

Monitoring and Reporting on Sustainable Development Goals: Cross-scale linkages

László Pintér, Ph.D.

1.0 Context

Based on a mandate agreed at the Rio+20 conference, the international community has been engaged in a process to define and agree on a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) as a cornerstone of the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Building on but going beyond the Millennium Development Goals and other pre-existing commitments in terms of scope and universal applicability to all countries, the SDGs are expected to play an influential role in guiding development policy and finance. Navigating the transition towards goals and specific targets will require monitoring progress based on suitable indicators and transparent reporting of results. In order to inform and influence decision making and implementation, SDG monitoring information will need to be systematically built into strategy and planning processes.

2.0 Challenges

Monitoring and reporting can build on earlier experience with integrated reporting, assessments and indicators such as the integrated environmental assessment reports published based on UNEP's Global Environmental Outlook model or the regional or national leading indicator reports published by a number of statistical agencies, or even the organizational reports by companies using the Global Reporting Initiative framework. While building on existing experience, SDG monitoring and reporting will also need to cover new priority areas with improved indicators and better quality data. Anticipating some such needs, a prototype global sustainable development report was already designed by the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development.¹

One of the challenges will in fact be striking a balance between the need for maintaining continuity in what is being monitored and reported on and the need for innovation in addressing new elements brought by the SDGs. Monitoring progress towards the SDG will, to a significant extent, need to rely on existing data and monitoring capacity. This is needed for tracking SDG progress over time, as new measures will be put in place. On the other hand,

¹ You can view the report here: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/975GSDR%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>

new metrics and new monitoring capacity will be needed to measure progress towards new goals or to fill persistent data gaps.

Practically all SDG proposals as of May 2014 envision an expanded set of goals as compared with the MDGs, in line with the Rio+20 mandate that recognized the need for SDGs to include a more balanced coverage of social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development. While monitoring systems and indicators exist for many issues that will be re-adopted for the SDGs from the MDGs or other international agreements, there will be new goals where finding matching and scientifically sound indicators will be a significant challenge. As data gaps are a consequence of gaps in monitoring systems and capacity, addressing the gaps will require investment in capacity development.

Innovation will be needed not only in what is being monitored and reported, but also in how information is actually used in decision making and implementation. This is often beyond the scope of interest of the indicators and statistical community, but its importance is supported by the fact that there is evidence that indicators are often left unused to improve policy and practice—their ultimate purpose (Sébastien, Bauler, & Lehtonen, 2014). In order to realize its potential to influence SDG-related decision making, the role of monitoring and reporting needs to be addressed in all stages of the policy cycle, from goal setting to planning, implementing, evaluating and learning. Monitoring, and particularly indicators, have to be considered early, as they are also needed for establishing baselines that are important for goal definition and target setting (Pintér, 2012).

3.0 Opportunities

Besides challenges, monitoring and reporting on progress towards SDGs can also take advantage of several opportunities. Since the adoption of the MDGs, there have been significant advances both in the conceptual and technical aspects of measurement. For example, the UN Statistical Commission finalized and released a new Framework for the Development of Environmental Statistics (FDES) that also covers cross-cutting issues such as climate change, agriculture and energy, and there is work under way on broader measures of progress both at UNSTAT and the Better Life Initiative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (United Nations Statistics Division, 2013; OECD, 2014). In the international community, the Group on Earth Observation is developing a GEOSS Common Infrastructure (GCI) to ensure continuity and interoperability of geospatial observation and facilitate access to and use of geospatial data (Group on Earth Observations, 2013). And the case for rethinking measurement in the macroeconomic and societal well-being context received a significant push from the Sarkozy Commission (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2010). Given adequate support and political will, these efforts can help improve the technical basis for a cross-scale harmonization of monitoring and reporting efforts.

While a political economy of monitoring, measurement and reporting still needs to be developed, there is improving awareness and understanding of their roles in improving policy. While indicators left unused are a challenge, there are also a growing number of examples where what is measured is actually being managed. With leaps and bounds, “evidence-based policy,” or at least policy that is making better use of monitoring information as evidence, is gaining acceptance, a practice helped by the development of extended indicator systems and web-based, real-time reporting.

On balance, the need for the creation or strengthening of monitoring and measurement systems for the SDGs represents a significant opportunity to advance a global measurement reform agenda in a way that results not only in adding yet another set of metrics to the already significant chorus, but in improving the effectiveness of governance, which is really the higher-level objective.

4.0 Preparations for SDG Monitoring and Reporting at the International Level

Work on developing the conceptual foundations and details of monitoring and reporting systems for the SDGs has started by a number of organizations. The discussions focus on the development of illustrative indicator sets associated with specific goals and targets, but also cover broader issues related to conceptual and strategic issues and the capacity of the statistical and Earth observation community to support the required data and information.

The main vehicle for the development of the SDGs, the Open Working Group (OWG), discussed measuring progress at a December 17, 2013, informal session, including lessons from MDG monitoring, review of current proposals and their requirements and a roadmap for measurement. A statement of the current Chair of the UN Statistical Commission highlighted the importance of considering statistical evidence in target setting and indicator selection, and underscored the importance of the statistical community's interactive participation through the SDG development process, including in considering monitoring and statistical data issues related to specific SDG themes (Vukovich, 2013). In agreement with the recommendations with the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (HLP), a Friends of the Chair Group on the broader measures of progress expressed support for a "data revolution" to improve the quality of statistics by establishing partnerships among the growing number of governmental, civil society and corporate actors involved in tracking socioeconomic and environmental issues. They also point to the importance of integrating statistical issues and activities across the domains of sustainable development, and to enable statistical organizations to undertake these activities in support of the post-2015 process (United Nations Statistical Commission, 2014).

Besides the work on monitoring frameworks and indicators carried out by the United Nations Statistical Commission and the United Nations Statistical Division, several other initiatives are under way that have already produced or aim to produce guidance and concrete proposals for monitoring, measurement and reporting progress towards SDGs. As an illustrative list, the table below shows some of the key initiatives.

TABLE 1: SELECTED KEY INITIATIVES RELATED TO MONITORING AND REPORTING ON SDG PROGRESS (AS OF THE END OF APRIL 2014)

LEAD ORGANIZATION	ACTIVITY	SOURCE
Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)	Methodology and conceptual framework for SDG selection and Illustrative goals for 14 countries in Asia-Pacific and Europe, development of targets and indicators as part of a goal-subgoal-indicator package	http://www.asef.org/images/stories/publications/ebooks/ASEF_Report_Sustainable-Development-Goals-Indicators_01.pdf
Green Economy Coalition (GEC)	Launched the Measure What Matters initiative and convened a High Level Working Group to maximize the transformative potential of measurement by bringing together the initiatives and interests of government, business, civil society and individuals in identifying better measures of progress and performance	http://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/updates/new-global-initiative-measure-what-matters
Open Working Group (OWG)	Informal meeting on measuring progress, overall coordination of the dialogue of countries on SDG selection	http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/owg.html
Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)	Developed and published a set of indicators to accompany the goals and targets that were published in the network's 2013 report <i>An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development</i>	http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/140214-SDSN-indicator-report-DRAFT-for-consultation1.pdf
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)	Joint UNECE/Eurostat/OECD Task Force on Measuring Sustainable Development to further develop a capital accounting-based approach to the development of long-term sustainable development indicators, including emphasis on measuring distributive aspects	http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/ge.32/2009/zip.2.e.pdf
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)	UNEP has developed a white paper on an integrated approach to embedding the environment in the SDGs; there is thematic work on targets and indicators related to key environmental sustainability themes, such as water and sustainable consumption and production; there is also ongoing work on UNEP Live, a new information portal with possible use in SDG assessment reporting.	http://www.uneplive.org/ http://www.unep.org/pdf/embedding-environments-in-SDGs-v2.pdf
United Nations Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda	Overview report on statistics and indicators for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, including current and required capacities, conceptual and methodological issues	https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/UNTT_MonitoringReport_WEB.pdf
UN Statistical Commission	Established Friends of the Chair Group on Broader Measures of Progress, preparatory work to identify the role of national statistical offices in post-2015 monitoring and reporting; ongoing review and revision of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA)	http://unstats.un.org/unsd/envaccounting/seearev
World Bank	Wealth Accounting and the Valuation of Ecosystem Services (WAVES) to help countries develop and adopt ecosystem accounting methods	http://www.wavespartnership.org/en/about-us

Source: Author compilation

An interesting aspect of the growing number and diversity of initiatives aimed at the monitoring, indicators and reporting aspects of the SDGs is that while their entry point may be different, collectively they all aim to strengthen the evidence base of SDG implementation. Also remarkable is the wide range of actors involved, from the representatives of official statistical offices to intergovernmental organizations, science bodies and groups with a primary focus on the economy.

In addition to the specific initiatives listed, two other processes are worth noting. Recognizing the importance of ensuring the SDGs become a genuine turning point in the history of sustainable development, an international group of leading non-governmental organizations formed an Independent Research Forum that supports the SDG process with coordinated research and capacity building. Several groups that are in the Independent Research Forum are also involved in various initiatives listed in Table 1, but the interactions within the group also resulted in analyses aimed at specific aspects of the SDGs, including sector-specific or broader reviews of possible targets and indicators (e.g., Nilsson, Lucas, & Yoshida, 2013; Suter, 2014).

While the operation of monitoring networks and regular reporting of data will be a task of the statistical community, making sure that targets and indicators reflect the impact of development on the condition of the Earth's resource base will require the substantive involvement of science. Two issues that will be particularly important are the relationship of SDG targets and indicators to planetary boundaries, and the reflection of new scientific knowledge related to the Earth as a dynamically changing, complex adaptive system. These perspectives are advanced by Future Earth and, in a broader sense, by the International Council of Scientific Unions, among others.

Overall, the monitoring and measurement work can both feed off and support the broader and increasingly better institutionalized "Beyond GDP" agenda that aims at replacing the current theory and practice measuring national wealth and well-being with a new set of metrics and the underlying infrastructure of both monitoring and reporting and indicator use. The SDGs, given their high profile, present a unique opportunity to advance such new ways of measurement.

5.0 Considerations at the National and Subnational Scales

The need for monitoring and reporting on progress towards SDGs will present a unique opportunity for countries to come together and develop a shared agenda for addressing the common task of monitoring, indicator selection and reporting. However, beyond the immediate need for monitoring and reporting towards the SDGs, it is also an opportunity to redefine the broader framework of measuring progress in a collaborative way. Governments will be key players in this process, not only because they are the ones with an ultimate say in what the SDGs and associated targets and indicators will be, but also because they operate some of the institutional infrastructure of data collection and monitoring. In addition, they have the legitimacy to bring together other sectors of society, from business to civil society and the science community, to proceed in a concerted way.

The development of monitoring, measurement and reporting instruments will take place in parallel on multiple levels. The process has started at the global scale, but regions, countries and communities are bound to find it both necessary and useful to develop their own goals and matching monitoring and reporting systems. In order to realize the transformative potential of monitoring and reporting based on a revised set of indicators aligned with the SDGs, governments need to keep the following in mind:

- While there will be a need to synchronize SDGs in the interest of pulling in the same direction on critical global issues, national-level differentiation will be needed via subgoals and targets. Where possible, indicators related to common goals should be the same, so that higher-level aggregation and comparisons are possible.
- Governments should engage their national statistical offices and their geospatial data communities early to identify potential SDG indicators and review how the country has evolved and where the country stands on them. Rely on this information as needed in international negotiations to shape global goals and targets.

- Monitor and get involved in the international dialogue about SDG and broader progress monitoring and, based on this assess the adequacy of existing national monitoring and reporting capacity and tools and develop work plans and budgets for addressing critical gaps. Also, recognize and where possible build on other monitoring and reporting capacities at the subnational level (communities, ecosystems, sectors etc.).
- While statistical and geospatial observation and data collection is a technical matter and is the competence of the respective agencies, goal setting is a science-policy process that requires broader societal engagement. The conditions for such engagement need to be established, not unlike in the case of earlier Agenda 21 processes. Engagement will be needed not only to establish more realistic targets, but also to develop broader societal ownership of the goals, targets, their associated indicators and, of course, their implementation.
- Recognize that the purpose of monitoring and reporting progress based on indicators is to improve the quality of decision making and to strengthen the effectiveness and accountability of implementation. Build direct links between strategies, plans, programs and budgets and SDG reports and indicators where possible.

6.0 Implications for National Sustainable Development Strategy Practitioners and Networks

The momentum that has gathered and that will continue to build around SDGs and the Post-2015 Development Agenda leads to some important tasks and opportunities for the sustainable development strategy community. The SDGs and the Post-2015 Development Agenda will require governance frameworks such as those advanced by National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) and integrated development plans that are able to connect across sectors, issues and, indeed, goals. The NSDS community can play a key role in pointing out the importance of evidence-based decision making and policy, and by demonstrating concrete opportunities for building specific targets and indicators as performance monitoring tools into strategies and implementation. To close the strategic policy cycle, this should also include considerations for corrective/adaptive action if actual performance deviates from targets.

As of late 2013 about 70 countries participated directly in the official OWG process. That is already very significant, but considering the intended universal applicability of the SDGs, ultimately all countries should be involved. In the case of countries where governments are still sitting on the sidelines, the NSDS community could play a catalytic role by pointing out the importance of the agenda, mapping out opportunities for involvement and starting to take stock of existing monitoring and reporting capacities and gaps. Working at the policy level, NSDS institutions can also help elevate the level of the SDG discourse beyond technical (e.g., statistical) agencies. To date, countries in the OWG process tend to be represented by ministries of foreign affairs, but detailed implementation will be the task of finance and sector departments that thus also need to get involved.

Based on the global goals and targets, there are already discussions about new global reporting mechanisms, including possibly a global sustainable development report, building on SDG targets and indicators, but also going beyond by providing interpretation, critical synthesis and likely projections. Similar reporting needs will emerge at the national and subnational levels. NSDS practitioners, often already involved in and having a track record in integrated reporting, can take the initiative and lead discussions about the nature of reporting mechanisms required for closing the loop on SDG implementation.

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Contact:

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (IISD)

75 Albert Street, Suite 903, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1P 5E7

INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES (IGES)

IGES Regional Centre, 604 SG Tower, 6th Floor, 161/1 Soi Mahadlek Luang 3, Rajdamri Road, Patumwan, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

Email

info@SDplanNet.org

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SDplanNet is a sustainable development planning network created to help government professionals at the national and sub-national levels share good practices and build capacity in the preparation and implementation of strategies for sustainable development or development plans that incorporate sustainable development principles.

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