

The Process and Challenges of Developing SDG Indicators and Implications for Future Global Indicator Frameworks

Ichiro Sato

Executive Senior Research Fellow, JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) consist of 17 goals and 169 targets that outline the vision of a sustainable world toward which humanity should strive. Guided by the principle of “leaving no one behind,” the SDGs encompass all aspects of human security—including people’s survival, safety, livelihoods, dignity, and the conservation of the environment that serves as the foundation for human existence. Achieving the SDGs is therefore aligned with the realization of human security. In contrast to their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs are goals that apply to all countries and people, and they are highly regarded for having been formulated through an open negotiation process that reflected the views of a diverse range of stakeholders.

However, several challenges have been identified, including inconsistencies among the goals, targets, and indicators, as well as difficulties in monitoring and managing progress toward the goals and targets. This essay examines the background and context in which these challenges arose based on existing literature and seeks to draw implications for constructing an indicator framework for international development goals that will succeed the SDGs.

Issues Diluted During the Negotiation Process

Although the SDGs were agreed upon through an open negotiation process, the balance of power among negotiating groups influenced the outcome. Using Goal 10 (Reducing inequality within and among countries) and Goal 12 (Ensuring

sustainable consumption and production patterns) as examples, I outline the issues over which opinions diverged and the resulting outcomes.

Regarding Goal 10, Fukuda-Parr (2019) reports on the negotiation process surrounding “reducing inequality.” According to Fukuda-Parr, two main positions emerged as ways of addressing inequality: one aimed at supporting the poor and marginalized (those at a disadvantage in terms of access to power, wealth, resources, and opportunities) and promoting social and economic inclusion; the other aimed at correcting domestic and international inequalities in income, assets, and political power. Although Goal 10 was originally intended to encompass both of these positions, the negotiation process for the targets and indicators reportedly focused on inclusion, thereby diluting the perspective of reducing extreme inequality. Fukuda-Parr argues that while inclusion is an extension of traditional development issues focused on supporting the poor and specific groups, reducing extreme inequality requires societal transformation that involves limiting the wealth and power of the wealthy and powerful. She argues that influential stakeholders who wished to avoid a focus on reducing inequality created a target framework centered on inclusion, thereby preventing the adoption of indicators that measure inequality during the indicator deliberation process.

For example, the Gini coefficient and the Palma ratio are representative indicators of income inequality. Although some experts advocated for adopting these measures,

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neither was included when the SDG indicators were initially established. The Gini coefficient was subsequently adopted as indicator 10.4.2 during a review of the indicators; however, as of now, this indicator is classified as a Tier II indicator (those for which established methodologies exist but data are not regularly produced by countries), and there is still no indicator that fully functions as a direct measure of inequality.

Goal 12 has a similar history. According to Gasper, Shah, and Tankha (2019), while Goal 12 calls for sustainability in both production and consumption, during the negotiation process, targets related to sustainable consumption were weakened or left vague, and the associated indicators were limited to narrow scopes of measurement. Instead, the focus shifted to reducing the environmental impact of production and improving its sustainability through technological innovation and other means. Gasper, Shah, and Tankha point out that these shifts were influenced by the interests of the business community, which benefits from a mass-consumption society. Additionally, resistance from developed countries may have been a factor, stemming from developing countries' demands during negotiations that developed nations curb their own excessive consumption.

Dysfunction of the SDG Monitoring Framework

While the establishment of Goals 10 and 12 raised awareness of the two challenges of reducing inequality and promoting sustainable production and consumption—and represented a significant step forward in advancing these efforts—a discrepancy arose between the goals and their targets. This occurred because, during the negotiation of targets and indicators, the focus on reducing inequality shifted toward social inclusion, while the perspective on sustainable consumption was weakened. Furthermore, a lack of indicators to measure inequality and sustainable consumption, as well as the adoption of indicators with insufficient measurement scope, has led to gaps between the targets and the indicators.

Furthermore, as a more general issue, there was reportedly political pressure to limit the number of indicators per target to just one whenever possible, out of concern that the number of indicators would become excessive (MacFeely 2020). As a result, for many targets, the established indicators failed to cover all the key aspects of the targets (Kim 2023). Conversely,

despite some targets being complex, ambiguous, or difficult to measure, the requirement to assign at least one indicator to each target led to the somewhat forced inclusion of some indicators, despite being practically difficult to measure. Consequently, the SDG global indicators constructed in this manner are now unable to fully function as progress monitoring tools.

Implications for the Design of a Future International Development Goal Indicator Framework

Based on the discussion thus far, I would like to make a few proposals regarding the indicator framework for international development goals beyond 2030. As noted above, the SDGs consist of 17 goals and 169 targets, with 234 indicators established for these targets, excluding duplicates. While the Goals set forth ideals in simple terms—albeit with some ambiguity—the targets are packed with issues that diverse stakeholders have advocated for, resulting in some being lengthy and complex in their descriptions. Under these circumstances, it is impractical to establish a set of indicators that can measure all major aspects of the targets while keeping the number of indicators low. Therefore, one possible solution is to set global indicators for the Goals rather than for the targets. If we select two or three indicators that are most suitable for measuring the ideal state set forth by each goal, then, for example, with 17 goals, the number of global indicators would range from 34 to 51, making it a manageable scale. Even in countries where data collection is difficult, supporting data collection is realistic with this number of indicators.

From the perspective of comprehensively capturing the key aspects of each goal, it is useful to set targets at the global level, as is the case with the SDGs. However, indicators for targets should be established by regional, national, and subnational entities according to their respective contexts, policies, and strategies, with an expectation that they explain how progress against these indicators contributes to the global goals and targets. To encourage all countries to make sufficient contributions to all goals, it is desirable to strengthen mechanisms (similar to the current Voluntary National Review) that enable countries to voluntarily prepare contribution

plans, indicators, and progress reports, and to conduct mutual reviews.

Setting global indicators for the goals will also help prevent key issues from being watered down during the negotiation process for targets and indicators. Since the number of targets and their corresponding indicators will be large, those with abundant negotiation resources—including experts in various fields—will have an advantage in negotiations. By shifting the focus of negotiations to the goals and approximately two to three global indicators per goal, we can expect to mitigate inequalities arising from disparities in negotiation resources. Finally, as Kim (2023) and MacFeely (2020) point out, indicators are crucial because they effectively define the content and scope of the goals to which they belong. Therefore, rather than first agreeing on goals and targets and then considering indicators—as was the case in the SDG negotiations—if indicators are to

be set for specific goals, goals and indicators should be negotiated as an integrated whole. In such negotiations, not only political and diplomatic experts but also experts in data and statistics should participate.

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