



From goals and targets to indicators: Understanding the SDG process

While the proposed goals and targets for the emerging Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been subject to political negotiations through several stages, the international statistical community was in March 2015 entrusted with developing a set of indicators for monitoring global progress towards 2030, and guided by a continued political oversight after the post-2015 inter-governmental negotiations come to an end this September. This Stats Brief introduces the ongoing process of developing SDG goals and targets illustrated through comparison with the development of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); and provides the background and status of the current efforts to develop a supporting global monitoring framework.

The world's first framework of internationally agreed development goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),¹ were able to re-direct attention towards the development issues included because they were so simple and compelling. They unified all countries around a common agenda of concrete and time-bound development targets that could be measured with a standardized set of indicators.

From the Millennium to the Sustainable Development Goals

The MDGs and targets were endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2001² based on a roadmap prepared by the United Nations Secretary-General.³ The roadmap was the product of a series of conferences and summits, culminating with the Millennium Declaration,⁴ adopted by all then 189 United Nations Member States. The Goals themselves have not changed since 2001, however, the targets and indicators have been subject to some revisions over the years, mainly through the 2005 World Summit.⁵

The associated indicator framework used to measure progress towards the targets of the MDGs was endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) at its thirty-third session in 2002.⁶ In its work on reviewing the MDG indicators the UNSC is advised by the Inter-agency and Expert Advisory Group on MDG Indicators (IAEG-MDG), consisting of international agencies, regional organizations and national statistical offices. The Group has been responsible since then for

the preparation of data and analysis to monitor global progress towards the MDGs, including the development and review of methodologies and technical issues in relation to the indicators.

Since the MDG targets were set for 2015, a process to agree on a new development agenda for the years beyond 2015 has been initiated. This process involves two interconnected tracks, a "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" process and a "Post-2015 development agenda" process. The former, focusing primarily on dialogue among Governments, emanated from the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) outcome document "The Future We Want."⁷ The Open Working Group (OWG) on SDGs, comprising willing Governments, subsequently drove this track, which concluded with a specific proposal for the goals and targets in July 2014.⁸ In parallel, the latter track was initiated when the United Nations Secretary-General established the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda in July 2012, and featured extensive consultations with all stakeholders, including Governments, civil society, the private sector and the public.⁹

Ultimately, the two tracks were consolidated by the United Nations Secretary-General in his December 2014 Synthesis Report,¹⁰ to feed into the formal intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) on the post-2015 development agenda.¹¹ The Synthesis Report included support for the OWG's proposal of 17 goals and 169

targets. The IGN process began in January 2015 and is developing a draft outcome document for deliberation and endorsement by all Governments when world leaders convene for the “United Nations Summit to adopt the post-2015 development agenda” in New York between 25 and 27 September 2015. The IGN will negotiate a broad range of aspects of the post-2015 development agenda that will make up the outcome document, including the political declaration and the SDGs and targets themselves, which will form a core of the post-2015 development agenda. The IGN will not negotiate indicators, but may make recommendations.

The Summit will be the culmination of five years of consultations and negotiations since Governments first called for “*further steps to advance the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015*” at the 2010 High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly.¹² The process has evolved organically; with the focus on sustainable development and the idea of SDGs stemming from the outcome of the Rio+20 conference.

Developing SDG indicator framework

It is worth noting that the political – typically resulting in the goals – and the technical – typically resulting in the targets and indicators – processes leading to the formation of frameworks for internationally-agreed development goals are different but interdependent. The ongoing political process will most likely not be revisited after it is finalized, while the technical process will be an evolving process and can be adjusted to reflect changes such as advances in technology and capacities, and updates in definitions and methodologies. The MDGs process demonstrated that efforts to develop indicators, measurements and methodologies can continue after goals have been agreed.

In order to initiate the process of defining the monitoring framework for the SDGs, the UNSC at its 46th session in March 2015,¹³ stressed that the development of a robust and high-quality indicator framework is a technical process which requires time and needs to be conducted in stages, including the possibility of future refinements as knowledge evolves. In this process the national statistical offices (NSOs) need to play the leading role to ensure national ownership; and the existing regional mechanisms (such as the ESCAP Committee on Statistics) should be used to ensure equitable regional representation and reflect the challenges related to data and statistics faced by a variety of countries.

The UNSC recommended that a global indicator framework should contain only a limited number of indicators; strike a balance between reducing the number of indicators and policy relevance; build on the experiences of the MDGs; and take into account conceptual indicator frameworks that have already been developed. Besides global, universal indicators, indicators for regional, national and thematic monitoring, organized in an integrated architecture, could be developed.

The following architecture for the development and monitoring of a global indicator framework was endorsed by the UNSC at its session in 2015:¹⁴

- An Inter-Agency Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal indicators (IAEG-SDG), comprising 28 representatives of NSOs and, as observers, regional and international organizations. The group is tasked with fully developing a proposal for a global indicator framework in an inclusive and transparent process.
- A High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Post-2015 Monitoring (HLG), comprising of 15 to 20 NSO representatives and, as observers, regional and international organizations. The HLG will establish a global partnership for sustainable development data and provide strategic leadership for the SDG implementation process.

The UNSC endorsed the following roadmap for the development of the indicator framework:¹⁵

- **February 2015:** Expert Group meeting on development indicators for the post-2015 development agenda;
- **July 2015:** The newly created IAEG-SDG provides a first note on possible indicators and an indicator framework for the monitoring of goals and targets;
- **November 2015:** An electronic platform for the monitoring of the goals and targets will be launched;
- **November/December 2015:** The IAEG-SDG provides a note on possible indicators and an indicator framework for the monitoring of the goals and targets agreed by Member States;
- **March 2016:** The UNSC will discuss and endorse the proposal of the IAEG-SDG for the indicator framework (and the set of indicators), and will discuss and agree on an implementation plan; the

proposal will be submitted to the further intergovernmental process;

- **June/July 2016:** An SDG baseline data report for global monitoring will be released, providing data and identifying gaps;
- **March-December 2016:** Possible release of national and regional baseline data reports;
- **2016-2020:** Scaling-up of national, regional and global capacities to monitor the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda.

The indicator framework was also discussed during the March session of the IGN.¹⁶ In preparation for the discussion on indicators, the UNSC provided a technical report to illustrate how a list of global universal indicators might look, thereby providing some insights on how the targets can be measured.¹⁷ The proposal lists more than 300 provisional indicators – one or two per target – that were compiled from submissions by experts from international agencies. The report provides an assessment of the provisional indicators according to their feasibility, suitability and relevance, which was informed by a survey, administered by the United Nations Statistics Division to solicit the views of experts from national statistical offices and systems.

The IGN supported the decisions and plans of the UNSC on indicator development and pointed out that national indicators should be developed at the national level. During this IGN session it was stressed that: the number of global indicators should be limited and should include multi-purpose indicators that address several targets at the same time; there is an urgent need to strengthen statistical capacity and transform statistical systems to be able to respond to the challenge posed by the large number of indicators; statistics development should be a priority in the Financing for Development (FFD) process and be discussed at the July 2015 conference in Addis Ababa; the regional dimension is important for the monitoring of the SDGs and that regional indicators could be developed with the assistance of the United Nations Regional Commissions and other regional entities.

International development agenda and development of statistical capacity

The role of the MDGs as a structured international development agenda in raising the profile of statistics cannot be overemphasized. Progress towards the achievement of its targets has been monitored globally.

It is within the context of this initiative that developing countries and international organizations have mobilized efforts to produce more and better data in order to compile the millennium development indicators, which have become an important part of official statistics in many countries. The initiative has also encouraged and facilitated dialogue among policymakers, civil society and statisticians in the design of national goals and the preparation of regular monitoring reports. The importance of statistics and the statistical capacity development is highlighted in the post-2015 process and has been reflected in the OWG's proposal for targets 17.18 and 17.19:

- “17.18 by 2020, enhance capacity building support to developing countries, including for LDCs and SIDS, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.”
- “17.19 by 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP, and support statistical capacity building in developing countries.”

In fact, the two strategic goals of the ESCAP Committee on Statistics adopted in 2010 are very relevant in this context. These over-arching goals are:¹⁸

- a) ensuring all countries in the region, by 2020, have the capability to provide an agreed basic range of population, economic, social and environment statistics; and
- b) creating a more adaptive and cost-effective information management environment for national statistical offices through stronger collaboration.

ESCAP's future work will be focused towards statistical capacity development and coordinating the regional monitoring framework through the Committee on Statistics and other regional fora. The importance of development of statistics for the post-2015 development agenda on the regional level is being discussed the following two events. The participants of the Asia-Pacific High-level Consultation on Financing for Development¹⁹ recommended that the NSOs need to be properly resourced and that the requirements of data users need to be met to promote better planning,

monitoring, accountability and data literacy. Whereas, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2015²⁰ dedicated a special session to discuss what are the essential elements of an effective mechanism for monitoring and accountability for the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda and what monitoring and accountability functions can be best supported at the regional level.

For more information regarding ESCAP's work in statistics development please visit:

<http://www.unescap.org/our-work/statistics>

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References

¹ The internationally agreed development goals emerged from a series of UN Summits and Conferences since 1990. These Summits and Conferences sought to give concrete content to the objectives of the United Nations Charter preamble: to “promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom” and to “employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples.” Article 55 expands on these purposes:

“With a view to creating conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, the United Nations shall promote:

- a. higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development;
- b. solutions of international economic, social, health, and related problems; and international cultural and educational cooperation; and
- c. universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”

² UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/56/95.

³ Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. UN General Assembly document A/56/326.

⁴ UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/55/2.

⁵ UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/60/1.

⁶ Statistical Commission, Report on the thirty-third session. UN Economic and Social Council document E/2002/24.

⁷ UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/66/288.

⁸ Open Working Group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals [<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>]

⁹ A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty And Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development. The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. United Nations, 2013 [http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf].

¹⁰ The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet. Synthesis report of the Secretary-General. UN General Assembly document A/69/700.

¹¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015>

¹² UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/65/1.

¹³ Statistical Commission, Report on the forty-sixth session. UN Economic and Social Council document E/2015/24.

¹⁴ Report of the Friends of the Chair Group on broader measures of progress, Annex I and II containing the draft Terms of Reference for both groups. UN Economic and Social Council document E/CN.3/2015/2. However, they may have been changed since.

¹⁵ UN Economic and Social Council document E/CN.3/2015/2.

¹⁶ Documents and statements from the IGN session are available at:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/sdgsandtargets>

¹⁷ Technical report by the Bureau of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) on the process of the development of an indicator framework for the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda [[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/6754Technical%20report%20of%20the%20UNSC%20Bureau%20\(final\).pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/6754Technical%20report%20of%20the%20UNSC%20Bureau%20(final).pdf)]

¹⁸ UN Economic and Social Council document E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9.

¹⁹ Asia-Pacific High-level Consultation on Financing for Development, Jakarta, 29-30 April 2015, Chair's summary [<http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/JakartaFfD2015-Chair's-Summary.pdf>]

²⁰ Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2015, Bangkok, 21-22 May 2015, [<http://www.unescap.org/events/apfsd2>]