Global Indicator Framework for SDGs: value added or time to start over?

By Barbara Adams and Karen Judd

After 10 bi-annual sessions and a one-month open consultation, the Interagency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals (IAEG-SDGs) has made important progress in finalizing its global indicator framework by which to measure progress towards the 17 SDGs and 169 targets at the global level. It has agreed on some additional indicators, including a few long sought by civil society organizations, and has upgraded or replaced indicators stalled at Tier III, a continual demand by Member States.

But five years into the implementation of the SDGs, this process has raised new concerns. How has it helped advance progress on achieving the SDGs, particularly at the national level? Has it been overtaken by other assessments, including by UN bodies and the Global Sustainable Development Report, which seek to examine the obstacles to progress not included in the global indicator framework, such as external and global constraints as well as trade-offs as progress towards one goal may mean regression on another?

The IAEG-SDGs has presented its 2020 comprehensive review, which began in January 2019, as “an opportunity to improve the indicator framework to help the global monitoring of the 2030 Agenda and provide the necessary guidance to countries, many of which are already well advanced in implementing their national framework and reporting platforms.” Among their stipulations for proposals, in addition to not increasing the total number of indicators, has been the need to “take into account investments already made at the national and international levels and not undermine ongoing efforts”.

This long-promised opportunity to re-open the global indicator framework for addition, deletion, revision and replacement, following an open consultation (8 September-6 October, 2019) has resulted in a number of changes that will be submitted to the Statistical Commission for their March 2020 meeting. In the interim, outstanding issues are to be resolved separately with agencies and “other interested parties”, including Member States. This is consistent with the consultation process in the development of the indicator framework: it has been characterized with frequent opportunities for input, less frequent clarity and transparency on the dynamics of decision-making.
Additional indicators – winners and losers

Following a list of 27 possible additional indicators issued in October 2019, 16 proposals were considered at the IAEG-SDGs 10th meeting. Out of these, seven will go forward, including one for SDG 2 on hunger and malnutrition, one for SDG 3 on health and well-being, one on education, three for SDG 10, on inequalities, and three for SDG 16, on peaceful and just societies (see box 1).

Several of these respond to long-standing demands by civil society organizations (CSOs). One was the addition of an indicator on anti-microbial resistance, long championed by public health advocates. Under SDG 3, Target 3.d: “Strengthen the capacity of all countries, particularly developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks”, the new indicator will measure the percentage of bloodstream infections due to selected antimicrobial resistant organisms and will have WHO as “custodian agency”.

Also responding to CSO demands is the agreement on an additional indicator to measure inequalities under SDG 10. Under Target 10.4 on policies to achieve greater equality, two indicators were combined into a single indicator for submission to the Statistical Commission. One, the redistribution impact of fiscal policy, put forward by the Commitment to Equity Institute at Tulane University and Oxfam, and two, the Gini coefficient, put forward by the French labour federation CFDT and Oxfam, were combined to read: “Redistributive impact of fiscal policy (with Gini coefficient reported as second series in data base as it is a component of indicator).” Thus, interested researchers will find the Gini coefficient in the SDG indicators database, but it will not be named in the official list.

Another proposal for SDG 10, advocated by a range of CSOs (and put forward by CFDT and Oxfam), did not make the final list. This was the addition of the Palma ratio to measure Target 10.1 that promises “to increase the income of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average”. The current indicator, which deducts average national growth from that of the bottom 40% gives positive figures for many countries where the income of the poor has actually decreased, as a result of an even higher drop in the national average.

More successful was the inclusion of an indicator to measure access to civil justice under Target 16.3: “Proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism.”

This appears to line up with a proposal by World Justice Project, UNDP and OECD for an indicator on “the accessibility, affordability, impartiality and effectiveness of civil justice systems”, using Legal Needs surveys which look at civil justice from perspective of people rather than institutions and capture diverse ways people seek to deal with their legal problems.

In addition, a proposal was considered for an additional indicator under Target 17.3 on mobilizing resources for developing countries, put forward by the OECD: “Total official support for sustainable development” (TOSSD).

This proposal, which was advanced mainly by developed countries at the March 2019 meeting of the UN Statistical Commission, has been criticized by many developing countries and CSOs as an effort to dilute ODA with a number of other forms of assistance, including humanitarian and disaster aid as well as South-South cooperation. As summarized by UNCTAD, TOSSD represents an effort to “add together a wide variety of flows into a single metric”, including publically leveraged private investments, which
“makes little statistical sense, but does potentially provide an alternative to ODA measurements that some governments who are not meeting their ODA commitments could be tempted to use to undermine ODA in the future.”

Following objections that the proposal lacked an agreed methodology, the IAEG-SDGs noted that as it is important to measure aid flows, a two-year working group should be formed, “with more country and UN system involvement” to finalize the methodology, in particular the TOSSD components related to South-South cooperation, for the inclusion of this indicator in the global indicator framework in 2022.

Box 1: Seven additional indicators with custodian agencies

- 2.2.2 - anaemia in women 15-49 by pregnancy status – WHO
- 3.d.2 - reduce percentage of bloodstream infections due to selected antimicrobial resistant organisms – WHO
- 4.1.2 completion rate - primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education - UNESCO/OECD
- 10.4.2 - redistributive impact of fiscal policy (with Gini coefficient reported as second series in database as it is a component of the indicator – WB
- 10.7.3. No. migrants killed while attempting to cross maritime, land and air borders - UNHCR (pending clarification on data sources)
- 10.7.4 - proportion of the population who are refugees, by country of origin – UNHCR
- 16.3.3 – proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism - UNDP/OECD

Replacing/deleting stalled Tier III indicators

Six proposals to replace or delete indicators stalled at Tier III, are tentatively agreed.

Indicator 1.a.3 under SDG 1, “Sum of total grants and non-debt creating inflows directly allocated to poverty reduction programmes as a proportion of GDP”, which lacks a custodian agency, is proposed to be replaced with total ODA that focus on poverty reduction as a share of the recipient country’s GNI to be monitored by OECD as custodian agency. This is the same as the global proxy agreed in March 2019, and so would presumably replace it.

Under SDG 7 on access to sustainable energy, Tier III indicator 7.b.1, “Investments in energy efficiency as a proportion of GDP and the amount of FDI for infrastructure and technology to sustainable development services”, is proposed to be replaced by “Installed renewable electricity generating capacity in developing countries (in Watts per capita)”. 
Four indicators to replace or delete those stalled at Tier III under SDG 13 on climate change have been agreed. Under Target 13.2 to integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning, one indicator is to be deleted, allowing the addition of a new indicator: “total greenhouse gas emissions per year”, which is currently used as a global proxy.

Another indicator stalled at Tier III, indicator 8.9.2 on the proportion of jobs in sustainable tourism industries out of total tourism jobs, is tentatively agreed for deletion without being replaced.

In addition, the IAEG-SDGs requests proposals to replace five stalled Tier III indicators, including one under SDG 1, on government spending to sectors that specifically benefit women, and poor and vulnerable groups; one on SDG 11 on support to LDCs in building sustainable and resilient buildings; one under SDG 12, on support to developing countries on R&D for sustainable consumption and production; one under SDG 14, on countries ratifying accepting and implementing ocean related instruments that implement international law; and one under SDG 17, on number of science and/or technology cooperation agreements and programmes between countries.

Regrettably, this did not include a call for proposals to replace Target 17.17 on multi-stakeholder partnerships, despite the fact that the current indicator, which measures the amount of dollars committed to a) public-private partnerships and b) civil society partnerships is still at Tier III. The inadequacy and bias of this indicator have been pointed out by CSOs as well as Member States, favouring as it does partnerships that are measured by dollars not by excluded or discriminated-against communities and constituencies, nor by commercial practices that undermine the work of the United Nations and the achievement of the SDGs.

The CSO statement concerning Target 17.17 at the 2015 meeting in Bangkok noted that the OECD had already observed that “Indicators proposed so far only deal with public-private partnerships, and focus on specific projects and investments. The wording of Target 17.17 suggests a broader coverage of partnerships may be intended”. To address this problem the CSOs suggested that the value of public-private partnerships should be measured not in terms of financial commitments but in terms of their contribution to sustainable development, proposing the indicator be replaced by two indicators:

1) % of public-(for profit) private partnerships that deliver greater value for achieving the SDGs than public or private finance alone, as measured via ex ante and ex post evaluations of impact against cost effectiveness, poverty and equity; ii) % of public-(for profit) private partnerships that include full transparency of contracts, terms, and ex ante and ex post assessment results, and subject to the highest international environmental and social safeguards.

**Tier reclassification: an ongoing process**

Seven requests for moving Tier III indicators up to Tier II were made at the 10th IAEG-SDGs meeting, including one on drug treatment under SDG 3 on health and well-being; one on physical or sexual harassment under SDG 11 on sustainable cities; four under SDG 14 on marine resources (including an index of floating plastic debris density), one on alignment with the Aichi Strategic Plan for Biodiversity under SDG 15 on biodiversity, and one on illicit financial flows under SDG 16 on peaceful, inclusive and just societies.
Regarding illicit financial flows, UNODC and UNCTAD provided an update on identifying the methodology for measuring indicator 16.4.1, which would enable it to be upgraded from Tier III to Tier II by 2020. Following pilots in five Latin American countries UNCTAD and UNODC are refining the statistical measurement framework and the definition of methods. An additional testing exercise will be conducted in selected countries of Central Asia in 2020, and at the end of 2020 the agencies will submit a joint paper to finalize a typology and a measurement framework.

Following the 10th IAEG-SDGs meeting, discussion has continued on requests to upgrade the Tier III indicators, mainly with Member States. In a series of Webex meetings, 16 indicators are currently under discussion. Given the complexity of many of the indicators, Member State concerns focused on the ability of countries, in both the global North and the global South, to conduct the surveys and compile and analyse the data. Several developing countries are requesting custodian agency support, and many indicators were accepted for reclassification to Tier II subject to simplification or refinement, which will allow countries to receive support in collecting and analysing the data.

One indicator that was not yet accepted for reclassification to Tier II is indicator 17.14.1, “Number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development”. The proposed composite indicator illustrates well the complex and transformative nature that the SDGs capture, as it requires coherence between local and national levels of government, across ministries and sectors, national and international policy makers, and across national boundaries. Its methodology embraces long term goals and interests of future generations embedded in national legal or strategic frameworks, including stakeholder consultations, and the identification and mitigation of trade-offs. Many countries are hesitant to reclassify, seeking results of additional pilots, in which several asked to participate.

Data disaggregation

Many CSO requests for improvements to the framework addressed disaggregation across different groups. In response, the IAEG-SDGs requested several advocacy groups to list their priorities for disaggregation – including gender, LBGT, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, internally displaced and detained persons and urban/rural location. CSO statements on priorities, most of them resulting from stakeholder consultations are informative and available for action in a separate link on data disaggregation the IAEG website: [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/disaggregation/].

The global indicator framework – UN reports raise questions

Despite all the work (and money) devoted to improving the global indicator framework and building the capacity of national statistical offices to monitor it, the reality is that many of the targets will not only not be met, but unless things change radically, will never be met.

Acknowledging the lack of progress towards achieving many of the SDGs, Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed has reiterated the need not only for more ambition, but in some cases a different approach, including with regard to data. She has pointed out that on average data is available for only 20 percent of the indicators, and even if available the data lacks sufficient disaggregation to be useful for policy makers.
These concerns have informed two important reports, both of which raise questions about the way forward, including about the way progress towards the SDGs is measured.

**The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019**

In July, the UN released the 2019 UN Secretary-General’s report on sustainable development, pointing to the enormous challenges facing all countries and developing countries in particular.

Among its findings:

- We will miss the poverty target – More than half of the world’s poor live in countries affected by conflict and one in five children now live in extreme poverty; hunger is on the rise; a large number of countries are seriously stressed in terms of water and sanitation, especially in the Pacific region and greenhouse gas emissions are rising.
- We are also moving backwards on some of the goals, particularly Goal 8 on decent work and Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production.
- This calls for a different way of thinking about development: the principle of universality means that progress cannot be defined by comparing countries in different stages of development but by deliberate policy-making.
- There is a need for International cooperation among countries sharing rivers, lakes and water aquifers, in terms not just on indicators, but regarding solidarity, and collective action.

This reality concerning lack of progress also suggests the need to go beyond the global indicator framework to look at obstacles at the global level that may be impeding progress.

**2019 Global Sustainable Development Report**

More far-reaching was the long-anticipated Global Sustainable Development Report. This report was mandated by Member States in the Rio+20 outcome document, recognizing that the traditional siloed approach to development would not be adequate and that the future agenda would be unprecedented in ambition. In 2016, Member States decided that the report should be produced once every four years, to inform the high-level deliberations at the General Assembly, and that it should be written by an Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General.

Composed of 15 experts representing a variety of backgrounds, scientific disciplines and institutions, ensuring geographical and gender balance, the Group conducted an independent assessment of progress in achieving the SDGs, based on scientific evidence, and examined over 65 scientific assessments and flagship reports to determine the distance from achieving the SDGs in different countries as well as the likelihood of never achieving them.

One study the report examined looked at the likelihood of reaching each goal in five main regions: the USA, OECD (excluding USA), China, BRISE (Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa and 10 other emerging economies) and the rest of the world. It found that all regions were likely to remain furthest away from meeting targets on goals relating to inequality, responsible consumption and production, and nature (climate, life on land, life on water). With regard to country-level assessments and forecasts, a 2019 study found that no country was on track to meet all of the goals by 2030. While data availability by
country and by goal varied, no goal had more than 50 percent of countries on track to reach it by 2030. 

Most worrisome, however, were the report’s findings on targets for which recent trends are actually in the wrong direction, either because implementation has been unable to reverse pre-existing deterioration, or because “world recovery from the 2008 economic crisis has brought back negative trends that had been stalled, such as obesity, inequality, greenhouse gas emissions, land degradation, biodiversity loss, wildlife trafficking, absolute material footprints, overfishing and deterioration of coastal waters”.

Several of those negative trending targets are critical, not only because they are hard to change but also because of their impact across the 2030 Agenda as a whole, impeding progress on other goals and targets. The report identifies four trends that are particularly alarming: “rising inequalities, accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, and the increasing amount of waste from human activity that are overwhelming processing capacities”. The report adds that “some trends presage a move towards the crossing of negative tipping points, which would lead to dramatic changes in the conditions of the Earth system, in ways that are irreversible on time scales meaningful for society.”

What the report concludes is that the current development model is not sustainable; “progress made in the last two decades is in danger of being reversed through worsening social inequalities and potentially irreversible declines in the natural environment that sustains us.” A serious course change is needed, starting with decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and reducing social and gender inequalities of all kinds.

So if the model is wrong, which women’s and human rights advocates, CSOs, environmental scientists and more recently some economists have long argued, what does this mean for the measurement of progress?

The report highlights six key “entry points” where scientific expertise can be brought to bear and collaborative action can accelerate progress towards the goals:

1. Strengthening human well-being and capabilities;
2. Shifting towards sustainable and just economies;
3. Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns;
4. Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy;
5. Promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development;
6. Securing the global environmental commons.

In all of those areas, it argues “scientific expertise and innovation can be brought to bear and yield impressive results”.

The report acknowledges that the commitments needed for transformation, and the interventions to bring them about, look very different in developed and developing countries.

**Difficult - not only different - choices on measurement**

These observations and findings present existential challenges for content of the global indicator framework:

- Should the 2020 Review be a decision on its utility rather than its comprehensiveness?
- How useful is the global indicator framework in assisting countries to achieve the SDGs, given the likelihood that collecting and compiling the data for each indicator will perpetuate measurement in silos, obscuring, trade-offs and externalities?
- Why has it taken center stage not only for reporting but also in terms of investment?

Part of the rationale offered for investment in the global indicator framework is to build the capacity of national statistics offices, now underway in almost all developing countries. But the experience of various initiatives related to progress on the SDGs suggest it is needlessly complicated and despite efforts to simplify some of the indicators, limit them to national level only, and step up support to national statistics offices, will compete with more substantive capacity development efforts, including social and scientific research.

- Is there a better way to build the capacity of national statistics offices to measure progress towards their own sustainable development goals?
- Should the international community invest in natural and social science institutions based in developing countries, as the Global Sustainable Development Report concludes?

What are the implications for achieving the SDGs, with numerous obstacles and unexamined trade-offs? If, as these and other reports have suggested, the global indicator framework has become a distraction, occupying a tremendous amount of time by both the statistical community and Member States, but still generally unworkable at the national level, should the IAEG- SDGs go back to the drawing board?

This is the (unspoken) question that will confront Member States at the UN Statistical Commission in March 2020 in the consideration and assessment of how to measure the SDGs.