



International Institute for Sustainable Development

## BRIEFING NOTE

# Indicator Preferences in National Reporting of Progress Toward the Sustainable Development Goals

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## Monitoring and Reporting on SDGs

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intended to offer a “supremely ambitious and transformational vision” for our common future through 2030 (United Nations 2015). They are certainly ambitious—the SDGs cover all key aspects of sustainable development, from improving the well-being of the poorest to transforming production and consumption processes; reducing the use of resources as well as waste and pollution; combating climate change; and meeting basic needs such as food, health care, education and culture.

If we are to achieve the SDGs by 2030, we need to be efficient. Common wisdom says that what we don’t measure, we cannot manage. From the earliest days of the SDG process, there have been calls to develop indicators to understand our baseline, and measure and report progress in achieving the SDGs as soon as possible (Pinter, 2013).

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven” (United Nations, 2015). These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the high-level political forum (HLPF). The reviews submitted to the HLPF are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders.

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**IN THIS BRIEF**, we review countries' voluntary national reviews to the HLPF to identify the indicators that countries have actually used in their reports to date, and the data attached to those indicators. We are starting with nine countries (Finland, Germany, Georgia, Mexico, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Switzerland, Venezuela, Uganda). The basic framework is:

- 1. Countries that are producing reviews**
- 2. Indicators included in each country's review**
- 3. Alignment of the included indicators in the country's report with indicators suggested by the UN Statistical Commission to track progress towards the SDGs.**

The SDG indicator set has been developed by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), which was created by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC). The UNSC adopted the indicator set in March 2017. The underlying rationale of this framework is that countries will need to “customize” this indicator set in their reports due to the need to contextualize the SDGs to national contexts as well as to the need to accommodate differences among countries in their measurement and reporting capacities. As a result, countries choose subsets of the official SDG indicators, but may also need to modify and complement them to capture issues that are too country-specific to be fully reflected in global indicators. This process results in a bottom-up approach through which countries build a set of indicators to monitor the SDGs based on the top-down indicators adopted by the UNSC.

## National Preferences in Indicator Selection for SDGs

The indicator selection process has been led by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), which was established by the UNSC. Currently, there are approximately 150 “well-established” indicators suggested to monitor the SDGs, and over 230 indicators in total.

Ultimately, it is countries that need to take leadership in advancing SDG monitoring in their national implementation efforts. The global indicators provide useful guidance and facilitate comparability, but they cannot be copied in their entirety and used at the national level. This is partly due to the amount of time that would be required to operationalize new indicators and lock-in related to the use of existing ones. Implementation has already started (or needs to start soon), and indicators are needed to identify baselines and quantitative targets—and develop transition strategies and pathways connecting the two.

While there are already several data platforms relating to the SDGs, most notably the UN Statistics Division's own (UN DESA, 2015), they are designed to present statistical and geospatial data on individual indicators. It would be equally important to have high-level “data on data” to understand where countries stand with regard to operationalizing their commitment to track progress toward the SDGs, following the guidance provided mainly by the UNSC.

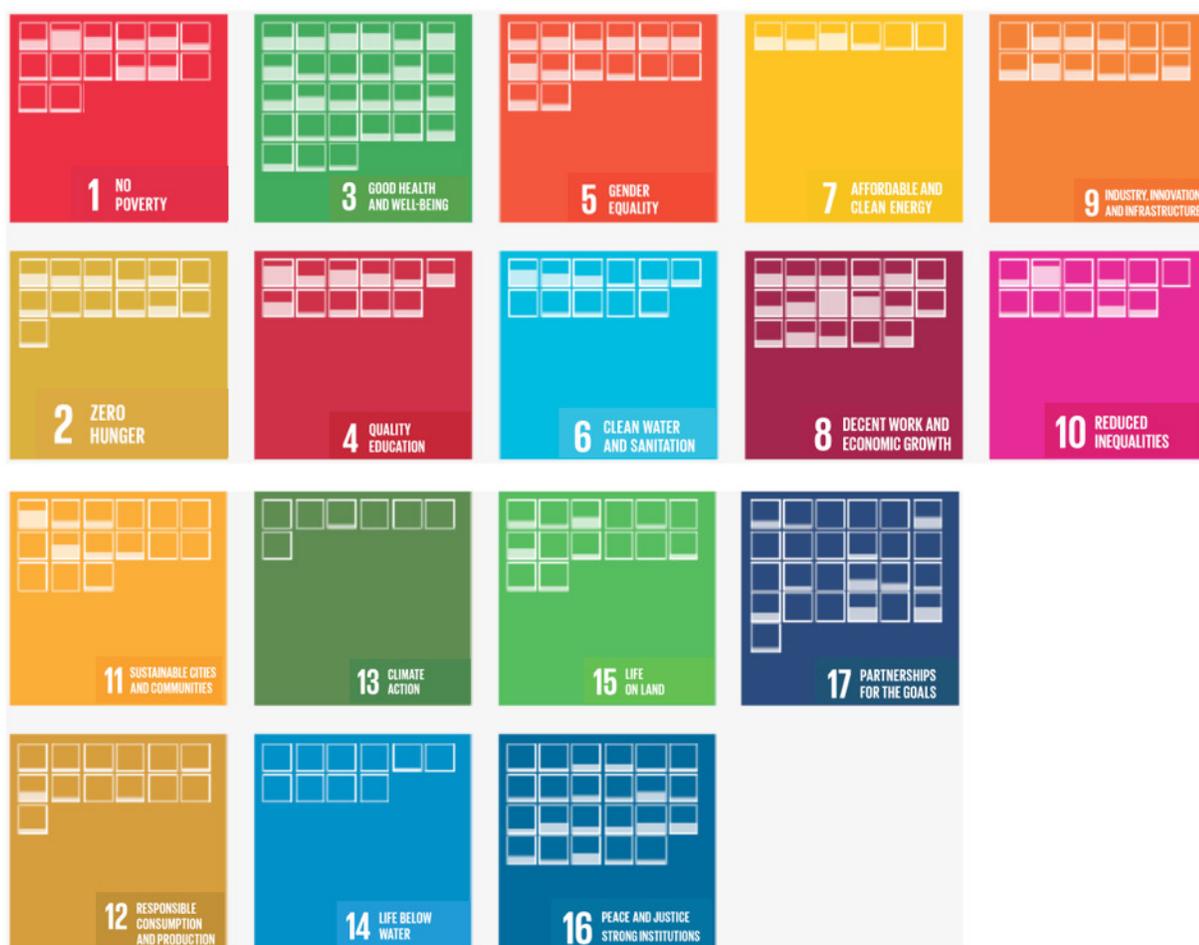


To do this, IISD established a “data on data” tool to keep track of SDG indicator reporting and to allow users to explore which indicators are being used (and by whom) in actual practice (IISD, n.d.). We reviewed the indicators included by countries in their voluntary national reviews to the July 2016 meeting of the HLPF and checked their alignment with those suggested by the UN Statistical Commission (Figure 1).

The tool provides a simple visual summary of the indicators reported per SDG, presently for nine countries. Besides the visual summary, the tool also shows the actual indicators, the degree of similarity to the UNSC set and whether any require spatial disaggregation. Overall, we found that of the

indicators suggested by the UNSC, over 26 per cent are not being reported by any of the countries.

The indicators used by countries underscore the major differences in the extent of reporting on different SDGs (Figure 2). The SDGs that are most included in country reporting mainly cover the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development, such as good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4) and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). The least-reported indicators are related to environment and nature, such as life below water (SDG 14), life on land (SDG 15) and emerging issues such as responsible consumption and production (SDG 12).



**Figure 1.** Overview of the extent of reporting by the selected countries on each SDG indicator suggested by the UN. The white bar in the box indicates the extent of reporting.



Most-reported indicators in the following SDGs



Least-reported indicators in the following SDGs

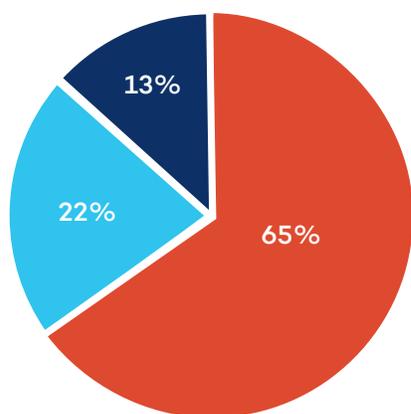
**Figure 2. The SDGs with the most- and least-reported indicators by the studied countries.**

In selecting indicators for reporting, countries have three choices:

- Reporting the same indicator as suggested by the UNSC. These are often indicators that the country already uses to report to international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and/or on international agreements and conventions such as on health, gender and the environment.
- Choose an indicator that is not the same, but very similar to the indicator suggested by the UNSC. These are often indicators that require some alignment as agreed in previous international processes, but their adjustment hasn't been concluded. These include, for example, indicators on cities, reducing inequalities, and energy and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.
- As a third option, countries may choose indicators to report on a goal and target very different from the indicator suggested by the UNSC. These indicators often express a specific national context for the target and/or long-term reporting tradition in

the country, for example through previous national sustainable development and other development strategies.

The nine reviewed countries use all three types of indicators in their reporting—those suggested by the UNSC, those similar to indicators suggested by the UNSC, and those that are country-specific and not reflected in the set suggested by the UNSC (Figure 3). Despite these options, our review found that, in the countries included in this study, the highest percentage of indicators reported were the same as those suggested by the UNSC (65 per cent), and 22 per cent were similar to those suggested by the UN. For example, for SDG 17, one of the indicators suggested by the UNSC is fixed Internet broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants by speed; the preferred indicator suggested by Finland is, for example, speeds for fixed broadband subscriptions, which comes very close to but is not identical to the indicator proposed by the UNSC. In terms of choosing a different indicator for SDG 5, Mexico is *using percent of women with title to the house they live in*, compared to the indicator suggested by the UNSC, which is *proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land*.



- Same as those suggested by the UN
- Similar to those suggested by the UN
- Different compared to those suggested by the UN

**Figure 3. Similarity between the indicators suggested by countries in their national reporting and those suggested by the UNSC.**

## Reconciling Global and National SDG Monitoring Processes

SDGs have been heralded as truly universal goals—covering all dimensions of sustainable development and applying universally to both developed and developing countries. In addition, many analysts highlight that the SDGs represent an *interrelated* set of goals (Le Blanc, 2015; Nilsson, Griggs, & Visbeck, 2016). Cherry-picking (i.e., selecting subsets of the goals for technical, policy or political convenience while ignoring others) would compromise not only the goals that were not selected, but also those that are selected, as their synergistic nature depends on achieving the complete set.

The success of the SDG framework, in contrast to other earlier global efforts—not least the Millennium Development Goals—relies on tracking and reporting progress and building policies on the evidence base represented by statistical or geospatial data. The major effort of statistical agencies, led by UNSD, and the geospatial community, through the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), and many others to develop common terminologies, methods and tools is a major step ahead. But implementation of internationally agreed measurement tools and practices, like the SDGs themselves, will happen mainly at national and

subnational levels. The theory underlying this paper and the tool developed by IISD is that, given the key role of indicators in goal implementation mechanisms, the use of indicators is *itself* an indicator of the degree of policy commitment to implementing the SDGs.

Given this relatively early stage of the SDG process it would be unrealistic to expect complete sets of indicators to appear in national reporting practice. As has been argued elsewhere for bringing global goals to the national level, it is more important for countries to start their process early with what they have, even if their indicators are not fully aligned with the UNSC set and build up practices and capacities as they progress (Pinter et al., 2013). But progress they must, and keeping track of how these practices and capacities evolve will be key not only for transparency and learning but for understanding what the SDG priorities and intentions of countries are.

Finally, defining the indicators for SDG monitoring at the global level is a lengthy process that will take several years. To some extent, is it understandable given the issues raised above—i.e., the large number of goals as well as the wide diversity of countries with different monitoring capacities. As countries advance their reporting to the HLPF, we will have more information about the strengths and gaps on national reporting systems to respond to this huge challenge. It is critical that countries move ahead in using their available indicators to implement the SDGs instead of focusing only on aligning their indicators before acting.

Based on this study, the following three preliminary recommendations can be made. First, countries should build up their SDG reporting capacities and practice based on their existing systems of measurement, while taking into account the global guidance developed by UNSC. Second, while keeping as close as possible to the global SDG indicator system, they could also complement global metrics with indicators related to key national issues if no global metrics are available for them. And third, tracking progress should not leave blank spots—indicators should cover not only what is easy and convenient for policy, but also those issues, such as sustainable consumption and production, that are conflicted, where entrenched interests may work against transparency or change but that may lie at the heart of the SDG challenge.



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