Principles for Framing Sustainable Development Goals, Targets, and Indicators

Issue Brief

Prepared by the SDSN Secretariat

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This brief note summarizes suggestions for framing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as their Targets and Indicators. These principles are derived from two reports prepared by the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN): The *Action Agenda for Sustainable Development* and *Draft Indicators for Sustainable Development Goals*. In these reports the SDSN proposes an integrated framework of 10 goals, 30 targets, and 100 indicators, taking into account as comprehensively as possible the set of principles described below. The SDSN is committed to supporting the various processes underway to design and adopt the SDGs by 2015.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The SDGs will be complementary to the tools of international law, such as legally binding global treaties and conventions, by providing a shared normative framework that fosters collaboration across countries, mobilizes all stakeholders, and inspires action. Indeed, as has been demonstrated by the MDGs, well-crafted goals will:

- **Unite the global community and inspire coherent public and private action at local, national, regional, and global levels.** Sustainable development must be pursued at all levels of government (local, national, regional) and by public and private stakeholders, including business, civil society, academia, and research. Well-crafted, outcome-focused goals will foster a unity of purpose across public and private actors. Such goals can be applied at local, national, and regional scales, and will shift the focus of debate from "what?" to "how?"

- **Help guide the public's understanding of complex sustainable development challenges, including neglected ones.** Just like the MDGs familiarized decision makers with maternal mortality and other development challenges, the SDGs will lay out an agreed list of priority challenges, which will educate heads of government, mayors, business leaders, scientists, and other stakeholders about the complex issues that must be addressed in combination. Children everywhere should learn the SDGs to help them understand the challenges that they will confront in adolescence and adulthood.

- **Promote integrated thinking and put to rest the futile debates that pit one dimension of sustainable development against another.** The challenges addressed by the SDGs are inherently integrated, so sustainable development will require that the goals be pursued in

combination, rather than individually or one at a time. As a result, SDGs cannot be ordered by priority. All are equally important and work in harmony with the others.

- **Support long-term approaches towards sustainable development.** The goals, targets and indicators will allow public and private actors to chart out long-term pathways to sustainable development, which can be shielded from day-to-day politics, short electoral cycles, and short-term business imperatives.

- **Define responsibilities and foster accountability.** The SDGs will also mobilize governments, businesses, civil society, and the international system to strengthen measurement and monitoring for sustainable development. In particular, the goals will empower civil society to ask governments and the private sector how they work towards every one of the new goals. The new set of goals for sustainable development must also be bolstered by significant improvements in local, national, and global data collection and processing, using new tools (GIS, remote sensing, social networking, etc.) as well as existing ones.

- **Inspire active problem solving by all sectors of society.** Just like the MDGs have spurred problem solving, particularly in health and agriculture, the post-2015 goals can promote active problem solving by governments, the private sector, and civil society on the challenges of ending poverty, promoting economic growth, strengthening social inclusion and trust, maintaining environmental sustainability, and improving governance.

SETTING GOALS, TARGETS, AND INDICATORS

The post-2015 goals should highlight priorities for which a global effort and global solidarity adds value. The post-2015 goals, targets, and indicators will not cover every sustainable development issue. The targets will set out operational objectives that will be quantified to the maximum extent possible. Indicators in turn provide a set of variables to measure progress at local, national, regional, and global scales. Below we describe criteria for setting goals, targets, and indicators.

THE GOALS

We concur wholeheartedly with the statement in the Rio+20 outcome document that the post-2015 goals should be:

> "…action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities." [1]

Based on this decision and the experience from the MDGs, we suggest 10 principles for the post-2015 goals:

1. **One set of ambitious but achievable goals that will stand the test of time:** The new set of goals must be forward-looking to address the full range of challenges the world will face over the next decades – not only the ones it faced over previous decades. In 2030 the children of today should applaud the goals for being relevant, bold, ambitious, and inspirational!

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[1] United Nations (2012). *The Future We Want, Our Common Vision*. Outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference.(A/CONF.216/L.1), paragraph 247.

2. **Universal application:** As agreed at Rio+20, the post-2015 goals should challenge and inspire all countries to act, including the high-income countries and emerging economies. This does not mean that every goal must be a "stretch goal" for every country. Many high-income countries will have met the economic goals, but not the social and environmental goals. Poor countries that cannot meet the goals out of their own domestic resources should receive international financial support to do so.

3. **Set normative standards:** The SDGs are a critical operational tool for governments and other stakeholders, but they must also set clear normative standards around which international cooperation for sustainable development is to be organized. The SDSN proposes to anchor the fight against extreme poverty as a global norm together with a right to development for all countries that respects environmental constraints (planetary boundaries).

4. **Small number of concise goals:** Like the eight MDGs, the post-2015 goals should be few in numbers and easy to learn. We believe that there should be no more than ten concise goals and thirty targets. A good test of conciseness is whether the goals fit easily on the back of a business card.

5. **Motivational and easily understandable:** The goals must be worded so that they mobilize key communities of stakeholders and the general public. Just like a health goal is needed to mobilize the health community, a goal on cities is needed to mobilize mayors and local authorities. Likewise, broad issues like gender equality cannot simply be "mainstreamed" into goals and targets. To mobilize the respective communities, gender equality should be referenced in a goal for all to see. To mobilize the public, the goals need to employ direct and simple language that avoids jargon, "negotiators' speak", or excessive scientific precision. For example, the term "cities" is not uniformly defined across the world, but it is well understood by all stakeholders and preferable to more lengthy but precise alternatives. Yet, in some places the SDGs may need to include scientific concepts like ecosystems to educate decision makers and the general public.

6. **Operational and applicable to all stakeholders:** The goals should be outcome-focused and framed in such a way that they can be defined and applied in every country, and ideally at sub-national levels as well (e.g. at state- or city-level). Businesses and civil society organizations should be called upon to share responsibility with governments in achieving the goals. Likewise, giving the poor a voice will be a critical part of operationalizing sustainable development. Any process for implementing the sustainable development challenges will need to ensure the participation and voice of all people, particularly the poor, in decision-making.

7. **Integrated or "systems-based" goals:** Actions to achieve economic, social, and environmental sustainability are interdependent, and the goals should emphasize the need for integrated approaches that tackle synergies and trade-offs. In many areas systems approaches are needed to devise sustainable strategies. For example, sustainable food production will require agronomic interventions to boost yields, investments in rural infrastructure, action to curb land conversion for agricultural products, greater efficiency in water use, and many other actions. Similarly complex challenges are urban development, biodiversity protection, or decarbonizing energy systems. Carefully crafted goals can promote system-wide approaches to these complex challenges. Examples are the SDSN draft goals 6 (rural prosperity), 7 (cities), 8 (climate change), and 9 (ecosystem management).

8. **Based on international consensus:** Importantly, the SDGs cannot resolve issues around which no international consensus exists. For example, the goals cannot include quantitative country-level targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions until parties to the UNFCCC have reached such an agreement. Likewise, they cannot resolve the impasse in completing the

Doha Development round. However, this lack of consensus on quantitative country-level targets cannot mean that the goals should not address climate change or trade, for both are critical to sustainable development. In such instances, the goals can take up existing international agreements, such as the 2°C target and means of implementation endorsed by the COP in Cancun, even if such a goal does not translate easily to the country level. They can then be updated once agreement has been reached on country-level targets (see next point). Similarly, we propose a broad target on the need for consistency of the international rules on trade with achieving the SDGs.

9. **Dynamic goals:** The MDGs were expanded after their initial adoption (e.g. to include targets on sanitation and reproductive health). The post-2015 goals should be similarly dynamic to incorporate new and more ambitious international agreements (e.g. on climate change) and to account for new scientific evidence and technological breakthroughs. Such a periodic updating of the post-2015 goals could be part of 5-year review summits.

10. **High-quality and consistent measurement:** The MDGs have suffered from a massive time lag in reporting and patchy data. The post-2015 goals should be based on easy-to-measure indicators and should require annual reporting on progress. Where possible, indicators should be obtained from integrated data systems, such as systems of national accounts and system of environmental-economic accounts, in order to analyze synergies and trade-offs using international statistical standards.

The SDGs need to be easy to understand and operational. They should help countries, businesses, the research community, and civil society address the sustainable development priorities, which in turn requires a pragmatic approach to designing the goals and targets. Some proposed goals are thematic and focus on outcomes (e.g. health and education). Other proposed goals are place-based to deal with the need for integration across a broad range of dimensions (e.g. the urban goal) and others are issue-based (e.g. the health and education goals). Finally, some goals highlight crosscutting issues (e.g. gender equality, human rights, water resources management) that affect every goal but require high-level commitment, which can be fostered by a dedicated goal.

THE TARGETS

In comparison to the goals, targets need to be more specific and should include – where possible – quantitative measures. Targets should also be few in numbers (we propose no more than 30, i.e. three per goal), but their wording can be longer and perhaps more technical. Targets do not need to pass the "back of a business card" test.

Targets need to speak to all relevant stakeholders, including sub-national governments, business, and civil society. For this reason the targets proposed by the SDSN do not refer explicitly to stakeholders (e.g. government, civil society, or business) or to countries.

Targets should also be consistent with existing thematic and sectoral target frameworks, such as the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, the Hyogo Framework for Action on disaster risk reduction, or targets adopted by the World Health Assembly. Yet, since the number of existing intergovernmental targets is vast, the SDGs cannot encompass all of them.[2] For this reason a careful balance needs to be struck to ensure consistency with available target frameworks without replicating them fully.

In general, targets should be "SMART": specific, measurable, attainable (though some will be "stretch" goals that can be attained only with considerable effort), relevant (to all dimensions of sustainable

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[2] For example, a UNEP compilation of internationally agreed environmental goal and objectives covers over 100 pages of text.

development), and time bound to 2030 or earlier. It is important that every target can be measured at the national or local level, although not every target can be defined globally in a meaningful way, for three distinct reasons:

    i.   The starting points may differ too much across countries for a single meaningful quantitative standard at the global level;

    ii.   Some targets need to be adapted and quantified locally since the underlying issues are highly site-specific, or the targets may be relevant only in subsets of countries (e.g. targets referring to specific ecosystems like rainforests, or location-dependent diseases like neglected tropical diseases);

    iii.   For some targets no global consensus exists today, and these still need to be negotiated, as is the case with greenhouse gas emission reduction targets. In the meantime, countries should establish their own plans and targets.

It may therefore be necessary to focus some targets on broad principles and ask countries/regions to adopt their own context-appropriate quantitative targets. While quantitative targets are generally preferable, non-quantitative targets can play an important normative role and spur international action towards reaching an international consensus on quantitative metrics.

Where possible, targets should focus on outcomes, such as ending extreme income poverty. Yet, the distinction between outcomes, outputs, and inputs needs to be handled pragmatically, and the design of goals and targets should be guided by approaches that are best suited to mobilize action and ensure accountability. For example, ensuring universal healthcare coverage or high-quality early childhood development (ECD) are important commitments for every government. Goals and targets that focus on these outputs will ensure operational focus and accountability. In some instances it also makes sense to target inputs. For example, official development assistance (ODA) is critical for ensuring many SDGs and needs to be mobilized in every high-income country. Mobilizing resources for sustainable development is difficult, so subsuming ODA as an implicit input into every target would make it harder for government leaders, citizens, and civil society organizations to argue for increased ODA. It would also weaken accountability for rich countries. Similar considerations apply to targets such as integrated reporting by governments and businesses on their contributions to the SDGs, or prices on greenhouse gas emissions.

Most post-2015 targets, including those proposed by the SDSN, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons, and the UN Global Compact, call for "universal access" (e.g. to infrastructure) or "zero" deprivation (e.g. extreme poverty, hunger). For each such target, the technical communities and member states will need to define the precise quantitative standard for their commitment to "universal access" or "zero" deprivation. We hope that in most cases these standards will indeed be 100 percent or 0 percent, respectively, but there may be areas where it is technically impossible to achieve 100 percent access or 0 percent deprivation. In such cases countries should aim to get as close as possible to 100 percent or 0 percent, respectively.

THE INDICATORS

The purpose of SDG indicators is twofold. First, an indicator should be a management tool, to help countries develop implementation and monitoring strategies for achieving the SDGs and to monitor progress. Second, an indicator is a report card, to measure progress towards achieving a target and ensure the accountability of governments to their citizens. Where possible, objective quantitative metrics are used, but subjective and perception-based indicators can also play an important role. Often, multiple indicators are used for each target.

While there have been great improvements in data gathering, the MDG indicators have not fully fulfilled their dual purpose because the data come with too great a time lag to be useful in management and accountability. Often the MDG indicators arrive with a lag of 3 or more years, which

is not useful for real-time management. Data from national statistical systems and household surveys is often spotty and of poor quality.

International agencies rely in part on primary data produced by the statistical system of each country. Involvement and cooperation between international agencies and National Statistical Offices (NSOs) was also missed by the MDG process, and must be strengthened for the SDGs. This will require:

- Investing in national statistical systems, household surveys, remote sensing, and big data;
- Identifying areas where statistical standards are currently lacking and asking the statistical community to develop them in the future;
- Thinking in terms of the measurement instruments that each country should have in place (e.g. vital statistics, censuses, surveys, national accounts, administrative records, big data); and
- Specifying the quality requirements (e.g. frequency of data-collection, timeliness of releases, geographical detail, common set of variables available for cross-classification purposes).

As for the content, not the timing, of the indicators, we expand the criteria for the selection of indicators proposed in the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) handbook.[3] The SDG indicators:

1. Should provide relevant and robust measures of progress towards the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals;
2. Should be clear and straightforward to interpret and provide a basis for international comparison;
3. Should be broadly consistent with systems-based information, such as systems of national accounts and systems of environmental-economic accounting to ensure coherence of the indicators;
4. Should be based to the greatest extent possible on international standards, recommendations, and best practices;
5. Should be constructed from well-established data sources drawing on public and private data, be quantifiable, and be consistent to enable measurement over time;
6. Should allow, where relevant for disaggregation by (i) characteristics of the individual or household (e.g. gender, age, income, disability, religion, race, or ethnicity); (ii) economic activity[4]; and (iii) spatial disaggregation (e.g. by metropolitan areas, urban and rural, or districts);
7. Should have a designated lead international organization or organizations to be responsible for timely, high-quality national reporting of the indicator with due consideration to cost effectiveness and lean reporting processes.

Since a very large number of indicators would be required to comprehensively track progress towards all targets, we propose that countries consider two sets of indicators. A first set of "Core Indicators" would be applicable to every country and track the most essential dimensions of the targets. A second set of "Tier 2" indicators would track issues that may be applicable to some countries only, such as indicators for neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), or that may give countries greater scope in applying complex concepts, such as inequality, to their specific needs. The Tier 2 indicators represent a menu of options for countries to choose from, though the list proposed by the SDSN is far from exhaustive.

Core Indicators should be chosen with respect to:

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[3] United Nations, (2003), *Indicators for Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals: Definitions, Rationale, Concepts, and Sources*, New York, NY: United Nations.
[4] For example, water use should be accounted for by economic activity using International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities ISIC.

- MDG consistency: Where possible, Core Indicators should be consistent with available MDG indicators to ensure continuity in data collection and analysis.
- Universality: Many (though not all) Core Indicators should be equally applicable in developed and developing countries.
- Reliable data: To allow for comparisons across time and countries, data for Core Indicators should be reliable, widely available with good coverage, and have short lag times (ideally one year) for data collection and processing.
- Broad consensus: Core Indicators should be underpinned by a broad international consensus on their measurement.
- Disaggregation: Data for SDGs should be disaggregated, where relevant, by sex, urban/rural, and other qualifiers to improve the tracking of progress. Preference should therefore be given to indicators that lend themselves to such disaggregation It is recommended that the disaggregation by age follows established guidelines, for example, in the recommendations of the UN Statistics Division.[5]

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[5] Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System (Revision 3) recommends distinguishing amongst the following groups at a minimum: under one year (infants), 1-4 years (pre-school age) 5-14 years (school age), 15-49 years (childbearing age), 15-64 years (working ages) and 65 years and older (elderly persons).