

Layers of Politics and Power Struggles in the SDG Indicators Process

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Abstract

The process of designing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was intensely political, as it can be expected of United Nations negotiations of that magnitude. Inevitably, those politics have spilled over into the technical process of formulating global indicators to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals. This commentary explores some of the tensions between competing priorities and various constituencies that affect the design of the global SDG indicator framework.

As the articles in this special issue point out, the selection of indicators for monitoring progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda does not depend purely on technical considerations but is inherently about political questions of competing priorities between various stakeholders. The SDG indicator process itself has been beset with power struggles.

Let's get out of here

It was 7:35 pm on Sunday 2 August 2015 in the hallowed halls of the United Nations General Assembly, the final moments of a marathon negotiations session that was supposed to have ended 48 hours before. An errant open microphone captured that sigh from a senior diplomat as he banged the gavel to mark the end of the negotiations on the Post-2015 development agenda, and the room erupted in cheers. Those five words reflected the relief of diplomats who had deployed the finest of their skills to steer through taxing, intense and extensive negotiations spanning several years, to achieve a fragile consensus between a myriad of competing policy priorities, political posturing, and opposing stakeholders. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development would be adopted by Heads of States a few weeks later, hailed as a pinnacle of multilateralism, and an innovative exercise in crowd sourcing policy-making on a planetary scale. With 17 goals and 169 targets, it had things that everybody could be happy about. But it also had things that everybody could be unhappy about. As the Post-2015 negotiation process was nearing its end, and the window for influencing the choice of goals and targets was closing, many stakeholders quickly turned their attention to the still undecided part of the new global development agenda, the indicator framework to monitor its implementation.

In June 2015, the UN Statistical Commission convened the first meeting of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators, a carefully selected group of member states

mandated with developing an indicator framework for the newly adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its 17 Goals and 169 targets.

Statisticians meet politicians

Held in the halls of the United Nations Headquarters in New York, the first meeting of the IAEG-SDGs was attended by chief statisticians representing its members, some escorted by representatives from their Permanent Missions to the UN, as well as UN Agencies and (a few) civil society representatives. It was perhaps intended to be a celebratory beginning of a technical process to develop sound and objective metrics to track progress towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda. But from the beginning, sparks flew, and the meeting descended into a shouting match, chaotic at times, between technically minded statisticians eager to get started and politically minded diplomats just emerging from a bruising though ultimately successful negotiation of the 2030 Agenda. Since then, the IAEG-SDGs, which met for the 8th time in November 2018, has carefully avoided meeting in New York. It is fair to say that consequently, the IAEG-SDGs has been driven more by technocratic and financial considerations, and has struggled to fully grasp the overarching political ambition of the 2030 Agenda, notably when it comes to the 'Leave No One Behind' principle and interlinkages between SDGs.

Statisticians meet UN bureaucrats

Even before that fateful first meeting, the IAEG-SDGs had already been confronted with the very political question of *who* calls the shots on the SDG indicators. United Nations agencies had led the technical process of developing the MDG indicators, arguably an unreserved success in establishing the importance of statistics in development. They expected to play a similar role for the SDGs. Instead, they found themselves relegated to the status of observers,

elbowed out by member states represented by their chief statisticians. Since then, UN agencies have been looking in from the outside, shut out of the IAEG-SDGs decision-making process taking place mostly behind members-only closed doors. Following a near-rebellion by UN agencies, the IAEG-SDGs, starting with its fourth meeting, rejigged the format of its meetings to allow more time for participation by and interaction with UN agencies. Recognizing the necessary role of UN agencies to support the development of indicators, assist developing countries in data collection and strengthen national statistical capacity, the IAEG-SDGs instituted a system of custodians and partner agencies responsible for specific indicators. While it provided UN agencies the stakes they needed to devote resources to the SDG indicators process, it did not address the sensitive issues of who decides on indicator formulation. On the one hand, the IAEG-SDGs has been trying to assert authority over UN agencies by not 'approving' indicator formulations not taking into account the views of its members. On the other hand, many UN agencies have been reluctant to commit on indicators not specified by themselves or to take on new responsibilities not already included in their programmes of work or organizational mandates. These would require significant resources, and 3 years on, there is no indication from member states where the funding to support data production and statistical capacity development for the 2030 Agenda would come from. Some indicators have remained 'orphan', unclaimed by any agency. It would seem nobody wants to track resources allocated to poverty reduction programmes (SDG indicators 1.a.1 and 1.a.3) or spending allocated to sectors that disproportionately benefit women, the poor and vulnerable groups (SDG indicator 1.b.1), which is quite telling. Orphan indicators run the risk of being dropped at the comprehensive review of the SDG indicator framework in 2020. Another side effect of the custodianship system has been competition among agencies for the lead role on some indicators that the IAEG-SDGs had to mediate.

A tense debate is taking place on data flows from national to regional to global levels, and on custodian agencies' role in harmonizing national data for global comparability, as countries assert their sovereignty over national data. Who should have the final say on the official data to be included in the global SDG Indicators database? As added complication, developed countries, unaccustomed to dealing with thematic UN agencies, are reluctant to submit themselves to the exercise of providing their data to a multitude of custodian agencies. A peace committee of sorts, composed of the Chairs of the Committee for Coordination of Statistical Affairs representing international statistical agencies, and the Chairs of the IAEG-SDGs representing the official government statisticians, has been negotiating a cease-fire. A joint document on data flows will be submitted to the UN Statistical Commission for adoption.

Statisticians meet civil society

The Post-2015 process of designing the 2030 Agenda and formulating its goals and targets was characterized by a

formidable deployment of the advocacy machinery by civil society groups, defending various issues and special interests. The diplomatic leadership of the Post-2015 political negotiation process embraced organized civil society, providing numerous avenues for contributions and inputs by the Major Stakeholder Groups. There would be no such opening by the IAEG-SDGs, which to date has not formally recognized the Major Groups. Civil society representatives have expressed concerns about the opacity of decision-making in the IAEG-SDGs on the selection of indicators, their formulations and refinements, and their (re)classification in tiers.

IAEG-SDGs meetings in various locations around the world have also been an impediment to civil society participation. But that has not been a deterrent for civil society to deploy its advocacy machinery. Anecdotally, members of the IAEG-SDGs have complained about civil society representatives reaching out directly to high-level government officials in their countries. From a few minutes at the end of day initially, the few civil society representatives that attend IAEG-SDGs meetings now get opportunities to meet with the co-chairs for dedicated briefings.

Layers of politics and power struggles

Many more layers of politics have plagued the SDG indicators process and add to the complexity of the data for development landscape, such as the existential struggle between statistics (seen as traditional and even obsolete by some) and data science (seen as innovative and the new normal), the tension between 'official' statistics and citizen-generated data, or the push and pull between the values-driven 'open data' and the regulatory-minded government statistics. There has been a disconnect between the technical, quantitative SDG monitoring and the political, qualitative SDG reporting process at the High-level Political Forum, which is more accustomed to 'adopted' inter-governmental decisions, negotiated and then nearly cast in stone. The HLPF and its parent body the Economic and Social Council are struggling to adapt to a constantly changing, never to be finalized global SDG monitoring framework of which 25 per cent of indicators cannot even be measured (62 Tier III indicators as of May 2018).

In fairness, the UN Statistical Commission has undertaken significant efforts to bring together the various data constituencies. At its 49th session in March 2018, the UN Statistical Commission pledged to convene dedicated sessions on data and the needs for statistical capacity development at the High Level Political Forum. The Statistical Commission's High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development regularly convenes the UN World Data Forum, which in short order has become the premier venue for the who's who of data and statistics for development to see and be seen. At the first edition of the Forum in January 2017, the then co-Chair of the IAEG-SDGs, Ms. Lisa Grace Bersales, National Statistician of the Philippines, acknowledged that 'statisticians must learn new languages' in the

new, broader and expanding ecosystem of data for sustainable development.

UNDP's exploration of the politics of data ecosystems

For its part, UNDP believes that measurement goes beyond a technocratic exercise and that the data revolution is about more than just statistics. As noted by Morten Jerven (2013), 'the political economy in which the 'facts' are embedded does matter'. UNDP favors a rights-based approach that considers data as a necessary but not sufficient means to an end, puts a premium on national relevance, and focuses on development outcomes for the most vulnerable. Former Human Rights Commissioner Ms. Navi Pillay recommended to 'measure what you treasure'.¹ People, as users, producers, beneficiaries and owners of data, must be at the core of accountability and participatory processes for the 2030 Agenda. Through its Data Ecosystem Mapping project (UNDP, 2017), UNDP attempted to advance understanding of data constituencies, their stakes, roles, motivations, and challenges at different stages of the data value chain, from collection to processing to analysis to dissemination to use. The initiative assessed obstacles and entry points for engagement between data stakeholders at the national level in six pilot countries, and at regional level in the first edition of the Africa Data Revolution Report. Among its findings, the initiative recommended to strengthen the bedrock of official statistics, expand the notion of national statistical systems beyond government institutions and 'official' data, redefine the roles of national statistical offices as coordinators of the broader data ecosystems, provide incentives for data sharing and collaboration between stakeholders, and develop capacity for data analysis and use.

UNDP's political economy approach to the data revolution for sustainable development was very much inspired by Fukuda-Parr and Yamin (2013) earlier research on the power of numbers in the MDGs era. The advent of the 2030 Agenda, with many more goals, targets and indicators as well as countless inter-linkages between goals and targets, has only amplified the need for more in-depth research on the interplay and necessary tradeoffs between data and policy. By revealing the politics behind the selection of SDG

indicators, the articles in this special issue can inform the design of more pragmatic and actionable national frameworks for monitoring the 2030 Agenda. As shown by UNDP's (2016) initiative to pilot governance as a national sustainable development goal, sensitive issues that seem insuperable in global fora are often felt less acutely at national levels, where officials tasked with implementation are driven more by a desire to deliver responsive and effective programmes that benefit their populations.

Notes

1. Statement by Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the Final meeting of the Global Consultation on Governance and the Post-2015 Development Agenda (March 2013), quoted from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/GlobalDevelopmentPost2015.aspx> [Accessed 10 November 2018].

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Author Information

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