Highlights From The Knowledge Session On Learning From Evaluating Progress and Addressing Challenges in Tracking The SDGs

On the first day of Evaluation Week 2020, IDEV partnered with the AfDB's statistics department to hold a knowledge session on how countries monitor and evaluate their progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This knowledge event's objective was to discuss the role of learning in advancing the delivery of the SDGs.

Two representatives from the Government of Uganda demonstrated how the country set up its systems and institutions that collect SDG indicators and evaluate progress. The focus was on how Uganda monitors and evaluates progress towards the SDGs through Voluntary National Reviews and other mechanisms, and how this serves as a basis for learning. Following a discussion on the presentations from Uganda, the AfDB statistics department showcased its Africa Information Highway and SDG tracking data portals. The session concluded with a reflection on data collection in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, presented by the SDG Advisor at the Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa.

The following excerpts of participants' interventions capture the flow of the session.

Presentation of Uganda's SDG monitoring

Pascal Byarugaba, Monitoring & Evaluation Specialist, SDG Secretariat Office of the Prime Minister, and **Margaret Kakande**, Head, Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit at Ministry of Finance, both from Uganda, presented how the country tracks its implementation of the SDGs and evaluates its progress. Following their presentations, two experts in the field, **Stefano D'Errico**, Head of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, International Institute for Environment and Development, and **Roza Mamuye Bora**, Senior Statistician, AfDB Statistics Department, reflected on the Uganda case study and provided insights on issues of data collection and what to do with the data, from their perspectives and experiences.

Pascal Byarugaba:

A highlight of what the government of Uganda has been doing regarding monitoring and reporting of the SDGs.

To contextualize and map out the SDGs, Uganda set up its coordination framework in 2016 and allocated relevant national institutions to each SDG. Out of the 232 established SDG indicators, 201 were applicable to the Ugandan context.

With the AfDB and the United Nations Statistics Division's help, we set up a portal housing all indicators of the SDGs. To populate the portal, a matrix was set up that shows which indicator needs what kind of data and who is responsible for producing this data. As a result, in 2020, Uganda presented its second Voluntary National Review and reported data for 92 indicators.

SDG indicators should be localized. One often doesn't see district or regional averages. We mapped out which indicators are relevant at the local level to ensure that districts and local government entities can track these. We hope to roll this out in early 2021.

Margaret Kakande:

On the alignment of the national development strategy with the 2030 agenda

Leaving no one behind requires us to empower people through civic engagement and voice, enacting equity-focused SDG policies, interventions and budgets, as well as using data that is disaggregated and people-driven. Uganda has embraced all three levels.

First of all, we have much civic engagement in Uganda and we generate constructive debate on the SDGs. We have what we call Barazas, where government officials discuss within the community, issues such as sustainable development. These are public discussions where they hold officials to account.

The National Development Strategy and Plan is very well aligned with the 2030 Agenda. We looked at how the SDGs can be made part of the national development plan. Although we agreed that the best way forward was to implement all the SDGs, we realized that it is better to focus on a few accelerators. We agreed that the focus would be on the environment, governance, and industry. The current national development plan has been able to develop 18 programs that all speak to those three categories.

Also, we are looking at how we can improve the coordination and collaboration of institutions. We are looking to minimize wastage and duplication, and have a program for community mobilization and mindset change. ▶▶

▶ We are going through a public sector transformation, looking at how we can run the government more like a business and not just take things for granted. We are also focusing more on sequencing, ensuring that this complex SDG framework can be implemented, making sure intersectional linkages are optimized. We know that with the SDG agenda and leaving no one behind, we cannot have business as usual.

On the role of evaluation in SDG reviews in Uganda

There was a review in 2016 to assess Uganda's readiness to implement the SDGs, looking at policy frameworks, institutional capacity, budgetary operations and M&E practices, in other words, "what are the guts". When we had our second review completed in 2020, the evaluation role took on more importance. Several evaluations were among the 300 documents reviewed for the Voluntary National Review. We are very proud that we have been able to establish baseline indicators for those where we have data. This is important because if you don't have baselines, you cannot really talk about evaluation.

There are still challenges. We have some areas where we have no evaluation practice, such as poverty reduction, climate change, and infrastructure development. These take a lot of the government's investments.

Evaluation of the SDGs is critical for meaningful national reviews, but we need to have significant funding levels to connect evaluation studies and fit into these reviews. Effective integration of the SDGs into national policy, planning, budgeting, and M&E frameworks is one sure way to achieve the complex and integrated SDG objectives.

Roza Mamuye Bora :

Reflecting on the Uganda experience – principles of the global framework of SDG follow-up and review.

Looking at how the Ugandan experience fits into the global framework, the global follow-up and review framework has principles, among them the voluntary country national review process. These are the foundation for the regional as well as the global review processes. These frameworks also suggest that monitoring and evaluation processes, as well as indicators and targets, need to be tailored to the country context. The second principle I would like to highlight is an open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent review process for all. The same principle is followed for the global SDG monitoring framework. In addition to those frameworks and tools, the global agenda suggests mainstreaming the SDGs into national plans and strategies. This is what many countries have done, including Uganda. Noteworthy is that only half the countries have comparable data for 4 out of the 17 goals and there are country deficits. Also, with some data, there is a significant time lag.

In terms of Uganda, we can see that it is very much in line with the framework and the country has taken the appropriate steps in integrating the SDGs into its national plans.

Stefano D'Errico:

On Uganda's tracking of SDG indicators and the use of data at the national level

I was impressed by the level of effort made to set up the national statistics system in Uganda and fine-tune the system with the SDG indicators. I was particularly impressed to hear that there are now 201 SDG indicators.

A vast amount of data is being generated since the Agenda 2030 was signed in 2015. This can be credited as an achievement of the SDGs so far, producing data on sustainable development. I want to provoke a bit of discussion with the question: what are we going to do with all this data at the national level? ▶▶

▶ There is the risk that we will create a massive amount of fascinating and vital information, but then just use all of it for global aggregation, on whether we have achieved the target or not. I'm not sure that would be very useful.

Data collection is only helpful if used for decision-making at the national and local levels. We are only ten years away from our 2030 target and we have spent a lot of time developing this data, and it was a necessary exercise to map all national policies to the SDGs. But are we going to use this data? How will we do that? What is taken on board?

One of the significant challenges is to make sure we can derive some meaning from the data to understand what is progressing well and what is progressing less well. The complexity of the agenda can be very cumbersome, and we do not always understand in which area we need to make more progress.

On the use of data for the SDGs

The big question for our discussion today is then: how are we going to use this data? How can we make sense of it? At IIED, we have been producing resources on evaluation of the SDGs, and evaluation is a great tool to make sense of the data. However, the critical element is prioritization. There is a significant risk that, because we have too much data, what we are tempted to do is cherry-pick the most useful data to tell the story people want to hear and that fits into the agenda we have. The SDGs should be the opposite - we should understand all the data linkages and make decisions on that basis.

So we have two key questions. The first question is how can we use all this data for national planning and prioritizing urgent issues at the national and local levels? Priorities must be different for different contexts, realities, and countries. The second question is how do we use evaluation and statistics to make decisions and and choose good priorities to progress as fast as possible towards the SDGs? Since the inception of the SDGs, the role of a robust integrated and effective follow-up and review framework has been recognized as one of the SDGs' pillars and tracking its progress. This process in turn is a central building block of the evaluation process.

Presentation of the Africa Information Highway portal

In the second part of the knowledge event, **Momar Kouta**, Statistics Information Systems Officer, AfDB Statistics Department and **Rafik Mahjoubi**, also of the Statistics Department, showcased the Bank's network of live open data platforms called the Africa Information Open Highway, including the regional SDGs hub.

Rafik Mahjoubi:

On the Africa Information Highway:

The AfDB was requested by Heads of State to put in place a system for data dissemination. The objective of the open data portal by the Bank was to facilitate access to data and statistics to improve evidence-based decision-making. Simultaneously, we still wanted to harmonize data on a regional level to compare among countries. So all these indicators should be standard-driven. That is the spirit in which we produced the Africa Information Highway and introduced this portal-a network of systems across the continent that share the same standard.

It is the first time that this has happened on a continental scale. We have one platform with 54 portals for countries and 16 more for regional and sub-regional organizations. So that results in one platform with 70 data portals, all connected. Having this platform is important for the countries as ▶▶

well as our partners. We have a partnership with organizations such as IMF, IFAD, UNICEF, and UNSD and with countries such as Uganda for the reporting and dissemination of data. We have also been providing support in the form of workshops on the use of international standards and training so that countries can update and include data in the portal.

Momar Kouta:

On the Regional SDGs hub:

The Bank has also developed a portal to support our efforts in countries in attaining the SDGs. We have an SDG regional hub with the aim of disseminating global SDG data. We have also implemented a country-level SDG database portal and developed the portal to see the data per goal and all indicators by target. We plan to expand our technical support to RMCs in the coming years, including helping to automate data reporting to reduce the reporting burden. We will also assist countries in coordinating SDG data and provide support for modeling data using international standards.

COVID-19 and SDG data collection

The last part of the knowledge session featured Ambrose Rwaheru Aheisibwe, SDGs Advisor at the Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa. He reflected on the problems and possible solutions for data collection compounded by COVID-19.

Ambrose Rwaheru Aheisibwe:

On the effects of COVID-19 on Africa's progress towards the SDGs and monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs.

Figure 1: Effects that COVID-19 has on SDG indicators in Africa



Source: 2020 Africa SDG Index and Dashboards Report, SDGs Center for Africa and Sustainable Development Solutions Network

▶ Before COVID-19, the SDG situation in Africa was mixed and not a good one. We expect some SDGs to be affected more than others.

Crucially, meeting SDG reporting requirements will be a challenge for African countries in light of COVID-19. The traditional means of data collection are no longer possible. We need to build capacity when it comes to national statistical offices. Beyond that, we have also seen African countries facing financing constraints for data collection. We thus need to take advantage of the revolution in information and communication mechanisms. Geo-referenced data collected by mobile phone applications could be beneficial for this purpose—especially government locations, water points, or issues to do with climate change.

To meet this challenge, we will need to engage national statistics and planning offices to ensure we have comparable accurate and real-time data. The only way we can do that is to use the existing regional database systems, like the one presented here today and the monitoring and reporting system database developed by the SDG Center for Africa.

Conclusion:

As we continue to understand how and how well African countries are progressing towards the SDGs, the availability of accurate and relevant data will remain crucial, as well as the need to make proper use of the data we collect. The additional challenge of COVID-19 implies that innovative solutions for monitoring and evaluating the SDGs are needed. For possible solutions and relevant topics, read the edition of eVALUation Matters Magazine on "Preparing Evaluation for the future: Big Data, modern technologies, and shifts in global development priorities". eVALU