

# LEARNING WHILE DOING: EXPERIENCES FROM PILOTING THE SDGS

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## INTRODUCTION

The breadth and ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pose practical questions about the capacities and actions needed to deliver and monitor SDG 16's aim of building effective institutions. Of the utmost importance is the question of how to ensure that the SDGs become tools for government authorities in promoting development, rather than a distraction or an additional demand on institutions already limited by resource and capacity constraints. This brief explores how to ensure that the SDGs become tools for government authorities in promoting development, rather than a distraction or an additional demand on institutions already limited by resource and capacity constraints.

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Security, justice and governance are all interrelated and need to be approached together. This can and should be done in a manner contextually appropriate to specific countries and specific issues. It is necessary that non-state actors develop independent but complementary roles to national governments in supporting and monitoring implementation. Support and solidarity between developed and developing countries is vital to achieving the goals.

Implementing SDG 16 is a *security* and *financing* challenge. Because many fragile and conflict-affected countries face ongoing security and development threats in parallel with severe financial restrictions, they struggle to balance funding priorities. The question of how to achieve sufficient stability to foster development with limited resources is, therefore, key and is an essential consideration for SDG implementation.

*Capacity* is often another limiting factor in those states for which progress towards the SDGs is arguably the most urgent. Most countries—developed and developing, fragile and stable, donors and recipients—learned lessons from the process of implementing the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which they may now bring to bear on the SDGs. However, for the reasons mentioned above, capacity in fragile and conflict-affected countries is often stretched thin. In order to implement and monitor the SDGs effectively in these contexts, additional training, structural support and technical assistance may need to bolster existing capacity.

SDG implementation requires a strategic, integrated approach. The SDGs are highly interdependent and will, as a result, oblige diverse stakeholders to work together in order to deliver the desired outcomes in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. There will inevitably be tensions between goals such as security and fundamental rights. It is important to note that while priorities and emphases will differ by national context, the universality of the SDGs and the development of common indicators to measure progress towards each target is important for ensuring that some goals are not sacrificed in pursuit of others.

That the SDGs are expressed as verbs without subjects (e.g. 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere') may encourage their adaptation to national contexts and facilitate ownership at the national and local levels. Leaving out the subject creates space for collaboration and partnership among a broad range of actors which, in circumstances where national resources are limited, will enable stakeholders with a mutual interest in a particular SDG or target to collectively champion its implementation. This opportunity is accompanied by a responsibility for increased dialogue with domestic and civil society actors, as well as national and local government agencies.



Implementation and measurement of the goals will be a considerable challenge, demanding cooperation and a common understanding across sectors and levels of government. However, the goals do provide a ‘universal language’ reflecting a broad consensus at the global level. Translating this into mobilization of sufficient resources and political will for success at the national level will require cooperation and solidarity, and will present a challenge to both developing and developed countries. Examples of such solidarity would include efforts to assist developing countries in securing stolen assets as well as relieving the burden of odious debt.

The implementation of SDGs should build upon the infrastructure, systems and processes from the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and in doing so utilise existing strengths, capacities and lessons. Measurement will require determining data needs and working to develop common and complementary indicators capable of aggregating nationally meaningful data into a global measurement framework. Networks developed via the MDG process at the regional, sub-regional and grassroots levels can also support SDG implementation.

The most fundamental challenge to SDG 16 and other goals will be posed by regimes that lack political incentives to implement them. In contexts where political will exists but resources or capacity are an issue, it will be important to keep measurement and reporting manageable.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Develop institutional cooperation between states to build solidarity and promote exchange

- Establish new structures in support of SDG implementation such as working groups, implementation teams and communities of practice
- It will be important for developed countries not only to provide support and technical assistance, but also to listen to the experiences of developing countries in implementing the MDGs, and build on their experience.

### 2. Invest in statistical capacity

- In fragile and conflict-affected states, where there may not be an existing bank of data on these indicators, the capacity to collect and analyse data is restricted by a number of factors. On one hand, it may be unsafe or infeasible to travel to dangerous areas or those which are inaccessible due to lack of infrastructure. On the other hand, if trust in government is low, individuals may be wary about sharing their personal information.
- To be sure that no one is left behind, data will need to be disaggregated in many ways. There’s a limitation to the level of disaggregated data that surveys alone can provide.
- Donors and partners should support statistical capacity through financing, IT infrastructure and training for national statistics personnel to ensure that baseline data and future progress can be measured methodologically.

### 3. Countries should be prepared to support one another in the prioritization of the SDGs and targets.

- Different national contexts must sequence their interventions and invest their resources according to the urgency of different development needs. In fragile and conflict-affected states, prioritization is of the utmost importance.
- In many cases national governments will need to delegate roles and responsibilities to local authorities. Assistance to help them coordinate these is vital.



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