



Background information for Project Workshop, November 20-21, 2017

Venue: The New School, New York

Day 1 (November 20, 2017)

Alvin Johnson/J.M. Kaplan Hall (66 West 12th Street), Klein Conference Room (A510),

[Directions](#), [Website link](#)

Day 2 (November 21, 2017)

Eugene Lang College (65 West 11th Street), Wollman Hall (B500)

[Directions](#), [Website link](#)

Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring SDGs is an independent research initiative. Coordinated by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (The New School), Desmond McNeill (University of Oslo) and Alicia E. Yamin (Georgetown University), it involves 10 other researchers from universities around the world. We are grateful for financial support from FES, UNDP, The Studley Research Grant at The New School, and the University of Oslo. The papers will be published as research papers in a special issue of a high standard peer reviewed journal.

The workshop

The primary purpose of this workshop is to discuss the draft case study papers. The discussions will seek to:

- Comment on each of the papers, its arguments, evidence used, and key findings regarding knowledge and power in elaborating and measuring SDGs;
- Draw some policy relevant lessons;
- Draw common themes from the case studies;
- Develop conclusions about power and knowledge in the SDGs.

The workshop will also be a special opportunity for authors to interact with key stakeholders involved in implementing the SDGs. This will contribute to developing more policy-relevant conclusions.

Concept Note on Project

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Desmond McNeill and Alicia Ely Yamin
October 2017

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an enormously important normative agenda. Negotiated through an unprecedented process of engagement of stakeholders with diverse interests and aspirations, the agenda is ambitious, calling for development that is inclusive and sustainable, containing elements that tackle some structural causes of inequality and environmental destruction. Is there a danger that in the process of translating this into detailed targets and indicators, this agenda may become distorted?

The underlying premise of the study is that global goals are a terrain of contestation, with different actors that compete for their interests (strategic or material) and ideas. They attempt to exert influence by ensuring that the goals are formulated and measured in ways that frame discourses that favor their agendas. The formulation of the SDGs was hotly contested involving an unprecedented engagement of governments, development agencies, NGOs and academics. The selection and interpretation of indicators has followed a different process in which statisticians play the central role. Though intended to be a neutral and ‘technocratic’ process – this too continues to be contested, with potentially deleterious effects.

The aim of the study is to better understand the limitations as well as the potential of these global goals/targets/indicators so that they can be used appropriately. The research, consisting of a dozen case studies, is applying a consistent conceptual framework to provide a systematic comparison across (most of) the SDGs, covering topics such as gender, education, food and agriculture, inequality, environment, and employment. It also includes two papers focused on the changing landscape of data in development. It draws on and aims to contribute to the social science literature on quantification and its effects on governance and knowledge, particularly to the recent research on the use of indicators in governance.

The study builds on experience with our earlier *Power of Numbers Project*¹ which traced the effects of the MDGs – particularly their quantitative targets - on norms and policies, such as how ‘hunger’ was understood and defined, the policy strategies that were followed, and evaluated the consequences on priorities from human rights and capabilities perspectives. We found that some MDGs effectively contributed to mobilizing resources and policy attention while others had little effect. More importantly, we concluded that the MDGs had nefarious effects in two ways: in shaping knowledge where the indicator redefines the objective; and in shaping policy priorities where the monitoring indicator becomes a policy priority. These

¹ See the special issue of *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, republished as a book by Routledge under the title *MDGs, Capabilities and Human Rights: The Power of Numbers to Shape Agendas* (Routledge, eds. S. Fukuda-Parr and A. Yamin, 2015).

effects are amplified particularly if the targets are poorly defined, and indicators selected on the basis of data availability rather than alignment with the goal.

Unlike much of the current policy debate in the international development community about the SDGs that ask ‘how can the SDGs be achieved?’, this study problematizes global goals and asks ‘what are the implications of the SDGs and the quantification of priorities? How will this reshape the meaning of development and strategies? Who, what interests and what ideas are the winners and losers of these processes?’. And most importantly, how can we use these insights to inform ways that would ensure the effective use, and avoid perverse consequences, of the targets and indicators.