



From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and Opportunities for the Evaluation Community

CAITLIN WIESEN

UNDP Regional Manager, Asia Pacific Regional Centre

MICHAELA PROKOP

UNDP Programme Adviser, Asia Pacific Regional Centre

At a United Nations Summit in September 2015 Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” which “seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom”. The 2030 Agenda commits all countries and all stakeholders to work together to “free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet” to address inequality and injustice and to ensure “that no one will be left behind.”⁵

The 2030 Agenda presents an integrated plan of action with a Vision and Principles for Transforming our World as set out in the Declaration; a results framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets which set out quantitative and qualitative objectives for the next 15 years; a Means of Implementation and Global Partnership; and a Follow-up and Review process.

The SDGs formulation process included extensive consultations including 88 national consultations and 11 thematic dialogues for the ‘World We Want’ and the My World Survey gathering votes from more than 8 million people across all countries.⁶ The follow-up and review framework calls for accountability of people, national ownership and country-led processes. Evaluation practice will provide an important means to raise the voice of stakeholders and to inform, support, measure and assess development efforts around the SDGs.

This paper will briefly discuss the main differences between the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the SDGs, lessons learned from implementing the MDGs and then outline some of the implications, challenges and opportunities of the 2030 Agenda for development cooperation and in particular for the evaluation community. It will also briefly present the joint United Nations Development Group (UNDG) approach to

5 Available at <<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>>.

6 <<http://www.beyond2015.org/world-we-want-2015-web-platform>> and <<http://data.myworld2015.org>>.

FIGURE 1. THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SDGS



Source: UNDG *Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Reference Guide to UN Country Teams – February, 2016*

mainstreaming and implementing the 2030 Agenda called ‘MAPS’ (Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support).⁷

FROM MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS – WHAT IS NEW?

There are three fundamental differences between the 2030 Agenda and the MDGs.⁸ First, the 2030 Agenda has a much wider scope, going beyond the largely ‘social’ goals of the MDGs, taking into full consideration the need for economic, social and environmental sustainability and recognizing the importance of peaceful societies. The breadth of the 2030 Agenda implies a need to go beyond silos and take an integrated approach to development interventions. With the MDGs, the question was: what are the goals that are lagging the most, what are the gaps, and how can we fill them? With the SDGs, the question becomes: what are the actions required to accelerate progress across a broader range of interlinked goals? Addressing this question requires thinking through the connections and synergies across the goals and pointing out how actions in one area draw dividends in other. Tools are also required to assess and manage trade-offs. In this context “evaluation methods will need

7 UNDG. 2016. *Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Reference Guide to UN Country Teams: February 2016*.

8 This section is adapted from UNDP. 2016. *UNDP Support to the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UNDP Policy and Programme Brief. January 2016.

to determine whether the right choices were made to achieve possibly conflicting desirable outcomes, and how the different outcomes should be valued.⁹

Second, the 2030 Agenda is a much more ambitious agenda aspiring towards the elimination of poverty with universal access to health and education. Eliminating poverty and ensuring universal access to health and education require addressing the root causes of the last mile of exclusion and deprivation which are often deeply embedded in economic, social and political disenfranchisement. Third, the 2030 Agenda is universal, applying to all countries, to all people with an implicit recognition that international collective action will be required to achieve the SDGs.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MDG IMPLEMENTATION

One of the lessons of MDG implementation was that early strategic planning is important in laying the groundwork for long-term progress, as putting in place priority actions at an early stage can have multiplier effects on development outcomes. Targets associated with the MDGs were only shaped over time while financing the MDGs was discussed in Monterrey two years after the Millennium Declaration. So the inclusion of a detailed results framework and means of implementation in the 2030 Agenda presents an opportunity for early action.

The 2015 MDGs report highlighted that “the MDG monitoring experience has clearly demonstrated that effective use of data can help galvanize development efforts, implement successful targeted interventions, track performance and improve accountability.” The MDG framework also strengthened the use of robust and reliable data for evidence-based decision-making with many countries integrating the MDGs into their national priorities and development strategies.¹⁰ Country ownership, leadership and participation of a wide range of stakeholders have been vital for MDG progress and to ensure accountability.

However, while much has been achieved during the MDG implementation period, a key criticism of the MDGs was that there was insufficient attention on generating evidence on achievements and learning from challenges.¹¹ Much greater focus has been on monitoring and reporting with many countries publishing national and also subnational MDG progress reports, while evaluation of what policies and interventions have worked (or not) were often only conducted at a later stage and as part of designing MDG Acceleration Frameworks.

MDG progress was largely tracked at aggregate level, masking huge disparities in performance and disguising rising inequalities. Moving forward to ensure that no one is left behind, a better understanding of why and how certain policy choices and interventions affect different segments of society will be imperative. Recognizing that “only by counting the uncounted

9 ‘Evaluation Beyond 2015: Implications of the SDGs for Evaluation’, blog by Caroline Heider, Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank, 15 September 2015 available at: <<http://ieg.worldbank.org/blog/evaluations-beyond-2015-implications-sdgs-evaluation>>.

10 United Nations. 2015. *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015 – Measure what we Treasure: Sustainable Data for Sustainable Development*, United Nations, p. 10.

11 See EvalSDGs at <http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/files/EvalSDG_Overview_Paper_8-12-15_1-pager.pdf>.

can we reach the unreached”¹², SDG targets should be met for all nations, peoples, segments of society and “reach the furthest behind first”. There is a commitment (target 17.18) to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographical location and other characteristics relevant to national contexts. Many of the SDG targets include both quality- and outcome-based targets such as target 4.1. *by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. Progress against these targets will be challenging to assess.*

The launch of the new Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data in Addis Ababa is a promising first step. Target 17.19 of the SDGs also calls for developing *measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries.* New, innovative ways of collecting and disseminating data, big data and the ‘data revolution’ present new opportunities but also challenges to the monitoring and evaluation community. Real-time data are needed to deliver better decisions faster.¹³ Moving forward much stronger links between those who produce data and those who use data, between data systems and decision-making processes, as well as significant investments not only into capacity-building for data, monitoring and reporting but also into evaluation capacity are needed.

The universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and the changing dynamics of development finance and development cooperation also present an opportunity to move from donor-driven to country-led monitoring and evaluation. There is growing awareness of the importance of people’s engagement in monitoring and evaluation and accountability mechanisms including through social accountability tools and peoples report cards,¹⁴ a process that is greatly facilitated by the increasing coverage of cellular networks and mobile phone ownership.

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA – MAPS

The 2030 Agenda places a strong emphasis on each national government defining and measuring its own objectives and targets. The SDGs and targets are defined as aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. Some countries have already started to translate the 2030 Agenda into national strategies, policies and budgets. UNDP, together with other UN agencies and development partners, has been facilitating this process in many countries.

12 *ibid*, p.11.

13 See, for instance, the Global Pulse initiative which is working to promote awareness of opportunities of ‘big data’ for relief and development, forge public-private partnerships, generate high-impact analytical tools and approaches through networks of Pulse Labs and drive broad adoption of innovations across the UN System. For further information: <<http://www.unglobalpulse.org>>.

14 See, for instance: <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/campaign/peoples-report-card/>>.

FIGURE 2. MAPS: MAINSTREAMING, ACCELERATION AND POLICY SUPPORT FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA



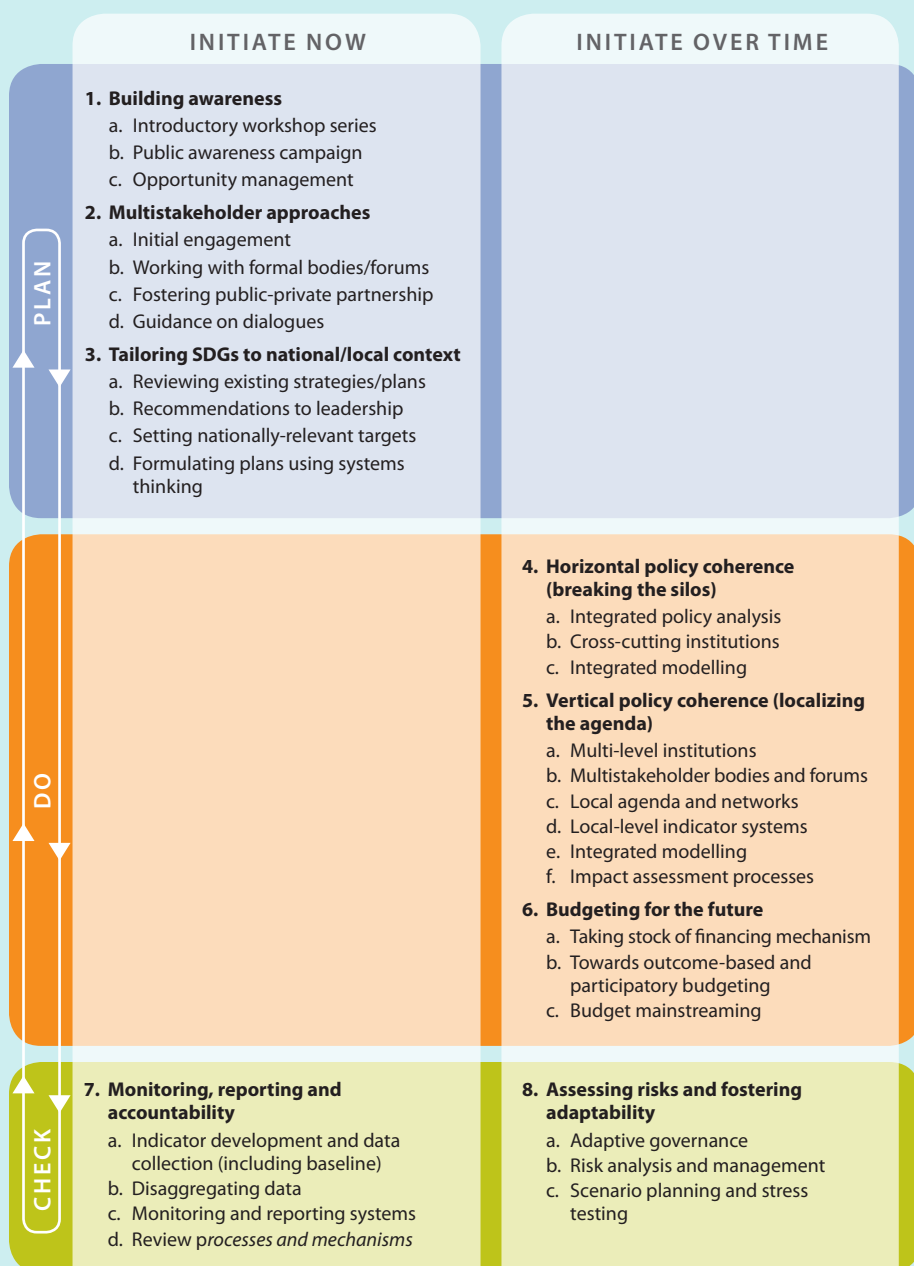
Source: Adapted from UNDG. *Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Reference Guide to UN Country Teams – February 2016*

In response to Member States' request for a coherent and integrated approach from the UN development system for implementing the 2030 Agenda, UNDG developed a common approach under the acronym MAPS (Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support). The approach focuses on policy coherence (both vertical and horizontal), multistakeholder engagement, paying special attention to cross-cutting elements of partnerships, data and accountability. Capacities for both effective monitoring and evaluation of SDGs have to be built early into national SDG frameworks/roadmaps for implementation and related planning, budgeting and policymaking processes. This will facilitate accountability of the process while also facilitating greater policy coherence and better policy choices.

Evaluative thinking, learning and innovation will need to inform the roll-out of MAPS in countries. Evaluation can provide the context to data and collect evidence on what works and what does not, for whom and in what circumstances, and offers evidence-based guidance to help strengthen development results, ultimately contributing to improved accountability.

"Policies and programme design need to include evaluation to test response strategies and use real-time feedback to make necessary changes. Independent evaluation can assess how effective these feedback loops are working as well as take a dispassionate look at results

FIGURE 3. THE 2030 AGENDA MAINSTREAMING GUIDANCE AREAS



Source: UNDG. *Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Reference Guide to UN Country Teams – February 2016*

and performance.”¹⁵ Policy choices and resource allocation decisions need to consider their impact on all three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental. For instance, economic policies and investment decisions need to carefully consider the impact they have on social and environmental issues. Strategies, policies and investment decisions need to be continuously reviewed and evaluated to inform policymaking processes, most importantly to inform prioritization and to allow for continuous adjustments and learning.

To support countries in this process, UNDG has developed implementation guidance for the mainstreaming process outlining eight areas as per Figure 3.

Careful reflection of lessons learned during the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and making timely corrections along the way will be integral to an effective follow-up and review process. Applying multistakeholder approaches will be key to this.

Evaluative thinking will also be key to *Assessing Risk and Fostering Adaptability* (point 8) which stresses the importance of identifying risks and emerging issues, and adapting to them.

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15 'Evaluation Beyond 2015: Implications of the SDGs for Evaluation', blog by Caroline Heider, Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank, 15 September 2015, <<http://ieg.worldbank.org/blog/evaluations-beyond-2015-implications-sdgs-evaluation>>.