



Measuring the ...

**SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
GOALS**

## **Measuring the Sustainable Development Goal Indicators: An Unprecedented Statistical Challenge**

*Steve MacFeely*<sup>1</sup>

In March 2017, the United Nations (UN) Statistical Commission adopted a measurement framework for the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, comprising of 232 indicators designed to measure the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their respective 169 targets. The scope of this measurement framework is so ambitious it led Mogens Lykketoft, President of the seventieth session of the UN General Assembly, to describe it as an ‘unprecedented statistical challenge’.

Naturally, with a programme of this magnitude, there will be foreseen and unforeseen challenges and consequences. This article outlines some of the key differences between the Millennium Development Goals and the SDGs, before detailing some of the measurement challenges involved in compiling the SDG indicators, and examines some of the unanticipated consequences arising from the mechanisms put in place to measure progress from a broad political economy perspective.

*Key words:* 2030 Agenda; unintended consequences; national statistical systems; administrative data.

# Today's discussion

From MDGs to SDGs

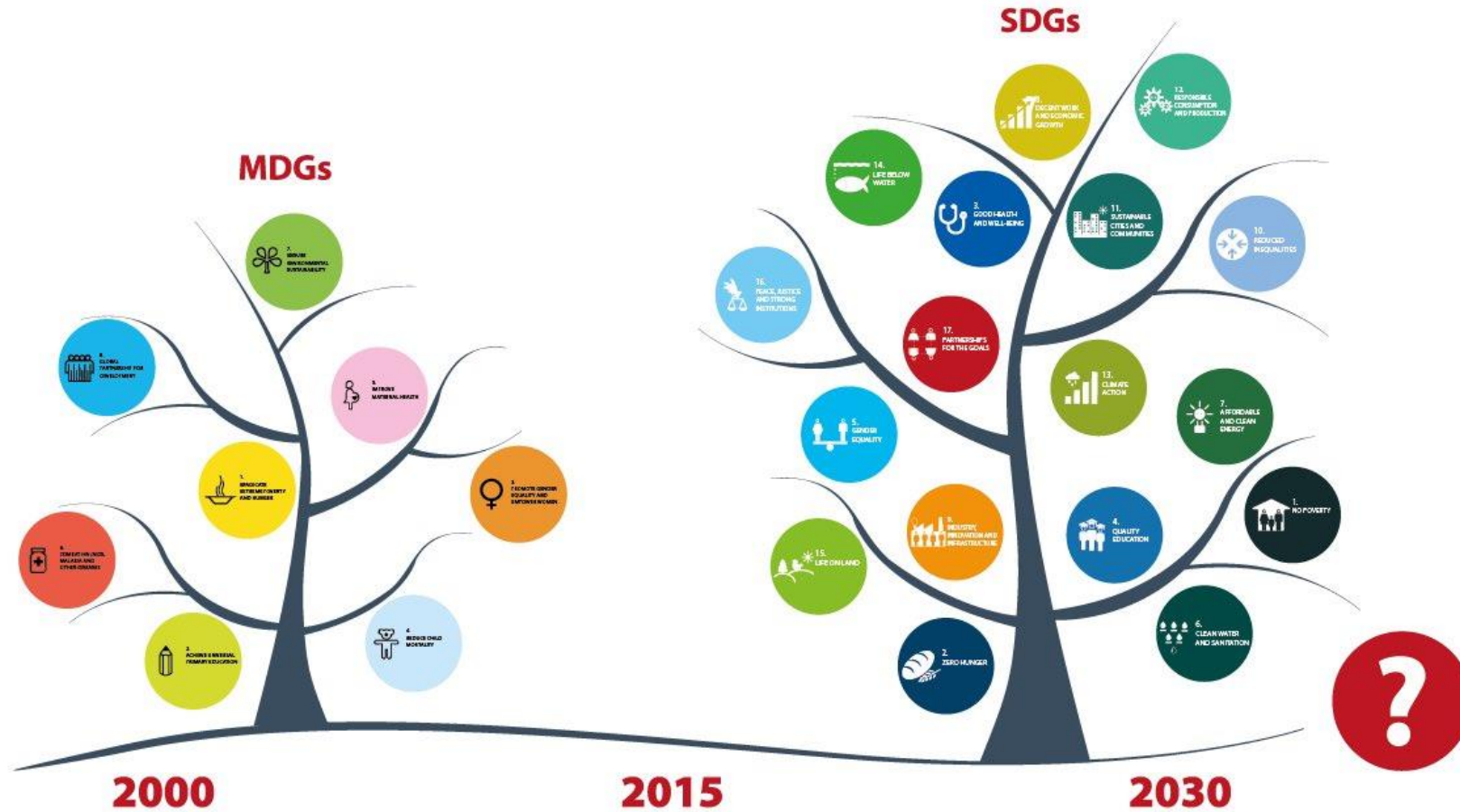
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graph TD; A[From MDGs to SDGs] --> B[Measuring the SDGs]; B --> C[Some unanticipated consequences]; C --> D[Things to consider];
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Measuring the SDGs

Some unanticipated consequences

Things to consider

# Part 1 – From MDGs to SDGs



# MDGs (2000 – 2015)

The 8 Millennium Development Goals



8 Goals

21 Targets

60 Indicators

# Agenda 2030 (2016 – 2030)

Action oriented  
Global in nature  
Universally applicable

17 Goals  
169 Targets  
231 Unique indicators

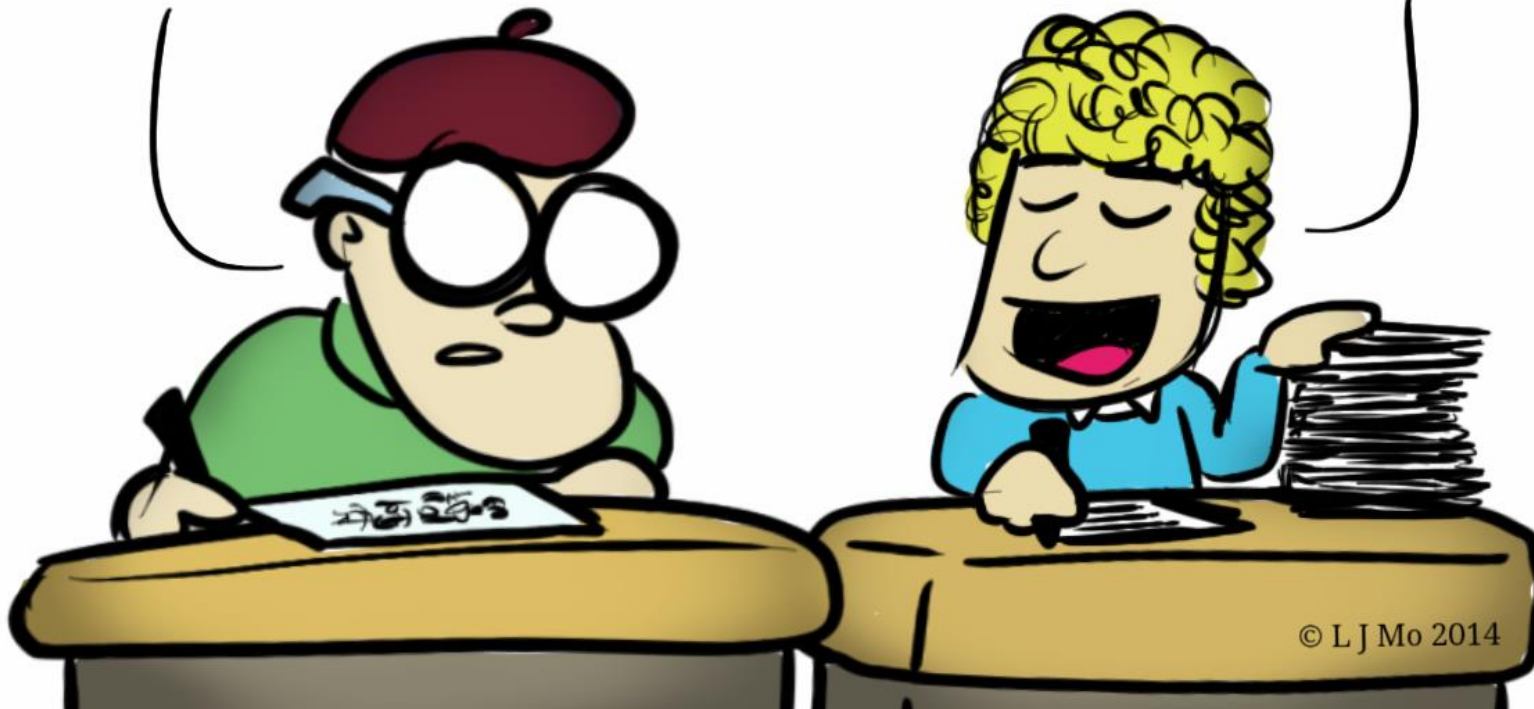


*'To do list for planet and people'* – Ban Ki-moon

# A mixed reaction

IT IS NOT A MATTER OF QUANTITY, BUT QUALITY!

WELL, MINE CLEARLY HAS MORE DEPTH.



The  
Economist

Stupid Development Goals

‘169 commandments means, in practice, no priorities at all’

# But not all negative



- A global vision
- Universal: applies to all countries
- Holistic coverage: integrated, indivisible
- Precautionary approach
- Addresses causes e.g. peace and security
- 'zero' targets
- Leaves no one behind
  
- Catalyst for statistical innovation



**2** ZERO HUNGER

**3** GOOD AND HEALTHY LIVES

**4** QUALITY EDUCATION

**7** AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

**8** DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

**9** INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

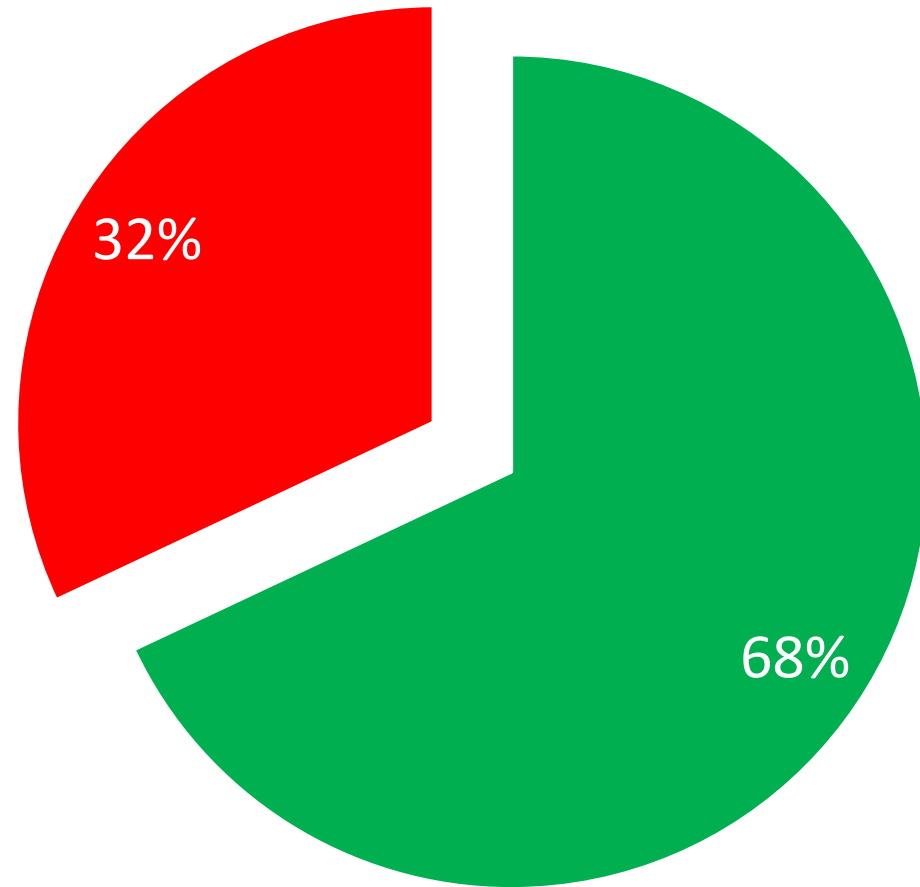
Part 2 – Measuring the SDGs



# Lesson from MDGs

**2015:**

Developing countries can only populate 68% of MDG indicators



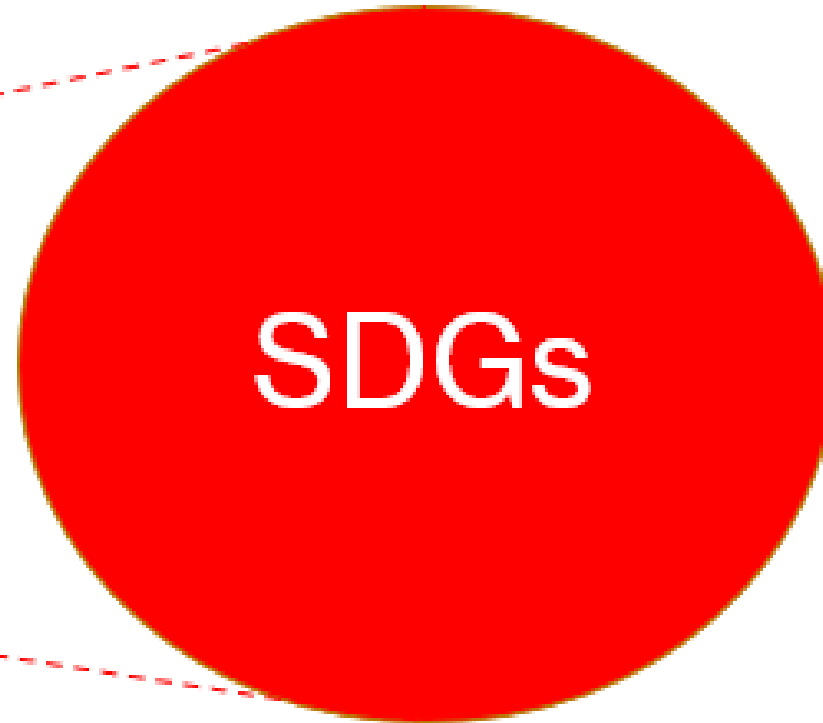
# Scale

An “unprecedented statistical challenge”

Mogens Lykketoft

President 70<sup>th</sup> session UN General Assembly,

8 goals  
21 targets  
60 indicators



17 goals  
169 targets  
232 indicators

# Decoding the SDGs

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.

promote  
adequate  
integration  
effective  
efficient  
access

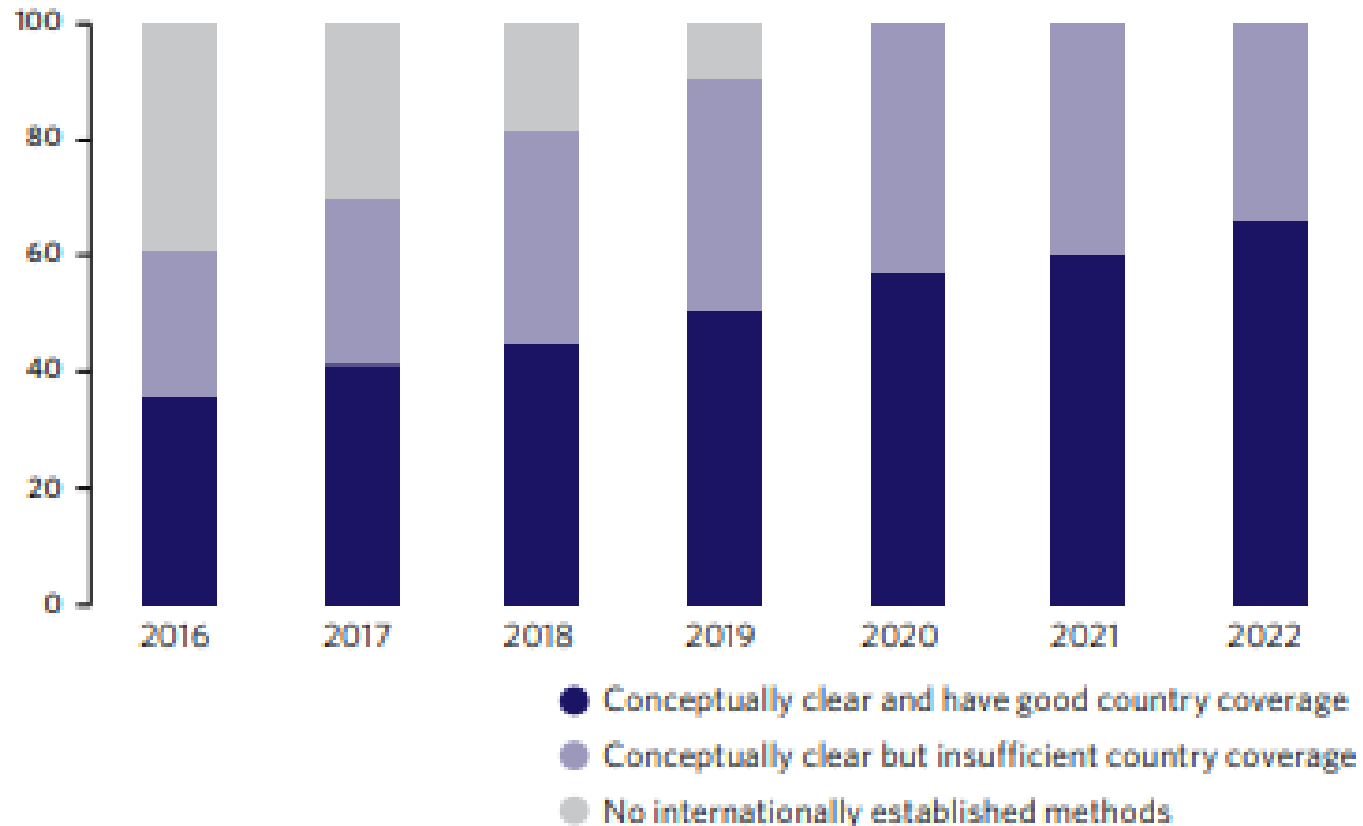
# Defining Progress



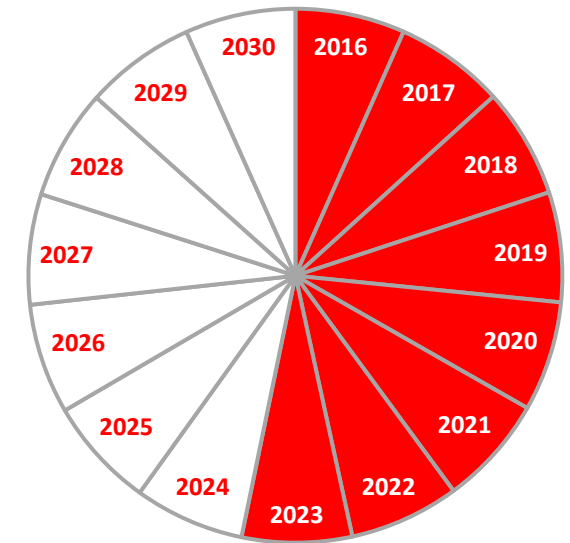
- What determines success?
- Many targets do not have clear objectives or timelines?
- What is the appropriate baseline?

# Statistics best kept secret

Proportion of global SDG indicators, by availability of standards and national data, 2016-2022 (percentage)



<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>



We have reached consensus on measurement

# Part 3 – Unanticipated Consequences



# Delegation

SDG indicators do  
not simply  
measure the 2030  
Agenda.

They define it!



# Prioritisation

Prioritisation of official country data may be counter-productive



# 1 indicator per target

- Few indicators fit the specifications of targets exactly
- Many indicators are proxies
- Most indicators originally designed for another purpose
- Too many indicators; yet too few



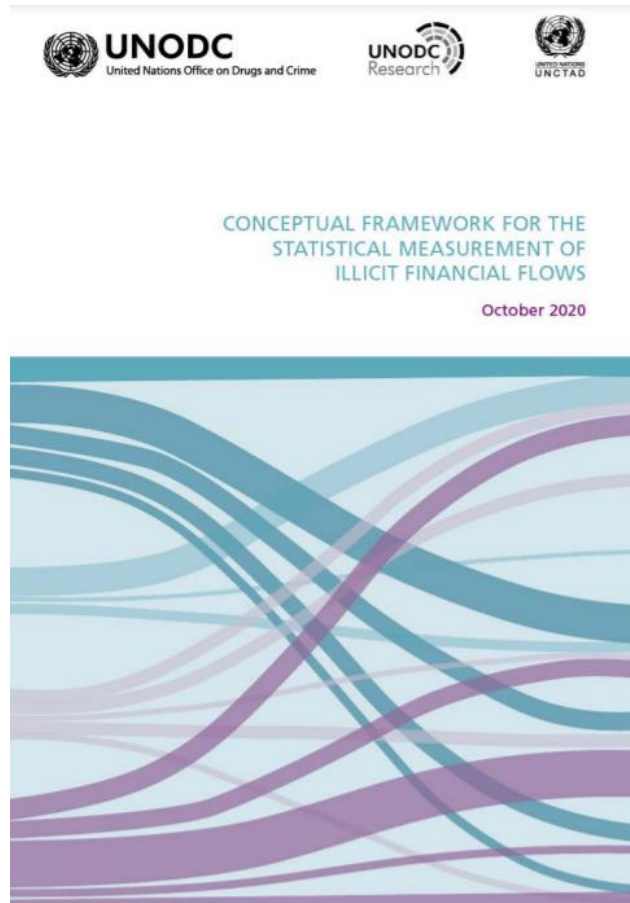
# Influence



The 2030 Agenda will have a profound influence on the future shape and organisation of official statistics

# 2 examples

16.4.1 – Value of illicit financial flows



17.3.1 – Resource mobilisation



**South-South  
Cooperation**

# Part 4 - Some parting reflections

- 2030 Agenda is the first democratically forged agreement on development. It will guide global development but also profoundly influence many new statistical developments. It will be the driving force behind the breaking of new statistical ground.
- Despite many constraints (not least financial) the UN Statistical Commission and the IAEG-SDG has made tremendous progress - the SDG GIF was assembled in record time.
- SDG indicators criticised for missing their targets or being reductionist / of watering down the ambition of the goals and targets. Unavoidable, given the complexity of targets and requirement for only one indicator per target. But in unavoidable distillation process has the essence of the targets been faithfully captured or not?

# ...and a few more

- Not clear that policy makers understood in delegating the measurement to the statistical community, they also delegated the meaning of Agenda2030.
- While there are issues surrounding some indicators, they hopefully offer, at least some common ground to progress policy discussions.
- SDGs offered space to develop some very politically sensitive statistics.
- Risk that in fulfilling the SDG GIF we have lost sight of wider role of statistics. SDGs indicators are only performance metrics. What about upstream role?
- The SDG process also offers an opportunity for statisticians to engage and reflect with data users on the future direction of official statistics.
- 2025 Comprehensive Review an opportunity to reflect on 1<sup>st</sup> 10 years and prepare strategically for post 2030 Agenda.

Fin



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