

# Political Thriller Exposes the Underbelly of Global Goals

Sara Burke and Bettina Luise Rürup  
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New York

## Abstract

This commentary characterizes the SDG indicator framework as a 'political thriller' in which the power struggles are hidden behind the veil of technocratic expertise. Like a Trojan horse, each indicator conceals the theories of change and development that lie within, exerting their interpretive influence. Where the politics will ultimately lead to by 2030 – in shaping policy priorities, power structures, and knowledge about development – is for now unknown and unpredictable.

The special issue of *Global Policy Journal* – 'Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs' – will surely become the political thriller of 2019, with links to its various articles shared widely among stakeholders to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda.

A worthy sequel to its predecessor, 'The Power of Numbers', which looked at the politics behind the Millennium Development Goals of 2000–2015, this special issue tells the story of how the lofty aspirations motivating their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have also been consistently watered down and even distorted in the power struggle over who defines development. This 'slippage' in the ambition of global goals is taking place even though the SDGs have been adopted by the consensus of all UN member states.

The roots of the power struggle over global goals lie in conflicting theories of economic and social change embraced by different development actors: national governments, civil society groups, multilateral agencies and the private sector.

The weapons in the power struggle are numbers, or more accurately, the translation of qualitative norms expressed as global goals, into numbers. In the process, the aspirations behind the goals – which express social and political priorities – become weakened and distorted as the goals are distilled into time-bound targets that can be quantified and measured by indicators.

'Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs' reveals how the politics of goal setting lies hidden behind a veil of technocratic expertise that burnishes the whole operation with the appearance of objectivity. Meanwhile, behind the veil, indicators chosen to represent social realities instead reinterpret those realities. Like a Trojan horse, each indicator conceals the theories of change and development that lie within, exerting their interpretive influence. In the case of the SDGs, this is producing multiple, negative unintended effects as the overall impact of the power of numbers is brought to bear on the goal-making process. The result has been a rushed competition to create quantifiable indicators, regardless of the quality of the available data.

Looking back, we see that the impact of politics on the history of the MDGs produced no less than a profound reframing of development. Postcolonial concepts of development

forged in the latter part of the 20th century, which were focused on the transformation of productive capacities to improve standards of living, were replaced early in the 21st century by the singular idea that development equals poverty eradication. In this reductionist framework, the concept of poverty itself shrunk to the notion of meeting only basic needs, which cast aside multidimensional concepts such as capabilities, paid lip service to human rights agendas and sidelined discussions of root causes of poverty, all of which are approaches consistent with the values of social democracy.

While we all enjoy a good mystery, we are not detectives and cannot yet know the overall impact this power struggle over indicators is having now on the SDGs. However, this special 'political thriller' issue of *Global Policy Journal* reveals the dark underbelly of competing interests in the 2030 Agenda and their sometimes mysterious unintended consequences.

## Note

This text is produced in the context of the special issue project organized by S. Fukuda-Parr and D. McNeill in collaboration with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York Office; UNDP; University of Oslo Centre for Environment and Development and the Environment; Julien J. Studley Grant to the New School Graduate Programs in International Affairs.

## Author Information

**Sara Burke** is FES New York's senior expert on global economic policy issues. Her work focuses on emerging economic policy frameworks in the global multilateral system, policy coherence among the international financial institutions, and the role of trade unions and other groups in civil society to hold corporations and governments accountable to international standards.

**Bettina Luise Rürup** is the Executive Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) office at the United Nations in New York. For more than 25 years, she has been engaged with empirical, analytical and policy oriented work of FES around topics of development, social justice and democracy in the global North and South. She has served as head of department at FES Headquarters in Berlin as well as at offices in Chile, India, Turkey and Thuringia, Germany.