

P O S T C A R D

74. A proposal to monitor intersecting inequalities in the post-2015 Agenda

Deborah S. Rogers

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 is specifically directed at reducing inequalities within and among countries. Beyond this, however, the need to reduce inequalities is also reflected in the requirement for disaggregated monitoring data, and in the declaration presenting the new goals, which states that 'no one will be left behind'. Indeed, tackling inequality is a primary theme that permeates nearly every one of the goals and many of the targets. SDG 1 calls for eradicating extreme poverty and halving poverty as defined nationally, SDG 2 calls for ending hunger, SDG 3 calls for universal health coverage, SDG 4 calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, and so on. To ensure achievement for all, the data for monitoring progress towards most goals must be disaggregated by relevant groups, including socio-economic class, gender and sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, disability, rural or urban location, legal status, and other characteristics that can lead to discrimination.

Inequalities are multidimensional, and various dimensions often interact in the form of a vicious cycle. We cannot focus on just one or two of the dimensions, for example economic inequality or gender discrimination, but must monitor disparities across the spectrum of factors contributing to human well-being. Because political inequalities often serve to perpetuate other inequalities, the key to reducing and overcoming inequalities of all kinds may be broad-based participation in decision-making, monitoring and accountability processes.

Many inequality-related indicators have been proposed, and no set of indicators has been settled on as of the time of writing. Space does not permit an analysis of each proposal. While the development of one synthetic indicator would greatly simplify matters, there can in fact be no objective indicator that is synthetic across the range of dimensions of inequality.

A subjective indicator could come closer, however: for example, asking individuals how they perceive and feel about their own well-being and prospects, compared with those of others in their community and society.

If we could choose three indicators for monitoring progress on reducing inequality, I would suggest the following:

Economic: I recommend using the Palma ratio for each nation (ratio of the income share of the top 10 per cent to that of the bottom 40 per cent) before and after transfers. The Palma ratio is thought to be the most sensitive to changes in economic inequality, because the income of those between the fiftieth and the ninetieth percentiles is relatively stable.

Social: I recommend a subjective assessment of relative well-being across a range of indicators (social acceptance, personal safety, health, education, housing, employment, financial stability, community influence and so on), disaggregated by characteristics relevant to discrimination. This would not be a measure of perceived happiness or optimism, but rather a set of questions concerning subjective perceptions of relative well-being along multiple dimensions (for example, do I feel that I am safer or less safe than others?), to determine whether different groups in society answer differently, and whether these differences are internally consistent.

Political: Political participation is a key leverage point in reducing inequalities. I recommend measuring representation in various local, national and international decision-making bodies, disaggregated by characteristics relevant to discrimination. While this does not measure actual political participation by all groups, it measures the outcome of that participation: the numbers of people from various social groups who end up in positions of decision-making power.

These three indicators are relevant to every nation on Earth, making the new equality-and-justice-focused SDGs much more powerful than the old poverty-and-aid-focused MDGs. However, monitoring these indicators will be difficult in terms of cost, credibility and political will. It is unlikely that most individual nations, or the United Nations itself, will allocate the funds needed to conduct scientific surveys for all these social indicators.

The most efficient means of monitoring would be a participatory, citizen-initiated monitoring and accountability approach, as recommended in the United Nations' 2014 Consultation on Participatory Monitoring and Accountability (see UNICEF, UN Women and UNDP, 2015).¹ Rather than utilizing a centralized, staff-based research approach, participatory monitoring relies on civil society actors to facilitate subjective feedback and monitoring by members of poor and marginalized communities. Community findings and priorities are then brought forward through organized citizen initiatives to hold governments accountable for progress towards the development goals.

At least two such civil society proposals are already being tested: the Frontline project by the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) and the Field Hearings project by Initiative for Equality (IfE). Two other initiatives, the World Values Survey and the regional Barometer series (including Afrobarometer, Asia Barometer and so on), also provide data on citizen views, but are staff-based and do not engage in accountability activities.

Governments and private stakeholders that benefit from the status quo will probably not have the political will or motivation to monitor progress toward reducing inequalities, and may not accept citizen monitoring results as credible. But this is a matter of political interests rather than any lack of resources or technical proficiency.

Assessments of transparency and accountability initiatives suggest that the participatory monitoring and accountability approach recommended above, if well organized, can be effective in empowering citizens to demand more equitable development, as well as other public goods and policies, from their governments. In the end, this political pressure from below will be more effective than SDGs without teeth to give them bite.

Note

1. See Initiative for Equality's report on its Participatory Monitoring project, submitted to the UN Consultation on Participatory Monitoring and Accountability: Rogers et al. (2014).

Bibliography

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■ **Deborah S. Rogers** (USA) is affiliated scholar, Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, Stanford University, and president, Initiative for Equality. Her research interests include socio-economic inequality, citizen participation in decision-making, and achieving sustainable human well-being.