



METHODOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SDG INDICATORS: FAO'S EXPERIENCE

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FAO'S METHODOLOGICAL WORK ON SDG INDICATORS

- Methodological development is one of FAO's key areas of work on SDG indicators, alongside capacity development and global data dissemination & reporting.
- FAO is the custodian agency for 21 indicators, 13 of which were initially classified in the Tier III category.
- **FAO has upgraded 6 Tier III indicators over the last three sessions of the IAEG-SDG,** and aims to upgrade the remaining 7 indicators within 2018.
- FAO is also a contributing agency to four more indicators, playing an active part in the development of the respective methodologies.
- **Huge investment:** development of definitions, methods and survey tools; pilot testing; expert meetings and global technical consultations; intergovernmental bodies.
- Overall positive and enriching experience; raising however also **some key challenges.**

CHALLENGES FACED IN UPGRADING TIER III INDICATORS

- **Very complex endeavour:** it sometimes entails the development of new international definitions that go beyond the SDGs. Should it be the IAEG-SDG to decide or the UNSC?
- Besides the UNSC, there is **no recognized authority and no codified process for the adoption of new international standards**. Are UN governing bodies authorized to adopt international statistical standards?
- **The IAEG-SDG has progressively tightened the criteria for the reclassification of Tier III indicators** over time. Many of the indicators upgraded in the past would not qualify for upgrading now. Should the classification of these indicators be re-discussed?
- **Should the criteria for upgrading, decided unilaterally by the IAEG-SDG, be further refined?** Difficulties in the methodological validation and pilot testing of new methods due to the lack of country collaboration.
- **Lack of transparency in the decision-making process of the IAEG-SDG.** Many decisions are arbitrary. International Agencies do not have a real possibility to dispute the decisions taken. The Secretariat can play only a facilitator role.

NEW DEFINITIONS

- In some cases, the methodological development of new SDG indicators entails the development of new international definitions that have implications in other statistical domains, e.g.:
 - Definition of **small scale food producers** (indicators 2.3.1 /2.3.2)
 - Definition of **agricultural sustainability** (indicators 2.4.1, 15.2.1)
 - Definition of **rural/urban areas** (relevant for most SDG indicators), in collaboration with OECD, UNHABITAT, EUROSTAT, etc
- Should the decision in these cases be taken by the UNSC?

NEW IAEG-SDG CRITERIA FOR TIER RECLASSIFICATION (MARCH 2017)

- While the UN Statistical Commission last year urged the IAEG-SDG to accelerate the work on Tier III indicators, the IAEG-SDG tightened the criteria for reclassification.
- List of criteria adopted at its 5th session in March 2017:
 - ✓ NSOs need to be involved in the methodological development of new indicators
 - ✓ Need to pilot-test the new methods in a sufficient number of countries with comprehensive regional coverage (**at least 5 countries, 1 per region**).
 - ✓ Need to provide information on when the methodology has become an international standard
 - ✓ Comprehensive metadata to be provided to UNSD using the agreed template

SHOULD THE IAEG-SDG CRITERIA BE FURTHER REFINED?

- **When a methodology becomes an international standard?**
 - Should global technical consultations be organized to validate the new methods? How they should be organized? Should the IAEG-SDG Co-Chairs and the Secretariat be involved?
 - Is the adoption of the new methodology by a UN governing body sufficient and replace the global consultation criterion? By which UN governing body?
- **What does it mean pilot testing?** Desk study, pilot data collection or testing a new survey? Completely different resource and time implications.
- **How can country collaboration in pilot testing be promoted?** Following the 6th IAEG-SDG, FAO has reached out directly to a number of IAEG-SDG member and observer countries requesting their collaboration on pilot testing the proposed methodologies, but with almost no response. Should the IAEG-SDG Co-Chairs and the Secretariat be involved?

IAEG-SDG DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

- **Lack of transparency:** detailed information on the decisions are generally not provided.
- **Arbitrary decisions are often taken**
- Many members don't vote, and decisions are taken by a qualified majority of the respondents: e.g., FAO example, 9 out of 16 members objecting were sufficient to block a reclassification request, even if 9 members represent only 1/3 of the total membership.
- For those members who do vote, many do not motivate their responses
- For those members who do motivate their responses:
 - ✓ Sometimes the justification provided is not related to the criteria adopted (“indicator not relevant to my country”; “need of more capacity development”; “indicator not easy to interpret”)
 - ✓ Sometimes the criteria are not applied uniformly (FAO presented data for 29 countries on indicators 2.3.1/2.3.2, but the reclassification request was rejected)
 - ✓ Generally, the adoption by UN governing bodies is not taken into account (methodology for indicator 14.6.1 adopted by the FAO Committee on Fisheries, but upgrade request rejected)

CONCLUSIONS

- Workplan announced at 6th IAEG-SDG underlined more flexibility in the Tier reclassification process, including considering ad hoc Webex meetings in between physical IAEG-SDG sessions. This is a welcome, but insufficient, development
- Proactive role of the Secretariat and the IAEG-SDG Co-Chairs in promoting country collaboration in pilot testing and global consultations
- Further refinement of the IAEG-SDG criteria for Tier III indicators upgrading. Specification of UN governing bodies authorized to adopt international statistical standards and whether this criterion replaces the global consultation.
- Transparency of the IAEG-SDG decisions. The results of the IAEG-SDG decision making process should be made public