Measuring the ...
Measuring the Sustainable Development Goal Indicators: An Unprecedented Statistical Challenge

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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

Measuring the SDGs

Some unanticipated consequences

Things to consider
Part 1 – From MDGs to SDGs
MDGs (2000 – 2015)

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

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
Part 2 – Measuring the SDGs
Lesson from MDGs

2015:

Developing countries can only populate 68% of MDG indicators
An “unprecedented statistical challenge”

Mogens Lykketoft
President 70th session UN General Assembly,

Scale

8 goals
21 targets
60 indicators

MDGs

17 goals
169 targets
232 indicators

SDGs
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.
Defining Progress

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

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

UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

UNODC Research

Total Official Support for Sustainable Development

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 1st 10 years and prepare strategically for post 2030 Agenda.
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