

### MAIN MESSAGES

- Data quality, availability, and collection capacity fall well short of what is needed to monitor the SDGs effectively. Long-term commitment is required to support statistical offices and data quality as well as transformation of data into useful evidence for decision-making.
- New technologies and ‘big data’ may help narrow gaps in data quality and availability, but are no panacea and involve important technical challenges and privacy issues. There remains substantial scope for sustained investment in and better use of existing data sources.
- Accurate measurement and reporting may involve political setbacks. A focus on generating data and monitoring results for learning, rather than for sanctioning, can provide incentives for investing in accurate measurement and effective reporting.
- Agenda 2030 involves policy trade-offs and synergies. Analysing impacts of individual policy decisions across sectors and monitoring related indicators are critical for improving policy coherence for sustainable development.
- While there is a great need for multi-level, multi-stakeholder coordination for effective implementation and monitoring of the SDGs, the potential for coordination failure is real, as is the risk of a costly, ineffective proliferation of indicators and monitoring requirements.

### Introduction

More than 200 people gathered in Geneva on 9 June 2016 for a full-day conference on measuring and monitoring implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The conference, organised by the e-journal *International Development Policy* in partnership with the Millennium Institute and The Graduate Institute’s Centre for Finance and Development, brought together academics, policy-makers, civil society representatives and development practitioners. The event provided fertile ground for cross-sector exchange and original reflection on questions such as: how best to manage politics and governance when designing effective data collection and monitoring systems? Can ‘big data’ be a magic bullet to improve data quality and availability? These issues, among others, were raised in a series of four panel discussions. The conference highlighted specific - and often urgent - challenges involved in monitoring the progress of Agenda 2030. This Brief summarises selected issues that emerged from the event.

### Emerging themes

From the opening remarks to the final panel discussion, participants were reminded that data quality, availability, and capacity fall well short of what is needed to monitor the SDGs effectively – while at the same time there is a proliferation of indicators, which can be costly and of little relevance to policy-makers. The global framework for monitoring progress toward the SDGs relies on 230 indicators to track progress toward 169 targets. Many of these indicators are not regularly generated, or still face methodological obstacles. Beyond technical aspects, participants highlighted that the politics of SDG monitoring and reporting must be fully integrated into the Agenda 2030 debate.

Although less ambitious than the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) saw many countries struggle to provide relevant information over the past 15 years. At times, poor data quality led to scepticism about how to interpret and use the results. In other cases, data were – and remain - missing. The SDGs include new and universal development issues, and in turn new indicators that pose challenges - such as the adequacy of national reporting systems for tracking illicit arms flows under SDG 16. There is also new emphasis on sub-national governments as key actors. One panellist noted that five mid-sized cities involved in a pilot study of indicators for SDG 11 were willing to measure progress – but struggled to provide the required data.

Addressing gaps in data availability and quality is crucial for ensuring that “no one is left behind”. Narrowing these gaps, most acute in the Global South, requires long-term commitment not only to improve data quality, but to train and retain staff, particularly in government statistical offices.

These employees, noted speakers, are often ‘hired away’ once they are trained. Speakers pointed to a need not only for financial support and coordination among donors in supporting national statistical offices in the South, but also incremental domestic ownership and greater political resolve to support measurement and reporting.

In some cases, civil society actors may step in and narrow data gaps – although the precise role and contribution of non-governmental organisations gave rise to diverging viewpoints. On the one hand, some participants acknowledged that civil society plays a crucial role in filling gaps where official data are absent, such as reporting deaths attributed to police action or war casualties. In addition, some SDG indicators may not necessarily demand official statistics and could be provided through partnership with non-governmental actors, including businesses. However, the question remained open as to whether it is the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) to collect data and generate indicators. One panellist insisted that the role of CSOs is rather to help shape (or challenge) arguments by uncovering critical issues that can be drawn from existing data.

Ultimately, participants were reminded that politics often trumps the technicalities of data collection, and data alone cannot be a substitute for policy choices oriented to sustainable development.

### *Big data*

Presentations highlighted a number of monitoring tools such as the *SDG Global Compass*, a tool for businesses to monitor their contributions to Agenda 2030; the *iSDG*, a simulation tool for exploring trade-offs across the 17 goals and alternative approaches to investing in the SDGs; the use of earth observation and geo-spatial information for tracking crop conditions, forest cover, air quality and other issues related to SDG targets; and other types of ‘big data’ collected from mobile phones and online social networks.

Although new tools offer the potential to narrow data gaps, speakers underscored that new technologies – particularly big data – are no substitute for the better use of existing data and sustained investment in official statistics. Big data generally complement rather than serve as a substitute for official statistics. They offer the advantage of generating vast quantities of data that can then be updated faster than data generated through traditional surveys. There is substantial potential for geo-localized data and integration of different data sets. But big data, too, pose problems for data quality and availability, often require traditional statistics (e.g. from surveys, administrative data) to validate them, and demand substantial technical capacity to be used effectively. Often the countries with inadequate official statistics also have poor big data coverage. Even when big data are available, their integration into monitoring arrangements and subsequent analysis presents important ethical issues (e.g. privacy protection, data ownership) and technical challenges (e.g. due to their unstructured and often subjective nature), which researchers and policy-makers ought to be aware of.

### *Political and financial incentives*

Do governments really want accurate data and SDG indicators? Speakers throughout the day acknowledged that monitoring can create both positive and negative incentives for effective measurement, target setting, and reporting. On the one hand, speakers noted that monitoring the MDGs contributed to improvements in data, as in (Eastern) European economies in transition, and that cross-country comparison can generate positive peer pressure. On the other hand, speakers highlighted that the political costs of failing to meet a target can be substantial, which can also discourage reporting. Indeed, accurate and transparent measurement can uncover or confirm entrenched societal issues (at times despite significant investment allegedly directed at addressing such issues). Recognising and dealing with incentives is therefore crucial. One panellist suggested that emphasising and building capacity for the effective use of monitoring and evaluation as a tool for learning (as opposed to sanction), could potentially mitigate some of the negative incentives involved in monitoring.

At the sub-national level, discussions on SDG 11 (sustainable cities) pointed to the interest in and the uptake of monitoring functions at the municipal and city level. As for the business

community, one speaker noted that reporting over and above mere financial data can foster a more comprehensive valuation of companies and reward those with strong environmental and social performance, as long as incentives are provided by investors (and/or regulators). The business sector has diverse experience in the regular measuring and monitoring of social and environmental performance, which can be developed further and tapped into within the SDG framework.

#### *Trade-offs between conflicting interests and objectives*

Measuring and monitoring policy interactions across sectors can strengthen the implementation of Agenda 2030 by drawing attention to trade-offs and synergies, improving decision making, and thus enhancing policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD). Trade-offs are neither static nor restricted to national borders: policy decisions to advance toward one SDG can have both positive and negative side effects across goals, countries, and generations. For example, while there is scope for improving access to financial services in developing countries, increased access to credit without adequate oversight and regulation also raises the risk of financial instability. Similarly, improving agricultural productivity is important for structural transformation in developing countries, but energy and water subsidies can have harmful environmental impacts that may, in turn, weaken agricultural productivity. The live demonstration of the Millennium Institute's iSDG model, an interactive simulation tool, helped illustrate such dilemmas. It is designed to help national policy-makers understand the complex relationships underlying SDG-related investment decisions and to evaluate trade-offs between different policy combinations. The OECD's PCSD Framework is a self-assessment tool also intended to help governments in crafting mutually reinforcing policies to achieve the SDGs and to support progress toward SDG target 17.14 (policy coherence for sustainable development).

The importance of seeking synergies extends beyond individual policy choices to the alignment of agendas. The global development agenda, it was noted, exists alongside national and regional goals, requiring governments to align or adapt priorities and monitoring arrangements in order to move forward on different fronts. African countries, for instance, need to coordinate implementation and monitoring of the SDGs with Africa 2063, the continent's own long-term development agenda. Yet, various factors can interfere with the way national and sub-national governments prioritise the achievement of diverse goals. In one example, high commodity prices during the implementation period of the MDGs allowed a resource-dependent developing country to reach many of the targets in terms of poverty reduction without emphasising the MDGs at a domestic political level. Low commodity prices may put at risk some of these achievements.

#### *Multi-stakeholder engagement and coordination*

Implementing the SDGs requires engagement from stakeholders at all levels of governance and across sectors. The conference highlighted the roles of international organisations, national governments (and, crucially, national statistical offices), sub-national governments, the private sector, and civil society in monitoring progress toward the SDGs. The necessary engagement of so many actors demands substantial coordination, but also raises the risk of coordination failure. A lack of coordination can lead, not least, to conflicting policies and sub-optimal budget allocations. Moreover, when multiple actors jockey to ensure their interests are represented in monitoring arrangements, the result is a proliferation of indicators which is costly and undermines priority-setting.

Coordination was called for 1) at the global level to ensure that international organisations align their efforts to help (developing) countries develop indicators, collect data, track progress, and build needed capacity; 2) at the national level to increase policy synergies across sectors and achieve an integrated approach to tackling the goals, which are often interlinked; and 3) between levels of government to support sub-national implementation of the SDGs, monitor context-specific progress, and strengthen data collection capacity at the sub-national level. It was noted that such coordination needs are not new and there is no indication from previous experience that coordination will spontaneously increase for Agenda 2030. Speakers called for political resolve, adequate resources and a mix of restraint and innovation to limit a costly and unproductive proliferation of indicators.

**- CONFERENCE PROGRAMME-**

**The Graduate Institute | Maison de la Paix, Geneva  
9 June 2016**

**WELCOME**

Gilles Carbonnier, Director of Studies, The Graduate Institute (IHEID); Editor-in-Chief, *International Development Policy*  
Hans Herren, President and CEO, Millennium Institute

**OPENING ADDRESS**

Jean-Louis Arcand, Director, Centre for Finance and Development and Professor of Economics, IHEID

**SESSION 1: MULTI-LEVEL/MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MONITORING**

Moderator: Cecilia Cannon, Coordinator, Programme for the Study of International Governance, IHEID

- *The Global Monitoring Framework and its application to Switzerland*  
Michael Gerber, Ambassador, Special Envoy for Global Sustainable Development, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
- *Lessons from monitoring the MDGs and their application in the current context*  
José Palacin, Senior Economic Affairs Officer, UN Economic Commission for Europe
- *Monitoring SDGs at the national and sub-national levels in Peru*  
Carlos Casas, Professor of Economics, Universidad del Pacifico
- *The role of business and lessons from monitoring ESG performance*  
James Gomme, Manager, Social impact cluster, World Business Council for Sustainable Development

**SESSION 2: A HOLISTIC VIEW OF COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS**

Moderator: Gilles Carbonnier

- *Macroeconomic policy options for SDG implementation and trade-offs*  
Stefania Fabrizio, Deputy Unit Chief of the Developing Markets Strategy Unit, Strategy, Policy and Review Department, IMF
- *Modelling policy synergies towards comprehensive and coherent SDG strategies*  
Matteo Pedercini, Director of Modelling and Capacity Development, Millennium Institute
- *Tracking progress in policy coherence for sustainable development*  
Carina Lindberg, Policy Analyst, Office of the Secretary-General, OECD
- *Monitoring implementation in Africa*  
Bartholomew Armah, Chief, Renewal of Planning Section, UN Economic Commission for Africa

**SESSION 3: MONITORING ACROSS SECTORS**

Moderator: Hans Herren

- *SDG1: Monitoring to ensure no one is left behind*  
Claire Melamed, Managing Director, Overseas Development Institute
- *SDG 16: From monitoring arms flows and homicides to progress on SDG16*  
Luigi De Martino, Operations Coordinator, Small Arms Survey
- *SDG 11: Implementing and monitoring the indicators at the city level*  
Helen Arfvidsson, Lead Researcher, Mistra Urban Futures
- *The role of civil society in monitoring the SDGs*  
Ricardo Fuentes-Nieva, Executive Director, Oxfam Mexico

**SESSION 4: BIGGER AND BETTER: "BIG DATA" AS A MAGIC BULLET?**

Moderator: Barbara Becker, Director for Global Transformation Affairs, ETH Zurich

- *What is the state of statistics and statistical capacity? What role for big data?*  
Johannes Jütting, Manager, The Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (PARIS21)
- *Use of satellite imagery in the service of Agenda 2030*  
Giovanni Rum, Work Program Coordinator and AfriGEOSS Support, Group on Earth Observations
- *Promises and pitfalls of big data approaches*  
Karsten Donnay, Postdoctoral Researcher, International Relations & Political Science, IHEID