

# Country heterogeneity and the missing tier in the SDGs reporting

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Many countries have made significant strides in transitioning from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which expired in 2015, to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 interdependent SDGs cover social, economic and environmental development issues as well as governance and partnerships. Each goal has a list of targets that are measured with indicators.

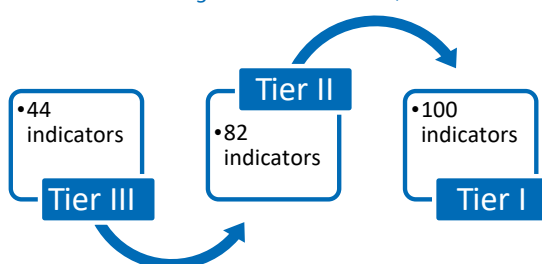
The global indicator framework developed by the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) contains 232 **unique** indicators for measuring 169 targets for the 17 SDGs. The indicators are classified into three 'tiers':

- **Tier I** indicators are conceptually clear, have an internationally established methodology with available standards, and data are regularly produced by at least 50 per cent of countries in every region where the indicator is relevant.
- **Tier II** indicators are conceptually clear, have an internationally established methodology with available standards, but data are not regularly produced by countries.
- **Tier III** indicators currently have no internationally established methodology or standards, but they are being (or will be) developed or tested.

IAEG-SDGs has made vast progress on the data-gathering approach and methodology for most indicators, formally recognising them and allowing for a more comprehensive measurement of the indicator sets in the global SDG indicator framework.

The updated classification contains 93 Tier I indicators, 72 Tier II indicators and 62 Tier III indicators. In addition, there are five indicators that have multiple tiers (different components are classified into different tiers).

**FIGURE 1**  
Tier classification of global SDG indicators, March 2019



Note: Six other indicators have components in different tiers.  
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Many of the indicators have been reclassified from Tier III to Tier II, and from Tier II to Tier I. As of the end of April 2019, the classification comprises 100 Tier I indicators, 82 Tier II indicators and 44 Tier III indicators, with 6 indicators having multiple tiers. A comprehensive review will be conducted at the 51st session of the United Nations Statistical Commission, in March 2020. Tiers are regularly reviewed; ultimately, tiers II and III will vanish, and only a single tier will remain, comprising the entire set of indicators.

In the context of both voluntary national reviews (VNRs) presented at the high-level political forum as well as national reporting on SDGs, national statistical offices, custodian agencies and other partner agencies for certain indicators are doing their best to significantly increase the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable official data disaggregated by various characteristics, such as income, gender, age, ethnicity, geographic location etc., that are relevant to national contexts. The ongoing progress to localise and mobilise the resources required to implement the 17 SDGs is remarkable, considering the wide range of distinct national realities.

By reviewing and tracking the several rounds of VNRs worldwide from 2016 to 2018 regarding the implementation of the SDGs, we noted, for most countries, a set of indicators that—from the point of view of the respective country's authorities—does not apply to their national context. We call this set of indicators 'Tier 0'. They represent varying percentages that may exceed 50 per cent of the total of 232 indicators—for example, Malaysia 12 indicators (5 per cent), Netherlands 44 indicators (19 per cent), Moldova 70 indicators (30 per cent), Sweden 109 indicators (47 per cent) etc.

None of the VNRs explicitly state the number of Tier 0 indicators or explain why these indicators are not considered applicable to national contexts.

For the sake of better reporting and clarity, we recommend that both VNRs and national reporting cycles on the SDGs include Tier 0 as an additional tier of indicators.

Contrary to the North–South approach of the MDGs, the SDGs apply universally to all countries (developed, developing and least developed). Given this significant heterogeneity, it is important, when measuring performance according to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, that a country may additionally provide a valid (although brief), evidence-based explanation as to why the set of Tier 0 indicators is deemed irrelevant for its national context.

#### References:

- United Nations. 2019. *Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. A/RES/71/313, E/CN.3/2018/2, E/CN.3/2019/2. New York: United Nations. <[https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/Global%20Indicator%20Framework%20after%202019%20refinement\\_Eng.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/Global%20Indicator%20Framework%20after%202019%20refinement_Eng.pdf)>. Accessed 17 June 2019.
- United Nations Economic and Social Council. 2018. *Statistical Commission. Fiftieth session, 5–8 March 2019: Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators*. New York: United Nations Economic and Social Council. <<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/E/CN.3/2019/2>>. Accessed 17 June 2019.