

Framing Sustainable Development Goals, Targets, and Indicators

Issue Brief

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This paper briefly summarizes some suggested considerations for framing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as their targets and indicators. It updates and replaces an earlier version of this document to reflect the outcomes of the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals.¹

WHY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS ARE IMPORTANT

The SDGs will be complementary to the tools of international law, such as legally binding global treaties and conventions, by providing a shared normative framework that fosters collaboration across countries, mobilizes all stakeholders and inspires action. Indeed, as has been demonstrated by the MDGs, well-crafted goals will:

- **Unite the global community and inspire coherent public and private action at local, national, regional, and global levels.** Sustainable development must be pursued at all levels of government (local, national, regional) and by public and private stakeholders, including business, civil society, academia, and research. Well-crafted, outcome-focused goals will foster a unity of purpose across public and private actors. Such goals can be applied at local, national, and regional scales, and will shift the focus of debate from “what?” to “how?”
- **Provide a coherent narrative of sustainable development** and help guide the public’s understanding of complex challenges, including neglected ones. The MDGs explain extreme poverty in all its forms and have familiarized decision makers with maternal mortality and other neglected development challenges. Similarly, the SDGs will explain sustainable development and articulate the priority challenges. The goals will educate heads of government, mayors, business leaders, scientists, and other stakeholders about the complex issues that must be addressed in combination. Children everywhere should learn the SDGs to help them understand the challenges that they will confront as young adults.
- **Promote integrated thinking** and put to rest the futile debates that pit one dimension of sustainable development against another. The challenges addressed by the SDGs

are inherently integrated, so sustainable development will require that the goals be pursued in combination, rather than individually or one at a time. As a result, SDGs cannot be ordered by priority. All are equally important and work in harmony with the others. Each goal should be analyzed and pursued with full regard to the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental).

- **Support long-term approaches towards sustainable development.** The goals, targets and indicators will allow public and private actors to chart out long-term pathways to sustainable development, which can be shielded from day-to-day politics, short electoral cycles and short-term business imperatives.
- **Define responsibilities and foster accountability.** The SDGs will also mobilize governments, businesses, civil society, and the international system to strengthen measurement and monitoring for sustainable development. In particular, the goals can empower civil society to ask governments and the private sector how they are working towards every one of the new goals. The new set of goals for sustainable development must also be bolstered by a 'data revolution', i.e. significant improvements in local, national and global data collection, processing and dissemination, using new tools as well as existing ones.
- **Inspire active problem solving by all sectors of society.** Just like the MDGs have spurred problem solving, particularly in health and agriculture, the SDGs can promote active problem solving by governments, the private sector and civil society on the challenges of ending poverty, promoting economic growth, strengthening social inclusion and trust, maintaining environmental sustainability and improving governance.

SETTING THE GOALS, TARGETS, AND INDICATORS

The SDGs should explain sustainable development and highlight the priorities for which a global effort and global solidarity adds value. They can draw attention to neglected issues. The MDGs, for example, have helped galvanize action on child mortality. Today, half as many children die before the age of 5, as in 1990.

The targets will set out operational objectives that will be quantified to the maximum extent possible. Indicators in turn provide a set of quantitative variables to measure progress at local, national, regional, and global scales. Below we summarize criteria for setting goals, targets, and indicators.

PRINCIPLES FOR SETTING SDG GOALS, TARGETS AND INDICATORS

Goals	Targets
	<p>“SMART” targets that are also:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Applicable to all relevant stakeholders2. Consistent with existing international frameworks3. Universal but adaptable4. Action-oriented5. Clear on their definition of “zero” deprivation
	<p>Indicators</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Clear and straightforward2. Consensus based3. Broadly consistent with systems-based information4. Constructed from well-established data sources5. Disaggregated6. Universal7. Outcome focused, if possible8. Managed by a designated organization

THE GOALS

The Rio+20 outcome document mandates that the SDGs should be:

“...action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.”ⁱⁱ

Based on this decision and the experience from the MDGs, we suggest 9 principles for the SDGs:

1. **One set of goals that provides a coherent generation-long narrative:** In addition to setting quantitative objectives for sustainable development and providing an indicator framework for management and monitoring purposes, the SDGs will explain to the world what sustainable development is. Every child should learn them in school as guideposts for the world's most important challenges. The statement of the goals is like the setting of a global compass and narrative: to help guide thinking and action for the next generation. Therefore, the OWG did well to mention priority challenges (including cross-cutting ones like gender equality or climate change) explicitly in the goals for all to see. Cross-referencing and integration of such cross-cutting challenges into the targets is important, but priority issues belong in the goals and cannot be "mainstreamed" at the levels of targets alone.
2. **Universal application:** As agreed at Rio+20, the SDGs should challenge and inspire all countries to act, including the high-income countries and emerging economies. This does not mean that every goal must be a "stretch goal" for every country. Many high-income countries will have met the economic goals, but not the social and environmental goals. Poor countries that cannot meet the goals out of their own domestic resources should receive international financial support to do so. The package of goals must map out a balanced universal agenda, allowing for individual goals to apply more to some countries than others.
3. **Set normative standards:** The SDGs must set clear normative standards around which international cooperation for sustainable development can be organized. The OWG has rightly anchored the fight against extreme poverty as a global norm, together with a right to economic development for all countries that respects environmental constraints.
4. **Concise and motivational:** As stipulated in the Rio+20 outcome document, the SDGs must be "concise and easy to communicate." As with the MDGs, the goals must be simple to understand and remember, and worded so that they mobilize key communities of stakeholders and the general public. Just like a health goal is needed to mobilize the health community, the goal on cities is needed to mobilize mayors and local authorities who would not rally around a set of sectoral goals. To this end, the goals need to employ direct and simple language that avoids jargon, "negotiators' speak", or excessive scientific precision. Yet, in some places the SDGs may need to include scientific concepts like biodiversity to educate decision makers and the general public.
5. **Operational and applicable to all stakeholders:** The goals should be framed in such a way that they can be defined and applied in every country, and ideally at sub-national levels as well (e.g. at the city-level). Businesses and civil society organizations should be called upon to share responsibility with governments in achieving the goals. Likewise, giving the poor and marginalized a voice will be a critical part of operationalizing sustainable development. Any process for implementing the sustainable development challenges will need to ensure the participation and voice of all people, particularly the poor and marginalized, in decision-making.

6. **Integrated or “systems-based” goals:** Actions to achieve economic, social, and environmental sustainability are interdependent, so the goals should emphasize the need for integrated approaches that tackle synergies and trade-offs. In many areas systems approaches are needed to devise sustainable strategies. For example, sustainable food production will require agronomic interventions to boost yields, investments in rural infrastructure, action to curb land conversion for agricultural products, greater efficiency in water use, and many other actions. Similarly complex challenges are urban development, biodiversity protection, or decarbonizing energy systems. Carefully crafted goals can promote system-wide approaches to these complex challenges.
7. **Coherent with other intergovernmental processes:** In some cases the SDGs are precisely the forum to adopt new quantitative targets, such as an end to extreme income poverty or preventable child stunting. But in many other areas, including biodiversity and climate change, formal intergovernmental processes already exist for agreeing on targets and for monitoring their implementation. Clearly, the SDGs cannot and should not create parallel negotiations and should not include quantitative goals in areas where no international consensus exists today. New climate and biodiversity goals should be agreed under the UNFCCC and the CBD, respectively. Due to their importance for sustainable development, climate change and biodiversity the OWG did well to include them as headline priorities in the SDGs and the accompanying narrative.
8. **Dynamic goals:** The MDGs were expanded after their initial adoption to include targets on sanitation and reproductive health. The SDGs should be similarly dynamic to incorporate new and more ambitious international agreements reached at a later stage (e.g. on biodiversity or climate change) and to account for new scientific evidence and technological breakthroughs. Such a periodic updating of the SDGs could be part of 5-year review summits.
9. **High-quality and consistent measurement:** The MDGs have suffered from a massive time lag in reporting and patchy data. The SDGs should – to the extent possible – be based on easy-to-measure indicators and should require annual reporting on progress.

The SDGs should help countries, businesses, the research community and civil society address the sustainable development priorities, which in turn requires a pragmatic approach to designing the goals. Some proposed goals are place-based to deal with the need for integration across a broad range of dimensions (e.g. the urban goal) and others are issue-based (e.g. the health and education goals). Finally, some goals highlight crosscutting issues (e.g. gender equality, water and sanitation, climate change) that affect every goal but require high-level commitment, which can be fostered by a dedicated goal.

THE TARGETS

In comparison to the goals, targets need to be more specific and operational. They should include – where possible – quantitative measures. Targets should also be few in numbers, but their wording can be longer and perhaps more technical. It is widely accepted that to the extent possible targets should be “SMART”, i.e. specific, measurable (though some targets may need to be quantified at the national or sub-national level), attainable (though some will be

“stretch” goals that can be attained only with considerable effort), relevant, and time bound to 2030 or earlier.

In order to ensure global relevance, we propose five additional principles for SDG Targets:

1. **Applicable to all relevant stakeholders:** Targets need to speak to all relevant stakeholders, including sub-national governments, business, and civil society. For this reason the SDSN avoids referring to governments or countries in the wording of the targets, although some targets proposed by the SDSN refer explicitly to business.
2. **Consistent with existing international targets:** Targets should also be consistent with existing thematic and sectoral target frameworks, such as the Aichi Targets for biodiversity, the Hyogo Framework for disaster risk reduction, or targets adopted by the World Health Assembly. Yet, since the number of existing intergovernmental targets is vast, the SDGs cannot encompass all of them. For this reason a careful balance needs to be struck to ensure consistency with available target frameworks without replicating them fully.
3. **Universal but adaptable to local contexts:** The SDSN recommends that targets be quantified at the global level so that they can effectively galvanize action around the world. However, there are three instances where targets cannot be defined globally in a meaningful way: (i) starting points may differ too much across countries to allow for a single meaningful quantitative standard at the global level; (ii) some targets are highly site-specific, or may be relevant only in subsets of countries; and (iii) in some cases no global consensus exists today on quantitative country-level targets, as is the case with greenhouse gas emission reduction targets that need to be negotiated under the UNFCCC. If one of these three conditions is met then the corresponding targets may need to focus on broad principles and ask countries/regions to adopt their own context-appropriate quantitative targets.
4. **Action-oriented:** Where possible, targets should focus on outcomes, such as ending extreme income poverty. The distinction between outcomes, outputs, and inputs needs to be handled pragmatically, however, and as per the design of goals, target-setting should be guided by approaches that are best suited to mobilize action and ensure accountability. For example, ensuring universal healthcare coverage or high-quality early childhood development (ECD) are important commitments for every government. Goals and targets that focus on these outputs will ensure operational focus and accountability. Similarly, we support the OWG’s proposal to include “input targets” on development finance.

In some instances it also makes sense to target inputs. For example, official development assistance (ODA) from high-income countries is critical for ensuring many SDGs. Since mobilizing resources for sustainable development is difficult, a dedicated indicator is needed. Subsuming ODA as an implicit input into every target would make it harder to hold governments to account on their ODA commitments. Similar considerations may apply, for example, to a proposed target on integrated reporting by governments and businesses on their contributions to the SDGs, or the need to impose a price on greenhouse gas emissions.

5. **Clear on their definition of “zero” deprivation:** Most post-2015 targets, including those proposed by the SDSN, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons, and the UN Global Compact call for “universal access” (e.g. to infrastructure) or “zero” deprivation (e.g. extreme poverty, hunger). For each such target, the technical communities and member states will need to define the precise quantitative standard for their commitment to “universal access” or “zero” deprivation. We hope that in most cases these standards will indeed be 100 percent or 0 percent, respectively, but there may be areas where it is technically impossible to achieve 100 percent access or 0 percent deprivation, for example on child mortality. In such cases quantitative standards should be considered for “zero” deprivation. In the case of child mortality, the SDSN and many others recommend an upper threshold of 20 deaths per 1000 live births that can be deemed preventable.ⁱⁱⁱ

THE INDICATORS

The purpose of SDG indicators is twofold. First and foremost, an indicator should be a *management tool*, to help countries develop evidence-based implementation strategies for achieving the SDGs. Second, an indicator is a *monitoring tool*, to measure progress towards achieving a target and ensure accountability to the broad range of stakeholders.

While there have been great improvements in data gathering, the MDG indicators have not fulfilled their dual purpose because the data comes with too great a time lag to be useful for real-time management and for monitoring. Poverty data, for example, is commonly three or more years out of date by the time it is published, compromising the utility of this data for planning and budgetary processes. Data from national statistical systems and household surveys is often incomplete or of poor quality. Much greater investment in building national statistical capacities, strengthening quality and standards will be required for the SDG indicators to fulfill both key functions.

Since a very large number of indicators would be required to comprehensively track progress towards all targets identified by the OWG, we propose that countries consider two sets of indicators. A first set of “Global Reporting Indicators” would track essential dimensions of the targets and be reviewed by the international community. A second set of “Complementary National Indicators” would track issues that may be applicable to some countries only, such as indicators for neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), or that may give countries greater scope in applying complex concepts, such as inequality, to their specific needs. The Complementary National Indicators represent a menu of options for countries to choose from. Of course countries would be free and even encouraged to consider additional indicators that are not included in a list of Complementary National Indicators.

Building upon the standards proposed in the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) handbook,^{iv} we propose eight criteria for robust SDG indicators (defined below). We have stopped short of stipulating that objective quantitative metrics should always be used, because subjective and perception-based indicators will likely play a role for some goals.

Criteria for SDG indicators:

1. **Clear and straightforward:** Indicators need to be simple to compile and interpret. For this reason, composite indicators should be avoided where possible since they require more complex data collection methods, often rely on imputation for missing variables, and arbitrary weighting. Perhaps most importantly, composite indicators do not lend themselves easily to policy recommendations.
2. **Consensus based in line with international standards:** Global Reporting Indicators, in particular, should be underpinned by a broad international consensus on their measurement and be based on international standards, recommendations, and best practices to facilitate international comparison.
3. **Broadly consistent with systems-based information:** To ensure coherence indicators should be broadly consistent with systems of national accounts, systems of environmental-economic accounting, and other systems-based information.
4. **Constructed from well-established data sources:** Indicators should draw on well-established sources of public and private data and be consistent to enable measurement over time.
5. **Disaggregated:** Preference should be given to indicators that lend themselves to disaggregation according to (i) characteristics of the individual or household (e.g. gender, age, income, disability, religion, race, or ethnicity); (ii) economic activity; and (iii) spatial dimensions (e.g. by metropolitan areas, urban and rural, or districts). As the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Agenda report recommends, targets can only be considered 'achieved' if they are met for all relevant groups.^v
6. **Universal:** The set of SDG indicators as a whole needs to track a universal agenda. Many (though not all) Global Monitoring Indicators should therefore be applicable in developed as well as developing countries.
7. **Outcome-focused, but only if possible:** As with the definition of targets it is generally preferable for indicators to track outcomes. Yet, the choice between input and outcome measures must be handled pragmatically. In some cases input metrics can play a critical role in driving and tracking the changes needed for sustainable development. For example, access to health services is a vital component of Universal Health Coverage. Similarly, ODA is difficult to mobilize but critical for achieving the SDGs. Dedicated indicators are needed to track both.
8. **Managed by a designated organization:** Each Global Reporting Indicator should be managed by one or more designated lead organization(s) that will be responsible for annual, high-quality national reporting of the indicator with due consideration to cost effectiveness, lean reporting processes, and national monitoring methods.

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- ⁱ Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (2014). Available at <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=400&nr=1579&menu=1300>
- ii. United Nations (2012). *The Future We Want, Our Common Vision*. Outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference. (A/CONF.216/L.1), paragraph 247.
- iii. See for example UNICEF (2013) *Key Asks On the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, New York: United Nations Children’s Fund; or Save the Children (2013) *Getting to Zero: How We can be the generation that ends poverty*, London, UK: Save the Children UK.
- iv. United Nations, (2003), *Indicators for Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals: Definitions, Rationale, Concepts, and Sources*, New York, NY: United Nations.
- ^v High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, (2013), 17.