

Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or the 2030 Agenda, came into effect on January 1st, 2016 and set forth a formidable task for the global community following the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs consist of 17 goals and 169 associated targets that provide an opportunity to integrate development goals and focus on all countries. The MDGs were a step forward to keep development and poverty eradication relevant with the use of 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. However, the MDGs suffered from major design flaws, including ignoring local capacities. Localization, or working at the subnational level to take better account of specific locales and markets, is an important aspect to implement the SDGs.

Establishing a coordinated effort towards economic, environmental and social development that is sustainable will require some degree of localization. The Agenda 2030 takes into account the limitations of the MDGs and raises the question of how cross-cutting and sector-specific goals, data, and monitoring and evaluation will be executed effectively and efficiently in specific places. However, there is not much clarity about what localization really means. This note aims to suggest areas of focus for the localization agenda for the SDGs.

Localization Matters

The MDGs fell short of many targets and goals because they lacked local capacity, ownership, and leadership required to implement goals and achieve the respective indicators. The MDGs were able to get support from the international development community and many countries, but they did not sufficiently engage local actors and take into account local specifics. The SDGs allude to the necessity of localization, but mainly addressing change at the national

policy level when more attention needs to be given to the “particular roles that subnational/local governments can and should play in achieving the SDGs and the capacities and resources they need to do so” (Nixon and Smoke). Localization matters for the SDGs because success depends on each country being responsible for their own economic and social development (General Assembly: 2015) in a way that reflects their internal diversity. This depends on a mix of implementation methods and financial instruments that can benefit from technology transfers and other supportive mechanisms. Financial mechanisms include national and local sources, transfers and borrowing while implementation methods can be public, private, or a blend. Moving forward requires increased attention to subnational considerations and variations.

Building local responsibility requires translating the SDGs from targets for national governments to into “goals that are relevant, applicable and attainable at the local level” so that communities have ownership of their future development and increase accountability of both local and national governments (UNDP: 2016). There is no “one size fits all” way to localize the SDGs rather the options are a blend of implementing the goals at the local level by subnational actors (governments, civil society, and businesses) and monitoring progress at the subnational level. The operationalization of interventions to achieve SDG targets will require local governments to adopt a subset of the goals and targets for which they have specific delivery responsibility. This is obviously a matter for negotiation with central governments, and the center will continue to play important roles, including supporting local governments. Such an approach will involve the prioritization of subnational planning and resource allocation by local government in a specific sector based on subnational variations (Lucci: 2015). Inequalities within countries can be identified and levels assessed to establish starting points and progress trajectories for specific goals. This would require that most outcome-based targets be

disaggregated at the subnational level in collaboration with local governments, thus placing more emphasis on a sub-set of goals corresponding to these subnational variations. The role of local governments in both implementation and monitoring may vary across goals.

Localization and Implementation

Implementing the SDGs raises two main questions: who is responsible and at what level and how should interventions be developed to achieve SDG targets? One method to find answers for both these questions is through disaggregation. Disaggregation is used to decompose responsibilities across and between levels of government, as well as civil society and the private sector to understand which actors and in what combination will implement SDGs.

Disaggregation of SDGs is done by dissecting and reorganizing SDG targets and indicators into specific, related thematic indicators. The process of disaggregation can identify targets and indicators that have similar objectives and develop interventions that are more resource-efficient and reduce redundancy.

Disaggregating responsibility should not be used to shift blame from the national to the subnational level. Nor should it be used for national governments and external organizations to rationalize more centralized or parallel mechanisms to execute interventions because subnational governments do not have the capacity. Localization calls for an increased emphasis for partner countries to move away from allowing or contracting global entities to manage local projects and instead increase engagement with local governments, NGOs, and businesses, even if external resources and support are needed. Local capacity development will often be needed, and it will be necessary to understand who is responsible and where variations are between and within countries. This will allow the creation of interventions that balance increased responsibilities,

resources and support, and promote more locally determined solutions that are problem and context driven.

Disaggregation of cross-cutting SDGs, such as SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions runs the risk of downplaying their overall importance when linking targets and indicators with sector-specific SDGs. Disaggregation should not weaken the added value of these goals, rather it should reinforce their broader importance. Disaggregation can be used to highlight development priorities of poverty, health, security, governance and other broad themes if it promotes better coordination across subnational government sectors that may otherwise work independently to achieve more limited priorities. It is important to know who is doing what, but we need to keep in mind why they are doing it and how we will measure success. Disaggregation is a useful tool but ultimately its success depends on data collection and monitoring.

Localization and Monitoring

SDGs and localization will require designated starting points and understanding what can be achieved over a reasonable time in specific locations. Data and monitoring will be critical to meet these tasks. Data collection at the local level will help determine if the indicators are being met. The Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDG) developed the global indicator framework “to ensure equitable regional representation and technical expertise” (IAEG: 2016). Even with standardization and clear instructions on what is to be measured, there are concerns about local level capacity for data collection and monitoring.

There have been some investments to ensure that information collection will be used to create a baseline and measure progress in meeting indicators. However, they are not universal nor is there common understanding about how this data will be used to help achieve the SDGs. If

so much energy goes into measuring the SDGs, how does it contribute to achieving them, particularly if data collection and measurements are too concentrated at the national level and in the face of so many technical and data constraints? Although the Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators was mandated to develop and provide the support for the implementation of a mutually agreed upon indicator framework for the SDGs and related indicators, it is still unclear how data will be gathered, measured, evaluated and disseminated.

With complementary pathways of implementing and monitoring, local governments could expand so much energy on measuring without considering how this energy would also contribute to achieving the SDGs. Monitoring and evaluation could become a disproportionately high-cost of SDG projects. Local governments whose main focus is public service delivery and adherence to national mandates would have to deal with an additional supranational set of indicators for monitoring and evaluating the SDGs, and this could further strain their limited capacity and resources (in both developing and developed countries). Support from the international community will be necessary to manage SDG demands and expectations with not only implementation but also data collection and monitoring.

Localization will impact international support to the SDGs, specifically requiring international donors to adopt supportive policy, program and procurement reforms. Although it is great that the global development community is going local, the main players will need to make adjustments to contribute in the context of the localization movement, including changes and enhancements to data collection and monitoring methods.

Governments have finite sets of resources and will have to manage various trade-offs, e.g. investment for national comparison versus having statistical capacity that would compare sub national differences and progress within countries. The call for greater data collection and

monitoring with the SDGs is an opportunity for the international development community to develop a new focus and set of expertise, including allowing local governments to manage more of the work to an extent that is consistent with local realities and that may grow over time

Conclusion

The success of the international development agenda will be determined in part at the subnational level through localization. Disaggregation, target analysis, and data collection will be important factors in the creation of an analytical framework for localizing the SDGs. The necessary assessments will differ for each SDG as some are sector specific and others are quite broad. Such analysis will also facilitate identifying redundancies, e.g. if one SDG overlaps with another in terms of indicators and targets. Noting and addressing such duplications could increase resource efficiency. There are, of course, many challenges to overcome, but the opportunities for productive action are considerable.

Localization is critical for achieving the SDGs because it will encourage countries to become self-reliant and assume responsibility for development and not depend on outside partners. Localization will allow governments to monitor how progress is occurring differentially within their own borders. It will also facilitate comparison to others and create a foundation for exploring why some countries and localities are performing better or worse in terms of achieving the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set a formidable task for the global community on international sustainable development over the next 15 years. Sustainable Urban Development and Urbanization have climbed higher on the agendas of governments to development organizations around the world since 2008, when for the first time in human history the global urban population exceeded the rural. According to the UN, two-thirds of the world's population will be living in urban areas by 2050. The post-2015 discussions highlighted these concerns, with the High Level Panel stating “cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost.” Consequently, the success of the SDGs is dependent on how well they are localized. One suggested approach to localize the SDGs is disaggregation. This memo will analyze Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11) and its related localization challenges.

Why *SDG 11*?

SDG 11 is to *Make Cities and Human Settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*. It is comprised of 10 targets, which range from infrastructure to social inclusion pertaining to sustainable development, and are linked, thematically, to 10 other SDGs and 28 indicators¹. This is consistent with the language used to describe SDG 11: *safe, resilient and sustainable*, are very broad, expressing concepts that involve the coordination of actors across sectors to be successful. Moreover, the inclusion of *Human Settlements* gives weight to those informal settlements that are important to urban areas in the developing world but are sometimes an afterthought. However, why have cross-cutting goals (i.e. those SDGS that have targets and

¹ UNSDSN <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/150320-SDSN-Indicator-Report.pdf>

indicators linked to other sector-specific goals and targets) if it appears that these broad ambitions may create redundancy and duplication of tasks?

Broad, cross-cutting goals implicitly focus on integrated or territorial forms of development, and therefore tie in closely with the localization questions. The WHO illustrates this, stating that health is not just a matter of biology but also a product of societal architecture and is, therefore, amenable to human intervention across sectors.² Similarly, city is more than infrastructure, it is a product of people, communities, and agglomeration of symbiotic systems working together. In the previous Framing Memo, Brandli and Patole describe the utility of SDG 11 and other cross-cutting goals is that they are greater than the sum of their targets and indicators, integrated in their approach. The UCLG stated that SDG 11 adds critical dimensions of the urban challenge not specifically addressed by any of the sector-specific goals and the *UN Chronicle* reiterates the importance of SDG 11: “the success in achieving the targets under SDG 11 sets the stage for achieving targets in many of the other SDG goals.”³

Overall, the SDGs are a set of goals that are interdependent and their individual success depends on progress in other areas. Sector-specific SDGs are necessary to acutely address specific issues but the sentiment of the SDGs is to be more integrated, holistic and local in its approach towards achieving the goals. Cross-cutting goals cover broad themes, such as health, poverty, security, etc and promote cooperation and coordination among actors to achieve. Although the cross-cutting linkages and their importance could be implied, the reiteration of interdependence of goals, targets and indicators related to urban sustainability as a stand-alone goal places emphasis on the importance of urban development. Local and regional governments

² World Health Organisation (2008). Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Available from: http://www.who.int/social_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/en/ [Accessed 03 February 2015]

³ <http://unchronicle.un.org/article/goal-11-cities-will-play-important-role-achieving-sdgs/>

are essential in defining, implementing and monitoring the targets to be attained for most of the proposed goals. This point is furthered by Nixon and Smoke, who state that subnational governments and their direct links to local constituents view development in a more holistic, integrated way whereas central/sectoral agencies are siloed in their approach and responsibility.⁴ For some goals, they may also have a more realistic sense of what can be achieved over particular time periods.

What does localization mean and imply for SDG 11?

Localization is vital for the transition to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs for the global community. Lessons learned from the MDGs, rapid urbanization, and lobbying by various constituencies provided the justification for an “urban” SDG. The importance of SDG 11 is noted in the *UN Chronicle*: “it will be under the auspices of cities where we will succeed or fail in achieving our goals of poverty eradication, equality, climate change reduction, and ensuring healthy lives.” Much of the discussion thus far has been on the “why” an urban SDG is important but not much has been said on “how” to achieve the targets by subnational actors. In addition, the horizontal variations between and within countries should be taken into account when considering pragmatic solutions. As covered in the Framing Memo by Brandli and Patole, one approach to localize a cross-cutting goal like SDG 11 is through disaggregation.

Disaggregation of SDGs has two components, the SDG itself and responsibility for the SDG. Disaggregation of an SDG involves the dissection and reorganization of SDG components and related indicators (once completed and confirmed) by sector or theme. Disaggregation of SDG responsibility involves identification of specific actors, including subnational level of government and department charged with SDG in question and therefore responsible for meeting particular indicators. The process of disaggregation can aid in the development of potential

⁴ Nixon and Smoke page 1

process improvements, policy interventions and projects and in so doing, reduce lack of clarity and unnecessary redundancy. Furthermore, disaggregation can identify the local disparities/inequalities, and allow for better collection of data, and monitoring and evaluation of SDG progress.

SDG 11 states “lack of funds to provide basic services, a shortage of adequate housing and declining infrastructure” as some of the challenges facing cities. It is clearly a complex goal, so that a more sophisticated approach for intervention development would help improve the ability of the relevant actors to deal with it. Let us look at SDG 11 and how disaggregation can aid localization in the case of SDG 11.

Disaggregation of SDG 11 and SDG 6

A preliminary review of the proposed indicators developed by IAEA-SDG for SDG 11 identified 10 specific targets and 33 potential indicators.⁵ Since SDG 11 is cross-cutting, it is necessary to identify a target that is related to a specific sector and that is relevant to both the developed and developing countries, Water supply and Sanitation (WATSAN) is used for this case study since it is a continued concern for developing countries and a growing concern in developed countries (i.e. Flint, MI, and California in the USA) and important for the sustainability of urban areas in light of rapid urbanization, pollution, climate variability, and water variability over the coming decades. Although service delivery is part of the mandate of a central and/or subnational government, lack of capacity and/or resources often leads to a myriad of partnerships with formal and informal, public and private, small to international service providers. WATSAN was high on the priority list in the 2030 Agenda after its minor role in the MDGs (MDG 7, Target 10), where it was categorized with SDG 6: Water and Sanitation. For the purposes of this case study, SDG 11 will be disaggregated in comparison to SDG 6.

⁵ <http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/metadata-compilation/Metadata-Goal-11.pdf>

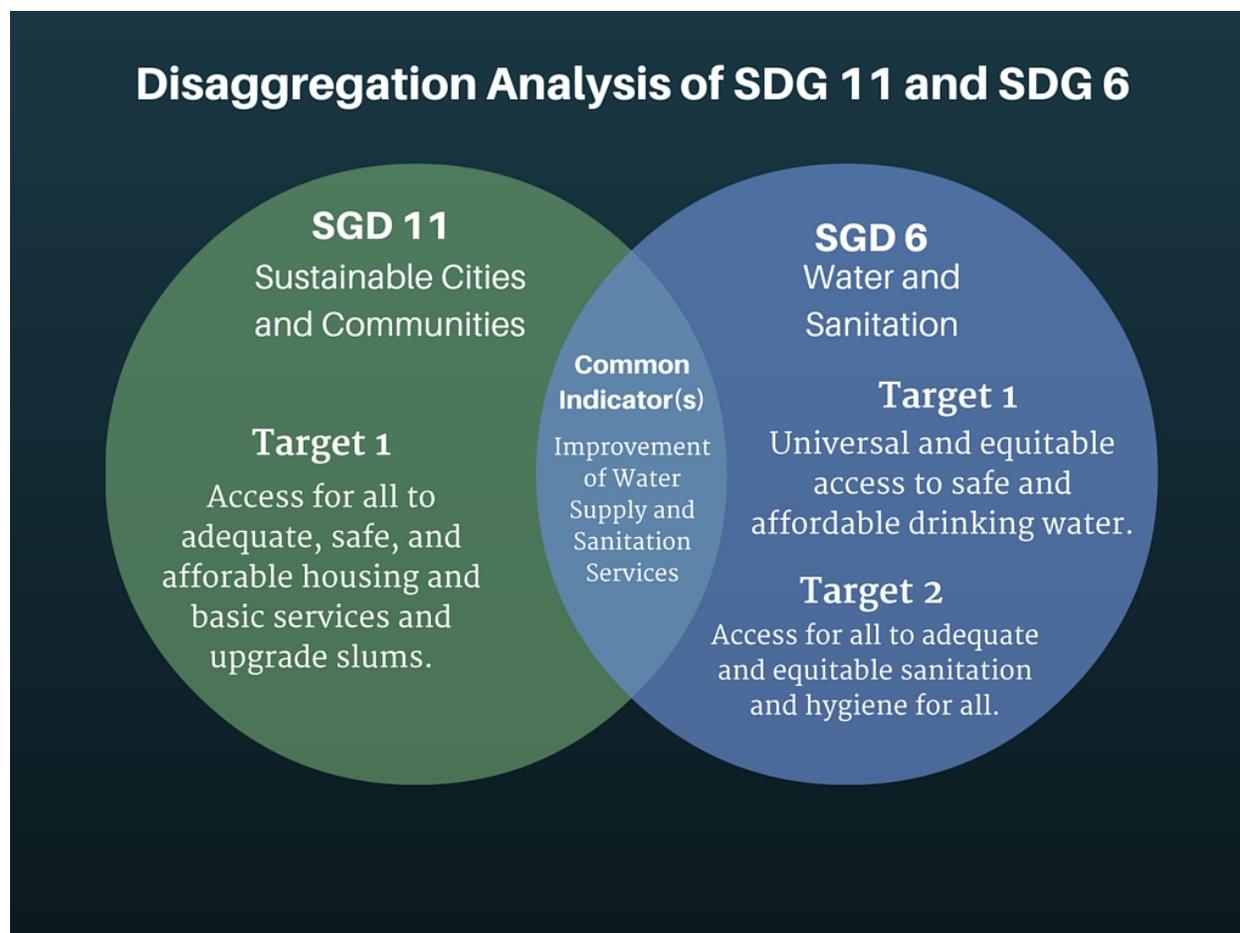


Figure 1: Disaggregation Diagram Illustrating Common Indicators Between SDG 11 and SDG 6

Disaggregation analysis of SDG 11 and SDG 6 showed WATSAN linkages between indicator 11.1.1 for SDG 11 and indicators 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 for SDG 6 (see Figure 1) in which improved access to water supply and sanitation services are included in the objectives. Although a relationship between 11.1.1 and 6.2.1/6.2.1 was observed, the utilization of WATSAN between the indicators was not the same. WATSAN is a single component of the objective of indicator 11.1.1, whereas water supply and sanitation are divided between indicator 6.2.1 (water) and indicator 6.2.2 (sanitation). Other differences were observed between the indicators, related to the units of measurement, rationale and methodologies.

The similarity but not equivalency of indicators mentioned is not necessarily good or bad. Disaggregation of targets and indicators of SDGs is intended to identify possible relationships and how these relationships can present an opportunity for subnational actors to develop interventions that meet multiple indicators. For example, the objective of indicator 11.1.1 is to reduce the proportion of those living in slums--access to water and sanitation is obviously part of this. But the objective of indicators 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 is specifically to increase access to water supply and sanitation respectively. The stated objectives are not the same but an intervention to formalize slums will also help increase access to water supply.

Although such analysis is useful, it is important to note some limitations. The depth of the targets and indicators are not consistent within and across the SDGs as currently developed. In reviewing the proposed indicators of both SDG 11 and SDG 6, the latter was more robust in terms of detail, which can be attributed to cross-cutting versus the sector-specific nature of these SDGs. The indicators provided by the IAEA-SDG is still in the draft stage and the IAEA-SDG are currently in the process reviewing recommendations and refining indicators. Once the indicators for the SDGs are confirmed and respective targets are finalized, the depth and detail can be reassessed.

One of the critiques that has carried over from the MDGs is the lack of a definition of terms being provided and the impact of this on data collection, monitoring and evaluation. For example, in the MDGs, the word “improved” was implicitly defined as “safe.” However, the lack of specificity in this definition created ambiguity from the start as contextually the interpretation could be improved relative to a point in time or percentage of coverage. Furthermore, the lack of clarity about what is intended can create indicators subject to interpretation, resulting in implemented activities with diverging aims. It is difficult to create indicators that satisfy all and

that are completely objective. Some subjectivity is expected, but the variations of interpretation should be limited through some mechanism, a glossary of sorts perhaps.

In terms of the process of analysis, the question arises - *where to draw the line of associations?* The example used in this memo was very specific in scope but such an approach can be a slippery slope when looking at all the SDGs, their targets and numerous indicators. The IAEA-SDG will soon disseminate the final list of indicators but the volume of data for SDGs will provide a challenge for many subnational actors and governments in both developed and developing countries to disaggregate on their own. However, as part of the broader part of localization, subnational actors can work together to use their individual comparative advantages. If we also consider the above-noted concern of interpretation, disaggregation can be even more difficult. Some organizations, such as the UCLG and Sustainable Development Solutions Network, have conducted disaggregation exercises on the first iterations of the indicators that can be used as a benchmark going forward.

Disaggregation analysis demonstrates how related indicators can be identified, subject to some concerns raised above. However, disaggregation also demonstrates the utility of cross-cutting goals and how they are greater than the sum of their parts. For example, the purpose of indicators SDG 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 is to improve access to water and sanitation, which can be achieved through construction of toilets and pipes. However, the purpose of indicator SDG 11.1.1 is to reduce the percentage of urban population living in slums or informal settlements, in which improving access to WATSAN is only one component, along with security of tenure, durability of dwelling and sufficiency of living area. The construction or rehabilitation of existing homes and water infrastructure alone will not achieve this objective. Slums and informal settlements involve more than just construction of infrastructure--they also require reduction of

spatial inequalities and formal integration with urban areas. The construction of a standpipe or latrine may improve their quality of life but it does not mean they are out of poverty.

Nevertheless, cross-cutting SDGs, such as SDG 11, add value through aggregation of sector-specific SDGs implicitly linked for greater overall local development.

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set forth a formidable task for the global community on international sustainable development for next 15 years. Comprised of 17 goals with 169 targets and an unknown number of indicators, disaggregation is one element of an approach to localize the SDGs. The example of disaggregating SDG 11 and 6 demonstrates how the process to identify opportunities for subnational interventions that can achieve multiple targets and indicators. At what level of government will depend on context. In some cases where they have autonomy, subnational actors can work independently on indicators, but in most countries the purpose is to push central actors and donors to help identify a productive role for subnational governments. Although some limitations were identified, disaggregation also demonstrated that cross-cutting SDGs, like SDG 11, are more than a collection of sector-specific targets and indicators. The examples presented here are only illustrative--future research to support the development of an analytical framework that elucidates how to disaggregate and localize the SDGs would be a valuable tool for national and local governments, implementing partners and other interested parties to appropriately develop activities that properly address defining and meeting SDG indicators, improve cooperation among all involved, and limit redundancy.

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