

**United Nations High Level Political Forum
Opening Panel, 10 July, 2017**

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Thank you, Mr. President,
Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very honoured to have the privilege of speaking here today. In my short statement, I would like to speak to the issue of data. I will argue for a holistic approach in reviewing progress of the UN2030 agenda – rather than just specific goals and targets individually – and based on not only on quantitative but also qualitative information.

Perspective on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

Before going into the specifics, let me first explain my personal perspectives on the UN2030 - why they are important and hold the promise for transformative change. The adoption of the 2030 agenda was a historic achievement. It is a significant advance in our thinking about development to reflect the realities of the 21st century. In a clear departure from the MDGs that envisioned development as meeting basic needs in developing countries, the 2030 agenda re-conceptualizes development as sustainable development and a universal challenge. Some of the important new elements of this concept include the following.

- It recognizing the ecological limits of the earth, and achieving consensus on inclusion and equity - leaving no one behind – as an political priority, consistent with human rights principles.
- It is underpinned by a theory of change built on lessons of past decades and the challenges we face that recognizes the complexity of the process – including the failures - and the need to address the systemic causes of poverty, inequality and environmental destruction.
- Many of these priorities have been in international debates for decades but what is new is that they are integrated in a single agenda, requiring an coherent set of actions across different sectors and domains.
- And finally, it recognizes the important role of private sector, national governments and civil society.

In reviewing progress, we need to keep our eye on the ball of sustainable development, particularly on these innovative elements.

SDG indicator framework

Let me now turn to the SDG Indicator Framework. The SDGs pose particularly complex and difficult measurement challenges. The demand for data is enormous in relation to the capacity of statistical agencies and networks to collect and process data, the limits to the reasonable number of indicators that could be in an international monitoring framework, and methodological possibilities of measurement. It is a tribute to the global statistical community, particularly the UN Statistical Commission, the IAEG, and the UNSD that we now have a consensus framework with 232 indicators that has been elaborated with of dedicated effort, expertise and deliberation.

Yet this is still an on-going process as work continues to expand data coverage and develop Tiers II and III indicators. Mr. Wu has already spoken to the gaps that remain. I would like to highlight some issues which could compromise the most transformative and new elements of the 2030 agenda.

First, the issue of capacity. Even in well-resourced countries, not all of the 232 indicators or even 82 tier I indicators are collected. In developing countries, significant capacity building is needed – estimated at some \$1 billion per year. This is far more than the support provided to statistics in recent years that has been in the order of \$338, a tiny 0.18% of total ODA.

Another important priority will be in developing Tier III indicators and disaggregation; these are where the cutting edge issues of the transformative agenda and the challenge of leaving no one behind lie. Proactive effort is needed to develop these indicators and to proceed with disaggregation by groups going beyond conventional lines such as sex and rural/urban residence to exclusion of ethnic or racial and other groups.

Second, while the SDG indicator framework has been carefully constructed, it must be acknowledged that there are many gaps but also distortions. This is often due to lack of data collection. But when indicators are poorly chosen, they can re-interpret the meaning of the target and the goal. This can happen particularly when there are no measurement tools, or when the target or the goal is inherently not amenable to quantification. For example, most of the indicators for environment related goals are either tiers II or III. The indicators for systemic issues in goal 17 are largely either III or II.

Many indicators only partially reflect the target or goals. For example, the targets related to technology are central to the agenda; technological progress can propel progress in a broad range of areas, in both the private and public sectors. Yet the indicators selected are narrowly focused on the diffusion of the Internet, and on donor funding. There are also omissions, for example in goal 10 for reducing inequality within and between countries, there is neither target nor indicator for distribution of income and wealth, nor on income inequality between countries.

As a result of these gaps, progress reporting based on indicators is currently incomplete. More importantly, the reporting can also be unbalanced, particularly leaving out many of the most innovative elements of the 2030 agenda that depart from past paradigms of development.

Indeed, the 2017 SDG progress report has met with sharp criticisms from civil society commentators; Kate Donald from the Centre for Economic and Social Rights writes in a recent blog: “the ambitious spirit of the 2030 agenda would be undermined by the weakness of the ‘official’ monitoring and reporting arrangements”, and points out a number of ways in which the report does not report on some of the most transformative propositions of the agenda.

Reviewing the 2016 and 2017 progress reports, my own assessment is that they tend to highlight the trends based on data availability. It is only to be expected that those conventional socio-economic indicators related to socio-economic outcomes (rather than policy change) that dominated the MDGs would continue to populate the SDG progress reports while new issues would be neglected due to lack of data. Mr. Wu has already noted the lack of adequate data on disaggregation leading to weak reporting on leaving no one behind. I can give a few examples to illustrate these points for some of the goals under review this year:

- For goal 2 on hunger and food which has 13 indicators, the 2016 report included 3 outcome tier I indicators while the 2017 report included one outcome and two policy indicators. But there was no disaggregation.
- For goal 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment, the 2016 report included 3 tier I and 1 tier II indicators out of a total of 13 indicators. The 2017 report included 7 outcome indicators from tiers I, II and III but still there were no reporting on means of implementation which refer to women’s access to technology and economic resources.

I can cite many other examplesⁱ. Let me just mention one distorting indicator for goal 14 on oceans and seas. The target for reducing subsidies and illegal land

unregulated fishing is measured by an indicator related to illegal and unregulated fishing only.

The basic point here is to warn against over-reliance on data. Progress reporting cannot be based solely on the quantitative data using the SDG indicator framework. Like all quantitative evidence, SDG datasets should be only one – not the only – information source to assess progress. Sustainable development as a concept is larger than the list of 232 indicators/ or the 82 tier I indicators. Agenda 2030 needs a holistic review with due attention to key issues of inter-linkages, leaving no one behind and means of implementation. Indicators are merely a representation of a social phenomenon, and not all social phenomena can be translated into a single number.

Development Data

Before I end, I would also like to make a short comment on the broader context of data for SDGs: the new landscape of development data in the 21st century and the challenge of modernizing and strengthening data systems. There has been a rapid expansion in the new sources and methods of data generation - a data revolution – and a great deal of discussion of its potential. How and where this can catalyze strengthening of SDG progress monitoring that involves cross country comparisons and tracking over a long time span (as opposed to micro-project level decision making) is still an open question. I want to emphasize here that the new landscape also challenges the capacity of the official arrangements for the governance of development data to ensure accountability, accessibility, and priority setting to meet the demands of SDG implementation and monitoring.

Data and measurement are technical issues requiring expertise to ensure that they are legitimate and reliable. Yet they are also deeply political. They need to be scrutinized and interpreted with care. And while data are essential, we also need to ask what they do not show and the trends that they mask.

Thank you for your attention.

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- ⁱ Goal 2: Hunger, food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture (13 indicators)
- 2016: 3 outcome indicators (tier I); 2017 3 outcome ((tier I) and 2 policy indicators (tier III)
 - No disaggregation
- Goal 5: Gender equality and empower all women and girls (14 indicators)
- 2016: 3 tier I outcome indicators and 1 tier II; 2017: 7 outcome indicators (tier I, II, III)
 - No reporting on means of implementation (economic resources, technology, policy reforms)
 - No disaggregation
- Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries (11 indicators)
- 2016: 3 tier I outcome indicator. 2017: 3 tier I outcome indicators and 1 tier III indicator;
 - No target and indicator on inequality among countries
 - No indicator on income and wealth distribution within countries
- Goal 14: Oceans, seas and marine resources
- 2016 report on 2 tier I outcome indicators. 2017 report on 3 tier III and 2 tier I indicators
 - Neglect of 7 policy related indicators
 - Distorting indicator: instruments to combat *illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing*
 - Goal 17: Means of implementation and Global partnership (25 indicators)
 - 2016: report on 9 tier I indicators. 2017: report on 10 tier I and 1 tier II indicator.
 - Neglected issues - technology access, financial stability, policy space, policy coherence
