"If the international community can agree on a reliable indicator framework and commit to on-going monitoring, progress towards the goals can be tracked, and implementation actions can be evaluated and refined."

B R I E F

Monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Joy Hyvarinen and Larry MacFaul

VERTIC

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals are expected to form the centrepiece of the UN post-2015 development agenda. In contrast to their predecessors the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals will apply to all countries, instead of being focused on developing countries.

A UN summit meeting, to be held in September 2015 in New York, will adopt the new post-2015 development agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Intergovernmental negotiations are under way.

How progress towards the SDGs will be measured is part of these negotiations. This includes the development of an indicator framework, which will measure progress towards specific targets under the goals.

The technical work to develop the indicator framework has begun, in parallel with the post-2015 negotiations. This framework will be an important element in ultimately achieving the SDGs, but the development and implementation of the indicators faces challenges, as indeed does the process to fully finalise the current proposal for the SDGs and their related targets.

Key Context: The Millennium Development Goals

At the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 world leaders unanimously adopted the UN Millennium Declaration,[1] which covered a broad range of issues from peace, security and disarmament to environment and human rights. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which focus on a narrower range of issues, were subsequently drawn from the broader Millennium Declaration.

The MDGs emerged through consultations involving the UN secretariat and international bodies such as the World Bank, rather than intergovernmental negotiations.[2] A consequence of this was that it took some time for the goals to become fully accepted. The eight MDGs (see Box 1) were built on already agreed international development targets and aimed to consolidate and focus existing development efforts and to generate the political momentum that had previously been lacking.[3]

Each of the MDGs has at least one target attached to it. For example, one of the targets under the goal to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (goal 1) aims to '[h]alve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day'. In addition, each of the targets has indicators for measuring progress.[4] Most of the targets under the various MDGs have 2015 as a deadline. Several of the targets have now been met, but others remain to be achieved.[5]

The structure of the MDGs, the targets and the indicators, reflect the challenges involved in breaking down briefly worded broad global goals into time-bound, quantified targets and indicators through an international process. For example, one of the targets under the goal to ensure environmental sustainability aims to '[r]educe biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss'. One of the indicators for this target is the 'proportion of land area covered by forest'. In practice, increases in the land area covered by forest in a country could have little impact on reducing biodiversity loss: for example, monoculture plantations could increase the forest area but not necessarily biodiversity.[6]

The MDGs focus on developing countries, but the goal to develop a global

1. Millennium Declaration, UN Doc. A/RES/55/2 18 September 2000.

2. See Report of the Secretary-General: Road Map towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, UN Doc. A/56/326, p 7

3. Joy Hyvarinen, The Millennium Development Goals: at a decisive stage? Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), September 2003.

4. See the official list of MDG indicators, available at http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.Content=indicators/officiallist.htm.

5. See The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014, available at http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2014%20MDG%20report/MDG%202014%20English%20web.pdf.

6. Note 3, p. 4

partnership for development (Goal 8) also addresses developed countries, with targets related to trade, finance and debt.

The indicators for these targets cover official development assistance (ODA), market access and debt. The MDGs have become the focus of international development efforts, even for many who were doubtful about them to begin with.[7] In the views of many, they have 'unified, galvanized, and expanded efforts to help the world's poorest people'.[8] However, the MDGs are not without their weaknesses. For example the development economist Sakiko Fukuda-Parr has highlighted a number of issues. Firstly, the goals are biased against countries with low starting points; secondly, their narrow focus inadequately reflects important issues such as governance and equality and fails to adequately address human rights.[9]

The emergence of the Sustainable Development Goals

The question of how to build on the MDGs and what should succeed them after 2015 was raised in the preparations for the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development ('Rio + 20'). During the negotiations, Colombia and Guatemala put forward a proposal for new global sustainable development goals. The proposal envisaged that the goals would apply to all countries, both developing and developed. It identified the following potential issue categories that the goals might cover:

• Combating poverty;
• Changing consumption patterns;
• Promoting sustainable human settlement development;
• Biodiversity and forests;
• Oceans;
• Water resources;
• Advancing food security; and
• Energy, including from renewable sources.[10]

The result of the Rio + 20 conference was reflected in the outcome document, 'The future we want.'[11] It included an agreement to establish a process for developing new global sustainable development goals, to be agreed upon by the UN General Assembly. The process was set to take place in an open working group under the General Assembly, comprising 30 representatives nominated by member states from the five UN regional groups 'with the aim of achieving fair, equitable and balanced geographical representation'.[12] This turned out to be a challenging task.

The Rio + 20 conference also agreed that the new goals should be:

…action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally

7. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Should global goal-setting continue, and how, in the post-2015 era? DESA Working Paper No 117 ST/ESA/2012/DWP/117, July 2012.

8. John McArthur, Own the Goals: What the Millennium Development Goals Have Accomplished, Brookings, 21 February 2013, at http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/02/21-millennium-dev-goals-mcarthur.

9. Note 7.

10. See RIO + 20: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), A Proposal from the Governments of Colombia and Guatemala, available at http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/colombiasdgs.pdf.

11. See UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/66/288 11 September 2012.

12. Note 11 para. 248.

13. Note 11 para. 247

14. See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1661.

applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.[13]

The UN Open Working Group: Participation and process

It took until January 2013 before the new open working group was established, because of difficulties in reaching agreement on the membership. A solution was found by basing the membership on an innovative arrangement where 69 countries shared 30 seats. Some seats were held by one country: for example, Kenya and Congo each had seats. Others were shared, such as seats held by the combinations of China/Indonesia/Kazakhstan and Denmark/Ireland/Norway.

Non-governmental stakeholders participated actively as observers in the open working group. In addition, the co-chairs held meetings ('morning hearings') with stakeholders before the start of the official meetings.[14]

The open working group held 13 sessions between March 2013 and July 2014 at UN Headquarters in New York. Initially the open working group operated in 'stock-taking' mode, which included hearing expert presentations and sharing views among governments. This helped representatives to identify key issues and understand one another's views, in what some referred to as a learning process. It was only in 2014 that the open working group moved into a negotiating phase.

Challenges

The open working group faced many challenging questions, including how to structure the SDGs and how to limit the number of goals without excluding important issues. Challenging discussions covered issues such as: financing for developing countries and

related issues; the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities among countries (CBDR); sexual and reproductive rights; inequality (with developing countries—the G77 and China—arguing for inclusion of inequality among nations, not only inequality within nations); and rule of law and peaceful societies.

Climate change was one of the challenging topics, in particular the relationship of the open working group negotiations with the on-going negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which are aimed at adopting a new climate change agreement in December 2015. Climate change impacts are recognised as a major development threat, but some countries were concerned that including a Sustainable Development Goal on climate change could prejudice the UNFCCC negotiations. The political sensitivities related to the climate change goal (Goal 13 of the open working group's proposal) are reflected in an asterisk (see Box 2), which recognises the primacy of the UNFCCC as the intergovernmental forum on climate change.

The unfinished outcome: proposed Sustainable Development Goals and targets

The open working group concluded its negotiations in 2014 with a proposal for 17 SDGs (Box 2). The political nature of the negotiations, the complex issues, time pressures, and the need for compromises meant that the proposal is far from perfect, nor is it fully developed. However, it was a proposal that states could accept.

Like the MDGs, each of the proposed SDGs has a set of targets attached to it, with a total of 169 targets for all the goals.[15] For example, SDG 1 aims to '[e]nd poverty in all its forms every-

Box 2: The Open Working Group's proposal for Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.*

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

 Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.

*Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.

15. Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals, UN Doc. A/68/970 12 August 2014.

16. ICSU & ISSC, Review of the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective. 2015.

17. US statement in the post-2015 negotiations, 26 March 2015.

18. UN General Assembly resolution on modalities for the process of intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda, (draft version), UN Doc. A/69/L.46* 22 December 2014, para.2 (d).

19. Co-Facilitators' summary of the stocktaking meeting of the intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda, 21 January 2015, p.2

20. The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet, synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda, UN Doc. A/69/700, 4 December 2014, para. 137.

where'. Its targets include, for example, 'eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day' by 2030, and 'reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions', also by 2030.

However, the formulation of many other targets is very generic, lacking dates or quantification. For example, one proposed target seeks to '[p]romote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities'. It relates to the goal to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (Goal 12).

For some targets, it appears that there was a desire to include quantitative metrics, but the open working group was not able to do so. This resulted in targets that were not fully elaborated and only include a place-holder 'x' in square brackets. For example, under a goal related to terrestrial ecosystems (Goal 15) a target to 'promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and increase afforestation and reforestation by [x] per cent globally' by 2020, and under the education goal (Goal 4) a target to 'ensure that all youth and at least [x] per cent of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy' by 2030.

A review of the targets by the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the International Social Science Council (ISSC) considers that 49 targets are well developed, 91 targets could be strengthened by being made more specific and 29 require significant work.[16] At the March session of the post-2015 negotiations, the US stated that its analysis found. 32 percent of

the targets to be excellent; half to be in need of 'modest work'; and 18 percent in need of considerable work. The US pointed out that 70 percent of targets lack any specific, quantifiable metric, while recognising that not all targets need quantification.[17]

Next steps

The open working group's proposal for SDGs and targets is now part of the intergovernmental negotiations that are taking place at UN Headquarters in preparation for the summit that will adopt the UN post-2015 development agenda in September.

At the time of writing, the status of the open working group's proposal and how it might evolve as part of the post-2015 negotiations is not clear: the UN General Assembly resolution that set out the framework for the negotiations, states that the proposal 'shall be the main basis for integrating sustainable development goals into the post-2015 development agenda, while it is recognised that other inputs will also be considered'.[18]

Despite the apparent lack of a consistent approach to the targets, there appears to be broad support for not re-opening the negotiations that resulted in the open working group's proposal. However, there are differences in views when it comes to 'technical proofing' by experts.[19]

In his synthesis report on the post-2015 agenda, released in December 2014, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated that UN technical experts were available to review the targets to ensure that they are specific, measureable, achievable and consistent with existing UN standards and agreements 'while preserving the important political balance that they represent'.[20] The Secretary-General also proposed that where no quantitative target was

specified, states might wish to seek the input of the UN system, in consultation with its partners in academia and the scientific community.[21]

This led to intense debate as some countries supported technical review, but the G77 and China opposed it, arguing that it could disturb a delicate balance achieved in the open working group's proposal. At the time of writing, it is unclear how this will be resolved. At the recent negotiating session (18 – 22 May 2015), the co-facilitators of the post-2015 negotiations circulated a revised document with suggested adjustments for 21 targets, building on a similar document circulated in March.[23] The document's aim was to complete work on some of the targets by replacing the 'x' with new wording and to ensure consistency with international agreements. In addition, the co-facilitators added references to humanitarian assistance in two targets to emphasise the importance of the issue. At the May negotiating session there was no agreement on how to proceed.

Development of the monitoring and review framework for the Sustainable Development Goals

The negotiations on the UN post-2015 development agenda are considering issues related to follow-up and review, including development of indicators for measuring progress towards the SDGs. However, it will not be possible to finalise the indicator framework until the goals and targets have been adopted in final form. There is also recognition that the indicator development will require considerable technical work. There seems to be broad agreement that technical experts should develop the indicator framework, but also a strong wish, in particular among developing countries, to maintain political oversight of the development of indicators.

The roles of the UN Statistical Commission and the Interagency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal indicators (IAEG-SDGs)

The UN Statistical Commission, a subsidiary body of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is leading the work on indicator development. The commission has endorsed a road map for developing an indicator architecture by 2016. It includes the launch in November 2015 of an electronic platform for monitoring the SDGs and targets, as well as a new Interagency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal indicators (IAEG-SDGs).

The IAEG-SDGs is developing the indicator framework. It consists of 28 representatives of national statistical offices and, as observers, representatives of regional commissions and regional and international agencies, including ones responsible for global reporting on the MDGs.

Members are nominated through existing regional mechanisms (for example, the Statistical Commission for Africa) for an initial period of two years, after which some are expected to rotate as agreed by respective regional mechanisms. The aim is to ensure equitable regional representation and technical expertise and to include members from Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Non-member countries may send representatives to participate as observers.

Existing global monitoring groups that are working on specific indicators will contribute to the work of the expert group, as deemed appropriate by the group. New global monitoring groups may be formed, bringing together national and international experts to

"There seems to be broad agreement that technical experts should develop the indicator framework, but also a strong wish... to maintain political oversight of the development of indicators."

21. Note 20, para. 138.

22. Statement by South Africa for the Group of 77 and China, 23 March 2015.

23. Available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/

24. Terms of reference for the Inter-agency Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators.

25. See Technical report by the Bureau of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) on the process of the development of an indicator framework for the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda, working draft, Annex I, p. 7

26. Note 11. Para. 38.

27. For more information about the FOC see http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broader-progress/development.html.

28. Note 25, p.1

29. Note 25, p.1

support the IAEG-SDGs on selection and definition of indicators, data compilation and reporting to monitor progress in new and emerging areas. The expert group is meant to conduct its work in an open, inclusive and transparent manner, inviting experts, as appropriate, from civil society, academia and the private sector to contribute know-how and experiences on indicators and innovative data compilation methods.[24]

In addition, a new high-level group under the Statistical Commission will provide strategic leadership related to implementation of the SDGs. It is expected to consist of national statistical offices, and regional and international organisations as observers, operating under the auspices of the commission. The high-level group is intended to promote national ownership of the post-2015 monitoring system and foster capacity-building, partnership and coordination for post-2015 monitoring.[25]

The road map for the development of indicators that is mentioned above was created by the Commission's Friends of the Chair Group on Broader Measures of Progress. The Friends of the Chair Group was established in 2013, in response to a request by the Rio+20 conference, to launch a work programme on broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product (GDP).[26] The group has been providing support to the post-2015 negotiations with the aim of ensuring that a robust statistical measurement approach is part of the post-2015 preparations.[27]

The IAEG-SDGs is expected to provide a first document on possible indicators in July 2015. The 47th session of the UN Statistical Commission in early 2016 is expected to endorse a proposal by the IAEG-SDGs for the indicator framework and consider an implementation plan. Interestingly, in mid-2016 a baseline data report for global monitoring will also be released, providing data and identifying gaps.

Some progress has already been made towards developing the indicator framework. In response to a request from the co-facilitators of the post-2015 negotiations, the Statistical Commission released a working draft of a technical report in March 2015, with an initial assessment of more than 300 proposed provisional indicators for global monitoring. Only intended to be a preliminary document, the report emphasised that the proposed indicators have 'not been discussed or endorsed by national experts and hence do not pre-judge or precommit the work of the IAEG-SDGs'.[28] The commission has stressed that developing a robust and high-quality indicator framework requires time and needs to be conducted in stages.[29]

At the May session of the post-2015 negotiations, which focused on the theme 'Follow-up and review', the chair of the Statistical Commission provided an update on development of the indicator framework. He noted that the indicators might be organised in three tiers: indicators for which methodology and available data exist; indicators for which methodology exists but no data are available; and indicators for which methodology does not exist.

Some challenges: scale of the task

Given the vast range of issues covered by the SDGs, it is clear that a substantial amount of technical work will be needed to develop and test the indicators at global, regional and national levels. Moreover, a well-designed indicator framework is crucial for their success. Constructing the indicator architecture—globally and at national

Box 3: Examples of some indicators considered as part of the initial assessment of proposed provisional indicators by the UN Statistical Commission.[30]

Target 1.1	By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day.
Indicator 1.1.1	Proportion of population below $1.25 (PPP) per day disaggregated by sex and age group.
Target 1.2	By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.
Indicator 1.2.1	Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) disaggregated by sex and age group.
Indicator 1.2.2	Proportion of population living below national poverty line, disaggregated by sex and age group.
Target 8.b	By 2020, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization.
Indicator 8.b.1	Total government spending in social protection and employment programmes as percentage of the national budgets and GDP.
Target 14.6	By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation.
Indicator 14.6.1	Dollar value of negative fishery subsidies against 2015 baseline.
Indicator 14.6.2	Legal framework or tax/trade mechanisms prohibiting certain forms of fisheries subsidies.
Target 15.8	By 2020, introduce measures to prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of invasive alien species on land and water ecosystems and control or eradicate the priority species.
Indicator 15.8.1	Adoption of national legislation relevant to the prevention or control of invasive alien species.
Indicator 15.8.2	Red List Index for birds showing trends driven by invasive alien species.

30. Note 25.

31. For more information about the MDGs and indicators see http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Default.aspx.

32. Note 25, p. 2

33. Thematic evaluation of monitoring and evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals: lessons learned for the post-2015 era, Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services E/AC.51/2015/3* 18 March 2015, pp. 17 – 18

34. Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals: launching a data revolution for the SDGs, a report by the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Revised working draft (Version 7), 20 March 2015, p.14

35. Statement on behalf of the Group of 77 and China by South Africa, 23 March 2015.

36. Note 35.

levels—and related review processes can build on experience with the eight MDGs and their indicators,[31] but the task is much greater for the SDGs.

The number of targets and indicators is one of the main difficulties here. The UN Statistical Commission has expressed concerns about '… the enormous challenge that a large number of indicators would pose for national statistical systems'.[32] A report by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services identified lessons learnt from experience with the MDGs, including that: '[a] fully developed strategy to support national statistical, monitoring and evaluation capacity development needs to be in place; the strategy needs to include multilateral and bilateral support as well as a resource mobilization plan'.[33]

A recurrent theme in the post-2015 negotiations has been to 'leave no one behind', with accompanying calls for much greater disaggregation of data. It is widely agreed that there is a need to improve the quality and availability of disaggregated data and to take into account factors such as gender; age; ethnicity; income; and disability, for example. A report on indicators for the SDGs by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network identifies key dimensions for disaggregation as including: (i) characteristics of the individual or household (e.g. sex, age, income, disability, religion, ethnicity and indigenous status); (ii) economic activity; and (iii) spatial dimensions (e.g. by metropolitan areas, urban and rural, or districts).[34] The network, launched in 2012 by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and hosted by Columbia University, aims to bring together scientific and technical expertise from academia, civil society and the private sector all over the world, in order to address sustainable development issues. The report emphasises the urgency of agreeing and operationalizing an indicator framework for the SDGs and proposes indicators for global monitoring, accompanied by suggestions for complementary national indicators.

Sovereignty and global accountability
Establishing a coherent indicator and review system that links global, regional, national and local frameworks and processes will be challenging and time-consuming. Finding the right balance between global accountability and national sovereignty is, as usual in international negotiations, a fundamental challenge.

The dividing line between technical work and political negotiations may not be clear-cut when it comes to the global indicators, which are under consideration in the post-2015 negotiations. The G77 and China insist that the mandate to formulate indicators is confined to global indicators and 'should in no way delve into national indicators'.[35] Political oversight of the technical work on the indicators in general is also a sensitive issue for the G77 and China. The group has been arguing strongly that indicator development should not undermine or re-interpret the goals and targets proposed by the UN open working group.[36]

Political oversight of indicator development may in the future take place through the new High-level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF), which is considered further below.

Terminology
A note by the co-facilitators setting out their preliminary impressions on follow-up and review, which was released during the May negotiating session, noted that '[t]he first thing we have to agree on is the terminology'.

The co-facilitators asked if we should be speaking about a 'monitoring and accountability framework' or a 'follow-up and review framework'?[37]

At the May negotiating session developing countries favoured use of 'follow-up and review', while for example the EU referred to the importance of a 'monitoring, accountability and review' (MAR) framework. According to the EU:

[t]he concept of monitoring, accountability and review is not new…. Many potential targets in the post 2015 agenda are already addressed by legally binding accountability mechanisms under existing treaty bodies. There are also existing monitoring frameworks which could contribute to monitoring of specific issues. The MAR for the post 2015 agenda should seek to build on and improve these existing mechanisms, rather than set up parallel processes.[38]

In the view of the G77 and China, however, 'the phraseology "accountability and or monitoring" has no place and mandate in this debate'.[39]

There are three further formal negotiating sessions before the UN Summit in September 2015. How these differences in view will be resolved remains to be seen.

The process

The unfinished status of the UN open working group's proposal for the SDGs and targets creates a challenge for development of the indicators, especially in combination with the large amount of technical work that will be required.

As noted earlier in this paper, there appears to be broad support for not reopening the negotiations that resulted in the open working group's proposal for SDGs and targets. However, the

targets in particular need further development, and other changes could still be possible: as noted, the framework agreed by the UN General Assembly for the post-2015 negotiations states that inputs other than the open working group's proposal will also be considered. If the 'package' of the proposed SDGs and targets began to unravel, wide-ranging changes might be possible. However, this scenario seems unlikely at the time of writing.

As a consequence, the work on developing the indicators is proceeding before there is certainty about the goals and targets that they mean to complement. However, many countries wish to see rapid progress on developing the indicators. Experience with the MDGs shows how important it is to consider indicators and data needs at an early stage for the SDGs. It took several years to develop indicators for the MDGs—'data and metrics were a mere afterthought'.[40]

The new High-level Political Forum

The new High-level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF) was created following the Rio+20 conference. The forum is meant to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development. A central function is to follow up and review progress in implementation of sustainable development commitments. It is expected to become the 'institutional home' of the SDGs.

The High-level Political Forum will meet every four years under the auspices of the UN General Assembly at Heads of State/Heads of Government level. In between that time, it will meet annually under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).[41] The first substantive meeting was held in 2014.

"…the work on developing the indicators is proceeding before there is certainty about the goals and targets that they mean to complement."

37. See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/ content/Preliminary%20Impressions_cofacilitators.pdf.

38. EU statement 18 May 2015.

39. Statement by South Africa for the Group of 77 and China, 20 May 2015.

40. Guido Schmidt-Traub, Why data and metrics are essential for future development goals to be met, Guardian, available at http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/jul/04/data-metrics-millennium-sustainable-development-goals.

41. Format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development UN General Assembly resolution UN Doc. A/RES/67/290 23 August 2013.

42. Note 41, paragraph 8(c).

43. Note 37.

44. Larry MacFaul & Joy Hyvarinen, Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals, at http://www.sustainabledevelopment2015.org/index.php/blog/296-blog-governance/1649-monitoring-the-sustainable-development-goals.

45. See http://www.vertic.org/pages/homepage/programmes/former-programmes/environment.php.

46. Note 44.

Regular reviews of sustainable development commitments and objectives, in particular the UN post-2015 agenda and the SDGs, will start in 2016. These are meant to be voluntary and state-led, involving ministerial and other high-level participants, and UN entities. The reviews are also meant to 'provide a platform for partnerships, including participation by stakeholders'.[42] What that will mean in practice is not yet clear.

There is agreement that the forum should play a central role in review and follow-up, but (in addition to the differing views regarding terminology, as described above) there are differing views as to how centralised the process should be. In the note on preliminary impressions on follow-up and review, circulated in May, the co-facilitators stated that many see the forum as 'the crown of a network of accountability mechanisms'. The note added that an idea exists where thematic reviews of progress could be conducted in various platforms throughout the UN system, feeding into the forum, with ECOSOC and the UN General Assembly also having key roles.[43]

At the coming meeting in June-July 2015, the forum will focus on the theme of 'strengthening integration, implementation and review—the HLPF after 2015', which should help clarify how the future reviews will be organised.

Concluding notes

Success in attaining the SDGs will rest, in part, on how well efforts can be guided and where resources are directed. If the international community can agree on a reliable indicator framework and commit to on-going monitoring, progress towards the goals can be tracked, and implementation actions can be evaluated and refined.[44]

The expansive scope of the SDGs is the main challenge to developing a monitoring framework. The goals include a vast range of issues spanning all human activity on Earth: water use, energy, food and agriculture, health, sustainable consumption and production, industrialisation, urbanisation, education, inequality, poverty, and gender issues. Measuring progress will require collection of large amounts of different types of data involving a host of metrics from across several disciplines such as economics, social sciences, natural sciences, medicine and environmental science.

Research carried out by VERTIC and Chatham House to develop and run indicators for progress on good governance in just one sector—timber production and trade—showing that development and testing of indicators can require a considerable amount of time and technical work.[45] However, for many areas that the SDGs cover, indicators and data may already exist. The question is how much coverage do they provide (both in terms of issues and geographically), how reliable are they, and are they fair metrics.

Making sure that capacity building and training is available should be a priority. If monitoring of the SDGs is going to work, countries—in particular donor countries—will need to invest in this, starting as soon as possible. Such efforts will be worthwhile since establishing robust monitoring capabilities in countries will enable more accurate planning of national sustainable development priorities, as well as activities helping to keep track at the international level.[46]

About this paper

The Sustainable Development Goals are expected to form the centrepiece of the UN post-2015 development agenda. In contrast to their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals will apply to all countries, instead of being focused on developing ones. In September 2015, a UN summit meeting will take place in New York, and will look to adopt the new post-2015 development agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals. How progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals will be measured will be part of the negotiation process. This includes the development of an indicator framework, which will measure progress towards specific targets under the goals. The technical work to develop the indicator framework has begun, in parallel with the post-2015 negotiations. This brief will examine the development and implementation challenges that will face the new indicator framework and the process to fully finalise the current proposal for the Sustainable Development Goals and their related targets.

Building trust through verification