing the partnership secretariat, improving data coverage in specific areas and setting up 'innovative partnerships,' through the regional commissions, to strengthening the World Bank's Trust Fund for statistical capacity building in selected countries. The Bank is also helping to launch a Global Financing Facility with US$100 million committed to supporting Civil Registration and Vital Statistics strengthening. While many of these apparently respond to country-level requests this is less clear about the Bank's commitment to set up a new Trust Fund for Innovations in Development Data, raising US$100 million for "scalable or replicable innovations in technology and innovations in approaches, such as new partnerships, to improve data on the ground."

Moreover, it is unclear how many are new commitments extending beyond an expansive catalogue of existing commitments.

Another area of interest is how the Global Partnership and its "commitment-makers" will be aligned with the review and reporting mechanisms of the SDGs, including the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

Will this partnership enable developing countries to leapfrog over the cumbersome data collection process but while losing ownership of the data? Where are the legal safeguards? How can the inter-governmental process provide them? Or is this another example of parallelism, a multi-stakeholder initiative competitive with or pushing aside UN initiatives (see GPW, July 2015)?

This and other initiatives are receiving impressive pledges of resources at a time when the UNGA 5th committee is debating the budget for implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The UN budget submission lacks any of the ambition called for by the UN Summit in September 2015 in unanimously adopting *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development*, and is not confronting the ongoing pressure from the major contributors to the UN to reduce the UN budget. The very visible commitment to the universal and inclusive Agenda and the SDGs has shifted to the less visible debate on UN financing where the Agenda is being re-written and reduced—back to business as usual.

Selecting goals and targets to advance specific interests

Many of the same member states have just met in the G20 forum, where they brushed up some of the initiatives designed to meet existing G20 goals and linked them to the SDGs. These are focusing more narrowly, zeroing in on financial services and on urban and rural infrastructure, each with their associated Hubs.

The Global Partnership for Financial Inclusion (GPFI), precedes the SDGs by two years. Launched at the 2010 G20 Summit in Seoul to carry out the G20's Financial Inclusion Action Plan, the partnership is promoted as facilitating a bold new agenda of "financial inclusion," "cultivating government leadership" in "implementing policies that promote competition and market-based approaches," and "making better use of data to measure financial inclusion." Accordingly, it "aims to help policymakers understand financial inclusion and remove obstacles that may be preventing people from using financial services—and thus impeding progress toward completing the goal of universal financial access by 2020."

But whose goal is this?

Some light is shed by the Inclusion Hub, an "innovative pop-up portal" launched in September by the MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth and NewsDeeply. Noting that "It's become widely acknowledged that financial inclusion and sustainable development are inexorably linked," the Hub goes on to say that "the most visible marker of this new dynamic" is the Sustainable Development Agenda and its 17 goals. It highlights the World Bank's Global Financial Inclusion Database (Findex), launched in 2011, which "provides in-depth data on how individuals save, borrow, make payments, and manage risks."

How "inexorable" is this link? Although two of the SDG targets are concerned with access to financial services, one (1.4—to ensure equal rights to economic resources, including such things as land and property, natural resources and financial services, including microfinance) has no agreed indicator, leaving only an indicator limited to expanding access to banking institutions (8.10).

Assisting to meet this target will be the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the UNDP and the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), as well as MetLife Foundation, which has funded the work of Women's World Banking in large pilot markets to collect gender-based social and financial performance data that measures outreach to women and also "enables financial institutions to see how female customers contribute to their financial sustainability."

More convincingly linked to the SDG targets is the G20 Global Infrastructure Initiative, set up in November 2014 to "lift quality public and private infrastructure investment, including the establishment of a Global Infrastructure Hub" to "drive progress on the G20's multi-year infrastructure agenda and "engage with the private sector beyond business as usual." The Hub will report to the G20 and work with governments, the private sector, development banks and international organizations. The G20 estimates that the Hub could help unlock an additional US$2 trillion in global infrastructure capacity to 2030. So how will this be done?

Who profits? Who benefits?

According to the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), the G20 group "aims to finance the so-called infrastructure gap" by tapping into the roughly US$80 trillion in long-term private institutional finance—from pension funds to insurance schemes—by creating infrastructure as an "asset class". Under this model, governments will undertake a range of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and financial institutions will package and sell financial products "that offer long-term investors a stake in a portfolio of PPPs."

While strengthening road, energy and transport networks are recognized as crucial to achieving the SDGs, they need to be done in connection with other goals and targeted to the intended beneficiaries. Instead, examination of these mega-projects and new plans for financing them suggests that while they generate enormous profits for investors they do little to help the intended beneficiaries. Only 1 in 1000 are completed on time and some 9 out of 10 incur cost overruns, an expense borne largely by the public (cf. Flyvbjerg 2014).

According to HBF, new Infrastructure Project Preparation Facilities (IPPFs) are being established to fill the "pipelines" of nations and regions with "bankable projects." In addition, over 70 countries have established "PPP units" which are introducing new PPP laws and relaxing laws that prevent domestic pension funds from investing in risky infrastructure markets. The World Bank and other IFIs are avidly promoting new "economic conditionalities" which revamp investment laws in order to ensure the "ease of doing business" for investors.

All this in the name of the UN SDG agenda. Several of these initiatives prompt the question of whether governments will ultimately outsource data collection, the private sector will report to their shareholders, and only the investors will benefit. Has the G20 hijacked the sustainable development agenda?

Next steps

Following the Bangkok meeting, the IAEG-SDGs received 4,588 comments on the global indicators marked green in a three-day consultation process. The UN Statistics Division released a compilation of these, which were submitted by UN and government agencies, CSOs, the private sector and other stakeholders.

The SDGs that received the most comments were those of health, education and gender. By contrast, SDG 13 on climate change received the least comments, followed by the goals on oceans and marine resources and biodiversity, forests and desertification.

The IAEG-SDGs is expected to consider the results of the consultation as it finalizes its report for the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) in mid-December. Its work to resolve the greys will continue into February 2016 and will be delivered to the UNSC which is meeting 8-11 March 2016 at UN headquarters in New York.

In the follow-up and monitoring of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, however, there is a need to emphasize trends (improvement or regression) and to monitor policies and policy changes (and not just outcomes), and the statistical analysis should be a complement to, not a substitution for, qualitative assessments.

These issues continue to be on agenda of civil society observers as they call for the same level of ambition and complexity in the implementation, monitoring and accountability as in the design and definition of the SDGs.

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