SDG indicators challenged by many UN member states
By Bhumika Muchhala (New York, 24 March 2016)

UN Member States voice serious concerns at the Statistical Commission’s adoption of the
global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals

While the “global indicator framework” for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission on 11 March, the content of and process by which the indicators were formulated proved to be contentious and challenging.

The UN Statistical Commission held its 47th session on 8-11 March at the UN headquarters in New York. The central agenda item was the adoption of the indicators for the SDGs, generated by the Interagency and Expert Group on the SDGs (IAEG).

Many Member States expressed reservations and serious content concerns, and called for national and regional level indicators to play a stronger role, as well as future opportunities to update and amend the indicators. They also called for attention on scaling up capacity building in the National Statistical Offices of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS).

In the final decision, the Statistical Commission requested the IAEG to take into account the specific proposals made by Member States and asked them to “report back to the commission at its 48th session on progress made in developing and improving global indicators, especially on plans to develop methodologies for indicators in tier III, including for work on definitions and standards to be agreed at the international level with a view to guaranteeing international comparability.”

Importantly, the decision also emphasized that the SDG indicators are not necessarily applicable to all national contexts, and are intended for global follow-up and review of the SDGs. Indicators for regional, national and subnational levels of monitoring will have to be developed at the regional and national levels. The decision emphasized that national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development and that national reviews are voluntary and country-led, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development with respect to policy space and priorities.

This language reflects the views articulated by many developing countries on the lack of trust, transparency and disclosure in the IAEG process of formulating the indicators. The distrust is particular to the risk that an emphasis on “comparability” will pressure countries to use the
global indicators framework as a starting point, rather than as one of several reference points.

Statistical capacity building for LDCs, SIDS and land-locked least developing countries is recognized. Efforts by the UN system to strengthen national statistical capacities are stressed, as well as coordination between national statistical systems and international organizations.

Improvements in data disaggregation are deemed fundamental for the full implementation of the indicator framework and to fully reflect the principles of the 2030 agenda. One key action for data disaggregation is to establish a working group that will strengthen national capacities and develop the necessary statistical standards and tools.

Two key areas that the indicator framework did not address are the lack of transparency and openness in the process of the IAEG group as well as the numerous and significant gaps in the content of the indicators and the degree to which they reflect the actual targets under each SDG.

The next step for the indicator framework is the 3rd meeting of the IAEG in Mexico City during the last week of March 2016, where the tier system will be discussed and an agreement will be arrived at, together with a work plan for the coming year. Adoption of the global indicators framework by the Economic and Social Commission (ECOSOC) and the UN General Assembly will then commence. A submission to the High Level Political Forum will be in July 2016.

**Member States voice varying concerns**

The **G77 and China** group of 134 developing countries, represented by Thailand as its chair for 2016, stressed the importance of political oversight over the global indicators. While the indicators are supposed to encompass all 17 SDGs and 169 targets in a balanced and integrated manner, the G77 noted that Goal 17 on Means of Implementation (MOI) has not been adequately integrated. The indicators should be faithful to the SDGs and should not reinterpret its targets, it stressed.

The Group also noted that the work of the IAEG must be accompanied by capacity-building efforts to strengthen national statistical capacities in developing countries, particularly African countries, LDCs, landlocked developing countries and SIDS and other countries in special situations.

The G77 and China emphasized that many targets emphasize the obligations of developing countries and undermine those of developed countries. In the long term, the statistical community will need to identify indicators to complement the existing ones.

The Group also stressed that the work of the IAEG is a work in progress and that its work should not be prematurely concluded. In other words, the report of the IAEG by the Statistical Commission is not and will not be the end of the work on global indicators. The Group noted the importance of the IAEG maintaining an inclusive, open and transparent process, particularly with regard to transparency and public access to official statistics.

Finally, the G77 and China urged that national ownership is key and should be the guiding principle of the global indicator framework, in that the proposed indicators may not be applicable to all national contexts and country reviews. As noted in the 2030 Agenda, targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own targets guided by the
global level of ambition, but taking into account national circumstances. This means that regional and national level indicators will complement the global indicators, with the national frameworks being voluntary and country-led, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development. The importance of the national context was solidified as the Group stated that national processes would be the foundation for reviews at the regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.

The European Union, represented by the Netherlands, emphasized the need to develop a work plan for methodological advancement and international comparability. They stressed the importance of placing indicators in the technical domain. To ensure international comparability and avoiding data duplication, international and regional instruments should be considered. The EU highlighted the need for cooperation between National Statistical Offices and supranational institutions.

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) group, represented by Bangladesh in 2016, raised the importance of the LDC technology bank, which was discussed in the 2030 Agenda but is not adequately addressed in the IAEG indicators framework. LDCs stressed that many indicators fail to address the target. For example, indicator 17.8.1, “Proportion of individuals using the Internet” does not capture target 17.8 which is to “Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology.”

The LDCs group stressed the importance of taking universality into better account. Many of the indicators can be better measured and implemented by developed countries, which will result in major differences in performances between developed and developing countries. In reality, however, the performance of developing countries may be similar but the appearance and reporting may be far less impressive due to the lack of capacity in statistical, monitoring and reporting functions. The strengthening of National Statistical Offices in LDCs is thus a priority task in the 2030 Agenda.

Small Island Developing States (SIDs) stressed the need to increase the degree of transparency, openness and inclusiveness in the formulation of the global indicators framework. This call echoed the general sentiment among a large number of Member States that the IAEG’s process thus far has not been inclusive, transparent and open with regard to Member States in New York.

SIDs noted that a total of 241 indicators represent a four-fold increase over the 60 indicators in the Millennium Development Goals agenda. Specific indicators are also being introduced at the regional and national levels, which will require a scaling up of national investments in data collection. SIDs have consistently called for standardized data, as this issue is of considerable importance for the already strained National Statistics Offices in SIDs.

The African Group, represented by Tanzania, requested sufficient time to discuss ‘grey’ indicators at national and regional levels and the necessity of a discussion on how to enhance the annual report of SDGs in terms of a clear understanding of what will be required at the minimum, given the reality that some African countries may not be able to report annually. Human development and effective data cooperation is important, and resources and funds need
to be mobilized at the global level for the Group to be able to produce the requisite data.

(‘Grey’ indicators refer to those that have not been agreed on and that need further work.)

**Land-Locked Developing Countries** (LLDCs) stressed that all indicators should be further disaggregated. The Vienna Programme of Action is integral to this and one of the goals should be to minimize the reporting burden that LLDCs face. The LLDC group has special needs and there are some indicators that are especially important in tracking progress for LLDCs such as trade facilitation and regional integration to name a few.

**India** expressed its key concern that the indicators seem to go beyond the remit of the target they seem to be measuring and appear to editorialize the content of the targets themselves. In some other cases, the indicators do not seem to be directly relevant to the targets they are measuring, it pointed out, giving targets 3(c), 8(b), 9.4 as some examples.

The focus of most of the indicators seems to be exclusively on national action, even in respect of those targets that are clearly meant for international cooperation. For example, for target 1(a): ‘Ensure significant mobilization of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions’, the suggested indicator focuses only on national resource availability and does not mention international resources. This is true of several such targets.

India said that needless to say, this detracts from the spirit of the SDGs and in particular the Means of Implementation Goal 17 targets which seek to enhance international support for developing country actions.

It referred to several other indicators that seem to rely primarily on perception surveys or opinion polls as the primary data set. For example, the indicator 10.3.1: ‘Percentage of population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed within the last 12 months on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law’, or indicator 16.6.2: ‘Proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services’.

While some such perception surveys may have been used in a few, usually developed, countries, there are no internationally accepted standards or guidelines for them, said India. Extending them to a universal agenda and to developing countries would require significant additional work and would also have to account for socio-cultural differences among countries. Without these considerations, India cautioned that such indicators could be overly subjective, imprecise and also prone to misuse.

India stressed that while the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs are universal, they are also differentiated. Target 12.1 for example clearly mandates the developed countries to take the lead in implementation when it comes to promoting sustainable patterns of consumption. The indicator for this target in 12.1.1 addresses the number of countries with sustainable consumption and production (SCP) national action plans or a priority or target of SCP in national policies. This indicator thus completely neglects the dimension of developed country responsibility for sustainable consumption. It could be argued that this mis-focus is also
political, according to India.

**China** emphasized the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and pressed for its inclusion in the final report of the Statistical Commission. The CBDR principle has been deleted from the report and currently does not appear in the version submitted to the Commission.

China offered three reasons for the re-inclusion of CBDR. First, the 2030 Agenda reiterates (1992) Rio Principles such as CBDR. Therefore, the indicators should reflect this. Second, the inclusion of CBDR could reflect the concern by statistical institutions of the varying statistical capacities of countries. Third, those countries with a weak statistical capacity can also accept this indicator framework.

China said there are too many indicators for Goal 16, but Goal 17 on means of implementation, which is key to the implementation of the SDGs, has a clear lack of indicators, and the ones that are present are weak or insufficient. Greater focus should be placed on these issues and priorities in the follow-up process. Some indicators should be modified or improved for the following reasons: (1) Member States did not have enough time to discuss ‘grey’ indicators; (2) algorithms classification and grouping of indicators remain to be refined; and, (3) some indicators are not easy to quantify and cannot allow for the full measurement of relevant targets.

(SDG 16 is to ‘Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’.)

**Japan** expressed dissatisfaction with the process of the IAEG, and highlighted that civil society participation is important to include in the global indicator formulation process. It hoped that a meaningful modification of proposed indicators will be carried out in the IAEG. Japan also expressed regret that many countries have not been consulted on the development of new indicators in Annex 4, adding that it also has proposals on the new indicators in Annex 4 which it was not able to submit.

**Germany** pointed out that the indicators framework contains several cases where the target is not addressed in its entirety, and to address this need for improvement further methodological work will be necessary. The future work plan for the IAEG should include the assignment of indicators to different tiers. Expert groups can make valuable contributions to the IAEG, and these experts groups should be included in close cooperation, with an enhanced focus on disaggregation.

**Cuba, Mexico and Jamaica** also emphasized the importance of an inclusive and transparent process, and the need for greater capacity building. Governments should increase efforts toward harmonization and standardization of data and disaggregation is crucial in order to leave no one behind. The challenge of this task for LDCs should be addressed, while Member States, regional organizations, civil society and private sector should be included in the process of disaggregating data.