



EVALSDGs INSIGHT #13: Evaluation Challenges with the SDGs – Redesigning Measurement Indicators and Evaluation Systems

PURPOSE: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development forms an ambitious initiative that provides a shared vision for the preservation of our planet, for prosperity, peace and for *leaving no one behind*. The quality of the indicators used to measure the various goals and the quality of the data gathering processes leads to significant hurdles for proper monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This INSIGHT suggests that fresh thinking is needed to address the myriad challenges facing evaluators and the Agenda in general.

THE ISSUE: There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 169 targets, and 231 indicators in the 2030 Agenda. These 17 goals address a wide range of social, economic, environmental, and governance concerns. The goals are quite ambitious, and apply to all countries, regardless of their development level. In order to achieve the agreed-upon goals, a global effort is required. The SDG Agenda, as well as the programs and activities undertaken by diverse parties to accomplish the agenda, must be monitored and evaluated to ensure accountability and learning. Yet, the M&E process has several challenges, some of which are long-standing, some are related to the current epidemic, and others are more particular to the design of the SDGs, their targets, their indicators, and the corresponding number of initiatives and adjustments that are required. As a result, it is critical that evaluators working on monitoring and evaluating the SDG Agenda, as well as the policies and programs that support it, are aware of and equipped with the tools to address these issues.

MANAGING THE CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES ON M&E

Ensure Sustainable Funding: The Agenda requires vast financial resources, especially in light of the extraordinary economic, health, social, and climate related shocks which have occurred in recent times and have all been considerably exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the concentration of the world's wealth in the hands of a few powerful and influential actors, the Agenda risks achieving only limited successes. A fundamental philosophical mind-set change will therefore be needed so that these actors can buy-in and commit to the Agenda's vision of leaving no one behind. Moreover, the success of the Agenda cannot be known or properly measured if there is no sustainable funding for M&E initiatives related to policies, programs, and projects associated with the goals of the Agenda.

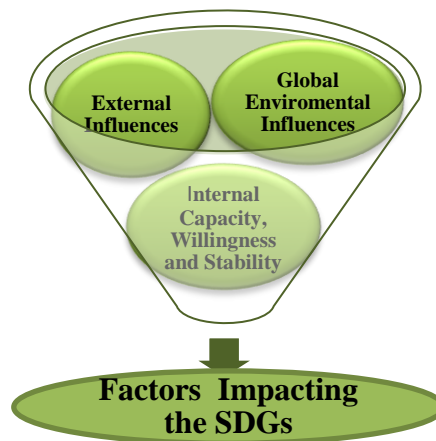
Improve the Credibility, Quality, and Funding of National Statistical Systems: Evaluations of the SDGs or projects, programs, and policies to support the achievement of all or some of the SDGs are weakened by the limited levels of credibility and quality of the national statistical systems. This has implications for the quality of decision making and policy design. Moreover, the limited culture of M&E in many parts of the world does not allow for comprehensive measurement of progress within this Agenda. This is due to badly designed M&E and data gathering systems caused by limited investment in human, physical, and financial resources. More specifically, the Agenda's scope, especially as it relates to the volume of indicators that need to be reported against, will present a major challenge for many countries, especially those classified as the Global South since these countries in particular have limited budgets, M&E systems, and data-gathering systems. This issue needs to be urgently addressed since the Agenda requires that all SDGs be implemented simultaneously in order for the Agenda to be effective.

Improve the Design of SDG Targets and Indicators: The design of many targets and indicators fall short from meeting the quality standards of validity, reliability, sensitivity, simplicity, usefulness and affordability. For example, there are currently 12 indicators that measure more than one goal which raises questions regarding their sensitivity, validity, and scope (Persaud & Dagher, 2021). This leads to significant challenges for evaluators looking to properly assess results. Moreover, since the indicators are overwhelmingly quantitative, the lack of qualitative indicators weakens the comprehensiveness of the information and the understanding of the situation. Finally, the lack of resources along with the weaknesses of the design leads to a limited ability to gather and assess data that falls outside the purview of those required by the Agenda. As such, there is need for a redesign of the most problematic SDG targets and indicators that lack the aforementioned quality benchmarks, which are a necessary prerequisite for credible targets and indicators (Persaud & Dagher, 2021). If a redesign is not done, then evaluators will need to perform

additional work to find more appropriate data and measurements, which will create a further problem, namely, global and regional comparisons with the measurement of progress.

Allow the Space and Funding for Alternative Indicators and Targets: With the already limited financial resources that are available for M&E and the large number of indicators in the Agenda, there are limited resources available for using alternative indicators and targets that are more appropriate for understanding and properly assessing the situation in the country in question. Given this reality, evaluators need to address this deficiency by going beyond the information provided by the existing SDG indicators, finding alternative and more appropriate measures, and providing more accurate and comprehensive assessments even when confronted with constrained budgets. Such alternatives can be drawn from non-SDG-related research, providing the necessary quality data requirements are met. However, again, this will affect measurement of progress at the global level.

Account for Internal and External Factors Affecting the Achievement of the SDGs: No country is immune to events in their immediate environment and beyond. While we often focus on what occurs within a country's borders, the current level of global interconnectedness at the environmental, economic, political, security, migratory, and social levels forces evaluators to account for the multitude of factors that affect what happens within a country (see Persaud & Dagher, 2021, Figure 2.1). As such, evaluators need to account for the intended and unintended consequences and limitations associated with events emanating from outside and inside the country's borders when assessing results. This requires evaluators to have knowledge of research regarding spillover effects of external and internal events.



Source: Persaud, N., & Dagher, R. (2021). Figure 2.1, p. 44

KEY LESSONS

1. The establishment, funding, and ongoing development of M&E systems and organizations, such as National Statistical Offices, must be prioritized, particularly since extensive data is required to comprehend the pandemic's implications.
2. The most problematic targets and SDG indicators must be revised, leaving room for alternate indicators and targets. Given the current pandemic's negative consequences and the agenda's reversion to the 2015 baseline, a reassessment is both appropriate and required to address new and emerging obstacles and/or roadblocks that may obstruct the agenda's development and success.
3. The internal and external elements affecting the achievement of the goals, as well as the conceptual problems with the targets and indicators, must be acknowledged and addressed by evaluators.

References

Persaud, N., & Dagher, D. (2021). *The role of monitoring and evaluation in the UN 2030 SDGs Agenda*. Palgrave McMillian Publishing, Springer Nature.

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EVALSDGs is a global network formed to add value and learning to SDGs, made up of people with a shared interest in evaluation and sustainable development. EVALSDGs Guidance Group (GG) is an EVALSDGs sub-group focusing on strengthening capacity development for evaluation and the SDGs. The EVALSDGs 'Insights' are short, light and easy to digest notes presenting ideas and new information, and stimulate thinking to strengthen evaluation capacity.

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