

# Measuring the SDGs: a two-track solution

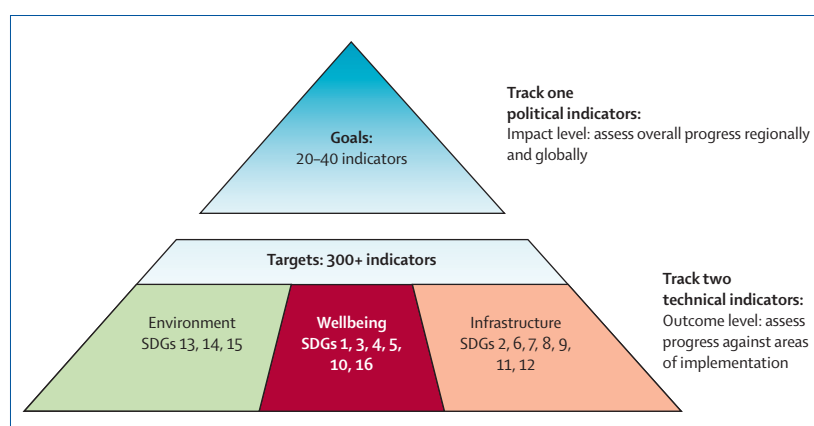
The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expire in 2015 and substantial effort is being put into the negotiation of a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDG agenda is broader and goes further than that of the MDGs, and critics claim that it is unmeasurable and unmanageable. On the positive side, the consultation process has been far more inclusive and credible than for the MDGs. The resultant Open Working Group (OWG) proposal provides a global agenda for action that is relevant to all nations.<sup>1</sup> As an example of the change, whereas three of the eight MDGs were focused on health, the new SDG for health aims to “ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages” and is only one of 17 SDGs. This single health goal is far closer to being all-encompassing than all three of the health MDGs combined, and the social determinants of health are further elaborated in other SDGs (eg, water, sanitation, nutrition, education, clean air, reduced poverty, increased equity, and empowerment of women and girls). If the SDG agenda were enacted in its totality, this would have an enormous effect on health and wellbeing for humanity, with particular improvements in the lives of the poor.

Two processes are currently underway towards the establishment of the SDGs—political and technical. First, a political negotiation about the content of the SDGs will result in a proposal of goals and targets to the UN General Assembly in September, 2015. In view of the difficulty in establishing consensus among the many represented member states, this final proposal is likely to be very similar to the OWG proposal, with several acknowledged technical weaknesses. The targets listed are often bundles of intervention areas and not specific or measurable, without quantified targets or end goals. Also, many of the targets—especially non-health targets—do not have readily available data with which to measure them. Second, a technical process is ongoing to define an accountability framework to allow measurement of these goals and targets by means of a robust set of indicators.

Part of the challenge will be the complexity of the new goal and target structure. Each of the 17 SDGs has 3–19 targets, and an additional 0–4 so-called enablers, which define how each goal can be implemented.

126 targets and 43 enablers mean that at least 169 indicators are needed to track all the separate elements. Not surprisingly, a preliminary list of indicators produced by the UN runs to more than 300 indicators, with technical demands for further expansion and development of new indicators. However, to ensure feasibility, affordability, and a focus on information, pressure is being applied to reduce the list to a maximum of 120 indicators. The technical process is therefore locked between two competing pressures—to sustain the full content of the intricately negotiated agenda, but also to reduce the number of indicators to be feasible and affordable.

Technical experts have not managed to convince the negotiators that indicators at impact and process level are different, and that both types are needed. Proponents of potentially useful umbrella indicators, which would measure progress at the goal level (eg, proposals that the health goal be at least partially measured through reductions in preventable mortality),<sup>2</sup> have also not prevailed. As the pressure to reduce the number of indicators mounts, the only suggested mechanism to reduce the list is through an assessment of indicators by statistical agencies.<sup>3</sup> The future therefore looks bleak for goals that do not have highly rated indicators—including several important determinants of health (eg, indicators to measure food insecurity, protection of households from catastrophic out-of-pocket health expenditure, population in urban areas exposed to excess outdoor



**Figure:** The two-track approach to measuring the SDGs  
SDGs=Sustainable Development Goals.

air pollution, Early Childhood Development Index, percentage of women and girls who have undergone female genital mutilation, percentage of women and girls who make their own decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, percentage of people living within 0.5 km of public transit in urban slums, and many more). The risk is that the resulting measurement framework will be conservative, incomplete, and will meet the needs of neither political nor technical proponents. A poor monitoring framework will severely restrict the usefulness of the SDGs as a force for development.

A solution that could break the deadlock is a two-track approach to include separate lists of indicators at the political and technical levels. A track 1 list of about 20–40 indicators could focus on impact measures to distil the essence of the SDGs at goal level (ie, poverty, equity, welfare, and environment). These indicators could be drawn from current lists, or they could be new umbrella-level or goal-level indicators. Many additional indicators would be needed to measure all of the specific aspects of the agenda, and these could be captured in a longer track 2 technical indicator list at the target level (300 or more indicators) that is disciplined and statistically validated.

This solution would work because, although the agenda is global, relevance for tracking of the entire agenda worldwide is likely to be restricted. The problems of France or Canada are unlikely to be similar to those of the Central African Republic or Afghanistan. Problems and solutions will be most pertinent at the regional level, and more effort is needed to decentralise analysis and action. Track 1 indicators could easily be built into regional scorecards, to enhance the accountability of leaders and mandated institutions for collective action to ensure comprehensive progress.

Track 1 indicators would also allow for relative ease and clarity of analysis and communication—with a greater likelihood of sustained political attention. Presentation of progress within subgroups of SDGs

would further enhance the communication potential. The categorisation of goals into areas of action (eg, welfare, infrastructure, and natural environment<sup>4</sup>) would allow global, regional, and country level analyses of the comparative progress in different areas of development (figure).

Track 2 indicators could be developed to allow effective measurement and management of the full range of elements within each target. However, these indicators should not be held hostage to what is available today, and could be progressively developed and validated, to expand the scope of monitoring and action during the course of implementation—the SDGs could be used to drive development and availability of new and important information.

What is measured in the monitoring framework will define the ability of the SDGs to mobilise, coordinate, and learn. The political negotiations up to September, 2015 are important, but the monitoring framework will be what will drive investment and practice to 2030. Unless a more creative solution to the framework is identified, this is not likely to be achieved.

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We declare no competing interests.

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