The Relevance of the SDGs for Inequality, Poverty and Technology

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IAP-SPEC Conference
Rio de Janeiro, March 28, 2019

Big picture and political economy

1) Why have global goals, anyway?
2) What are the SDGs? Why do we have them? Who do they serve? Who is accountable? What is the understanding of development that underpins them?
3) Considering how inequality, technology and poverty fit in
4) Conclusion and how to make the best of the SDGs

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1) Why have global goals?

Possible roles:

- Motivational
- Coordination
- Epistemic

- Can the SDGs play these roles?
- Are goals always of use?

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1) Why have global goals?

How should goals be pursued? **Flexibility**

- The need to plan and revise may be in tension with a target-centric perspective.
- The world and our knowledge of it may change over time.

1) Why have global goals?

How should goals be pursued? **Accountability**

- The question of how to determine whose actions can promote (or has promoted) a goal is a crucial one for those that believe goals can aid in accountability
- To enjoy legitimacy, global goals should presumably be seen to require something of all actors

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1) Why have global goals?

How should goals be pursued? **Coordination**

- Donor/recipient coordination (untying aid, working through country systems)
- Coordination across sectors (e.g. seeing connections between the goals)
- Coordination of global problems (e.g. climate change, financial crises)

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1) Why have global goals?

How should goals be pursued? **Assessment of success**

- Shortfall Assessment
  - Outcomes Attained vs. Outcomes Specified
- Progress Assessment
  - Outcomes Attained vs. Starting Points
- Counterfactual Assessment
  - Outcomes Attained vs. Counterfactuals

Now, let's consider the global goals that we have...

2) The SDGs

Why do we have them?

- It has been assumed the MDGs "worked", so in 2010 Ban Ki-moon as asked to start the process of creating follow-up goals.
- "…the MDGs helped to lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty…" Ban Ki-moon, 2015.
- If this is true, does it mean that the MDGs were a success?

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2) The SDGs

Why do we have them?

Did the MDGs lead to poverty reduction?

UN Photo/Tobin Jones

" The successes of the Millennium Development Goals agenda prove that global action works. It is the only path to ensure that the new development agenda leaves no one behind. "

Wu Hongbo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs

#MDGs #Action2015

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2) The SDGs

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– Poverty decreased, but did it have anything to do with the MDGs?

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Why do we have them?

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– Poverty decreased, but did it have anything to do with the MDGs?
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– China is responsible for a large proportion of that trend. Was poverty alleviation in China due to the MDGs?

UN Photo/Tobin Jones

66 The successes of the Millennium Development Goals agenda prove that global action works. It is the only path to ensure that the new development agenda leaves no one behind. 99

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#MDGs #Action2015

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2) The SDGs

What are they?

- 17 goals, 169 targets - Much broader than MDGs
- Many topics that weren't covered in the MDGs are covered in the SDGs - from technical interventions to structural transformation
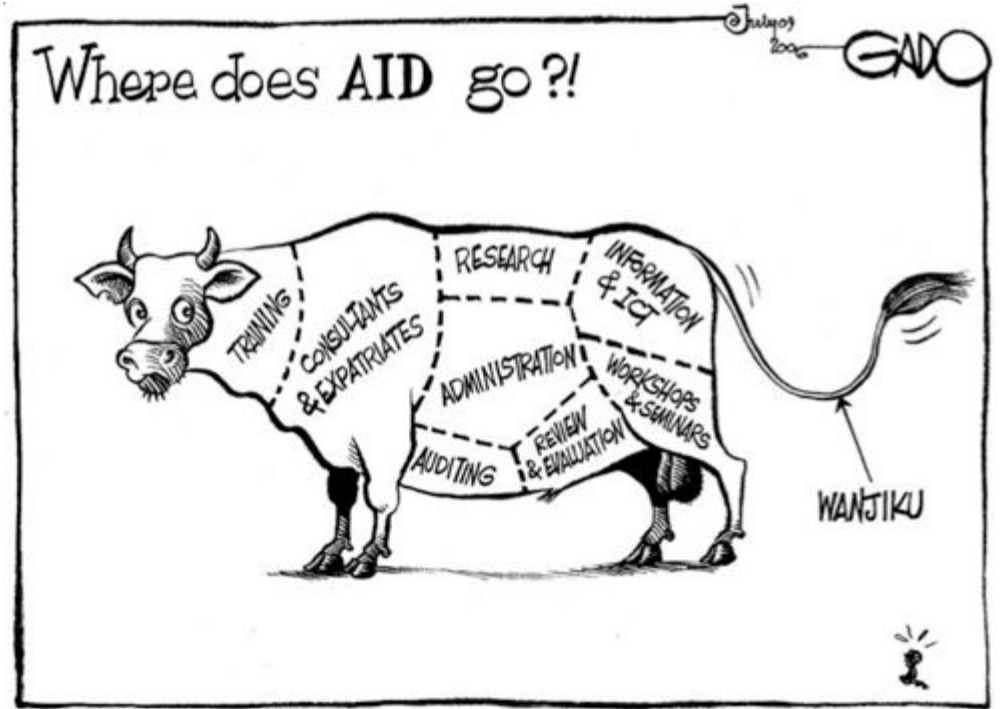- Some controversial topics are also included
- Universal

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2) The SDGs

Who do they serve?

"Universal", but...

- Who shaped them?
- Who is accountable?
- Who will/does benefit?

2) The SDGs

Who shaped them?

- **2012-2015 Goals and targets**: Broad consultations with civil society, countries, philanthropic foundations, multinationals to develop goals and targets.
- **2015-2017 Indicators**: The 232 indicators were developed through a much less participatory and less visible process (see e.g. Adams *et al.* 2016).

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2) The SDGs

Who is accountable?

- High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) main mechanism to review and monitor progress. Reports:
  - SDG progress report (annual publication)
  - Global Sustainable Development Report (every 4 years)
  - Thematic reviews– and the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)
  - Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (every 4 years)
- Significant role for the private sector in 2030 Agenda, but no mechanisms by which corporations can be held accountable.

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2) The SDGs

What understanding of development underpins them?

- 17 goals: Vision of development as holistic: Encompassing growth, inequality, the environment, technological development, etc.
- 169 targets: Movement towards more technocratic and prescriptive territory.
- 232 indicators: Depoliticising? Possibly a paradox of specification and a burden of measurement.

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2) The SDGs

Do the indicators change the meaning of the 2030 Agenda?

- The indicators are the main way progress is to be measured
- G77 and China:
  - Indicator framework does not encompass all the goals and targets in a balanced manner (in particular Goal 17)
  - Indicators change the meaning of some of the targets (again, with Goal 17 being the most controversial, see G77 2016)
- The indicators have led to a narrowing of the framework. (see also Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019)

3) SDGs and their relevance

How are the SDGs relevant for inequality, technology and poverty?

3) SDGs and their relevance: Inequality

- **Goal 10** is ambitious: "Reduce inequality within and among countries"
- **The 7 accompanying targets**
  - Defined in terms of generalities/minor adjustments
    - "To empower and promote inclusion"
    - To reduce the "transactions costs of migrant remittances".
  - Do not address institutional arrangements that have produced historically unprecedented levels of inequality.
- **The indicators** measure inclusive growth, e.g. income p.c. of bottom 40%, proportion of people living below 50% of median income .

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3) SDGs and their relevance: Inequality

- **Goal 10** is ambitious: "Reduce inequality within and among countries"

Between-country inequality:
- Indicator of 10.6: "Proportion of members and voting rights of developing countries in international organizations."

Overall:
- Targets and indicators associated with the inequality goal are 'weak and incomplete' (Fukuda-Parr 2018).

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3) SDGs and their relevance: Poverty

Goal 1 is ambitious**:** End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Targets too:

In addition to poverty measures, also:

- Equal rights to economic resources
- Social protection systems

3) SDGs and their relevance: Poverty

Goal 1 is ambitious**:** End poverty in all its forms everywhere

- MoI: Ensure *significant* mobilization of resources from a *variety of sources*, including through enhanced *development cooperation*.
- Accompanying indicator: Proportion of resources allocated by the government directly to poverty reduction programmes
- Also, note that:
  - If the existing economic trends and poverty reductions efforts continue the as they have between 1993 and 2008, it will take 100 years to eliminate absolute and extreme poverty (Woodward 2015).

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3) SDGs and their relevance: Technology

Technology

17.6 Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge-sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism

17.6.1 Number of science and/or technology cooperation agreements and programmes between countries, by type of cooperation

17.6.2 Fixed Internet broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, by speed

17.7 Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed

17.7.1 Total amount of approved funding for developing countries to promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies

17.8 Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology

17.8.1 Proportion of individuals using the Internet

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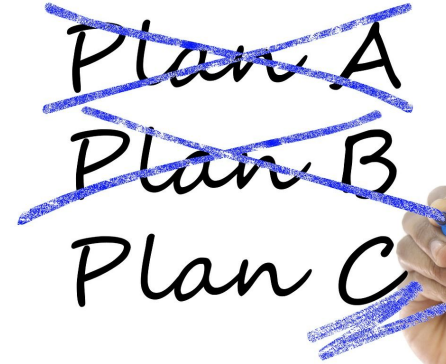
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4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Evaluating the SDGs in light of the above:

Flexibility:

- A too large quantity of sub-goals may distract from the larger goal.
- Many indicators and targets appear too prescriptive to allow for experimentation, learning and national democratic discussion.
- Everything that counts can't be counted...

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4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Evaluating the SDGs in light of the above:

Accountability:

- Accountability discourse strengthened with proliferation of indicators.
- But mechanisms to hold actors accountable are few and weak.

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4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Evaluating the SDGs in light of the above:

Assessment of success:

- Large efforts into developing indicators, new reports and national reviews, but…
- Lack of discussion on how progress will be measured

4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Evaluating the SDGs in light of the above:

<u>Motivation</u>:

- Difficult to measure. Little evidence of motivation.

4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Evaluating the SDGs in light of the above:

Coordination:

- Appears to be little of it through VNRs
- Thematic reviews may encourage UN agencies to work together on common topics.
- Otherwise, not clear if coordination is enhanced through 2030 Agenda

4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Evaluating the SDGs in light of the above:

Epistemic role:

- Language game to describe development efforts
- Difficult to assess whether goals are truly effective or merely (quite costly) window dressing
- In the worst case, could be difficult to gain traction for research and policy-work not framed as being relevant for SDGs

4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Finally, how to make the best of them?

<u>Policy-makers:</u>

- Don't get bogged down with the indicators, unless they are relevant
- Strategize, debate and consult about what strategy makes the most sense in your context
- Share your country experience with other countries.
- Focusing on the indicators won't necessarily lead to the goal.

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4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Finally, how to make the best of them?

Scientists:

- Consider the political nature of any development intervention.
- Consider how your work might fit in a wider strategy to achieve the SDGs, and whether this strategy is realistic.

4) Conclusion how to make the most of the SDGs

Finally, how to make the best of them?

Academics:

- If you can, research what appears to be meaningful related to poverty, inequality.

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