

Can SDG 16 Data Drive National Accountability? A Cautiously Optimistic View

Marie Laberge

Governance Measurement Expert

Nadia Touihri

National Statistical Institute of Tunisia

Abstract

Target 16.3 appears to provide a good example of 'slippage in the level of ambition' in moving from visionary goals to watered-down targets and indicators, due to the influence of powerful interests – in this case the UNODC. However, the SDG Agenda offers an important corrective measure, by encouraging Member States to 'domesticate' individual goals and targets – adapting them to local circumstances. Tunisia provides a vivid illustration of how a national SDG16 monitoring system can drive national accountability and contribute to positive change on the ground – provided indicators have broad-based buy-in and resonate with local grievances and priorities. First, the conceptual scope of the Tunisian Governance Goal was greatly expanded to include a strong focus on participation and human rights. Second the Tunisian SDG16 indicator set is dominated by survey-based indicators thus placing people's voice at the centre of the monitoring system. Third, the regular publication of national SDG16 data in Tunisia has incentivized tangible responses from public officials. Several more examples of national SDG16 consultative processes currently unfolding around the world are similarly showing that even while the politics of data may be undemocratic at global level, they can be increasingly democratic at country level.

After initial euphoria around the historic adoption of a Global Development Goal 16 dedicated to the promotion of 'Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies', the measurability of such a dense amalgam of concepts, let alone the wisdom of doing so, is regarded with mounting scepticism. Commenting on the process of moving from visionary goals to watered-down targets and indicators across the SDG Agenda, Fukuda-Parr and McNeill deplore a 'slippage in the level of ambition' that can lead to the outright reinterpretation of the goals. In the case of Goal 16, Satterthwaite and Dhital show how the Goal's stated ambition to 'provide access to justice for all', further reaffirmed in target 16.3, was radically distorted by the selection of two criminal justice indicators – one on unsentenced detainees and another on crime reporting. The authors correctly observe that this exclusive focus on the criminal justice system is not only out of sync with legal needs studies showing that a majority of people's legal issues are civil rather than criminal (World Justice Project, 2018), but most importantly, fails to provide an assessment of access to justice 'from the people's perspective'.

A key conclusion of this special issue is that 'governance by numbers' is a manifestation of power. As seen in the case of target 16.3 where the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), a powerful actor in the area of criminal justice statistics, successfully lobbied to narrow the

scope of target 16.3 so as to retain only two 'reliable and feasible' indicators they were already tracking internationally, 'decisions to use certain indicators are often intended to serve the purposes of powerful interests' (Fukuda-Parr, 2017, p. 6; Merry, 2011).

Yet all is not doomed. However real and detrimental these power dynamics might have been at the global level when SDG indicators were defined, the SDG Agenda offers an important corrective measure against such distortions. By encouraging Member States to 'domesticate' individual goals and targets and to conduct 'regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels [...] drawing on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector, national parliaments and other stakeholders' (UN General Assembly, 2015), the Agenda allows for power dynamics at country level to counterbalance the shortcomings of global metrics. In the same way the open and transparent Open Working Group process has been lauded as 'an important factor behind the SDGs' more transformative and ambitious agenda' (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill), an opportunity exists for similarly positive outcomes to emerge from multi-stakeholder processes around the contextualization of SDG 16 at national level.

It is these authors' belief, based on nearly a decade spent working with national statisticians and other stakeholders across all regions to produce nationally-relevant governance

data (UNDP, 2017a), that nationally created and nationally owned SDG 16 indicators can be powerful drivers of accountability at country level. Those lamenting the uselessness of global SDG indicators given their 'abstraction from diverse local settings' (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill) may be encouraged by the growing number of countries producing their own contextualized versions of Goal 16 (UNDP, 2017b). By translating the abstract concepts contained in global SDG 16 targets into the language of issues that are currently being contested in a given country, such exercises can overcome some of the distortions or 'slippage in ambition' that have plagued indicator selection processes at global level and can incentivize action by policymakers.

The case of Tunisia¹ provides a vivid illustration of how national SDG 16 indicators, when jointly defined by state and non-state actors and publicly monitored and disseminated, can emerge as a powerful 'currency' for governments to earn and retain public trust, and for society to hold it to account. In the wake of the 2011 revolution, reform-minded political entrepreneurs in the Presidency of the Government seized the opportunity offered by Goal 16 to respond positively to requests by a well-organized domestic civil society pressing for more openness and more participation. Meanwhile, Tunisian civil society welcomed the invitation to participate in the formulation of a Tunisian Governance Goal with corresponding targets and indicators that would provide them with an evidence base to hold the new leadership accountable on its promises (UNDP, 2017b).

Multi-stakeholder debates around the 'translation' of global Goal 16 into the Tunisian context led to the design of a Tunisian Governance Goal that is markedly different from the global goal in at least three respects – namely with regard to its conceptual scope, its preferred measurement methodology and its potential to impact national governance reforms.

First, the conceptual scope of the Tunisian Governance Goal² was greatly expanded. Strong civil society involvement in the consultations led to the formulation of a Tunisian Goal that does not shy away from the grievances and priorities of a society that has recently undergone a regime change and is seeking to establish new democratic foundations. For one, the Tunisian Goal has an explicit emphasis on the promotion and protection of human rights (contrarily to the global goal which conveniently avoids the language of rights in its targets), and a dedicated national indicator measuring people's perception of the extent to which fundamental rights and freedoms are respected in the country. Second, in a country where the vast majority³ of citizens had never been actively involved in a political party, a union or a community association prior to the change in government in 2011, as many as three new targets on civil and political participation⁴ were added to the Tunisian Goal (Government of Tunisia, 2015). In a marked departure from the global goal which only makes a vague reference to 'participatory decision making' under target 16.7, the Tunisian version urges the government to 'partner with nongovernmental organizations and the media to promote development and good governance' (Tunisian target 6), and

explicitly calls for the establishment of a 'sociopolitical environment conducive to a sustainable democracy by ensuring citizen awakening and engagement' (Tunisian target 9). Also, noteworthy is a stand-alone Tunisian target on the right to information, which in the global framework is somewhat diluted under target 16.10, where it is combined with the promotion of fundamental freedoms. After decades of opacity and secrecy in public life, and with the passing in 2016 of a new law on access to information, Tunisian stakeholders felt it was important to draw attention on this issue with a specific national indicator measuring people's perception of the extent to which press freedom is guaranteed in the country (Government of Tunisia, 2015).

Second, and most promisingly for those deploring the deceptiveness of SDG indicators that draw on 'expert knowledge' and that 'claim scientific authority' (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill), the Tunisian SDG 16 indicator set is dominated by survey-based indicators capturing a nationally representative snapshot of all socio-demographic groups and all regions of the country. Tunisians added ten survey-based indicators to the existing count of eleven survey items in the global set of SDG 16 indicators, which make 70 per cent of Tunisian indicators survey-based, compared to only 48 per cent in the global set. For instance, Tunisians were able to achieve at country level what has yet to be agreed at the global level, where the addition of a survey-based civil justice indicator under target 16.3 is still hotly debated (Satterthwaite and Dhital). Recognizing that 'people's own experience of justice – and injustice – must remain at the centre of efforts to assess progress toward a world where no one is 'left behind' (Satterthwaite and Dhital), Tunisians added two survey-based indicators to capture people's confidence in the justice system and their perception of the extent to which all citizens are treated equally before the law.

As explained by a Tunisian statistician from the National Institute of Statistics involved in national consultations on Goal 16, in such an open setting bringing together a multiplicity of interest groups, public officials had no choice but to concede that 'survey data were not only more reliable than administrative data sketchily produced by government agencies and ministries, but was also more in line with the very intention of Goal 16 – that is, to foster inclusive societies and accountable institutions. This made it especially important to include peoples' voices in monitoring progress towards the Tunisian Governance Goal.'

This recognition by Tunisian stakeholders of the intrinsic 'authority' of ordinary citizens in generating numbers on matters of governance has empowered the Tunisian statistical office to run in 2014 the first official household survey on 'Citizen Perceptions Towards Security, Freedom and Local Governance' ever conducted in the country (Tunisian National Institute of Statistics, 2015). This survey was repeated in 2017, this time fully funded by the government, and has since become an integral part of the country's regular statistical production.

Third, and perhaps most crucially, the regular publication of national SDG 16 data in Tunisia has shown that such data can indeed serve as 'a powerful mechanism for influencing

the strategies implemented on the ground' (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill). When the politics of SDG 16 monitoring are more 'democratic', as seen in the Tunisian case where both the process of selecting indicators and the metrics themselves reflected people's interests and priorities, SDG 16 monitoring can incentivize tangible responses from public officials.

Responses by the Tunisian leadership to the published data have taken several forms. For instance, when the first set of survey-based indicators were published by the National Institute of Statistics, a high-level official in Parliament publicly took note⁵ of the people's grievances *vis-à-vis* their elected representatives, as revealed by a national SDG 16 indicator measuring the extent to which people feel that their elected officials are listening to them and taking their opinion into account. Another such response consisted in an initiative by the Presidency of the Government to map existing SDG 16-related national strategies and policies⁶ onto the specific targets and indicators of the Tunisian Governance Goal, in order to identify gaps in the 'means of implementation' that could be hindering progress. This mapping revealed, for example, that the three Tunisian targets related to civil and political participation lacked an adequate policy environment (UNDP, 2017b). Efforts are currently underway for such a dashboard linking the national policy framework with national SDG 16 targets and indicators to be made publicly accessible, for citizens to be able to monitor the government's efforts at addressing such gaps. Yet another example of a response to national SDG 16 data can be found in the use of survey results by the Ministry of Health. When senior officials at the Ministry found out that Tunisians perceived health care providers to be the most corrupt⁷ public institutions in the country, they saw an opportunity in using SDG 16 survey results to enhance the provision of health care services across the country and met with the National Institute of Statistics to discuss how best this could be done. Disaggregated SDG 16 survey results, which now allow for the tracking of trends over time, from 2014 to 2017, are now being used by the Ministry to inform anti-corruption efforts in the health sector.

The Tunisian story shows that by reopening terrains of contestation at country level that were effectively closed by powerful institutional interests at global level, a national SDG 16 monitoring system can drive national accountability and contribute to positive change on the ground – provided indicators have local resonance and broad-based buy-in. This happened in Tunisia thanks to the leading role played by civil society, academia and recently established oversight institutions in defining and prioritizing the national governance issues that made it into the Tunisian Governance Goal and its related targets and indicators.

Besides Tunisia, several more examples of national SDG 16 consultative processes currently unfolding around the world are similarly showing that if 'the politics of [SDG] data may be increasingly undemocratic' (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill) at global level, they can also be increasingly democratic at country level. It is now up to SDG 16 advocates

and supporters to decide at what level to focus their attention and support in the coming years.

Notes

1. Disclaimer: This author (Marie Laberge) personally participated (as a facilitator) in the multi-stakeholder consultations leading to the adoption of the Tunisian Governance Goal with related targets and indicators.
2. The Tunisian Governance Goal seeks to 'Consolidate a State which is the guarantor of rights and fundamental freedoms, and to enhance efficiency, integrity, transparency and accountability of institutions at all levels in an enlightened, vigilant, inclusive and participatory society' (Government of Tunisia, 2015).
3. A survey (2014) conducted by the national statistical office of Tunisia revealed that 94 per cent of respondents had never been actively involved in a political party, a union or a community association prior to 2011 (Tunisian Institute of Statistics, 2015).
4. Namely, Target 5: Ensure inclusive and effective participation in the development, monitoring and evaluation of policies at all levels; Target 6: Partnership with non-government organizations and the media to promote development and good governance; and Target 9: Develop a socio-political environment conducive to a sustainable democracy by ensuring citizen awakening and engagement.
5. The SDG 16 survey (2014) conducted by the Tunisian NSO recorded a high level (56 per cent) of dissatisfaction among Tunisians saying parliamentarians were out-of-touch with their constituencies (Tunisian Institute of Statistics, 2015).
6. Policies and strategies reviewed as part of the policy gap analysis included the 2016–20 National Development Plan, the National Vision and Action Plan for the reform of the judiciary and the penitentiary 2016–20, the National Anti-Terrorism Strategy adopted in 2016, the National Strategy on Good Governance and Anti-Corruption for 2016–20 and its Action Plan for 2017–18, and the Second National Action Plan for 2016–18 within the framework of the Open Government Partnership. (UNDP, 2017b)
7. The SDG 16 survey (2014) conducted by the Tunisian NSO showed that 67 per cent of respondents perceived healthcare providers to be corrupt (Tunisian Institute of Statistics, 2015).

References

- Fukuda-Parr, S. (2017) *Millennium Development Goals: Ideas, Interests, Influence*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Government of Tunisia (2015) *Elaboration d'un Objectif de Développement Durable en matière de gouvernance en Tunisie*. Tunis: Government of Tunisia.
- Merry, S. E. (2011) 'Measuring the world: Indicators, human rights and global governance,' *Current Anthropology*, 52 (3), pp. 83–95.
- Tunisian Institute of Statistics (2015) *Results of the First Edition of the National Survey on 'Citizen Perceptions Towards Security, Freedom, and Local Governance in Tunisia'* Tunis: Tunisian Institute of Statistics.
- UN General Assembly (2015) *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Resolution 70/1 adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015.
- UNDP (2017a) *Voices from the field: African Experiences in Producing Governance, Peace and Security statistics – recommendations for NSOs for Monitoring SDG 16 on Peaceful, Justice and Inclusive societies*. Oslo: UNDP.
- UNDP (2017b) *Monitoring to Implement Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies – Pilot Initiative on National-Level Monitoring of SDG 16*. New York: UNDP.
- World Justice Project (2018) *Global Insights on Access to Justice – Findings from the WJP General Population Poll in 45 countries*. Washington: World Justice Project.

Author Information

Marie Laberge is an independent expert in the area of governance measurements, with nearly fifteen years of professional experience working with UNDP at global (New York, Oslo) and regional levels (Asia and Africa) in supporting national efforts to measure and monitor governance, peace and security.

Nadia Touihri is the Director of Demographic Statistics at the National Statistical Institute of Tunisia. She oversaw in 2014 the implementation of the first official household survey on 'Citizen Perceptions Towards Security, Freedom and Local Governance' ever conducted in Tunisia, as well as its second iteration in 2017.