

Global Governance Spotlight

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sef:

Indicators for Cities. Localizing the SDGs

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Rapid urbanization, climate change, environmental degradation, mass displacement, poverty and inequality present complex, intertwined challenges to our planet that demand a concerted global effort. In September 2016 a step forward was achieved when member countries of the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For the first time, with SDG 11, we have a specifically urban sustainable development goal (USDG) – to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. But all goals require strong local action, especially from cities where the bulk of the world population lives and produces wastes and greenhouse gas emissions.

But what does this mean in practice for cities? How can global goals be localized – adopted, used and achieved in practical ways at the local level to improve urban life? A critical, related question is how can progress be tracked and data collected? How useful are the indicators that are being developed and discussed at a global level when data at the city scale remains scarce in many parts of the world? Can the “data revolution” help? What can cities expect from this SDG process?

Data and indicators – a key focus

Monitoring and review for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs’ predecessors, did not

begin until five years after the goals were adopted. Even then, data often lagged by three or more years. Available data sources and MDG monitoring were of overall poor quality. Little disaggregation was done, and problematic assumptions were often made along with inadequate attention to ecological dimensions of human survival. Cities were also absent as actors. Overall, lack of accountability made it hard to know the true impact of the MDG Framework and undermined its effectiveness.

To avoid the pitfalls of the MDG process, indicators and data are a prime focus of attention. The indicators are being developed collaboratively by an Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs). It is comprised of selected Member States with regional and international agencies as observers and the UN Statistical Commission as the Secretariat and focal point for the group. The IAEG-SDGs is supporting and reviewing SDG monitoring. Its mandate is to “work in an open, inclusive and transparent manner” and to invite civil society and the private sector “to contribute their expertise and experiences on indicators and innovative data compilation methods”. Currently, it has three working groups on 1) Geo-spatial information, 2) Inter-linkages of SDG Statistics to allow for Integrated Analyses in the Monitoring, and 3) Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX). SDMX is basically about deciding on a global standard for how SDG data and metadata (information on how the data was collected) will be reported and shared.

A global database for the SDGs

Currently, the UN Statistical Commission has set up a global database for the SDGs, and the IAEG-SDGs is engaging in meetings in different parts of the world with various actors on data and improving data collection methodologies. For each target there is an evolving indicator framework. Indicators are placed into three categories depending on how available data seems to be: Methodology and data available (tier 1); Methodology exists but data not widely available (tier 2); Methodology in development (tier 3). For tier 3 indicators, the IAEG-SDGs is actively engaging lead agencies, national statistical offices and data experts to develop workplans for these methodologies. They will be tested mostly by national statistical offices of member states.

In practice, then, for many indicators we do not have data or even a methodology to measure progress at this point. And some of the methodologies under development will most likely be contested. This is especially a problem at the urban scale; most governments tend to collect statistics at a national level and not always in a way that can be easily disaggregated or interpreted at the city level. Further, it appears that cities are not active participants in developing the methodologies for these indicators. How cities will engage with the SDG framework and measure progress under these conditions is an outstanding challenge. A danger exists that, like for the MDGs, we will also delay in gathering needed data especially if cities are not involved more actively.

The need to engage cities

Some cities and their global networks such as ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental

Initiatives), the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and the C40 (Cities Climate Leadership Group) are involved in the SDG process. More recently, these groups along with the UN launched the Compact of Mayors as a common platform to “capture the impact of cities’ collective actions through standardized measurement of emissions and climate risk, and consistent, public reporting of their efforts”. The vast majority of cities, however, are not directly engaged in these networks, and they will need briefings and support to situate themselves in relation to the new targets and indicators. Given the inequality of preparation between cities, effort will be needed to find mechanisms to help many cities engage and find ways to harness opportunities that this new framework and the networking activities around it might offer. In this, outreach by national governments, network organisations and inter-city meetings will be important. Overall, given the centrality of cities in achieving the SDGs and the need for data at the city level to monitor progress on the urban SDG, cities should now expect more resources and support from national governments and global partnerships.

The challenge of localizing indicators

A number of challenges exist in relation to stepping these global goals down to the local level and in terms of the practical utility of the SDG framework. First, many cities have their pre-existing plans, policies and programs with their own indicators. For those cities localization becomes an issue of reconciliation and integration or simple validation. For example, the current plan OneNYC details New York City’s long-term sustainable development strategy centered on its own visions, goals, initiatives and indicators. The plan was negotiated through a multi-stakeholder process within more than 70 public agencies all of which occurred prior to the urban SDG. Many of

Sample Targets and Current Indicators by the USDG Campaign

Target 11.6

By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management

- **Indicator 11.6.1** Proportion of urban solid waste regularly collected and with adequate final discharge out of total urban solid waste generated by cities
- **Indicator 11.6.2** Annual mean levels of fine particulate matter (e.g. PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀) in cities (population weighted)

Target 11.7

By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities

- **Indicator 11.7.1*** Average share of the built-up area of cities that is open space for public use for all, by sex, age and persons with disabilities
- **Indicator 11.7.2*** Proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment, by sex, age, disability status and place of occurrence, in the previous 12 months

NYC's goals and targets mesh well with the USDG and even surpass the new global goal and targets. This may make it easier to extract what is needed to measure the USDG.

Secondly, indicators will have to be adapted at a local level and ultimately be useful to planning, policy and implementation of projects. Proponents of the USDG argue that the indicators need to be SMART (specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time-specific). A study by Mistra Urban Futures tested a set of proposed USDG indicators in five very diverse "secondary" or "intermediary" cities (Bangalore, Cape Town, Gothenburg, Greater Manchester and Kisumu) (Simon et al. 2015). The study found that all of the cities struggled to use some of the indicators and develop some of the capacities needed at a local level to track these indicators. The Bangalore and Kisumu teams in the study also noted the reluctance to share data among local and national levels of government. The Manchester team suggested that "linking data with analysis and implementational capacity is critical" but in practice hard to do given the complex stakeholder politics (Simon et al. 2015). Overall, a gap existed between international standards, global comparability and local realities.

Poor data availability

A number of factors work against many cities obtaining high quality data needed for the SDG framework. In many cities, the overall problem of poor data availability is acute, especially in smaller and often poorer cities and towns across the globe. In many cities, capacities to collect data and use new technologies for monitoring progress are weak, and cities rely on national government statistical agencies or incomplete local data gathering. The Mistra Urban Futures study found it was difficult to track progress on an annual basis, because many cities rely on National Statistical Offices that collect data approximately every decade or half decade. Also, the boundaries for these national household surveys fall along administrative boundaries. These do not always match the urban areas to be measured (Simon et al. 2015). In some places high levels of informality also mean that important processes and dynamics are missing from household surveys that form the basis of national statistics. Finally, in some cases, data does exist and is being created in the context of projects or in the private sector, but is inaccessible because scarce data are a valuable resource and often commoditized and embedded in power dynamics. Expanding a culture of open data and sharing along with laws and policies that encourage openness and create proper privacy protections will be central to the SDG monitoring process. Currently, this is missing in many places.

The "data revolution"

To address this issue, national and regional governments will need to support partnerships with cities to improve their joint capabilities of collecting often new kinds of data at the urban scale. This involves coordination and cooperation that at times can be challenging. Increasingly, the "data revolution" is being seen as one way to address data collection gaps. Harnessing the "data revolution" could be a way to support improved national statistical capabilities, supplement traditional data collection and also help cities in their data collection capacities.

Big data, the "data revolution" and the USDG

The "data revolution" refers to the dramatic rise in data created from technologies such as cellphones and low cost sensors, which often include geo-location capabilities. These technologies produce very "big data" sets, which can be mined for trends and patterns using sophisticated analytical techniques. Such technologies can enable citizen surveys and feedback and can help produce smaller data sets e.g. on critical urban infrastructures. Everyone with a cellphone is contributing to the vast amount of data produced by calls. New low cost air and water pollution sensors can also help gather critical data but require careful analysis and implementation. The hope is that "the data revolution" will allow us to get the information we need to track progress in a way that is cheaper and timelier than traditional methods such as household surveys.

However, "smart city" efforts are also very political with many big companies trying to sell their tools to cities without necessarily supporting the badly needed local capabilities to collect and interpret data. For example, anonymized cellphone data help us see how people move within the city and how close they are to transit routes. Such data was made available by Orange in Cote d'Ivoire and was used to improve public transport routing. But this openness in sharing is rare because of the proprietary nature of the data and legitimate privacy concerns. Thus, the "data revolution" is not a silver bullet. Moreover, to be able to engage in this more bottom-up way, in many cases, requires national and global support for stronger city institutions with knowledge of technology and data analytics along with investment in local universities and technology "eco-systems" in these cities.

Policy recommendations

- Cities should not replace strong local targets and indicators that are context specific and come out of local consultative practices. However, a useful exercise is to compare existing plans, goals and indicators to the SDG framework. SDG action plans built upon existing processes and efforts might be useful to develop, especially as cities engage in partnerships and networks and advocate for greater support. A comparison with the SDG framework will also help to identify gaps and other helpful efforts and programs. Overall, the SDG framework should be explored as a tool for cities to engage in more public discussion over priorities and improvements and can enhance advocacy for stronger support for local efforts including their bargaining with regional and central governments.
- Cities should ask for greater inclusion in the development of indicator methodologies, which is occurring through their national statistical offices. They should leverage the SDG process as an opportunity to increase their local data collection capacities, engaging local universities and technology companies in the process. Data for planning services and measuring progress including and beyond the SDG goals will be key in all cities. The SDG framework with the USDG provides an opportunity to push for greater support for expanding city data capabilities and monitoring more generally. However, cities need to approach the “data revolution” and “smart city industry” carefully and with an eye to strengthening city institutions and local partnerships and encouraging a local technology ecosystem tailored to local data needs.
- While protecting privacy concerns, critical data and metadata must be opened and shared for cities to be able to benefit from data through external research and entrepreneurship. For example, open air quality data or urban transport data can lead to improved information systems for citizens including through app development. Further, for monitoring of progress to be trusted by wider segments of the population and global actors open data is a key asset. Finally, open data allows for

higher quality research into improved interventions. Thus cities and their national governments benefit by having open data and sharing policies along with adequate privacy protections.

- Cities should join strong national, regional and global networks of cooperation and advocacy to strengthen representation within conversations about the SDGs including meetings on indicators and data by the IAEG-SDGs.

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Further Reading

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UCLG: The Sustainable Development Goals: What Local Governments Need To Know, https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/the_sdgs_what_localgov_need_to_know_o.pdf.

USDG: Indicator Site of the UN Statistical Commission, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/>.

USDN: Getting Started with the SDGs in Cities A Guide for Stakeholders, July 2016, <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/9.1.8.-Cities-SDG-Guide.pdf>.

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