

Developing indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals *Reflections on the work of the IAEG-SDGs*

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Indicators will be the backbone of monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) welcomes the establishment of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) and the leadership by National Statistical Offices (NSOs) of this important technical process. This group has a crucial role to play in the formulation of a bold, compelling, and successful SDG indicator framework.

The first meeting of the group on June 1-2 in New York highlighted the challenges of developing an operational and technically rigorous monitoring framework for the 17 SDGs. With this note, SDSN would like to share a few reflections drawing on the lessons learned in preparing our report, [Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for Sustainable Development Goals: Launching a data revolution for the SDGs](#). Over the course of 18 months, we conducted two global public consultations, which attracted detailed written input from more than 500 organizations. We also spoke with many leading experts from NSOs, UN agencies, academia, the private sector, and civil society.

In this process, we grappled with several complex questions that we believe are central to the work of the IAEG-SDGs. First, how to design an SDG indicator framework that works at global, regional, national, and thematic levels? Second, how can the use of multi-purpose indicators promote the integration of the post-2015 agenda and limit the number of needed indicators? And finally, how can data be disaggregated and made available annually to support countries in using the SDGs and their targets as management tools for pursuing sustainable development? We were pleased to see that the IAEG-SDGs has identified the first two questions as priorities for its work over the coming months. We therefore hope that the lessons from our work can be of help.

A first lesson concerns the number of global indicators. The [“first proposed priority indicator list”](#) compiled by the UN Statistics Division (UNSD) comprises some 164 indicators. Indeed, this is less than the number of targets as a few indicators appear more than once in the list. We believe this is the right way to proceed and an important first step towards arriving at an SDG indicator framework that is manageable for national statistical offices worldwide, but more needs to be done to reduce the number of global indicators to avoid overburdening statistical systems. During our consultations, we were advised that 100 harmonized global SDG indicators were the maximum NSOs could handle – even well-resourced statistical systems in OECD countries felt this number was the upper limit. Fortunately, as described in [Table 2 of our report](#), it is possible to comprehensively track all 169 targets with a reduced set of global indicators while treating all targets equally.

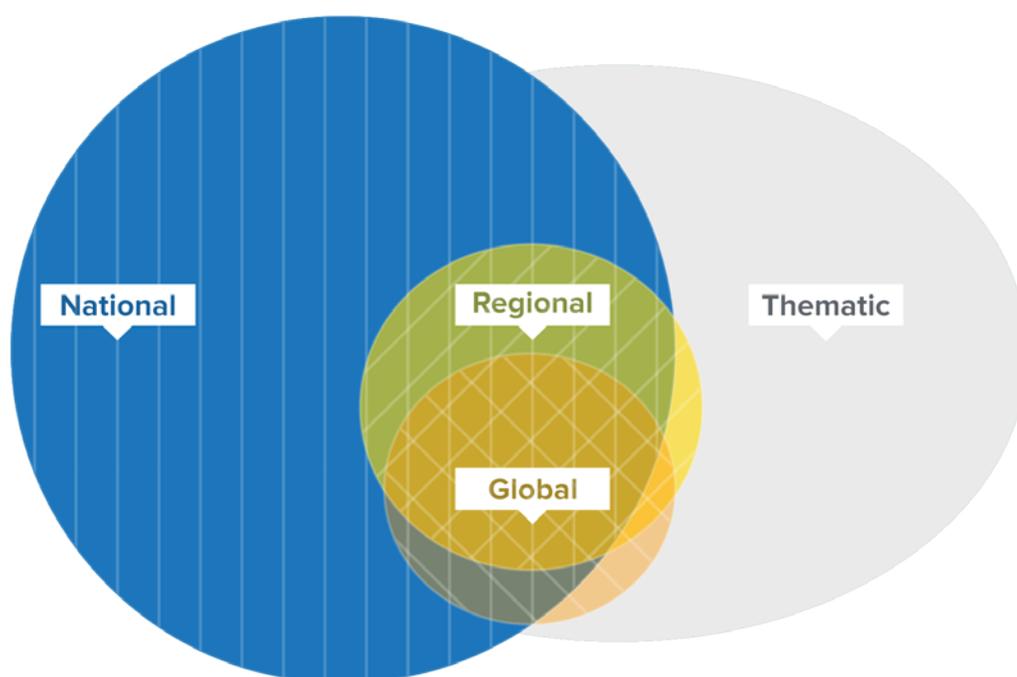
We therefore invite the IAEG-SDGs to consider how more multi-purpose indicators can track several targets, as illustrated in our report. For example, the proposed measure under Target 14.1: “fertilizer consumption (kg/ha of arable land” only tracks the amount of fertilizer being used, but gives no indication as to whether this level is appropriate. During a [roundtable organized by SDSN](#) with the International Fertilizer Industry Association, involving leading scientists as well as representatives from international organizations, civil society, and business, an agreement was reached on a science-based indicator of nitrogen use efficiency: “*Nitrogen use efficiency in food systems* (#15).” In addition to agricultural production (Targets 2.3 and 2.4), the indicator addresses the environmental impact of excessive fertilizer use, and contributes directly to understanding a key driver of marine nutrient pollution (Target 14.1). This type of multi-purpose indicator is critical to help keep a concise and meaningfully integrated global indicator framework—without resorting to multi-component indices that aggregate large numbers of individual variables.

In this way, every SDG target will have at least one indicator and will be treated equally, but some of the indicators will be the same across targets. The alternative approach of assigning at least one unique

indicator to each target risks leading to a vast number of indicators and may discourage cross-sectoral monitoring and collaboration. Some targets already have more than one indicator, which some thematic communities may use as a precedent to call for more indicators covering the targets that are of most interest to them. The result may be multiple indicators for many targets, which clearly would be unmanageable. For these reasons, we urge the IAEG-SDGs to explore how its discussions can be organized around an integrated indicator framework covering all targets instead of discussing each target individually. Its two working groups are ideally set up to address these questions.

A second set of lessons focuses on indicators to complement a global list. During our consultations, we have received important suggestions for indicators that could not all be included in a reduced global indicator framework. This has led us to consider a second list of [illustrative national indicators](#) that countries can choose from to track issues that are of particular national and/or regional concern (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Schematic illustration with explanation of the indicators for national, regional, global, and thematic monitoring



National monitoring is the prerogative of each national government. Each country decides on number and nature of national indicators, which follow national standards and may not all be internationally comparable. A limited set of Global Monitoring Indicators will also be integrated into national monitoring efforts. Although likely to be drawn from official data sources, countries may also decide to include non-official data among their national indicators.

Global monitoring is based on a set of Global Monitoring Indicators that are harmonized to common global standards and would form basis for review at the High Level Political Forum. GMIs would be predominantly drawn from official data. GMIs are generally applicable to all countries, but some may only cover a subset (e.g. malaria does not apply to countries in temperate zones and landlocked countries do not report on oceans).

Regional monitoring provides a platform to foster knowledge-sharing, peer review, and reciprocal learning across regions. Regional indicators comprise Global Monitoring Indicators, Complementary National Indicators, and possibly a small number of indicators targeting specific regional priorities. Regional monitoring mechanisms should build on existing regional mechanisms.

Thematic monitoring comprises specialist indicators reported on by epistemic communities. They can include input and process metrics as helpful complements to official indicators. Many communities may also use other sources of unofficial data and experiment with creative and novel ways of collecting, analyzing, and presenting data.

The terms of reference for the IAEG-SDGs allow the group to consider suggestions for complementary indicators that cannot all be accommodated in the global list. We therefore suggest that in its final report the IAEG-SDGs include an annex of “complementary indicators” for consideration at national and regional levels. Such a dashboard of indicators will of course not be exhaustive and can only be illustrative because each country will decide which indicators it wishes to use. Yet the dashboard would be an important tool for problem solving inside the IAEG-SDGs, as it offers a way to recognize technically sound indicators as part of a broader framework. Based on our experience in conducting global consultations, we believe it is indispensable to broaden the indicator framework in order to arrive at a consensus in this diverse group, without expanding the number of indicators beyond what statistical systems can reasonably bear.

Third, we were deeply impressed with the quality of technical inputs we received from UN organizations, NSOs, research institutions, civil society, and business. A tremendous amount of expertise resides in the UN system, which is strongly represented as observers in the IAEG-SDGs, but the group could also consider how expertise from outside the system can be mobilized. Since statistical work in the UN system has traditionally focused on developing countries, it will be particularly important to tap into expertise outside the system in order to craft a universal indicator framework.

Similarly, we recommend reaching out to the business community, e.g. through the UN Global Compact, the World Business Council on Sustainable Development, and the Global Reporting Initiative, to collect their input on how to design a global indicator framework that can then be translated into complementary key performance indicators for businesses. The SDSN will be very happy to share lessons learned during our consultations and help identify experts that can provide targeted input on specific questions considered by the IAEG-SDGs.

As a fourth lesson from our work we believe the IAEG-SDGs will need to acknowledge the substantial investments in statistical capacity that will be needed in order to implement an integrated indicator framework. Working with many international organizations and research institutions, we have developed a consensus estimate of the investment needs for effective SDG monitoring in our report [*Data for Development: A Needs Assessment for SDG Monitoring and Statistical Capacity Development*](#). Focusing on 77 low and lower-middle income countries, we found that an additional US\$1 billion will need to be spent each year to upgrade statistical systems and carry out regular data collection for the SDGs. In order to close the financing gap, Official Development Assistance (ODA) to statistics will need to increase by approximately \$200 million, which is a tiny fraction of the \$135 billion in overall ODA.

Of course, the mandate of the IAEG-SDGs does not include work on investment needs for SDG monitoring, but the group will need to offer a realistic assessment of the urgent need for additional financing to ensure that the indicators can be tracked at national, regional, and global levels. As described in our report, there is strong evidence that modest investments can strengthen statistical systems over time. We do hope that the upcoming Conference on Financing for Development [*makes investment in data systems a priority*](#).

We wish the IAEG-SDGs well for its important work. The SDSN and the organizations we have been working with over the past one and a half years stand ready to support the group in any way we can.