Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs: Introduction to Special Issue

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Abstract

The papers in this special issue provide accounts of the politics and knowledge that shaped the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The open and transparent processes in the Open Working Group (OWG) and Post-2015 agenda consultations challenged the MDG paradigm and set more transformative and ambitious goals. But across many goals, there was slippage in ambition when targets and indicators were selected. In some cases, this is due to genuine difficulty in defining a suitable indicator. In other cases, there is clearly a contestation about the agenda, and indicators are used to reorient or pervert the meaning of the goal. The accounts of the negotiations– concerning inequality, sustainable agriculture, access to justice, education, environment – show how the selection of an indicator is purportedly a technical matter but is highly political, though obscured behind the veil of an objective and technical choice. The papers also highlight how the increasing role of big data and other non-traditional sources of data is altering data production, dissemination and use, and fundamentally altering the epistemology of information and knowledge. This raises questions about 'data for whom and for what' – fundamental issues concerning the power of data to shape knowledge, the democratic governance of SDG indicators and of knowledge for development overall.

Policy Implications

- The research findings show that the SDG experience was an important innovation in more participatory and transparent goal setting, but they also call attention to the pitfalls of 'governance by indicators'. The HLPF and the UN SC should re-examine the most problematic indicators at the 2020 review.
- The UN SC should ensure that the IAEG-SDGs is open to comment and proposals for change, while civil society actors and others should continue to invest in scrutinizing the selection of indicators. Criteria for indicator selection should be based more on their accurately reflecting SDG norms and less on data availability. The international community should invest more in developing Tier II and III indicators.
- Most national statistical offices (NSOs) cannot implement the SDG indicator framework without adequate resources. National governments and international donors should give higher priority to supporting these needs.
- Big data can make a contribution to the SDGs but their development needs to be carefully managed to ensure they promote inclusive and participatory development. To ensure this, UN should play a more proactive role in governing the use of big data, for example through accreditation.
- Monitoring the implementation of SDGs should be based on a broad qualitative analysis focused on the goals, not on the indicator framework alone.

Keynes (1936, p. 383) once remarked, 'the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else'. But *which* ideas rule? The development field is replete with competing ideas about the essential objectives of what we mean by 'development', and theories about the best ways to achieve them. Global development agendas are an effort to bridge those divides and find common ground; but there is an intense competition for acceptance of one single set of ideas as the consensus global norm concerning both the ends and means of development. Thus it is not surprising that the formulation of the SDGs – an exercise to define a collective vision of development and set out key priorities – was an intensely contested process.

Much public debate about the politics of SDG negotiations has focused on the nature of the open multi-stakeholder process, to explain why they led to a transformative

and ambitious agenda; or, for the critics, an unmanageably expansive agenda with a proliferation of goals, targets, and indicators. This special issue is concerned with a different question, namely the use of global goal setting as a policy tool, and how this has shaped the normative evolution of development, the kind of contestation that drove it, and the consequences that the choice of goals, targets and indicators, has on development thinking and policy choices.

The SDGs are important in global governance because they achieved a normative shift. They re-conceptualized development as a universal aspiration for human progress that is inclusive and sustainable, displacing the MDG driven notion of development as a North-South project to meet basic needs to end poverty. They are also important because they brought about a methodological shift, namely the use of global goal setting to generate norms, moving toward 'governance by numbers'. Until the SDGs, development agendas were qualitative statements of important social and political priorities. Quantitative targets were often included in these agendas, but only selectively on a few actionable priorities. The SDGs were the first to use goal setting as a process for elaborating and negotiating a UN development agenda, and deliberately adopting the language of numbers to articulate global norms.[1] The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the UN General Assembly was elaborated *after* the SDGs were negotiated, and built around the agreed goals, not the other way round.

This new methodology has important implications for the types of knowledge and politics that shape development norms. To start with, the contestation over ideas is not only about whether a priority such as employment should be included but how it should be measured and how rapidly change should be achieved. The choice of measurement tools–the target and indicator–is essential in defining the norm itself and becomes a critical point of contestation. This brings politics to data, a field heretofore dominated by statisticians who follow codes of objectivity and professional expertise. Second, as social scientists have long pointed out and as we will elaborate further in this introduction, numeric indicators used as policy tools in governance have specific properties that have distinctive effects on knowledge (how things are conceptualized) and on governance (behavior of actors, policy choices). Goals can be effective in communicating urgent priorities, and mobilize attention and participation of stakeholders, and can contribute (Broome and Quirk, 2015) to a more meaningful collective governance of development and achievement of priority goals. But the reliance on targets and indicators can distort the meaning of social norms, create perverse incentives, frame hegemonic discourses and disrupt power structures (Broome and Quirk, 2015; Davis et al., 2012; Fukuda-Parr, 2017; Hansen and Porter, 2012).

These effects result from the choice of the measurement tool and are not always unintended. The power behind these effects is often hidden in the struggles over a seemingly technocratic decision concerning the choice of appropriate target and measurement tool, which in fact embed theories, values, and ideologies (Merry, 2011; Poovey, 1998).

The papers in this special issue explore these struggles; how contestations over ideas shaped the SDGs and continue to do so. They include case studies on selected SDG priorities: hunger, consumption and production patterns, inequality, environment, access to justice, education, sexual and reproductive rights and health. In different ways, each explores why the relevant goals were defined in a particular way, how the targets were set, and indicators selected, and the consequences that these choices have in shaping discourse and policy choices. The collection also includes two papers on the shifting terrain of data and the implications this has for the construction of knowledge that guides development policy priorities.

How global goals serve as a policy instrument

Vehicle for norms

Global goals are vehicles for internationally agreed norms. Norms are standards of behavior for actors of a given identity (Katzenstein 1996) while global norms are defined as 'the shared expectations or standards of appropriate behavior accepted by states and intergovernmental organizations that can be applied to states, intergovernmental organizations, and/or nonstate actors of various kinds' (Khagram et al. 2002, p. 14). Global development goals are informal norms that guide behavior. They define those priorities that are considered legitimate for states and other stakeholders in the international community to pursue, that deserve support from others and that can be used as standards against which performance can be evaluated and accountability demanded.

Global goals are vehicles – or instruments – that convey norms, rather than the norms themselves. They are a particular institutional arrangement for norm creation (elaborating, negotiating, achieving consensus), institutionalization (communicating and diffusing the norm), and implementation (evaluating performance and creating incentives). Used to evaluate performance, they can legitimate or reject the policy choices of governments and agencies, hold these actors accountable for commitments made. They can also be used to advocate for urgent priorities, mobilizing attention, and the need for action from policy reform to investments.

Global goals serve to translate a norm from the language of words to that of numbers, coupled with setting time bound targets. The MDGs and SDGs are constructed with three elements in a nested structure: a statement of a social and political priority (goal), a time-bound quantitative outcome to be achieved that sets benchmarks of performance (target), and a measurement tool to monitor progress (indicator). Not all SDG targets and indicators are quantitative, but the ideal concept of goal setting relies on measurable targets and indicators. And it is the indicators and quantitative targets that dominate progress reporting and demands for accountability.

Numbers in global governance–mechanisms of influence and effects on knowledge and power relations

While social scientists have theorized for decades about numbers as a tool of governance, used by states in exercising authority over citizens (see for example Derosiere, 1998; Poovey, 1998; Porter, 1994; Strathern, 2000), the recent proliferation of benchmarking and performance ranking across countries has led to growing research on the use of numbers – or governance by numbers – as contemporary practice in global governance. An important literature has developed including conceptual explorations and empirical studies of indicators in diverse areas – from human trafficking to state failure to violence against women; and disciplines – anthropology, sociology, international relations, law, science and technology studies, and development studies (see for example Broome and Quirk, 2015; Davis et al., 2012; Fukuda-Parr and Yamin, 2015; Kelly and Simmons, 2015; Merry, 2016). These studies show that the use of quantitative indicators is a tool of governance that has unique properties, exerts influence in particular ways, leads to distinct effects, and engages a particular type of politics. They warn of effects that are unintended or hidden, that are not part of the stated policy objective. Indicators are seemingly neutral but have deep effects on re-conceptualizing norms and shaping behavior that are not always visible, articulated, or benign.

First, translating a norm into a quantitative target and indicators can distort its meaning; indicators are intended to represent a social reality but often they reinterpret it. Translation into a number requires simplification of complex ideas into a set of measurable common elements, abstraction from diverse local settings, and reification of intangible social phenomena (Broome and Quirk, 2015; Davis et al., 2012; Fukuda-Parr, 2014; Merry, 2016). Quantitative indicators are inherently reductionist and can only capture a part of the full social objective (Derosière, 1998; Merry, 2016; Porter, 1995).

Second, numbers lay claim to objectivity and obscure the underlying theories and values behind why the particular measurement tool was selected among alternatives. Numerical indicators are intended to be – or are seemingly – 'objective' and 'neutral', generated by a scientific process. Yet they translate 'what might otherwise be highly contentious normative agendas and converts them into formats that gain credibility through rhetorical claims to neutral and technocratic assessment' (Broome and Quirk, 2015). But in the translation from words to numbers, choices made are based on assumptions derived from particular theories and values. Yet these are obscured behind the veil of a technocratic process driven by (supposed) objectivity. Indicators have theories embedded in them and these can – unwittingly or not – cause the goal to be reinterpreted, modifying its intent.

Third, the use of numbers intersects with their claim to scientific authority. It leverages the power and authority of the actor who issues performance indicators, at the same time enhancing their reputation as a source of expert knowledge in the field. But this too is deceptive. Benchmarking sets performance standards; it requires a deep knowledge of what performance would be feasible, how change takes place in a given field – whether progress, say in reducing corruption, is possible at a particular pace. But too often the quantitative expertise takes over, creating the indicator without adequate scrutiny of the quality of the data available, and often with recourse to using 'dodgy' data and extrapolations to fill gaps (Broome and Quirk, 2015).

How do numeric instruments like rankings exert influence on the behavior of states and other actors? They are instruments of self-regulation that create incentives for actors to align their priorities and discourse with the norm. They do not rely on the enforcement of legal frameworks but on social pressure (Kelly and Simmons, 2015). They use symbolic 'judgments' that create reputational damage through naming and shaming (Broome and Quirk, 2015; Davis et al., 2012; Kelly and Simmons, 2015). Or, on the positive side, they create incentives to be good performers, and create a sense of competition. For example the Human Development Index was created deliberately with this effect in mind as a strategy to promote human well-being as a priority in national and international policy making (Haq, 1995).

Power is central to governance by numbers; indicators leverage the authority of organizations that issue the measurement framework, and reinforce it (Kelly and Simmons, 2015). The decision to use indicators is often intended to serve the purposes of powerful interests (Fukuda-Parr, 2017; Merry, 2011). The choice of the measurement tool is a seemingly technocratic question but is deeply political. Poovey (1998, p. xii) explains that the use of numbers emerged in the 19th century to separate description of a social condition from interpretation and theory; even though numbers 'embody theoretical assumptions about what should be counted, how one should understand material reality, and how quantification contributes to systematic knowledge about the world' they are somehow 'immune from theory and interpretation' (Poovey, 1998, p. xii). There are multiple measurement tools for important social phenomena – such as inequality, economic prosperity, hunger, or access to justice. The chosen tool for measuring such phenomena embeds – in a covert way – theories about what that social phenomenon is, and influences the type of policy interventions that are judged to be needed. In a field like development which is marked by contestations over alternative strategies and policy approaches, the choice of indicators and targets in global goals becomes a critical political issue.

MDG experience

These properties make numeric indicators powerful tools of global governance that can lead to unintended and distorting consequences. As Fukuda-Parr, (2017; Fukuda-Parr and Yamin, 2015) argued in the predecessor project – Power of Numbers, co-directed with Yamin – this was evident in the experience of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They were more effective than their creators ever expected

them to be in raising awareness about global poverty as an urgent moral imperative of the world as a whole. They gained traction and became widely accepted by the main stakeholders – national governments, international agencies, activists, journalists, politicians and others – as the consensus agenda for development, regardless of whether they fully agreed with it. They were effective tools of soft power, as vehicles to propel the norm of ending poverty as a priority, in the *discourse* – not to be confused with policy change or impact – of key stakeholders. They were effective in large part because of their communicative power; MDGs expressed the objectives of a complex process – development – in a simple set of eight goals with a semblance of scientific certitude and accountability because they were concrete, time bound and quantitative targets, and set universal standards. Yet these properties of concreteness, simplicity, quantification and abstraction were precisely what led to their distorting effects. The goals derived from the Millennium Declaration, a statement of world leaders on their vision for human progress in the 21st century, that laid out a transformative vision based on principles of equality, respect for nature, solidarity, and human rights. But the MDGs were reductionist, and framed a narrative of development as a top down approach to meeting basic needs, promoting a target driven strategy, and de-contextualized from local settings.

In the predecessor project (Fukuda-Parr and Yamin, 2015), we developed a conceptual framework for analyzing the normative trajectory of the MDGs, and carried out case studies of 11 selected goals or targets. We found that the MDGs had two types of distorting effects: on policy priorities (governance effect), and on norms (knowledge effect). The translation of norms from words to numbers involved simplification, reification and abstraction of social conditions that are complex, intangible and location specific. MDGs were highly reductionist, articulating a very narrow agenda for development focused on poverty, and poverty interpreted as meeting basic needs. This led not only to increasing attention to neglected priorities but to diverting attention from other important objectives. For example, the goal for reducing maternal mortality not only cast a light on this important priority but a shadow on many other priorities in sexual and reproductive health and rights; the goal for education highlighted primary education but marginalized the challenges of skill training, secondary and tertiary education; and so on.

The effect was not only to narrow the range of priorities but to transport into the framework particular theories of development and exclude others. The case studies found that across several goals, the MDGs undermined the theory of development as capabilities expansion and the realization of human rights. As Diaz-Martinez and Gibbons (2015, p. 208) aptly concluded, the goals 'not only shrank the previous decades interrelated child survival and child health agenda, but untethered the goal from the Millennium Declaration's stated values, and with it the CRC and human rights standards and principles'. The goals were about outcomes and averages, without any reference to distribution and core principles such as equality, non-discrimination, and participation. Several studies found that goals and targets created incentives for implementation efforts that were target driven, relying heavily on technological solutions, neglecting institutional factors and consideration of local contexts, and the need to address the root causes of poverty through structural change. These approaches ignored much of the learning that occurred in the 1990s that began to recognize the limits of top-down technocratic interventions and the essential role of people as agents of change.

The MDG framework led to a consensus on ending poverty as the overall aim of development. This replaced earlier conceptions which focused on transformation of productive capacity of countries to raise living standards. It was an agenda for social investments that sidelined other priorities, and marginalized issues in the long standing agenda of developing countries for a more conducive international environment for development, and a more developmental macroeconomic framework. This served the purposes of the donor community, those actors who pursued health and other social investments as a priority, and the neoliberal economic policy agenda of the IMF and Wolrd Bank.

The MDGs reinterpreted norms. They were intended to be derived from, and reflect the norms adopted in the Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000), as well as the agendas set in the UN development conferences of the 1990s. These conferences set agendas that addressed root causes of deprivation in social, economic, and political structures. But once the numeric targets and indicators were defined, they began to reshape the way that development was understood, with dramatically reductionist consequences. The essence of the MDGs was to express development as the achievement of a set of selected outcomes rather than a process of transformative change. Goal by goal, the MDGs began to communicate simplified understanding of development; gender equality as educational parity, food security as adequate calories, and so on.

The main mechanism for this normative effect was framing discourse. As Morten Bøås and Desmond McNeill explain, framing is used by powerful states and organizations to exert power to influence policy agendas of other stakeholders; by creating a narrative about a social problem in a particular way that points to certain types of response as obvious, and others as irrelevant or unthinkable (Boas and McNeill, 2003). It is therefore an effective strategy for keeping out radical solutions and silencing debate on inconvenient issues. The MDGs were a vehicle for the norm to end global poverty. But this vehicle created a particular narrative of ending poverty framed as meeting basic needs. This kept out unfavored ideas – such as patriarchy and gender discrimination – as well as the core challenges that had long been at the center of global discourse of development such as economic transformation, employment, productivity, role of the state and national strategies. It also kept out capabilities and human rights agendas such as reproductive rights, access to justice, and so on. It kept out the critical but controversial issues of climate change, migration, conflict, and democratic governance. The goals came to shape the definition of development as ending poverty and

replaced the long standing understanding of development as the transformation of productive capacity necessary for improving living standards. Not only did the MDGs redefine development as ending poverty, they redefined poverty as meeting basic needs. This *displaced* other conceptions of poverty such as feminist, capabilities or human rights approaches that are concerned with the agency of people, and the structural and root causes of poverty.

How will the SDGs shape policy and norms? As of this writing, it is too early to analyze the effects, but it is instructive to explore what was the nature of contestation that shaped the goals, targets, and indicators; and whose interests won through in the final agreement.

Contestations in SDG formulation – the process

The UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs emerged from two parallel processes, as summarized in Table 1. The first was the consultations over the 'Post-2015 Development Agenda' led by the UN Secretary General (SG) to formulate a successor agenda to the MDGs (hereafter referred to as the 'Post-2015 process'). The second was the follow up to the Rio+20 Conference on the Environment and Development (Rio+20) held in Brazil in June 2012. These processes were different, in their histories and visions, actors and epistemic communities, and political dynamics.

In July 2011, the SG initiated a process to formulate a successor agenda to the MDGs. This was deliberately designed to be open and consultative, and included: (1) a review by an inter-agency technical team of the MDG experience; (2) multi-stakeholder consultations at national, regional, and global levels and on-line global consultations around 11 particular themes involving numerous events, taking place over 2012–13 (UNDG MDG Task Force 2013); and (3) the establishment of a High-level Panel of Eminent Persons (HLP) in July 2012 to make recommendations for a new agenda.[2] The HLP submitted its report in May 2013 and served as an input to the inter-governmental negotiations at the General Assembly.

In parallel to the Post-2015 process, the Rio+20 conference held in June 2012 adopted a commitment to develop a set of goals that would incorporate environmental, social, and economic priorities. The outcome document (UN 2012) also spelt out the process for its elaboration: to set up an Open Working Group (OWG) of the GA which would allow participation of stakeholders. This was a departure from the standard UN GA process which is closed to non-state actors, and proceeds with regional blocs developing their own positions first, and then coming together at the GA to negotiate. The OWG met in 13 sessions from March 2013 to July 2014 and reached agreement in July 2014 on a proposed list of 17 goals and 169 targets to be submitted to the GA. There was virtually no formal debate on this list of SDGs until it was tabled and adopted at the September 2015 GA.[3]

The two processes differed markedly in their agendas, politics, and thinking. The Post-2015 process was intended to create a follow-up to the MDGs – 'MDG plus' or MDGs version 2.0 – conceptualized in the same mold: a poverty/basic needs agenda, serving to coordinate international aid efforts. The OWG process was the product of Rio+20 and carried the agenda of its outcome document: a sustainable development agenda incorporating poverty, environmental sustainability, economic development, and social equity. It was more ambitious in seeking structural change in the way that the economy and society were organized, and broader in incorporating many sectors and issues beyond meeting basic needs.

The OWG process was led by member states rather than the UN SG and agencies as the MDG formulation process had been. The momentum of Rio+20 commitments was maintained, particularly regarding the vision of SDGs as something quite different from the MDGs. Developing countries played a key role in Rio+20, notably Brazil which served as the host country and Colombia which initiated the idea of SDGs as its major recommendation in 2011 (Caballero, 2016). The UNCED process has historically been a forum where countries of the South challenged the environment agenda of the North by arguing that environmental sustainability could not be conceptualized without integrating

Table 1. The formulation of the SDGs: a summary timeline

Date	The post-2015 process	Open working group
July 2011	SG opens consultation processes on post 2015 including: UN Task Team review of MDG experience; Global Public Consultations; HLP.	
June 2012		Rio+20 Outcome document *Future we want* - sets out mandate to establish OWG of UN GA to develop SDGs
July 2012	HLP established	
March 2013		First OWG meeting
May 2013	HLP Report *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development* submitted to SG.	
March 2013	Reports of Public Consultations submitted	
July 2014		Final (13th) OWG meeting achieves agreement on proposal with 17 goals 169 indicators
September 2014		GA adopts OWG proposal (as proposal)
September 2015		GA adopts 2030 Agenda and SDGs

Note: This only captures key stages in the official UN process of formulation. A multitude of other activities were undertaken that served as an input to these official processes.

developmental concerns. The constituency and many of the policy makers in the UNCED process were from the environmental community including environmental ministries, academics, activists, think tanks, and businesses. The political alignments in this community were historically not the same as those of the development community.

The OWG process was mandated in the Rio+20 outcome document to comprise 30 members. This was an important departure from the standard process for UN GA negotiations which are structured around regional voting blocs, G-77 and China, and the Western groups. Moreover, much of the legwork of drafting alternative language was done by the Secretariat. While the OWG was to comprise 30 members, many more member states vied to be included. As a result, most of the 30 seats were shared by up to four countries. The Rio+20 document also required the process to be open. Stakeholders were invited into the room, while participation of 'Major Groups' was institutionalized, giving them space to intervene. The co-chairs set up daily consultations with these groups during their meetings.

Paula Caballero of Colombia who was a major player in initiating and designing the SDG concept in Rio+20 explains that the OWG concept was a deliberate strategy to by-pass these standard processes and break out of the North-South political divide, to reduce reliance on the UN secretariat and agencies, and to ensure that the process itself would be open to inputs from civil society, academia, and business.[4] Only then could a consensus on a new paradigm of development be achieved. According to several diplomats who participated in the OWG, the new structure gave greater voice to smaller countries, and to more diverse ideas and positions, and helped de-politicize the negotiations and avoid entrenched North-South divides.[5] This helped promote new perspectives and agendas.

In contrast, the Post-2015 process was led by the SG and UN bodies. The process involved open consultation with a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the development community from around the world, including governments, NGOs, academia, and business. Thus, the HLP was co-chaired by Prime Minister Cameron of UK, President Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, and President Yudhoyono of Indonesia, and included personalities from civil society, academia, and business. Nonetheless, donor countries, notably the UK, played a leading role, particularly with Prime Minister Cameron co-chairing the HLP. Donor governments and philanthropic foundations provided special funding to the UN for the Post-2015 effort. Think tanks from donor countries, particularly the UK and US,[6] were prominent in producing many of the analyzes and organizing discussion events on key issues.

Set up as a process for defining a successor agenda to the MDGs, the HLP proceeded by asking 'what to keep, what to amend, and what to add' (HLP 2013, executive summary). The underlying assumption was that the MDGs were a successful framework; they unified the development community on ending absolute poverty as the primary goal and galvanized attention in a way unprecedented in the half century of international development. In contrast, Rio+20 debates were much more critical of the MDGs, particularly for their narrow focus on the poverty agenda, relevance limited to the least developed countries (LDCs), and failing to take on new 21st century challenges such as growing inequality, ecosystem limits, and unjust institutions. The Rio+20 envisioned an agenda within a different paradigm focused on sustainable consumption and production, inclusive economic growth, social justice, and equity.

The HLP approach was technocratic – aiming to develop an agenda underpinned by 'science based' strategy, to develop a set of goals that would not be merely aspirational but realistic and have 'real impact'. Each goal then had to be justified as having impact, based on 'evidence based' analysis (HLP 2013, p. 29). Though the HLP was a political body, its substantive agenda was carried by an Executive Secretary and Lead Author, Homi Kharas, a senior technocrat from the US think tank Brookings Institution and former official of the World Bank.

The two processes were not only different but were to some extent antagonistic; the OWG process can be seen as a push back to the MDGs that were seen as a donor led agenda. The OWG emerged from Rio+20 and reflected frustrations that many countries, especially middle income countries, had felt about the MDG process. The MDGs had been widely criticized as an agenda that was formulated without consultation, drafted by the SG's advisers on the 38th floor of the UN and data experts from the OECD, World Bank and UNDP. Developing countries – governments and civil society – did not embrace the MDGs initially, and middle income countries continued to criticize them as something only relevant for low income countries. States reasserted themselves through the Rio+20 commitment that spelt out the process by which the SDGs were to be formulated.

Power and knowledge in setting and measuring goals

The papers in this special issue provide accounts of the politics and knowledge that shaped the goal setting and measurement choices. Although each goal had its own trajectory, some common themes emerge. The open and transparent processes gave voice to those challenging the MDG paradigm and setting more transformative and ambitious goals. But across many goals, slippage occurred when the targets were set and indicators selected.[7] Slippage affected both the level of ambition and the interpretation of the goals, modifying their intended meaning. In some cases, the slippage may be due to genuine difficulty in defining an indicator – preferably quantitative – that is able to capture the full meaning of a social priority. In other cases, there is clearly a contestation about the agenda, and indicators were used to reorient or pervert the meaning of the goal. The accounts of the negotiations – concerning inequality, sustainable agriculture, access to justice, education, environment – show how the selection of an indicator, purportedly a technical matter, is in fact highly political. The politics of indicator selection is particularly mischievous because the

agendas of the actors involved are obscured behind the veil of an objective and technical choice. The papers also highlight different dynamics at play in the politics of indicator selection. The increasing role of big data and other types of non-traditional sources of data is altering the landscape of data production, dissemination, and use, but also more fundamentally altering the epistemology of information and knowledge. It is challenging the long standing role of the National Statistical Office and the core methodologies used for data production. This has implications for bringing new types of expertise, but also of financing, ownership, access, and accountability. This raises questions about 'data for whom and for what' – fundamental issues of the power of data to shape knowledge, and the democratic governance of SDG indicators and of knowledge for development overall. These points are elaborated below.

Open process – toward a more ambitious and transformative agenda and shifting conceptions of development

Much has already been written about the innovative process of setting the SDGs (Dodds et al., 2017; Kamau et al., 2018): its open and transparent structures; long duration, from 2012 to 2015; the intensity of consultations; the mulit-stakeholder participation; and the departure from the tradition of states negotiating in regional blocs. What has been less explored is how this process privileged certain types of knowledge and ideas, and how a shift in the conception of development was achieved in the passage from the MDGs to the SDGs.

The open and transparent multi-stakeholder process was undoubtedly an important factor behind the SDGs' more transformative and ambitious agenda. It opened up space for multi-stakeholder debate, and gave voice to those – particularly the Global South – who promoted a departure from the MDG mold. The SDGs are universal, integrated, and complex; in contrast the MDGs were for developing countries, and designed to be simple, narrowly focused on meeting basic needs. The integrated, complex SDG agenda encompassing a broad range of environmental, social, and economic objectives was also deliberately designed to reflect a different theory of development. Where the MDGs were focused on a linear concept of seeking a selected set of outcomes, the SDGs are underpinned by the idea that development is complex, multifaceted, and non-linear (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). The MDGs were driven by leaders of bilateral and multilateral development agencies (Fukuda-Parr, 2017); the SDGs were mandated by Rio+20, from the UNCED process with broader constituencies.

This created important space for civil society groups and less powerful states – particularly of the South, but also within the North such as smaller Western European countries – to reassert agendas that were marginalized by the MDGs. In this Special Issue, Yamin, Sen and Unterhalter document in fine detail the trajectory of the advances made to introduce more progressive agendas in areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), education, women's empowerment and gender equality. Gasper, Shah and Tankha provide an account of how a stand-alone goal for Sustainable Consumption and Production – for long an issue that has divided the North and the South – was included despite the objections of the North; while Fukuda-Parr details how the stand-alone goal for reducing inequality within and between countries was finally incorporated.

Civil society movements, while eager to include a 'list' of priorities representing their interests, were especially concerned to argue for structural change necessary to make transformative progress for sustainable human development that is equitable and empowering. A quote in Sen's article from the Women's Major Group expresses this well. She cautions:

> Against developing another set of reductive goals, targets and indicators that ignore the transformative changes required to address the failure of the current development model rooted in unsustainable production and consumption patterns exacerbating gender, race and class inequities . . . We call for deep and structural changes to existing global systems of power, decision making and resource sharing.

The papers in this issue provide accounts of the very extensive consultations that took place over 2012–15, as stakeholders organized multiple discussions of 'experts', held open public meetings, created alliances, and used multiple processes for making proposals. For example, Unterhalter shows how the education goals (SDG4) are far broader than the MDGs not only in incorporating more than primary education but in presenting a vision of education as a 'wider learning including global citizenship, sustainability and gender equality'. The SDG framework also integrates education as an element in other goals (SDG3 health and wellbeing, SDG5 gender equality and women's empowerment, and SDG8 decent work). Alongside the OWG and the HLP, a group of civil society organizations, trade unions, NGOs, academic networks as well as bilateral and multilateral organizations formed a loose alliance in the Education For All (EFA) alliance, closely associated with UNESCO. Unterhalter highlights their role in advocating this broader vision, in contrast for example to the HLP proposal which continued to focus on primary education. Similarly, Yamin shows how the women's movement began discussions about SRHR and other gender equality agendas in multiple meetings and processes over 2012–15. In line with the conception of development in the SDG framework that embedded women's and human rights principles, Yamin points out that SRHR is not a single goal but diffused throughout the SDGs under the goals on health (3), gender equality (5), and inequality (10).

These papers make clear that the SDGs did not result from a one-off negotiation but should be seen as part of a process of contestation over development agendas that had been on-going for decades. Feminist and other civil society mobilization for the SDGs started early, in the context of

Rio+20, and made effective use of the space that was opened in the OWG process, especially the Major Groups. But Sen reminds us that effectiveness also depends on the historical context. In the contemporary context, mobilizing for change must contend with an increasingly 'fierce and difficult' socioeconomic and political environment of growing inequality, climate change, and the proliferation of 'illiberal democracies' that is shrinking the space for progressive civil society and bringing a backlash on gender equality. Moreover, as all the articles in this collection point out, the gains made in the SDGs for the transformative agenda are partial; and, more importantly, undermined by the indicators framework which we will discuss in the next section.

The shift in conception of development is also apparent in the two papers that focus on environmental themes: by Elder and Olsen on the environment as a whole, and by Gasper, Shah, and Tankha on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns. Elder and Olsen show how the SDG framework reflects an integrated conception of 'sustainable development' encompassing environment, social, and economic factors as inter-related processes. The environmental priorities are not siloed as a single pillar, but expressed in numerous goals. Still more targets are indirectly related, leaving only 37 with no apparent relevance. The authors attribute this to the sustained efforts by the research and science community, particularly a group of norm entrepreneurs, in promoting the idea of an integrated agenda. They also conclude that the decision-making process of the OWGs was a facilitator. Gasper and his co-authors explain how the objective of sustainable consumption and production has been a core issue since the 1987 Brundtland report, and championed by South governments and civil society, but resisted - and distorted - by business interests. The incorporation of the issue as a stand-alone goal reflects a major gain which they attribute to sustained pressure from the governments of the South.

Fukuda-Parr details the struggle to incorporate inequality in the framework as a stand-alone goal. Its inclusion was a result of sustained advocacy by civil society groups and progressive academics, some UN agencies, and ultimately by South governments who insisted on a goal for reducing between-country inequalities, reflecting the underlying assumption that unequal outcomes are due to institutionalized obstacles that poor people and countries face. The resistance came from most of the governments of the North who argued that the goal was redundant.

Finally, the inclusion of access to justice as a goal (16) – as a part of broader governance priorities – recognizes the importance of justice as an intrinsically valuable end in itself as well as a means to ending poverty and inequality, and meeting many other objectives. Satterthwaite and Dhital explain how, 'simultaneous' to the OWG sessions, a push for inclusion of justice as a stand-alone goal came from both inside and outside the UN system. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) argued for a separate goal on the rule of law, justice, and security, setting forth proposed goals, targets, and indicators. Another forceful group was that created by more than 300 civil society networks and campaigns, as well as the World Bank, that mobilized for a goal on justice.

While these papers document the advances made toward adopting a theory of change that recognized a broad range of inter-connected and structural obstacles, the authors do not simply celebrate the achievements. Rather they point out the compromises made, the watering down of the ambition of the goals, or the reinterpretation of the goals by the choice of targets and indicators which threaten to nullify the progress made.

Slippage of ambition and vision – compromises on development perspectives

The inclusion of issues such as sustainable production and consumption, justice, and inequality came at the cost of some compromises in the way that these goals were conceptualized. These social and political priorities can mean different things, and multiple/competing perspectives have been advanced in international debates. Papers by Elder and Olsen, and by Gasper, Shah and Tankha both argue that the relevant SDG reflects a 'sustainable production' perspective of a particular kind: the view that economic growth can be made environmentally sustainable by technological solutions, through 'decoupling' and 'resource efficiency'. Sustainable consumption and production focuses on clean production and less on the total volume of consumption. This has been the mainstream approach in international debates since the 1990s, when corporate interests began to play a major role. These perspectives and the SDG framework are business friendly, and do not address planetary boundaries (Elder and Olsen this volume).

On inequality, the perspective of the SDG framework is to treat the issue as primarily one of poverty and exclusion, rather than 'extreme inequality' that directs attention to the concentration of income and wealth in the hands of the elite. There is no target on reducing unequal distribution. The lead target (10.1) is for inclusive growth – or the World Bank's concept of 'shared prosperity'. Yet it is extreme inequality and its potentially corrosive impact on democracy that has raised alarm in contemporary public debates. The poverty, rather than inequality, perspective was the argument of those who opposed a stand-alone goal. As the UK delegate stated at an OWG session: 'we see much greater practical potential and concrete impact in addressing inequality through goals and targets related to: poverty eradication, equal access to productive and other assets; social protection floors; gender equality; elimination of discriminatory practices, policies and laws; and job-rich and inclusive growth'.

Slippage of ambition – indicators

Essential to the way that a concept is defined is the choice of measurement method. One of the most striking findings of this research is how frequently the indicators watered down the ambition of the goals – by either narrowing down

or distorting their meaning. Each of the seven papers in this collection that analyzes the process of moving from goals to targets to indicators (education, environment, sustainable consumption and production, inequality, justice, sustainable agriculture, sexual and reproductive health, and rights) – shows how the visionary goal was transformed and diluted or distorted by the choice of indicator.

The goal to reduce inequality within and between countries is reinterpreted by the target and corresponding indicator as inclusive growth: that income of the bottom 40 per cent of the population increases faster than that of the national average. This is reinforced by omission of an indicator (such as the Gini coefficient or the Palma ratio) that measures distribution of income and wealth. During IAEG consultations, national governments, UN agencies, and civil society made proposals to include available measures, but these did not lead to any change because the indicator was locked in by the choice of the target.

In environment, justice, and sustainable agriculture, there is no agreement on a proposed indicator and the SDG indicator framework classifies them as Tier II (concept agreed but measurement method to be elaborated and data series not available) or even Tier III (neither concept nor measurement method agreed). Elder and Olsen conclude that the environment indicators 'were not very ambitious, and in many cases, were watered down or eliminated, particularly in the 'economic' goals (8 and 9). In many cases, this significantly reduced or eliminated the integration between the environment and other issues', such that the potential of an integrated agenda is undermined. Relating to justice, Satterthwaite and Dhital document in detail how the goal and target for 'equal access to justice for all' was sharply reduced to indicators (16.3.1 and 16.3.2) concerning criminal justice. The complex power dynamics within working groups of experts led to the choice of administrative data with narrow scope, and rejection of viable alternatives based on household surveys that would generate data on a broader range of civil as well as criminal justice, and based on the experience of people with everyday justice problems. In education, Unterhalter concludes that the indicator framework 'lacks engagement with the substantive idea of quality and its associated inequalities'. The indicators do not reflect the processes and structures that are essential to achieve transformative change for quality and equity in education. Some key priorities are omitted from the framework, such as free education, while proxy indicators are inadequate – such as ICT as a proxy for skills for work, or the provision of basic infrastructure (electricity, sanitation, internet) as proxy for access for the disabled; and equity indicators measure distribution, not structural discrimination. In 'sustainable agriculture', McNeill shows how the transformative vision of the goal is compromised by the way it is translated into targets and indicators, with increasing emphasis laid on *productive* agriculture, followed by the difficulty of getting approval for a methodology. This seemed likely to relegate the indicator to Tier III, effectively leaving the sustainable agriculture target without an approved indicator and therefore without monitoring.

Measuring the unmeasurable – more research, 'data revolution' or less reliance on quantification?

The gap between the indicators and the ambition of the goal/target can, in some cases, be explained by the unavailability of measurement tools and data series. For example Unterhalter acknowledges: 'education quality, equality, inclusion, gender equality may be unmeasurable with current indicators', while Elder and Olsen point out that the 'feasibility of data collection and measuring progress was an important priority'. The IAEG responds to the challenge by favoring what is practically feasible. But this leads to 'treasuring what we measure'. Unterhalter argues that the response should be to 'measure what we treasure' by further research on measuring the unmeasurable, and identifies some promising avenues for new metrics on the processes that drive quality and equality for education.

Regarding justice, Satterthwaite and Dhital also recommend investing in new measurement approaches, but they too suggest exploring new sources and methods of data generation – such as big data, geo-located data, and crowdsourced data and the estimates generated by algorithms – as in the call for a 'data revolution'. They provide a detailed account of how, in the search for justice indicators, national statistical offices (NSOs), have resisted such innovations, by insisting on 'internationally established methodology' as a requirement for adoption of an SDG indicator. But big data are not without pitfalls, as MacFeely shows. He reviews the potential of big data as a source for SDG indicators, and concludes that they offer potential to improve timeliness and to meet policy needs, especially in such complex issues as gender inequality. But he also notes that work is still at an incipient stage, and warns of pitfalls for NSOs making use of big data. Much of it is proprietary and not accessible. The source data is not under their control and may be unstable. They would have no access to the contextual knowledge, of the way that the data were generated. And the use of information from individuals raises serious ethical questions.

Mahajan goes further and explores the asymmetries of power driving the changing ecology of actors and methods that create and disseminate data in the health sector. Analyzing the rise of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) in the production of health metrics and its emergence as the dominant source of data for policy makers, researchers, journalists and others, she argues that this has also displaced official agencies such as the WHO from playing a central role. As NSOs and international agencies struggle to produce SDG data using conventional sources and methods, IHME is emerging with tableaux of estimates. These data relate to some but not all the SDG indicators. The IHME's SDG indicator framework is sharply focused on outcomes and inputs, and neglects indicators related to social determinants of health. Ironically, this trend is attributable to the generous financing they have received from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation at a time when funding for official statistics from public sources has been declining (Satterthwaite and Dhital, this volume), declining dramatically for WHO, and waning for NSOs.

The limitations of quantification need to be recognized. The language of numbers is best suited to capturing tangible outcomes or inputs, and is particularly ill-suited to representing processes, structural obstacles to achieving transformative change, and the particularities of local context – elements that are central to the realization of human rights. Yamin concludes in her paper: 'Although rights, and SRHR in particular, are apparently taken into account, there is a danger that measurement based on abstracted data systematically obscures structural obstacles to achieving those rights, and displaces the political energy needed to combat injustice. I suggest complementing such quantified measures with contextual, qualitative information'.

Conclusions

As Mahajan remarks 'measurement is never an innocent matter where, as it were, the facts speak for themselves. What is measured, who finances and does the measuring, how data are collected, interpreted and disbursed, how they are harnessed to decision-making and programme implementation, and how other measures and ways of collecting information are displaced – all these are contested matters because they are linked with the specific orientation of institutions and policies, the outcomes that they aspire to, and the forms of knowledge that they privilege' (Mahajan).

The case studies in this special issue illustrate how the real locus of power in setting international agendas has shifted to the selection of indicators. The exercise of power takes place through multiple steps in the process of setting the goals and measuring them; and it is, for the most part, obscured in what are purportedly strictly technical processes with technocrats in charge.

The selection of indicators – the work of IAEG – itself can be a 'complex interplay of technical and political considerations' (McNeill). McNeill describes the back-and-forth of proposals and counterproposals in developing a methodology for measuring 'productive and sustainable agriculture'. Sustainable agriculture is a contested concept in itself and the people debating it held widely different views of what that term meant and how to achieve it. They reflected a divide between 'industrial agriculture' and 'agro-ecology', and inevitably the different interests behind these two visions. He explains 'the ambition of those promoting agro-ecology is to replace the dominant productionist food regime promoted by industrial agriculture by one that is very different. In this, they confront not only vested interests but also certain taken-for-granted claims about the merits, even inevitability, of industrial agriculture'. Those having material interests in industrial agriculture – agro-industry, big commercial farmers, scientists working on 'resource intensive methods' – are not in the room, but are represented by the *idea* of industrial agriculture as a superior technical approach to food production that is highly productive and 'sustainable'. The reinterpretation of the goal for 'sustainable agriculture' to '*productive* and sustainable agriculture' in the target made all the difference. It was even suggested that total factor productivity could be included as an indicator– not surprisingly by the US statisticians – though this was not taken up.

Such contestations that reflect deeply embedded differences of view on the theory of development are at play in many of the 'technical' discussions among statisticians on how a social objective should be measured. These issues are highlighted in other case studies in this collection: by Fukuda-Parr on the theoretical divides regarding the concept and measurement of inequality that keeps out concentration of wealth out of the debate; by Yamin on the metrics of sexual and reproductive health and rights that undermine human rights concerns; and by Satterthwaite and Dhital on access to justice that interprets this as crime reporting and keeps out concerns with the structural obstacles to the enjoyment of civil rights.

Control of data is a powerful mechanism for shaping the strategies of a multitude of stakeholders, from national governments to development agencies to NGOs. As Yamin points out the 'growing hegemony of quantified measures of progress' undermines the promotion of SRHR and human rights more broadly. Other papers argue in similar vein that the watered down indicators will compromise the implementation of the ambitious agenda set in the goals (see particularly McNeill; Elder and Olsen; Fukuda-Parr; Unterhalter; Gasper, Shah, and Tankha).

These choices also shape the construction of knowledge for development. Ironically, where the SDG process made great strides in mobilizing a diversity of knowledge – from the South and the North, from the public and policy makers, from researchers and practitioners, from technocrats and politicians – the politics of data may result in a narrowing of the field. Privileging new sources and methods from private actors bypasses the complex structures of voice and accountability that have built up official systems of national and international statistics. Arcane and bureaucratic as the IAEG and UN Statistical commission might appear to be, they are institutions with norms of scientific standards and participatory accountability.

Global goals create a narrative about development that frames policy priorities. Data are at the core of the construction of this narrative, and they shape knowledge. And as Yamin points out 'construction of knowledge and how we frame the world is inexorably an ideological exercise, shaped by an often invisible architecture of political and epistemic trends of the day, which are themselves reflective of power'.

Notes

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1. While the predecessor goals – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – gained traction as a dominant normative framework of development, largely because of the power of goal setting, they were not used to develop the agenda. While the Millennium Declaration included a list of goals, the MDGs were subsequently developed and structured as a list of eight goals with targets and indicators, released in 2001 as an annex to the Secretary General's implementation plan.

2. Other processes were also put in place, including the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing, and workshops on technology.
3. There was one minor modification that was made without open debate.
4. Interview with national delegate, Interview 36 (20 July 2017).
5. For example with UN staff and national delegates: Interviews 11 (17 April 2017); 29 (10 July 2017); 25 (23 June 2017); 46 (21 November 2017).
6. For example UK think tank Overseas Development Institute (ODI) undertook a massive program on the post-2015 and SDG agenda, with much of the financing from UK DfID.
7. One counter-example to this general tendency relates to SDG5, where the target was in fact more transformative and ambitious than the goal.

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