



From MDGs to SDGs:

People's Views on Sustainable World Development

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Sociologists have roles to play as critics but also as data users as 'development plans' scale up from the national level to the global level (where more widely pertaining SDGs having now replaced more poor-country orientated MDGs). This article overviews the institutional complexities and especially the survey component underlying the selection of key goals and suggests there be more attention and active involvement from sociologists.

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National development plans have somewhat gone out of favour, but they continue at the international level. A series of development frameworks have been anchored by the UN, with the most recent being the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) beginning in 2000 and finishing in 2015, and being replaced post-2015 by the Sustainable goals (SDG) framework. Perhaps it is a consequence of methodological nationalism and a deficit of methodological cosmopolitanism but these frameworks seem not to have attracted sociological attention. A search of *Sociological Abstracts* yielded no items in sociology journals and only a few from associated journals. Yet it is surely important for development sociologists (at least) to keep track of such large international enterprises and to use the experiences and the data generated by the programmes to develop and test theories of development, in general and particularly in relation to their own country.

The well-known MDGs arose out of the September 8, 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit which concluded with the adoption of the Millennium Declaration as a global vision for the future. 'We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all the world's people.' The United Nations Millennium Summit concluded with the adoption of the global vision for the future provided by the Millennium Declaration which was based on a set of fundamental rights – freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility - and was structured according to the following topics:

- Peace, security and disarmament;
- Development and poverty eradication;
- Protecting our common environment;
- Human rights, democracy and good governance;
- Protecting the vulnerable;
- Meeting the special needs of Africa; and
- Strengthening the United Nations.

In the wake of this conference, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developed to keep the declaration operational. This was accomplished through an adoption of a Results-Based Management (RBM) approach coupled with 'SMART' indicators (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, and Time-limited). This framework included 48 indicators with data-series being pushed back to a baseline in 1990, and this project has generated some useful data and, moreover, some documentation on the (in)adequacy of world statistical measurement.

Publicity around MDGs was mobilised and this created a momentum that for many agencies brought the issue of development back on the international agenda, overcame aid fatigue and galvanised the public. Although the indicator framework was a further accomplishment there were many problems, including neglect of inequality and gender-specificity in the MDG framework together with a 3-5 year time-lag in the availability of statistics.

Much success was achieved, although the figures are problematic:

- Goals where world performance was ahead of goals: global poverty reduction; improved drinking water.
- Goals where there was major, measurable progress: primary education; malaria and tuberculosis.
- Goals where there were shortfalls: reduction of hunger, child and maternal mortality, gender equality, and environmental sustainability.
- Goals where there were large gaps: delivery of global partnership commitments, particularly ODA. Progress has also been uneven across countries and among different population groups and regions within countries.

Substantial statistical critique of the extent to which UN claims of success seem sustained by statistical studies can be found in studies such as Hickel (2016).

As the MDG era came to an end a large consultancy machinery was developed to guide its replacement for the next 15 years out to 2030. The SDG framework differs in one major respect which is that it is universal - with all countries participating, not just developing ones. However, the SDG has yet to gain the public cache that the MDG generated.

The UN reached more widely beyond nation-states view to those of the global public in developing the SDG. Amongst the various consultancy approaches has been the *Global Conversation/Peoples' Voices Challenge/My World* which is a largely online survey (in the 6 official UN languages) developed to guide the development of priorities for the post-2015 efforts. The focus of the study was to get people to

tell of the changes that would make the most difference to their lives, or the most important issues they would like the post-2015 agenda to address. The survey asked for a choice of six out of sixteen specified issues which had been built up from the priorities expressed by poor people in existing research and polling exercises, and from the ongoing technical and political discussions. The coverage began with the existing MDGs, expanded to include issues of sustainability, security, governance and transparency. Clearly, recourse to a quantitative framework was necessary given the ambitious coverage of the survey, but an open-ended option was included which seems to attract few extra comments. In the survey development process a final empirical test was conducted through a social media survey (SMS) survey in Uganda, where an open question was asked and the responses coded back to the 16 options. When asked about issues of most importance to individuals and their families, less than four per cent of the responses did not fall under the 16 options categories. Engagement with the survey has been fostered through a web of agencies (the organisation involved is recorded). The method of response and date and time of response were recorded so that methodological examination is possible.

The process has generated some 10 million responses from all UN countries making it – undoubtedly – the world's largest survey. Representativeness is a concern although there is a fairly even gender balance, but young people (under 30) make up the overwhelming majority of voters (nearly 80%). It is likely that educational levels are higher than the underlying populations. Downloadable data and on-line analysis for several characteristics is also available: see <http://data.myworld2015.org/>.

There has been much discussion of 'Global Civil Society' which is often seen as transnational arrays of NGOs, social movements and other associations, and sometimes much hope for international good-will is rather hopefully accorded this complex system. The sorts of organisations the UN has turned to for the conduct of this survey presents an interesting insight into the contours of 'Global Civil Society'. Many organisations were involved, with some 350 securing at least 30 responses, and with Nigerian UN-related

associational activity netting well over 2 million responses. An examination of the characteristics of the respondents each organisation mobilised offers an interesting glimpse into the range of NGOs across the countries of the world.

The UN broadly equally sorts countries into 4 HDI levels, although the world population is largely concentrated in the two middle categories. Compared

to the world population (after being broken down by HDI category) the survey considerably oversamples the low HDI category and undersampled the 'very high'. It is arguable that proper world goals might better be produced by weighting up the results according to the sampling coverage of the survey, although the resultant totals would not differ much.

Table 1: Characteristics of Survey

Respondents

HDI Level	Population (mill) Mean	No. of countries	Population (mill) Total	% coverage	Participants (mill)	% total participation	Ratio
Low	23.4078	51	1193.80	16.7	4.18	43.4	2.59
Medium	45.2747	55	2490.11	34.9	2.6	27	.78
High	61.5867	40	2463.47	34.5	2.32	24.1	.70
Very High	20.0504	49	982.47	13.8	.6	6.2	.45
Total	36.5633	195	7129.85	100	9.63	100	

Overall, there are minimal differences with regard to goals selected in terms of the social characteristics included but major differences in terms of type of country. In terms of social characteristics, older respondents (which may differentially come from particular countries or other social locations) are less likely to highly rank crime/violence, equality, reliable

energy sources, transport/roads but stronger in relation to freedoms, forests and climate change. The rankings are similar in terms of HDI level of countries, although the proportions in the 'very high' category were different - especially on issues such as water, energy, forests and climate change.

Table 2: Ranking of top 4 amongst 16 Goals by HDI level of country

Question	HDI level of Country: rankings				
	low	medium	high	v high	world
Good Education	1	1	1	2	1
Better healthcare	2	2	3	7	2
Better job opportunities	3	3	2	11.5	3
An honest and responsive government	4	5	4	3	4
Affordable and nutritious food	5	7	5.5	6	5
Protection against crime and violence	11	6	5.5	5	6
Access to clean water and sanitation	9	4	8.5	4	7
Support for people who can't work	10	8	7	14	8
Better transport and roads	7	10	12	16	9

Question	low	medium	high	v high	world
Equality between men and women	13	9	11	10	10.5
Reliable Energy at Home	6	14.5	14	1	10.5
Political freedoms	8	14.5	16	13	12
Freedom from discrimination and persecution	14	12	10	8	13
Protecting forests, rivers and oceans	15	11	8.5	9	14
Phone and internet access	12	16	15	15	15
Action taken on climate change	16	13	13	11.5	16

The SDGs which emerged from the process are:

1. **Poverty** - End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. **Hunger and Food Security** - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. **Good Health and Well-Being** - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. **Education** - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. **Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment** - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. **Water and Sanitation** - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. **Energy** - Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and clean energy for all.
8. **Economic Growth** - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9. **Infrastructure, Industrialisation** - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation.
10. **Inequality** - Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. **Cities** - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. **Sustainable Consumption and Production** - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. **Climate Change** - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. **Oceans** - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. **Biodiversity, Forests, Deforestation** - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16. **Peace and Justice** - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. **Partnerships** - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

To operationalise, these are some 169 proposed targets for these goals and 304 proposed indicators. Alongside these there has been launched a major statistical effort to assess progress in achieving these goals: a call for a 'Data Revolution' (UN, 2014).

The SDG framework has already been the target of considerable criticism: there are trade-offs, especially the divergent pulls and pushes of environmental versus development goals and there are so many goals so much so that priority-setting may be difficult. The Copenhagen Consensus (2015) in particular has generated much information on projected social, environmental and economic costs and benefits of more than 100 targets for the next development agenda. They argue that 19 targets would represent the very best value-for-money in development over the period from

2016 to 2030. An excellent description and critique by Kabeer (2015) sketches the development processes.

The SDG project provides an ambitious and interesting global vision: sociologists should consider getting involved with supporting and critiquing components of this programme through their analyses, as well as drawing on the useful stock of information relevant to their country and region which has been generated.

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