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Policy pointers

SDG indicators and monitoring data help track progress, but evaluation is needed to explain results and support change.

Achievement of SDGs involves context-specific challenges. Countries need context-sensitive measures that track efforts to attain goals, and evaluation methods that help determine what is working, for whom, under what circumstances, how and why.

Maintaining stakeholder involvement in follow-up and review processes will help national governments select the most relevant indicators, will inform their decisions and will foster widespread ownership of the development agenda.

Adaptive management will help governments explore emerging and alternative ways to meet objectives and targets, using knowledge from monitoring and evaluation to develop new understanding and appropriate ways of acting.

Counting critically: SDG 'follow-up and review' needs interlinked indicators, monitoring and evaluation

Global indicators are important for understanding progress towards each of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, they can mask sub-national and thematic variations. They cannot explain how or why change occurred or its significance to different stakeholders. Evaluation helps to define and assess the worth, merit and significance of national policies in different contexts. This briefing introduces key considerations for the use of indicators, monitoring and evaluation of SDGs implementation, review and follow-up at the national level. It promotes the importance of context-sensitivity, broad stakeholder involvement and adaptive management approaches in efforts to achieve development results. It is the second in a series of briefings discussing the role of evaluation in achieving the SDGs.

Lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for a robust follow-up and review process to track progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Experience with implementing the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) taught us that indicators are essential for tracking progress. However, we also learned that there were serious problems with what should be measured and how. National level indicators needed more attention, data were often low quality and not timely and, perhaps most significantly, data collection was not well-linked to decision making.

The 2030 Agenda promotes "a robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework [that] will make a vital contribution to implementation and will help countries to maximise and track progress […] to ensure that no one is left behind." The 2030 Agenda and the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (the central UN platform for the Agenda's follow-up and review) has emphasised that countries should establish follow-up and review processes from the very outset as they attempt to achieve the SDGs.

Already, 169 targets and 230 indicators have been approved (after a lengthy consultation) for the SDGs' follow-up and review processes.

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Indicators have been set at the global, thematic, regional and national levels. To date, much attention has rightly focused on the technical matters involved in selecting and developing the best indicators, as well as on the kind of national statistical capacity and data systems needed to gather and report on these. However, as discussed in our previous briefing,[1] simply monitoring by means of indicators is insufficient — evaluation is needed to analyse and probe the results achieved, both positive and negative.

Evaluation has a great value in elucidating clear chains of reason in development's complex and uncertain situations.

The 2030 Agenda includes evaluation as an important contributor to dynamic and meaningful follow-up and review (Box 1). Overall, the 2030 Agenda articles call for a process that goes beyond measuring progress towards targets and instead envisions dynamic and continuous learning (ie an adaptive approach) among the agencies and actors designing and implementing SDG-related interventions. Such 'learning cycles' make development more effective and bring new knowledge that can help achieve goals. Evaluating national plans, policies and programmes as they unfold and using the findings to inform decision making supports that learning process, and can help agencies and actors successfully address development's inherently complex challenges.

Indicators, monitoring and evaluation

To be effective, ongoing national voluntary review processes must understand the important roles of indicators, monitoring and evaluation, and how each can contribute to development.

What indicators do: an indicator is an observable characteristic that can be used to determine the state of something (for example, the Gini coefficient that measures income inequality) and to show changes or measure progress in achieving some aim, goal or target. For example, take the goal:

"By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes."

Indicators of progress might include the percentage of children/young people:

1. at the end of primary, and

2. at end of lower secondary school

achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in

    a. reading, and

    b. mathematics.

Measurements for each indicator are used to monitor progress towards SDGs' targets, such as a specific percentage of achievement. Standardised measures for indicators also help set national and global benchmarks that track aggregated progress towards the SDGs.

However, while indicators are important in understanding global progress, they can also mask sub-national and thematic variation that mean the actual outcomes achieved may differ for unique areas or populations.

What monitoring does: a monitoring system records and tracks:

- Inputs (for example government expenditures)

- Outputs (such as services and deliverables, for example the number of women visiting a pre-natal and maternal care clinic)

- Short-term outcomes (what has changed as a result of a policy or programme, for example are the women visiting the clinic more satisfied with the services they received), and

- Longer-term impacts (for example women have a higher quality of life).

Monitoring systems are a key aspect of tracking policy and programme implementation, and rely on observable indicators. They require careful design in line with the policy and programme design. The outputs and outcomes expected must be specified, so that the data collection methods provide reliable, high quality and timely data on progress achieved.

Box 1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's commitment to evaluation

Clause 72 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development affirms that follow-up and review processes will be "rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which are high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes".

Clauses 73, 74 (c) and 79 also identify key features of evaluation such as, to "promote accountability to our citizens, …, foster exchanges of best practices and mutual learning"; identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices; support reporting by all relevant stakeholders; require (…) strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes; and draw on contributions from indigenous people, civil society, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders."

What evaluation does: monitoring with indicators can follow progress in achieving the SDGs targets set for outputs, outcomes and impacts. *Yet indicators only indicate.* Indicator data cannot *explain* how or why change occurred, nor the significance of the change.

Evaluation strategies and methods (as distinct from monitoring strategies) can help develop the clear chains of reasoning needed to answer questions about the value (the merit, worth or significance) of policies and programmes. Such questions might be: 'how adequate was programme expenditure?'; 'was the programme's reach acceptable (did it serve enough people)?'; 'how well was the programme or policy implemented?'; 'how substantial and valuable were the outcomes and impacts?'; 'how were benefits distributed?'; 'is this approach to the problem better than others?'

To answer these kinds of questions, evaluators gather evidence from various sources (including, but not exclusively, from monitoring systems). This evidence allows them to judge performance on multiple criteria, as negotiated with stakeholders, including funders, policymakers, programme designers, implementers and intended beneficiaries. For example, the criteria might include effectiveness of implementation, outcomes, sustainability, impact, relevance, learning, cultural responsiveness etc.

Evaluation has a great value in elucidating clear chains of reason in development's complex and uncertain situations. It is both a tool and a process. It can capture the learning from implementation and inform ongoing decisions. Clearly, indicators per se cannot be the driving force for development. The achievements they indicate have to be framed in some form of a causal or contributory relationship to SDGs targets. For instance, if indicators show that the national percentage of secondary school participation rates increases, differences within the country may be missed and why participation rates differ will not be explained. Without a clear chain of reasoning, it becomes difficult to tell why indicators are or are not showing positive or negative changes, and what further changes need to be made.

So evaluation is central to follow-up and review processes because it provides national governments with an evidence-based way to continuing learning. It helps answer questions such as 'are we doing the right thing?'; 'are we doing it well?'; 'what works for our citizens, why, under what conditions?'; 'what's the quality of evidence gathered and what conclusions should be drawn from it?'

However, evaluations require careful planning and effective implementation to be valuable. These tasks should not be taken lightly; evaluation can be costly, time-bound, and can require high-calibre quantitative and qualitative analytical expertise. Therefore, developing capacity in procuring and conducting evaluations can help raise the quality of the SDGs' follow-up and review processes.

Actions for SDGs follow-up and review processes

Be context-sensitive. The 2030 Agenda clearly acknowledges that all countries are different. Thus, all indicators will not be equally relevant to each country. For example, Goals 14 and 15, on ocean and terrestrial ecosystems respectively, have different significance for the Republic of the Marshall Islands (approximately 750,000 square kilometres that is mostly ocean, with only 181 square kilometres of land), compared with the Kingdom of Nepal (which has 147,181 square kilometres of land, is landlocked and mountainous, with only 383 square kilometres of inland waterways).

Clearly, establishing SDG indicators and targets and measuring achievements through monitoring are processes that must be tailored to the context of each country. Factors that influence how well the SDGs are achieved at national and sub-national levels will also vary. Furthermore, development strategies aiming to achieve progress towards targets will need to be sensitive to specific development challenges. Evaluation methods can develop evidence within specific contexts that help explain and interpret development results.

Involve key stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement has been integral to developing the SDGs global indicator framework. The Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) conducted an open consultation on the draft indicators with all countries, regional and international agencies, civil society, academia and the private sector. The IAEG-SDGs is also tasked with supporting the implementation of the indicator framework with regional and national statistics agencies. National governments are beginning to tailor the indicators to their own contexts and priorities. Within this task it is important to continue and even expand stakeholder involvement for two compelling reasons. Stakeholders can shed light on which indicators are more relevant and why. Also, setting targets and establishing the related monitoring pathways will involve many

people at local, sub-national and national levels in generating high quality, relevant and timely data — early engagement will facilitate this process.

As results emerge, stakeholders have the right to understand the reasons behind successes, inquire about challenges that hinder progress, and examine whether benefits are experienced evenly or whether there are gaps that are masked by overall results. These questions are mostly answered by evaluation. In particular, key decision-influencers, such as parliamentarians, government officials, programme managers and other people with power to make changes, require accurate and comprehensive information for effective decision making. Monitoring data needs to be critically examined and analysed to present findings in a format useful to decision makers' specific roles in SDGs governance, implementation or review.

Adopt an adaptive management approach. Adaptive management is a strategy for navigating complex systems where agencies, policy aims, programme objectives and multiple actors interact in often unpredictable ways. In such systems, it is highly unlikely that there is a clear route to achieving targets or that there is a single best approach for attaining an SDG. Rather, an adaptive approach involves exploring emerging and alternative ways to meet objectives and targets, and using knowledge from monitoring and evaluation to develop new understanding and new ways of acting. Adaptive management is a set of principles focused on learning and then acting that involves partnerships between stakeholders.

Within adaptive management, tracking indicators and progress towards targets should be a trigger to further, improved action. Evaluation is crucial to adaptive management because it goes beyond simply tracking what is or is not happening. Instead, it builds understanding that enables regular evidence-informed adjustments (which can be major or minor) to plans, actions and resources. These changes ensure development adjusts to its context (local, sub-national and national), can stimulate innovation and can highlight aspects of development that most deserve our attention.

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Notes

[1] Schwandt, T *et al.* (2016) Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London.

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