

## The Sustainable Development Goals, Development Effectiveness and Development Evaluation Criteria

*Compared to the MDGs, which constituted a coherent basis for development planning efforts and for promoting the principles of effective aid, the SDGs present new challenges. They reflect the evolving aid architecture characterized by the diversification of the development finance landscape as well more complex and sophisticated aid modalities, instruments and partnerships. The SDGs come with the opportunity to devise new – more inclusive, integrated, equitable and sustainable – approaches to development and to better apprehend the diversity of development paths in their context. Development practitioners, policy-makers and evaluation experts will have to revisit the way they design and manage development efforts. Adaptability, equity and equality, coherence, and resilience will need to be factored into traditional development evaluation criteria.*

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## The MDGs, the SDGs and the Effectiveness Agenda

**F**ew development practitioners would debate the view that the MDGs played a critical role in furthering the development effectiveness agenda that evolved during their implementation period (2000–2015). The various statements issued at the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and its successor Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation made numerous references to the need to accelerate the achievement of the MDGs. At the country level, and to a certain extent globally, the MDGs constituted a solid basis for operationalizing the principles of development effectiveness as described in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and Harmonization (2005) and later refined in the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011). Working modalities of ownership and alignment, results-orientation, accountability and transparency, coordination and harmonization were clearly advanced through the mobilization of aid efforts around the eight MDGs.

Indeed, while criticized for their excessive simplicity and focus, the MDGs had a number of undeniable virtues for development planners and policy-makers.

The MDGs were coherent. Reflecting a “basic needs approach” to development thinking, the MDGs constituted de facto a coherent development agenda that was

relevant to developing nations (poverty reduction, access to education and health services, eliminate diseases, promote gender equality, etc.).

The MDGs were focused and realistic. The limited number of (8) goals supported by well-defined (17) target indicators sounded ambitious but achievable, rather than purely aspirational. They also proved to be powerful communication tools.

The MDGs were effective for alignment and partnership. The goals and targets provided a sound basis for the alignment of donor interventions with national policies and programs; they played a crucial role in shaping aid policies and allocations, defining or re-defining partners’ priorities around multi-donor sector-wide approaches, and helping build or strengthen alliances as well as coordination modalities.

The MDGs were results-oriented. Importantly, the goals were resolutely oriented towards tangible development results and outcomes which facilitated sound monitoring and accountability mechanisms as well as costing. The targets were appealing because they were precise, measurable, and trackable.

## SDGs through the development effectiveness lens

How do the SDGs compare with their MDG predecessors from the lens of ►►

► development effectiveness? Can they play similar functions in shaping the aid architecture and the development finance landscape? The rapid answer is probably “No”. In contrast with the above picture, the SDGs come with a number of conceptual and practical implementation challenges.

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***“The SDGs are so encyclopedic that everything is top priority, which means nothing is a priority”***

*(Easterly, 2015 a)*

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■ First, unlike their predecessors, the SDGs aim to reflect a universal and broad agenda, applying to all countries and situations in a holistic manner. This global agenda consists of no less than 17 goals, 169 targets and a very large number of indicators, which reflect in part the extent of consultations and the inclusive approach that was adopted in setting the post 2015 agenda. They also recognize the evolving aid architecture and development finance landscape, characterized by the emergence of “non-traditional” donors, south-south or triangular cooperation actors, and the growing influence of businesses and philanthropies, all of them joining the aid industry with new business models and priorities. On the flip side, the targets of the 2030 agenda do not provide a clear sense of priority or selectivity; to many development professionals, they read like a mere wish list. Some nations may perceive a lack of relevance or sense of urgency.

Moreover, such a broad agenda will ineluctably raise the question of the dilution of development aid, perceived as a major constraint to effectiveness.

Aid flows are likely to be spread over a larger spectrum of sectors and themes, and donors may face limited opportunities for synergies.

■ Second, the SDGs are not grounded on a well-articulated development theory; they actually illustrate the diversity and often times divergent views of development thinking: basic needs; growth with equity; human rights and capabilities approaches; ecological and sustainable development and green growth; development through industrialization; etc. The positive side is that the SDGs definitely represent an inclusive agenda, integrating the perspectives and priorities of diverse stakeholders. At the same time, there are inextricable contradictions and inconsistencies across goals.

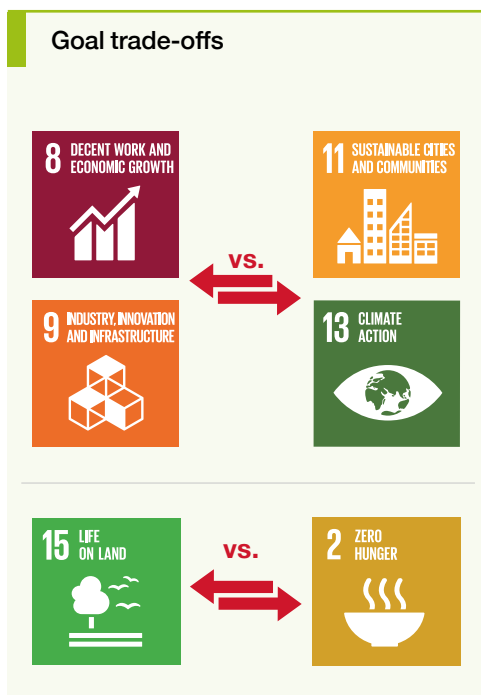
**Numerous trade-offs are not explicitly considered, the most obvious one concerning economic growth (goal 8) and industrialization (goal 9) vs climate change action (goal 13) and air quality and sustainable cities (goal 11). Similarly, biodiversity (goal 15) is likely to be endangered if forests are cut down to expand agricultural production for food security (goal 2).**

If there are competing and conflicting interests across the SDGs, there are also numerous synergies: addressing certain goals can help address others. Actions regarding climate change for instance, has co-benefits on health, environmental preservation and biodiversity. Poverty and vulnerability are rightly addressed in their multifaceted forms (income, delivery of social services, access to assets, human rights, etc.) through complementary and mutually reinforcing goals. ►



- ▶ Third, the SDGs are undoubtedly of an aspirational nature, as shown in their ambitious – and somewhat loosely defined – language: “peaceful and inclusive societies”; “safe and resilient cities”; “decent work for all”;

“healthy lives”, “sustainable production and consumption patterns” etc. There can be different standards as to what is considered decent, inclusive, peaceful, safe, sustainable, etc. and achieving such goals can only be a matter of appreciation. Other goals, while more precisely defined and obviously very laudable, appear unrealistic: “ending poverty in all its forms and dimensions”, “ending all discrimination against women and girls everywhere”, “achieve universal health coverage” or “correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions”. Many of the targets are also multidimensional. Target 1.4 for instance reads: *“By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including micro-finance”*. ▶





► ■ Fourth, the SDGs are not necessarily results-based, with means and ends often put at the same level in the formulation of targets and goals. For instance “Promote economic growth” as part of goal 8 or “Take action to combat climate change” under goal 13 are clearly not results. Formulations like “ensure mobilization of resources”, “create sound policy framework” “increase investments” or “adopt measures” are frequent across targets. They do not assign responsibilities either, except a collective one, and each government is free to set its own national targets. *“The SDGs continue a venerable UN tradition in which nobody is ever individually accountable for any one action but all the leaders, UN agencies, multilateral and bilateral aid agencies and numerous other private sector, nongovernmental and civil society actors are collectively responsible for all the outcomes”.* (Easterly, 2015 b)

■ Last, on a practical note and as a result of the above features, the SDGs strike us as being virtually impossible to cost and plan for. So far, rough forecasts have been made, but there has been no serious attempt at conducting any solid feasibility assessment of the SDGs (financial, institutional, political, etc.) either at the level of individual countries or globally. Some sector-level forecasts reveal astronomical figures. For instance, the World Health Organization estimates that the (67) low and middle-income countries would require new investments increasing over time from an initial US\$ 134 billion annually to \$371 billion by 2030 if they are to reach the health-related targets of the SDGs. Deficiencies in the indicators framework – such as the lack of baseline data, undefined targets, absence of clear definitions and standards for many indicators – also make costing and planning look

like impossible tasks. These obviously reduce the credibility and utility of the SDG for policy makers and can only be detrimental to coordinated implementation efforts. To quote William Easterly again, a fierce opponent of the MDG and SDG approaches alike, “the SDGs are about as likely to result in progress as beauty pageant contestants’ call for world peace”. (Easterly, 2015 b).

Yet, because of their seemingly impractical features described above, the SDG framework presents new opportunities and challenges for development planners and policy makers. The SDGs not only reflect the evolution of the new development finance landscape, they also rightly signal that the effectiveness agenda has moved away from a narrow and donor-centered concept of aid effectiveness to a more ambitious and holistic concept of devel-

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opment effectiveness. SDGs thus allow a variety of development models and paths which do not rely on, or overestimate the role of, official development assistance (ODA). The SDGs are more endogenous, country-focused and call for new sources of finance and partnerships across sectors and disciplines. ►

► The interlinked nature of the goals, while criticized, is the mere reflection of a complex reality. It can be seen as an opportunity to address development issues comprehensively and coherently both at the country level and globally. This brings into the debate the question of policy coherence and the need for maximizing synergies across policy actions while addressing potential conflicts and trade-offs. The issue of coherence is not

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new but it has received a growing attention, in part because of the potentially long term conflicting nature of the SDGs. At the global level, the SDG framework also explicitly mentions “policy and institutional coherence” as part of goal 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development).

Thanks to the SDGs, the concept of coherence has evolved into a more refined one of “*Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development*” (PCSD) defined as “*an approach and policy tool to integrate economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of domestic and international policy making*” (OECD, 2015). PCSD thus, goes beyond a “no harm” approach towards one that seek synergies between development cooperation and other policies while trying to correct existing incoherencies. This may sound ambitious but the EU has been moving in this direction through its security / development nexus approach (EU, 2016).

## **Development Evaluation in the 2030 agenda era: Revisiting the Criteria**

What are the consequences of the 2030 agenda for development practitioners and evaluators? How can they cope with such a broad and complex agenda? How useful are the traditional evaluation criteria and tools to assess performance with respect to the SDGs?

The SDGs, because of their diverse and inclusive nature, raise a number of issues regarding monitoring and evaluation. The deficiencies of the SDG indicator framework constitute a major impediment to any monitoring and evaluation effort, whatever evaluation criteria are being considered.

Numerous consultations took place throughout 2015 to define the list of indicators, leading to color-coding system that classifies indicators according to their availability and acceptability (agreement or not). There is a consensus that monitoring questions are complex and cannot be resolved in the short run. In March 2016, the UN Statistical Commission recognized that the development of a robust indicator framework was a process that will need to continue over time under the auspices of an Inter-Agency and Expert Group of SDGs. For a comprehensive discussion of the indicator framework, see “*Indicators and a Monitoring framework for the Sustainable Development Goals: Launching a data revolution for the SDGs*” (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015)

Another major issue is the ability of country and global systems to respond to the information needs required to effectively establish baselines and to track progress towards the SDGs. Data experts often share the view that the number of indicators should be limited because of the capacity challenges of national ►►

► statistical offices: a maximum of 100 global indicators seems to represent a practical limit. (ICLEI, 2015). For a number of indicators, definitions and standards have yet to be developed; for others, refinements are needed. Measurement issues occur at all levels, from inputs and resources to outputs and outcomes. A report by the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the International Social Science Council (ISSC) finds that of the 169 targets beneath the 17 goals, just 29% are well defined and based on the latest scientific evidence, while 54% need more work and 17% are weak or non-essential. (ICSU, 2015).

The “measurement apparatus” appears as necessary but not a sufficient condition to conduct proper evaluation of the SDGs through the commonly used criteria (IIED, 2016a). This necessary condition is clearly not met; there are more challenges that evaluators will face in their attempts to apply the traditional criteria of relevance, effectiveness and impact, efficiency, sustainability.

### The relevance criterion

The relevance criterion in evaluating the SDGs is clearly problematic; not because the SDGs are not relevant, but because they have been designed to suit all countries and donors alike. The SDGs are so broad and all-encompassing that relevance and alignment with any country and donor priorities is de facto. From the perspective of aid agencies, any intervention will correspond to the SDGs, irrespective of country settings, policies and priorities or beneficiary needs. Diluted aid flows over a large number of areas is, as already mentioned, a major risk of the SDG agenda. This can only weaken the applicability of the relevance criterion. As noted by Caroline Heider in her blog:

***“In practice, evaluators often use policies of governments, donors and aid agencies to assess whether an intervention is relevant in that context. More often than not, these policies are written in ways that can justify a whole slew of different activities. Hence meeting the bar of relevance is not all that hard”.***

*(C. Heider, 2017)*



The risk is that the SDGs will render the relevance criterion even less relevant to evaluation and learning. The relevance criterion also assumes that the needs of beneficiaries are homogeneous, aligned and well captured through government policies and programs. In practice, the relevance of development interventions for the direct beneficiaries or other groups of stakeholders is rarely considered by evaluators. The perception of relevance of a development intervention, program or policy largely differs between stakeholders: central vs local governments, public vs private partners, businesses vs trade unions, representatives of civil society or NGO vs government officials, etc. Evaluators come up against practical obstacles in integrating the diversity of needs, context and perspectives covered by the SDGs through their inclusive philosophy. How can these different perspectives be identified? What is their respective legitimacy? It possible to rank them by order of importance? If so, what criteria can be used? These are questions that evaluators of the 2030 agenda will need to address. ►





► Another complex matter is that relevance does not take into account fast changing contexts. In other words, solutions and lessons which are so dear to evaluators can only be seen as temporary and tentative. Evaluators often consider that if development problems and objectives are well defined at the outset of an intervention (during the design stage), then relevance can be ensured. In a development landscape where situations and policies are fast changing, relevance can no longer be considered as a question of good design and quality at entry. In the context of the SDGs, evaluators will increasingly have to consider the “continued relevance” of development efforts throughout their life cycles. Questions of flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to changing circumstances – rather than just relevance – will become critical in the SDG evaluation era. This is sometimes referred to as an “adaptive management” approach that *“involves exploring emerging and alternative ways to meet objectives targets, and using knowledge from monitoring and evaluation to develop new understanding and new ways of acting”* (IIED, 2016 b).

### Impact and effectiveness criteria

The impact and effectiveness criteria are often considered separately, but they are so difficult to differentiate in practice that many evaluators have proposed to merge them (see for instance C. Heider, 2017). Impact and effectiveness will be more difficult to assess in the context of the SDGs for two main reasons. The first one is that, many of the SDGs targets – unlike their MDG predecessors – are not formulated as development results. This is obviously a major obstacle since effectiveness is commonly defined as the ability of an intervention to reach the intended results, mostly at the outcome level. How will

we assess the effectiveness of “action to combat climate change” or the “mobilization of resources”?

The second reason is that the SDGs reflect complex realities rather than the simple theories of change which underpinned the MDGs. Development practitioners, and increasingly evaluators, acknowledge the limitations of linear models such as logical frameworks which oversimplify the cause – effect relationships. Interventions tend to have unintended and unanticipated effects (predictability issue), they can improve certain dimensions of well-being while deteriorating others (multidimensionality issue), their causality relationships – not to be confused with correlation – can be difficult to establish and assess (attribution issue), they can affect various groups differently (heterogeneity issue). The complex connections of the SDGs are difficult to apprehend using traditional evaluation models. Performance with respect to the SDGs is dependent on specific contexts and subject to various external factors that cannot be controlled. In response to these issues, some evaluators have called for a redefinition of the effectiveness criterion as well as changes in evaluation practices, increasingly drawing on systems thinking and complexity science (see for instance Michael Bamberger & al., 2016)

### The efficiency criterion

Efficiency, by its very definition – a measure of the extent to which inputs are well-used for an intended output or as the capability to produce a specific outcome with a minimum amount of expense – is linked to the effectiveness criteria and suffers from the same flaws. To summarize, even where input-based targets are actually achieved, no inference can be made as to whether the inputs ►

► have efficiently served the intended purpose or have constituted the best alternative to reach the desirable outcome. For example, it is possible to track the “proportion of domestically generated resources allocated by the government directly to poverty reduction programmes” (under SDG 1) but this will not answer the efficiency evaluation question.

Another issue related to efficiency is that commonly-used techniques such as cost-benefit analysis or economic rates of return which are well suited to the infrastructure sector or certain types of operations such as simple investment projects and revenue generating operations, are much less so to other sectors. Policy and budget support, technical assistance, guarantees, etc. or “soft” sectors (education, health, justice, etc.) entail more data constraints and complex qualitative issues. Economists have developed techniques and proxy methods for assessing the rates of return of social sector interventions, but these tend to be too costly and time-consuming to apply, especially at the level of individual operations. For many areas that form part of the SDG agenda, there is also very little experience to draw upon: how do we conduct a cost-benefit analysis of

interventions aimed at promoting say “access to justice” (target 16.3) or a “culture of peace and non-violence” (target 4.7) or “human rights”? With more complex and multidimensional operations, the practice of cost-benefit analysis has declined. At the World Bank, it is reported that only 25% of projects included calculations of economic rates of return in the 1990s against 70% in the 1970s. (Heider, 2017).

Current considerations of efficiency are challenged to take long term impact into account. The SDG agenda emphasizes the sustainable and inclusive dimensions of development, the costs and benefits of interventions in terms of equity and distributional effects, social and climate justice, as well as environmental preservation and ecological diversity. An intervention that is considered efficient at the time of its evaluation may, in terms of sustainability and inclusiveness, turn out to be highly inefficient a few years later because of its persistent devastating effects on natural resources.

### The sustainability criterion

The sustainability criterion, which requires assessing whether the benefits of an intervention are likely to extend beyond the period of implementation and financing flows, is by nature complex and multidimensional. It clearly extends beyond the environmental / ecological and financial dimensions (to which it is sometimes restricted) to encompass the institutional, political, economic, social and cultural aspects. It deals with issues of uncertainties and dynamics in the long run, compared to effectiveness which tends to focus on the delivery of outputs and outcomes during or immediately after the intervention. ►

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► In the SDG context, sustainability is increasingly associated with the more fashionable concept of resilience, which refers to the ability of a system to withstand and recover from shocks. While sustainability focusses on the ability to maintain an equilibrium in a certain context, resilience is mainly concerned with the ability to cope with stress and to adapt to changing environments, including unpredictable factors and catastrophes. Resilience is therefore a dynamic concept more suited to the SDGs. (Michael Bamberger & al., 2016).

Another issue with the sustainability criterion is that it fails to integrate the long-term policy coherence of the SDG framework. Evaluators can no longer solely focus on assessing aid policies and interventions; they also have to consider the impact of global and domestic policies, especially those from the OECD countries. Western World policies of agricultural subsidies, trade restrictions,

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financial flows, migration, etc. and the various ways they undermine development efforts, including ODA from these countries are also part of the picture. The question of policy coherence ►

► needs to become both a political commitment and an integral part of policy making and evaluation practices. The current approach which consists of assessing the impact of different policies on the effectiveness of aid is not sufficient.

**“What is needed is a more ambitious conceptualization of policy coherence for development which considers the interaction of all relevant policies in a given context, with a view to the achievement of overriding development objectives. This implies that policy coherence is best served when actors responsible for policymaking in various domains engage in a process of designing and implementing comprehensive policy frameworks with strategic objectives in mind”. (EU Directorate general for external policies, 2016).**

The challenge for evaluators – and of course for development practitioners

and policy makers – is to develop the ability to construct such integrated approaches to analyze the coherence of economic, environmental, social and institutional reforms.

## Conclusion

The synergies and also incoherencies that link the SDGs will make evaluation processes much more complex. This calls for a rethink of evaluation techniques, whereby simple linear models and cause-effects relationships have to be supplemented or at term superseded by systems approaches and complexity theories. At the same time, it calls for an overhaul of the traditional evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, impact, efficiency, and sustainability in favor of new ones that focus on considerations regarding equity and social justice, adaptability, well-being, resilience and coherence.




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