

Commentary on Special Issue: Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring SDGs Numbers and Norms

Barbara Adams
Global Policy Forum

Abstract

This Special Issue usefully analyses the links between statistics, knowledge, policy making and politics, and uncovers intended and unintended consequences of using indicators to frame policy. Many civil society organizations (CSOs) were actively involved in the Open Working Group, and some have continued their advocacy into the ongoing process of developing the SDG indicator framework. Some indicators are being reconsidered; but despite repeated efforts there is still no indicator to measure inequality between countries. There is a recognized need for innovative ways to supplement already existing data. The use of proxy measurements is already underway, and initiatives such as a collaboration between some UN agencies and Gallup. The active public engagement in the process that determined the SDGs may help to resist the reductionism often evident in translating from the goals to the targets to the indicators. The 2019 meeting of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) will be an essential occasion to address some of these issues and to chart a correction course.

This contribution delves into the twists and turns of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their linkages with the realms of measurement, statistics, policies and power and in so doing it draws out some opportunities and challenges to their implementation. The special issue edited by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Desmond McNeill navigates the complexity of each of these dimensions.

The introductory chapter emphasizes the links between statistics, knowledge, policy making and politics, and uncovers intended and unintended consequences of how measurement is used to frame policy directions. It provokes a number of questions.

To what extent does measurement support aspirational goals and to what extent reflect pragmatism?

The same numbers can be used to name and shame poverty or to merely prompt policies of temporary band aid responses to mitigate negative political impact.

Similarly with rankings of performance, these can be 'incentives to be good performers' but also serve to punish and damage reputation. Does the advantage of the former outweigh the damage of the latter?

Are indicators inevitably distorting as well as reductionist? The authors explore these dynamics concerning the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and address the possibilities for the SDGs if the global goals are connected to policy making.

How are indicators used - for what purpose and by whom?

Are they used to increase the influence of the dominant shapers of policy or used to support a more level-playing field?

The MDG approach enabled a pick-and-choose menu, and the resulting cherry-picking re-shaped the development agenda: in favor of the donor agenda rather than that of developing countries, in favor of a social sectors approach while being able to ignore the structural obstacles or measure the trade-offs (in increased inequalities or climate change for example).

Despite the universality of the SDG approach, lack of accountability risks the similar outcomes. The chapter provides a good analysis of how agendas can be re-shaped, even re-written, by how they are financed and measured.

It reveals that the links to policy-making or policy impact can be implicit and opportunistic as well as planned in a transparent science-policy framework. Numbers can inspire ambitious policies to reduce inequality, or be a tool of influence of the more dominant players in the policy spheres.

Going forward

As the chapter describes, the process of elaborating the SDGs was very different from that for the MDGs. It was led by member states, not a few UN staff, and with an unusual inter-governmental process in the UN Open Working Group (OWG). The OWG over 15 months delved into each SDG and was the forum where member states championed and

rejected proposed goals and targets. It provided many openings not only for member states but also for civil society organizations (CSOs) and major groups that engaged with the process doggedly and with skill. Nonetheless, as the research for this special issue concludes, there was slippage in the ambition of the transformative goals through the selected indicators, many of which reinterpret the goals.

While CSOs were strong players some for and some against the MDGs, they were not active in the shaping of MDG indicators. Their criticism tended to take the form of focusing on alternative measures and coalesced as the MDGs expired. Some CSOs have sustained their commitment and advocacy into the work of developing the SDG indicator framework by the Interagency and Expert Group (IAEG-SDGs) and demonstrated their expertise in the process of defining and refining the SDG indicators – an ongoing process. CSOs and academia have continued their participation despite the difficulties posed by the volume and breadth of players and processes. At the 7th meeting of the IAEG-SDGs, for example, the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative highlighted the inter-linkages between many different indicators including positive inter-linkages (moving in the same direction) and negative inter-linkages (progress in one indicator leads to regression in another). The Women's Major Group highlighted how CSOs are participating in the national reporting process in eight countries, especially as it relates to gender mainstreaming, identifying gaps in data disaggregation, and reviewing voluntary national reviews.

In part as a result of such CSO and academic pressures, some revisions are being considered. These cover a proposed list of 37 new indicators that the IAEG-SDGs is reviewing for 14 goals, giving particular consideration to those with an established methodology and some available data.

The final list of additional indicators is to be included as part of the comprehensive review package submitted to UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) in 2020. Among those to be reviewed are four new indicators for Goal 8 on employment and decent work and four for Goal 10 on inequality along with three for Goal 17 on means of implementation, including one on additional measures of progress to complement the GDP. However, despite repeated efforts of CSOs, which have proposed an indicator based on either the Gini coefficient or the Palma ratio, there is still no indicator to measure inequality between countries.

There is increased interest in the use of proxy indicators for those that still lack an agreed methodology (Tier III). The IAEG-SDGs plans to prioritize goals where many indicators are Tier III, focusing particularly on targets to be achieved by 2020, and will draw up a list of proxy indicators to submit to the UNSC in March 2019.

The use of proxy measurements is already underway, as multi-stakeholder data partnerships gain momentum –

particularly the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, Data 2x and the Digital Impact Alliance, all dedicated to increasing private sector engagement. The UNSD reports that the use within the statistical community of cell phone data is quite common, as a supplement to a myriad of surveys covering, for example, poverty, relocation and disease patterns. Additionally several countries and UN agencies have engaged the services of professional polling firms, particularly in measuring public perceptions.

The ILO, IOM, and FAO, for example, have teamed up with Gallup, a US-based opinion polling firm. An ILO-Gallup partnership examined how women feel about workplace opportunities while an IOM-International Data Analysis Centre report produced in collaboration with the Gallup World Poll examines public attitudes toward migration. Ownership rights to the results vary. In the case of the ILO-Gallup report on women and work the copyright is owned jointly by ILO and Gallup, while the IOM-Gallup apparently has no copyright restrictions.

Of greater concern, however, is the FAO-Gallup partnership, as it involves two SDG indicators that will be used for monitoring and accountability of Member States in implementing the SDGs—financial inclusion and food insecurity. Although Gallup makes clear that 'national institutions' can use the project's data base, called the Food Insecurity Experience Scale, the Gallup organization owns the data. However, the official data used to report progress on the SDGs is meant to be owned by NSOs, a point frequently repeated by all players, from the Statistical Commission to UN agencies, from the World Bank to mobile phone companies.

Can public ownership and engagement in the process that determined the SDGs also contribute to connecting the technical and political worlds of the SDGs and valuing the SDGs themselves, resisting the reductionism often evident in translating from the goals to the targets to the indicators?

At the institutional and governance levels these connections are slowly becoming apparent at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). In 2019 The HLPF will be held at the level of Heads of State and Government, making it an essential occasion to address the obstacles to achieving the SDGs and to chart a correction course from the current lack of accountability for extra-territorial obligations and lack of whole-of-government policies to strengthen the public sector and protect public ownership of data.

Author Information

Barbara Adams is Chair of the Board of Global Policy Forum. She has authored and co-authored many articles, reports, commissioned studies and books on the UN and multilateral issues, including *Fit for Whose Purpose?*