

The SDGs Indicators: A Challenging Task for the International Statistical Community

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Abstract

The papers in this Special Issue raise a number of relevant and important questions, of which three particularly deserve comment. *Are indicators reductionist?* They might be indeed, both regarding the process of defining them and in their use, which is why it is essential that each be based on a deep and sufficient knowledge of the phenomenon concerned. The human development index illustrates both the pitfalls and potential of global indicators. *Are there dark forces behind the selection of indicators?* The agreement of the 2030 Agenda was the outcome of a political process that led to a negotiated consensus accomplished by the Open Working Group. In determining the indicators, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG SDG) was asked for a simple and robust framework which would not affect the political equilibrium reached in the Open Working Group (OWG); no easy task. *Is the IAEG SDG an arcane bureaucratic entity?* In the face of this immensely challenging task, it has sought a balance between what is feasible in the short term and what is required in the long term. The IAEG SDG has become a space for open and constructive dialog between national statistical offices and international agencies.

Many questions arise from reading the introduction to this publication. From my point of view, and considering my participation in the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG SDG), I want to refer to three issues in a very brief way, even as answers are elusive to me: reductionist indicators; the darkness in the selection of SDG indicators and the IAEG SDG itself.

Are indicators reductionist?

Certainly, the indicators can be reductionist of the phenomena they measure. Two elements converge in this situation: (1) the first reductionist element is the process of defining the indicators; (2) the second is defined by how these indicators are used. Some potential users of the global indicator framework developed by the IAEG SDG, regard it as a minimalist expression of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and think that for the new items already included in the Agenda, such as those of Objective 16, it is necessary to develop a thematic framework of indicators. But, to develop this type of framework, it is an essential requirement to possess deep and sufficient knowledge of the phenomena of violence, insecurity, crime, peace and government, and then identify what can be measured in the short term, and what is desirable to measure in the future. For statisticians this requires a complete understanding of these phenomena for the design of adequate data collection tools, but also, and simultaneously, to promote strengthening of the capacity of national statistical offices and systems. Without these conditions, the indicators produced will inevitably reduce and reorient the contents of the Objective.

On the user's side: should the indicators guide and define public policies, by forcing numerical values and deadlines by which these should be reached? Matching a complex phenomenon or public policy with an indicator does not seem to be the right approach. Nor is it to define a public policy solely in the quantitative terms of an indicator. This kind of use of the indicators distorts the purpose of public policy and reduces it to the policymakers trying to achieve a number and render 'positive accounts', without making a full assessment of a problem or the impact of a proposed solution. Trying to solve a problem with the aim of reaching the numerical value of the indicator is to ignore the function of the indicator.

A good example of the production of an indicator and its use is the Human Development Index (HDI). This index has been produced and published since the 1990s. For those who created and promoted it, it has been an invaluable instrument that supports public policy decisions aimed at improving the populations' well-being. Economic growth is not synonymous with human development or with well-being. It has been necessary to quantify other dimensions: income, health, education, gender equality, inequity, etc. However, for many users, probably the majority, and here some government officials must be included, the HDI only serves to rank countries and find out who is up and who is down, and to compare in the most basic journalistic way. Undoubtedly, the index produces competition between countries and within regions, but only up to that point. For these users the important things about the HDI are not the concepts or their theoretical foundations but how a country looks in relation to others. These users are not aware about the message that HDI is trying to convey. In fact, in some

countries government officials have made strong claims at the Statistical Commission because the index was simply considered as a unilateral and simplistic ranking, prepared by an international agency. But, as a response to all the criticisms of the index, and with the establishment of an advisory statistical group, users have been given a greater substance, with more transparency, a simpler way to explain the methodology, and consequently a better use than it initially had.

The HDI shows that what is perceived as reductionist becomes reductionist when it is used out of context, and if users are not offered the explanations and the tools that make clear the message that is intended with this construction. Governments may consider the HDI as an important reference in the design and execution of public policies. In this sense, the evolution process of the HDI must be highlighted because it has achieved a greater statistical soundness, incorporated emerging topics and has reached the appropriate audiences.

Are there dark forces behind the selection of indicators?

In the case of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), targets and indicators, it is important to know how the global indicator framework approved by the UN General Assembly, was achieved. Just as the political process through which two different visions shaped the post-2015 agenda is described in this Special Issue, it is important to know what the process was for the agreement of the 232 global indicators. Reading the introduction, it seems that the definition of targets and indicators was a unique and continuous process. It should be clarified that the drafting of the targets and the goals, was conducted by the Open Working Group (OWG) as part of the political negotiations.¹

The mandate of the General Assembly to develop a global indicator framework to follow-up on the Sustainable Development Goals has been a very challenging task for the international statistical community. The political process that agreed to the 2030 Agenda resulted in 17 Goals and 169 targets reflecting the consensus accomplished by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. In this process, the international statistical community sought a close collaboration with the OWG. In December 2013, a special session of the OWG was held in which experts from the National Statistical Offices of several countries and international organizations presented the scope, limitations and benefits of the statistics, and more importantly, the need to establish a permanent dialogue between those who defined the goals and targets, and those who would define the indicators.

The drafting of the targets has been fundamental in the definition of the indicators; it was the formal input that statisticians received. A first glance at some of the 169 targets is enough to realize that in many cases the targets have multiple dimensions that cannot be measured with one single indicator, in other cases it is not clear which is the most relevant element of the goal; in others, the

indicators are not statistical. The IAEG SDG was asked for a simple and solid framework, which would not affect the political equilibrium reached in the OWG and should give the same weight to each one of the targets. The IAEG SDG should complete the framework with the least possible number of indicators. In fact, two or less for each target.

In addition, a compendium was delivered to the OWG with 29 statistical notes as input to its deliberations. The statistical notes provided the OWG with statistical background information on what data could be available to monitor possible goals and targets in the areas covered by the respective issue briefs, describing methodologies, data availability, data sources, challenges and limitations. The statistical notes also raise awareness for the need to consider statistical aspects (and to involve statisticians) in the design of the SDGs and the post-2015 development framework.²

'In preparation of the first meeting of the IAEG-SDGs (1–2 June 2015), agencies were requested to provide inputs on the indicators for global monitoring within their area of work and expertise based on the list of indicators compiled earlier in the year and already assessed by countries ... In addition, agencies were requested to provide for their proposed indicators the possible data source and the name of the entity that would be responsible for global monitoring (if available), indicate for how many countries data are available, and describe any interlinkages with other targets. The United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) consolidated these inputs into the list contained in this document. In cases where multiple indicators were proposed under one target, precedence was in general given to the proposals by agencies with a mandate in the specific area and/or already responsible for global monitoring on the specific indicator ... The first proposed priority indicator list is intended to summarize the current state of discussion on indicators on individual targets and will be the focus of the discussions at the first meeting of the IAEG-SDGs from 1 to 2 June 2015. One important consideration is that the number of indicators must be limited and that there should be only one indicator per target (or fewer if multipurpose indicators can be identified/developed). The suggested priority indicators in this list will be further revised based on the inputs provided during the discussion at the meeting and later during an additional round of consultations'.³

Is the IAEG SDG an arcane bureaucratic entity?

Unlike the Millennium Declaration process, it has been recognized that country contributions have been essential for the 2030 Agenda process. It is known as a country-led process. The situation is similar in the domain of the international statistical community, since the Statistical Commission agreed that the definition of the indicators should be carried out by the IAEG SDG.

For the Millennium Development Goals indicators, there was also a group that followed the statistical work of the countries and agencies. In short, 'the IAEG on MDGs is responsible for the preparation of data and analysis to

monitor progress toward the MDGs'. The Group also reviews and defines methodologies and technical issues in relation to the indicators, produces guidelines, and helps define priorities and strategies to support countries in data collection, analysis and reporting on MDGs'.⁴ This group had valuable contributions from the countries, which were taken into account, but basically gave priority to international agencies and organizations. It was mainly a top-down approach.

After the first meeting of the IAEG SDG, which was a little chaotic due to the urgency to organize it, it was agreed to organize closed meetings among the 27 member countries and the UNSD as Secretariat, before and/or during the plenary sessions. One of the reasons is that the group could reflect and discuss its decisions before involving other actors, especially international agencies. The criterion for doing so is that it is a process led by the countries. Despite the criticism of these closed meetings, the group has been consolidated and able to have generally common positions against international agencies, even as sometimes there are natural internal disagreements.

Because of the urgency in defining the global indicator framework, the IAEG SDG only had a very brief period to present its work to the Statistical Commission. After that first meeting in June 2015, there were consultations and discussions by electronic means. At the time of the second meeting in October 2015, the task was to review a set based on the agencies' inputs. After a teleconference organized in November 2015, the final set of indicators was practically defined.

An interesting topic is that of Tier III indicators. The reason why there were so many Tier III indicators is because the degree of ambition of the agenda requires a similar degree of ambition in the measurement. Because indeed, we measure what we treasure, the group has not made light decisions; it is necessary to develop concepts, methodologies, tools and training to start measuring what we treasure. On the other hand, without adequate resources, even the most developed countries cannot statistically embark on this type of measurement. A balance has been sought between what is feasible in the short term and what is required in the long term, in such a way as not to dilute the

ambition of the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, the IAEG SDG has decided to conduct two comprehensive reviews of the global indicator framework in 2020 and 2025.

The IAEG SDG has also become a space for dialogue between national statistical offices and international agencies. As in any other dialogue there are many agreements, but also disagreements. The IAEG SDG has taken a critical position on the procedures of some agencies in terms of the lack of transparency, communication and involvement of the NSO in the producing global, thematic and regional indicators, either through estimates, imputations, data modeling or conducting surveys in various countries. This situation has been discussed openly, the IAEG SDG presented guidelines for the data flows to the Statistical Commission to be observed by both national statistical systems and international agencies and these are in the process of implementation.

Notes

1. UNSD, 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. Available from: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/6754Technical%20report%20of%20the%20UNSC%20Bureau%20%28final%29.pdf> [Accessed 28 August 2018].
2. UNSD, Update on the Ongoing Process to Develop an Indicator Framework for the Post-2015 Development Agenda (Paper by UNSD, working draft as of 9 June).
3. UNSD, First List of Proposed Priority Indicators. Available from: <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8n3WhOaTbGVZ3JlbUQ4QlFWYjQ/view>
4. UNSD, Millennium Development Goal Indicators. Available from: <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=IAEG.htm> [Accessed 28 August 2018].

Author Information

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