

Measuring Progress on the SDGs: Multi-level Reporting

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In September 2015, heads of state will adopt Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The goals will chart out a universal holistic framework to help set the world on a path towards sustainable development, by addressing economic development, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and good governance.

The agenda laid out by the Open Working Group on the SDGs (OWG) in July 2014 is the main basis for the Post-2015 intergovernmental process, which began on 19 January 2015.¹ From now until the September summit, Member States will further review the goals and targets. They will also consider the means of implementation, the nature of a new Global Partnership, and a framework for monitoring and review of implementation.

As underscored by the OWG, the focus of reporting on the SDGs must be at the national level. Each country will choose the indicators that are best suited to track its own progress towards sustainable development. Yet, the Goals also describe a global agenda, including some global public goods that cannot be implemented by any country on its own. Success will require international coordination and collaboration, which in turn requires accountability and monitoring at global level. In addition, regional monitoring and accountability will play a critical role in fostering regional collaboration and coherence in strategies to pursue the SDGs. A fourth and critical level of monitoring occurs in each thematic or epistemic community.

The four levels of monitoring – national, regional, global, and thematic – are laid out in the Secretary-General's synthesis report. The report calls for "a culture of shared responsibility, one based on agreed

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¹ See conclusions of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly: <http://www.un.org/en/ga/68/meetings/>

universal norms, global commitments, shared rules and evidence, collective action and benchmarking for progress."² This culture of accountability must be particularly strong at the national level, "building on existing national and local mechanisms and processes, with broad, multi-stakeholder participation."

National reporting

National reporting should be the most significant level of reporting and will rely heavily on the work of National Statistical Offices (NSOs). Given the breadth of the SDG agenda, it seems important not to limit national reporting to NSOs and to foster broad, multi-stakeholder participation in national reporting.³

National ownership at all levels of the SDG framework is critical, and national reporting must respond to national priorities and needs. For this reason, each country may pursue its own set of national indicators. Such a set of indicators may consist of the Global Reporting Indicators used to support the global monitoring framework and Complementary National Indicators that address each country's specific challenges, priorities, and preferences.⁴

The MDGs provide several powerful examples of how countries successfully adapted global indicators to suit their national priorities. For example, Mongolia developed a 9th MDG on Strengthening Human Rights and Fostering Democratic Governance, which were seen as necessary preconditions for the achievement of all the other MDGs.⁵ This new goal was supported

² UN Secretary-General, (2014), *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet*, Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda, para 146.

³ UN Secretary General, (2014), para 146.

⁴ SDSN, (2015), *Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for the SDGs*, Draft Report, Paris, France and New York, USA: SDSN.

⁵ See UNDP Mongolia website: <http://www.mn.undp.org/content/mongolia/en/home/mdg/overview/>

by additional targets and indicators to track progress towards democratic governance and human rights. The indicators included nationally specific measures, such as “Expert evaluation of conformity of Mongolian laws and regulations with international human rights treaties and conventions (percentage),” as well as perceptions-based indicators such as “People’s perception on press and media freedom.”⁶

Similarly, Bangladesh adapted the MDGs to meet local needs by setting new targets and indicators for promoting women in local government bodies, as well as separate targets on access to reproductive health services. Continuing in this vein, Bangladesh prepared a detailed national proposal for potential SDG indicators in their 2012 MDG report.⁷

Given the greater breadth and universality of the SDG agenda, we expect that national adaptation of the goals, targets, and supporting indicators will play a bigger role than under the MDGs.

Global monitoring

As described above, global monitoring is a vital complement to national monitoring and reporting. Global monitoring will ensure global coordination, support strategies to manage global public goods, and indicate which countries and thematic areas are in need of greatest assistance. A global dialogue on progress will also encourage knowledge-sharing and reciprocal learning. To this end, a set of Global Reporting Indicators for the SDGs is required.

The majority of Global Reporting Indicators will be derived from NSOs, drawing on official data sources such as censuses, civil registration and vital statistics, and household surveys, but some may be prepared by specialist agencies, for example where no suitable, comparable official data exists. To ensure comparability, Global Reporting Indicators must be harmonized across countries. We therefore recommend that each Global Reporting Indicator have at least one lead technical or specialist agency, responsible for coordinating data standards and

⁶ Government of Mongolia, (2009), *The Millennium Development Goals Implementation: Third National Report*.

⁷ See Annex 3: Government of Bangladesh Planning Commission, (2013), *The Millennium Development Goals: Bangladesh Progress Report 2012*.

collection, ensuring harmonization, and providing technical support where necessary.

Global Reporting Indicators should be limited in number to minimize the reporting burden on national statistical offices. Consultations with NSOs suggest that 100 Global Reporting Indicators represents the upper limit of what can be reported at a global level.⁸ Similar constraints exist at the level of the global statistical community, including specialist agencies, which will compile and harmonize the global datasets that inform the global review process.

The global review process will take place under the auspices of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), scheduled to meet at the margins of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The exact nature of the HLPF, including its functional role and cooperative model, has yet to be determined and important lessons can be learned from exploring other global and regional review models such as the African Peer Review Mechanism, the Universal Periodic Review and the UNFCCC process.⁹ However, based on lessons learned from the MDGs,¹⁰ we recommend that the HLPF include an annual reporting process, which takes stock of Global Reporting Indicators.¹¹ The data should be collected from NSOs within the preceding year or based on robust estimations.

Regional monitoring

⁸ For comparison, the MDGs have some 60 indicators. As emphasized above, there should be no limit to number of Complementary National Indicators that countries will use to adapt SDG monitoring to national priorities and needs.

⁹ Beisheim, M, (2014) *The Future HLPF Review*. Working Paper. German Institute For International And Security Affairs. See also Ocampo, J. A. (2014) *A Post-2015 Monitoring and Accountability Framework*. Paper prepared for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

¹⁰ See Box 1 in SDSN (2015).

¹¹ Meaningful annual reporting of the whole set of Global Reporting Indicators will take some time to achieve, but by 2018 at the latest, we hope that the international system, and notably the UN organizations and partner institutions (including the OECD, World Bank, World Trade Organization and others) will have in place an accurate and meaningful annual reporting system. We underscore that this will require enhanced support to NSOs and other relevant national systems so that high-quality data can be collected in a timely manner.

Regional monitoring will have an important role in fostering knowledge sharing, reciprocal learning, and peer review. It will also promote shared accountability for regional challenges and opportunities, such as shared watersheds, regional conflicts, or regional infrastructure. Where possible, this monitoring should build on existing regional mechanisms, such as the Regional Economic Commissions, the Africa Peer Review Mechanism, or the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.¹²

Regional monitoring processes can also broker a link between the national and global levels. The Regional Economic Commissions may play a particularly important role in preparing inputs to the HLPF, since Regional Commissions are already subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC.¹³

Thematic reporting

To achieve the SDGs, complex challenges must be addressed across a broad range of sectors. Lessons learned in one country, for instance in health, education, agriculture, or infrastructure design, can inform progress in other countries. Similarly, implementation challenges and technology gaps are often common across countries, so it will be important that each major epistemic community is mobilized in support of the SDGs. This in turn will require thematic reporting on progress and implementation challenges.

Thematic communities – often under the leadership of specialized international organizations – can develop specialist indicators for monitoring and accountability that are tracked in countries across the globe. Often these indicators include input and process metrics that are helpful complements to official indicators, which tend to be more outcome-focused.

The implementation of the MDGs provides good examples for effective thematic reporting. For example, the UN Inter-Agency Group on Child Mortality Estimation developed a specialist hub responsible for analyzing, checking, and improving mortality estimation. This group, and its associated

database CME Info, is a leading source for child mortality information for both governmental and non-governmental actors. Sustainable Energy For All, Roll-Back Malaria, and UN Water (through the Joint Monitoring Programme) also demonstrate the power of collective multi-stakeholder monitoring of specific thematic priorities.

In some cases, universities are playing a leading role in thematic monitoring, such as the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington, which has become a leading and internationally trusted repository of key public health data, or the Université Catholique de Louvain, which maintains the EM-DAT database on disasters. We expect that universities can play an important role in closing some of the data gaps that currently exist in key SDG areas. Similarly, NGOs like Transparency International are playing an important role in collecting and vetting critical data.

In other cases, businesses may have access to data that can underpin thematic SDG monitoring. For example, the International Fertilizer Association (IFA) maintains one of the most extensive databases on fertilizer supply, production, and use around the world. Data from companies' supply chains can help track food loss and waste, and ICT companies can share data on the use of modern communication technologies.

To coordinate thematic monitoring under the SDGs, each thematic reporting initiative may have one or more lead specialist agencies or "custodian" as per the IAEG-MDG reporting processes. Lead agencies would be responsible for convening a multi-stakeholder group, compiling detailed thematic reports, and encouraging an ongoing dialogue on innovation. In doing so, these thematic groups can become a testing ground for the data revolution, trialing new measurements and metrics, which in time can feed into the global reporting process. As suggested in the UN Secretary-General's synthesis report, thematic reports are needed on an annual basis and may benefit from in-depth technical examination of specific concerns each year.¹⁴

¹² UNSG, (2014), para 149, ii.

¹³ Regional Commissions, (2014), *Towards an effective monitoring and accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda: perspectives from the regions*. Synthesis report of the regional consultations.

¹⁴ UN Secretary General (2014), para 149, iv.

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