

# Objectivity as Distance or Engagement: The Riddle of SDG Measurement

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## Abstract

What is objectivity in SDG measurement? This commentary explores the complexity of objectivity in measurement when the problems are 'global' yet manifest themselves with local specificities. This special issue helps elicit gaps in knowledge, tools and contexts in SDG measurement. But in doing so through the lens of political economy, 'sets the cat among the pigeons'. The key question they raise is the sanitization of measurement and its sanctification to the status of objectivity without realizing that the process is fraught with contexts that make self-interest and conflict of interest an endemic risk.

The advent of global approaches to what is seen as global problems has raised questions of the relevance and appropriateness of local specificities. How the two contexts are woven in a meaningful way is nothing short of extensive discursive discussion involving significant compromises and continuous delegations of responsibilities upwards, downwards and sideways to expert advice. In the course of the glacial shifts in the discourse, content and contexts are diluted; methodological lenses provide faint images and demands to conclude add significant pressure. Never have statisticians felt the pressure at the high table of global agenda more than with the advent of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) initially, and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) when the oven of the measurement discourse reached melting point. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Desmond McNeill have in this special issue been seized with the pathways through which we arrive at the truth and objectivity of measurement.

The United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) was established in 1947, and in 2017 it celebrated seventy years. At this point in time, the UNSC reflected on progress of statistical measurement. Three main reasons for celebration were apparent. First it was the accession to the Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics by the United Nations General Assembly at its sitting in 2014, 20 years after these were introduced into the United Nations statistics system in 1994. Second it was the adoption of the SDG indicators by ECOSOC in June 2017 and these were then acceded to by the UN General Assembly in July 2017; and third it was being 70-years-old and at that being one of the three or so oldest commissions notably sitting side by side with the Human Rights Commission.

The establishment of the UNSC was to achieve universal standards for measurement with the aim of ensuring macro-economic stability in countries and globally and thus minimize the exigencies of war, the cause of which was driven by the seismic macroeconomic instability. That statisticians

could be called upon to hold world peace is significant in its own right. The first responsibility at that was the creation and methodological advancements in the compilation of growth statistics, the national accounts and price statistics, the consumer and producer price indices. The censuses of populations and the decennial agenda followed very soon driven by the global decolonization movement and the demand for establishment of post-colonial states, particularly in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

More responsibilities came on board with the Rio Declaration on Environment. And by 1995, there was Cairo on Population Development and Beijing focusing specifically on gender, women and reproductive rights. This crucial evolution and discovery of fundamentals underpinning human endeavor drove the demand for measurement. The paradox of it all is both the oldest commissions of the United Nations, namely the United Nations Statistics Commission and the United Nations Human Rights Commission were not bed fellows for over 60 years and 'when the two commissions intersected through the lens of the human development index, alas they were distances apart' – they indeed became the strangest of bedfellows and the 2003 UNSC has a telling record of how the UNDP Human Development Report was dressed down. The advent driven through Partners for Development of Statistics in the 21st Century (PARIS21) of measurement of governance received a hostile audience at the UNSC in 2005.

The MDGs were equally received with skepticism by the statistical community. Correctly so, as the measurement discipline had not evolved to the level that the so called objectivity of time series could be guaranteed for most of the indicators. From the onset the MDGs were an imposition and statisticians had first to negotiate their way to manage this significantly unfunded mandate, second the politics especially of Goal 8 that discussed obligations of the north to the south in as far as financing development brought serious political chasms in the hitherto 'orderly agenda' of the UNSC. Twice,

and for the first time, the unwritten gentlemanly consensus of the UNSC was broken. The UNSC had to vote on Goal 8, and almost failed to conclude its business of the Commission. Not the strangest of experiences in many a Commission but an unwelcome demon to visit this 'holy' depoliticized and sanitized environment of statisticians.

At the face of it measurement is a science that applies statistical tools in a way within a laboratory that has to remain objective. Yet it is well-known that human endeavor is messy and fraught with self-interest. Thus conflict of interest is bound to cloud objectivity. It is this philosophy of objectivity that statisticians swear by, and human rights concerns become disrupters of statistical peace from nongovernmental organizations, think tanks and political masters.

The input of Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Desmond McNeill with the introductory article 'Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs' and Alicia Yamin on 'Data Ideology' in this the Special Issue of the *Global Policy Journal* has set the cat among the pigeons. The key question they raise is the sanitization of measurement and its sanctification to the status of objectivity without realizing that the process is fraught with contexts that make self-interest and conflict of interest an endemic risk of measurement – a Siamese twin, a scrambled egg that can be unscrambled only through very rich and false imagination so to say. While they appreciate the object of measurement and indicators, they are wary about the attendant pressures on, the irrelevance of tools of, and the aloofness of the agents of measurement to, the subject matter which constitutes the political economy of measurement. They lament other challenges that are not brought upfront and not laid on the table of human endeavor as typically a messy surgery of comprehending its anatomy. They recognize the limitations of the MDGs in their top-down approach and absence of consultation and do acknowledge the extensive consultation on the SDGs but recognize even then the potential effects of the lopsided power relations and time pressures and deadlines of brokering the process.

Finally when the indicators were agreed upon and presented, they appeared like the innocent bride and groom

ready and eager for their night of nuptials. The facade of measurement innocence fails to answer the vexed question of why the United Nations Statistics Commission and the Human Rights Commission never ever sat side by side despite being Siamese twins. Only through interlocutors have they tried to understand their *raison d'être*. Only recently under pressure from many other evolutions has human rights as a subject risen to top the agenda through the mantra of 'leave no one behind'.

The special issue helps to elicit gaps in knowledge, tools, contexts and more importantly advances the question of what defines objectivity. If objectivity means distance, then the measurement of MDGs was a venture into the unknown. If objectivity means distance then the SDGs represent an expedition of the titanic into an iceberg. Multidisciplinary methods are necessary and in this regard the architecture of the SDGs through ontological analysis and representations hold prospects for seeing the tip and the iceberg as one formation. Thus presenting elegantly with one indicator meets the communication requirements to a political audience and presenting awkwardly with 200 indicators reveals the path-dependency of data sources, analysis, diagnostics, prediction, context and prescription to practitioners. Never before has an opportunity for knowing, understanding and responding to universality of needs with specificity of context presented itself, but only if the objectivity of statistical and measurement science is not marked by distance of agency but by rigorous social intercourse and debate. This constitutes the political economy of measurement whereby transparency is a fundamental touch stone of objectivity and not distance nor disengagement. Fukuda-Parr, McNeill, Yamin and other contributors to this special issue have succeeded in making this potent dimension of knowledge creation and understanding spectacularly apparent.

### Author Information

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