

Measuring, Monitoring and Evaluating the SDGs

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The targets laid out by the SDGs will serve as guidelines to help governments at all levels to develop implementation strategies and allocate resources accordingly. This briefing sheet examines the role that data and indicators will play in ensuring transparency and accountability in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and for monitoring progress towards the SDG targets at the sub-national level.

Key Messages

- Within each of the 17 SDGs are a range of targets that provide the basis for a roadmap for action. Progress towards these targets will be measured through a set of globally harmonized indicators for monitoring performance, which are expected to be presented by March 2016.
- Monitoring and evaluating progress within the SDGs poses several challenges for local and subnational governments, as there are many possible differences between cities, including geographical, socio-economical and governmental, which make it difficult to select globally applicable and meaningful indicators. In addition, because the SDGs will largely be implemented at the local level, specific city-level indicators will be necessary.
- A "data revolution" – which must be accompanied by a much needed data "presentation revolution" – is critical for achieving the vision of the 2030 Agenda: at all levels of government, well-presented, intuitive and communicable data can strengthen decision-making, progress measurement, and the transparency and accountability of the entire SDG framework.
- As demonstrated by the MDGs, monitoring and evaluation are still often pursued in a disintegrated way, as "performance" is still monitored separately within sectoral divisions and different disciplines. The indicators should also strive to foster integrated approaches, rather than siloed approaches in cities.

Measuring progress within the SDGs

Now that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will guide the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have been adopted, attention is beginning to shift towards their implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. In order for the SDGs to be successful, every level of government will be counted on to benchmark and assess progress on each goal.

Each Goal is broken down into a range of targets, with a total of 169 targets spread out across the 17 goals. According to these targets, indicators are being established for monitoring and evaluating progress on each SDG in order to ensure high transparency and accountability within the 2030 Agenda.

A proposal of indicators developed by the Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) will be reviewed by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2016 and submitted to the UN's Economic and Social Commission and General Assembly for adoption. Currently, the proposal includes 229 Indicators, 149 classified as "green" (with general agreement), and 80 "grey" (requiring more in-depth discussion).

Measuring and Monitoring the SDGs

17 SDGs

169 Targets

229 (tbc) Indicators

Within this final monitoring and evaluation framework, city-level actions will be crucial for many reasons: (1) the implicit urban focus of many of the SDGs and their targets; (2) the growing international recognition of the transformative power of global urban trends; and (3) with an ever-increasing percentage of humanity living in cities, urban areas are the places where many actions can reap the greatest impact. Despite this, it remains unclear whether the final list of SDG indicators will incorporate specific city-level indicators and reflect the potential contributions that local and subnational governments can make towards monitoring and evaluation.

Developing the SDG indicators

The SDGs reflect a broader agenda than that set out by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. Correspondingly, the final proposal for indicators to be published in March 2016 by an Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators will need to be more expansive than the 60 indicators used to monitor and evaluate the MDGs.

There is some consensus that the overall number of indicators for the SDGs should be limited, as monitoring and evaluation can pose serious capacity challenges for National Statistical Offices (NSOs) and other public bodies. That being said, an understanding on how many indicators qualify as “limited” is not uniform: some experts recommend that all 169 targets be assigned a single indicator, many believe that 100 global monitoring indicators represents a practical limit, and others believe there should be even fewer.

The major disbenefit to an expansive list of indicators is the challenge of complete and effective data collection, particularly at the city-level. To address this challenge, there is a growing push to design cross-cutting, multi-functional indicators that, by measuring a single data point,

can inform progress on multiple goals or targets. However, the reliance on too many such panacea-type indicators means that overall outcomes of actions may be minimized, as decision makers may focus only on taking actions that directly increase performance against certain of these umbrella indicators, inadvertently ignoring other corollary benefits that should be part of reaching a target.

From “data revolution” to “presentation revolution”

Exactly how much progress was actually made on the MDGs has been the subject of considerable debate, yet one particularly positive trend emerged in the course of their monitoring and evaluation: data availability improved drastically. For reference, 135 countries had acquired data for at least two points in time for 16 to 22 indicators by 2012, while only four countries had this data coverage in 2003. This trend is representative of what UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has referred to as the “data revolution” that will be required to effectively measure and evaluate the SDGs.

This data revolution will incorporate international agencies and the private sector, and must take full advantage of new technology, techniques such as crowdsourcing, and the improved connectivity which have all emerged over the past two decades. Thanks to satellite images, drones, and statistical modelling, a great amount of high quality environmental and geographical data now exists that – if communicated in a manner that can be understood and applied by decision makers – possesses huge potential for devising the appropriate policies and interventions needed to achieve the SDGs.

Thus, in order to make the “data revolution” truly revolutionary, it must be accompanied by a “presentation revolution” which ensures that data is both digestible and applicable for policy makers. Data which has been effectively communicated can help to assess inequalities within countries, inform better decision-making and resource allocation at all levels, and provide the transparency that is necessary to hold governments accountable for progress.

What sort of data do local governments need?

Accessible, comprehensive and communicable data can make cities more viable subjects for investment and insurance, and can enhance the monitoring of progress within the SDGs at the local and subnational levels of government. For the SDGs and beyond, metrics will have to be developed by which relevant national and local statistical



Designing effective indicators

Often, useful data is hard to collect, and easy to collect data is not useful. Effective indicators must be measurable, relevant, reliable and comprehensible. The difficulty in such global processes is that conflicts can often lead to indicators of compromise or necessity (what is readily available data). It is important that indicators directly measure that which they are supposed to, and that they are easily understood by implementers and policy makers alike. The great risk of ineffective indicators is that a lot of resources and capacity is spent in order to improve performance against them, but in reality, despite measurement, the target has not actually been achieved.

authorities can monitor changes in housing, transport, health, environmental degradation and other thematic areas at frequent intervals to understand how key city-level indicators are progressing. High frequency monitoring and data that is up-to-date is important in order to be a useful management and policy tool.

What are the challenges to local government monitoring and evaluation?

1. Data availability

Although data is seemingly all around us, data availability varies significantly from city to city. Even for cities with abundant data, it is often excessively disaggregated and difficult to communicate; conversely, for many other cities the collection and organization of even the most basic city-level datasets have proven to be difficult. Moreover, the practice of obtaining or computing the “right kind of data” with relative ease is likely to become more complicated if current trends continue. This is because the increased automation of many urban services, as well as the rising usage of satellite images, drones, and statistical modelling is creating a massive data expansion.

2. Capacity and technical knowledge

Limits to staff capacity and expertise are the main challenges to monitoring and evaluation that are shared by the majority of cities. Practices such as collecting geospatial data, which often require additional on-site verification and checking in order to be applicable, are also capacity-intensive for local governments, as is aggregating data collected from various public and private actors. These challenges are particularly acute in 2nd tier, rapidly growing

cities with low data collection capacity but in urgent need for basic data. In such cities, the very question of knowing what data to collect, as well as language barriers – terminology, guidelines, and reporting tools that are not in the local language – make monitoring and evaluation even more challenging.

Further, even if cities have the best, most accurate data, the skills and knowledge of how to use data is scarce, yet crucial, within local governments. For example, emergency response teams need to know what to do with the data available to them immediately, and not after long periods of external analysis or debate.

3. Breaking through the “data silos”

Despite the lessons of the MDGs, monitoring and evaluation is still often pursued in a disintegrated way, with “performance” still monitored separately within silos and sectoral divisions. This presents various obstacles to the city-level measurement of performance outcomes. Local governments face challenges in regard to harmonizing workstreams within their own operations, communicating data, involving neighboring municipalities and country level counterparts, and measuring the co-benefits of integrated actions.

How can national and local governments together overcome these challenges?

1. Indicators for city-level action

Indicators must be relevant for local policy-makers in order to be effective for monitoring and evaluating the SDGs at the city-level. There is, however, a conflict between the locally-customized data solutions required by cities and the globally harmonized indicators of the SDGs, and this conflict demonstrates the need to find a balance between reducing the total number of indicators while being comprehensive, in order to increase their policy relevance.

To overcome this dilemma, city-level advocates must continue to encourage the development of simple, single-variable indicators with straightforward policy implications. Such indicators will have the benefit of being simpler to compile, interpret, and communicate, and can subsequently be aligned with existing sustainable urban development plans. If city-level indicators developed for the SDGs are not aligned with existing frameworks, they will pose a significant capacity challenge for local governments, which already have commitments to existing national and international reporting frameworks.

2. Coordination mechanisms for the vertical integration of sustainability data

Protocols and reporting mechanisms that support the vertical integration of data from cities and subnational authorities with the national and global level are necessary to be able to harmonize and aggregate data while avoiding double-counting. For example, the carbonn Climate Registry (cCR) established and maintained by ICLEI allows the vertical integration of greenhouse gas inventories and other climate action data from local and subnational governments worldwide, who report according to the Global Protocol for Community-Scale GHG Emission Inventories (GPC).

By gathering such data, the cCR is able to increase the visibility of local and subnational climate actions and their contribution to national and global targets.

3. Integrated urban governance

Along with the vertically coordinated mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the SDGs, improved institutions and regulatory procedures at national and local levels – which acknowledge the interconnected nature of urban and rural challenges – can help local governments pursue integrated approaches. The SDG indicators should therefore strive to foster integrated approaches, rather than siloed

approaches in cities. However, this does make it more challenging to come up with simple indicators, and also – as mentioned above – runs the risk that only actions which generate the best numeric results are pursued, without examining additional surrounding contexts or unmeasured added values.

Conclusion

Cities will need support, resources, technical know-how and capacity building in order to fulfill their key role for the data gathering and monitoring that is crucial to the successful implementation of the SDGs – and ultimately for the transparency and accountability of the entire 2030 Agenda.

While it is currently unclear whether the final list of SDG indicators will incorporate specific city-level indicators, the SDGs themselves reflect the fact that local and subnational governments – and the vital connection these administrations have with their citizens – are increasingly being recognized as being integral to effective sustainable development. Yet in order to make the monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs successful, a much sharper focus is needed on enhancing the roles and capacities of local and sub-national governments by providing the support and resources they need to fulfill their critical responsibilities.

Further Reading

- Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2015) How Information & Communication Technology can help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Online. (http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICTSDG_InterimReport_Web.pdf)
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- UN ECOSOC (2015) Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators. Online (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/47th-session/documents/2016-2-IAEG-SDGs-E.pdf>)
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