

ONS approach to measuring and reporting Sustainable Development Goals in the UK: response to [consultation](#)

Summary

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a learned society and professional body for statisticians and data analysts. We are one of the world's leading organisations engaged in promoting the importance of statistics and data, and have done so since we were founded in 1834. When global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched in 2015, the RSS issued a statement drawing attention to the fact that although considerable progress has been made throughout the world strengthening the capacity of national statistical systems, much still remains to be done.¹ In response to the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) [consultation](#) on measuring and reporting on SDGs in the UK, we:

- Express our strong interest in a fuller plan of how the UK's sustainable development indicators are being developed and published, to ensure that SDGs form an integrated part of statistical presentation of the state of the nation and national wellbeing.
- Support that the ONS has been given additional resources to fulfil the challenging agenda of producing meaningful data on all 244 global indicators set out in the SDGs.
- Recommend a fully flexible framework for analysis, be it by goal, target, indicator, by special interest group, or locality. This should be accompanied, as with any statistics, by all the metadata required to ensure that their quality and context is understood and thus correct use is made of them.
- Recommend that to assist other countries, the tools ONS develops for measuring and reporting sustainable development indicators should be made openly available and disseminated through the Department for International Development's statistical capacity building programmes.
- Stand ready to organise a meeting (or meetings) between producers and users once firmer proposals are available, for example to explore the measurement of the more novel indicators in Tier III.

Full Response

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) welcomes the leading role that UK has taken in developing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the global level, in the United Nations and other international fora. The SDGs represent a new and ambitious agenda for world development and an effective system of targets and indicators to underpin them will be central to the monitoring of progress. If the world is to live up to the promises made by our leaders, then more and better data will be essential. This is true of developed countries such as the UK as well as those in the developing world if the underlying ambition of 'leaving no-one behind' is to be achieved.

Given the breadth of this agenda, we are somewhat surprised that this consultation has such a narrow focus, concentrating mainly on presentation and reporting rather than delving into the

challenges of developing new and innovative data sources and methods to measure the more novel indicators, in particular those in Tier III. Research in other branches of statistics, and indeed in other branches of science, may have techniques and models that can be brought to bear on such issues, and the Society stands ready to facilitate such discussions. We look forward to seeing a fuller plan of how the sustainable development indicators are being developed and published, and for how all users, including citizens, will be engaged.

Turning to the specific issues as set out in the consultation document, our view can be summarised as follows: the SDGs should be seen as an integral part of ONS's – and indeed the Government Statistical Service's - statistical depiction of the 'state of the nation', not as an add-on or in any way separate from the ways in which national well-being is already measured and reported on. Although in some areas the current way in which wellbeing is measured in the UK may go beyond what the SDGs require, in many others the SDGs will supplement what is already collected and published. This fuller picture can only be to the advantage of users and commentators.

The consultation document asks whether the ONS should produce a report that combines measures to report on UK progress overall or one which is focussed solely on the SDGs. While it will be important for SDG indicators to be flagged as such within the data reporting system, so that users can extract them in whatever way they wish, we would argue that they should be made available alongside other indicators which, while not part of the SDG framework, are nevertheless linked to them and important in a national context. Flexibility of access to the indicators for users will be key, and we would urge that users are involved in the design of the new reporting system.

The questions of whether goal by goal, target by target, etc reporting should be the priority is something of a red herring – the database needs to be constructed and made available to users in a way that enables them to set their own framework for analysis, be it by goal, target, indicator or by special interest group, locality and so on, given the emphasis on 'leave no-one behind'. Again, flexibility is the key, particularly given that user requirements will almost certainly change over the lifetime of the SDGs.

As with any statistics, the indicators will need to be accompanied by all the metadata required to ensure that their quality and context is understood and thus correct use is made of them. In this context we would like to emphasise the importance of attaching estimates of statistical error (from sampling and modelling) to reported estimates and some indication of confidence intervals when comparing sub-groups as part of the required disaggregation – though we appreciate that for many of the indicators sampling error will be a relatively small part of the total error. The analysis of changes over time will become more important as the time series build up. We hope that care will be taken in considering what the most appropriate measures of change are, and whether the observed changes are more than would be expected as a result of sampling error.

We note that the devolved administrations (Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) will have their own reporting arrangements for the SDGs. We assume that there will nevertheless be a role for the ONS in bringing all country (and region/local) data together to provide a UK picture, for national as

well as international purposes. Coherence across the indicators produced for the UK and for the devolved administrations is very important. We urge that the results for the devolved administrations should be made available to users alongside those produced by the ONS through the same reporting system, so that users can make comparisons seamlessly, with full explanations of any differences in definitions or methods.

An important aspect of the SDGs for the UK is that, in principle, they will facilitate robust international comparisons. Although much of the reporting of international comparisons will be the responsibility of international organisations, we hope that they will also feature prominently in the ONS reporting of progress towards the SDGs.

It is clear that to produce meaningful data on all 244 global indicators will be a challenge for the UK statistical system, though we are pleased to note that ONS has been given additional resources to fulfil this agenda. However, too many countries operate under much more severe financial and human resource constraints than the UK.

When the SDGs were launched in 2015, the RSS issued a statement on World Statistics Day drawing attention to the fact that although considerable progress has been made throughout the world in building and strengthening the capacity of national statistical systems since the launch of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, much still remains to be done. To meet the data challenges of the SDGs, national statistical systems must be properly financed, the development of statistical skills and expertise must be supported, and access to new tools and technology must be provided. Also, support must be provided not just to the collection of data, but to its transformation into useful and actionable information available to everyone who needs it, not least the poor and the marginalised.

The RSS International Development Section is taking a keen interest in the global partnerships which are being set up to support poorly resourced countries to build capacity to collect and analyse the data of relevance to the SDG monitoring. Some of the reporting tools that the ONS is developing have the potential to be of great use to such countries too. We trust that they will be made openly available, and that ways will be found through DfID statistical capacity building programmes to promote their adoption and use.

Response submitted 21 September 2017

ⁱ RSS (2015) 'Data for Sustainable Development – A Statement for World Statistics Day' [webpage] http://www.rss.org.uk/RSS/Influencing_Change/World_Statistics_Day_statement/RSS/Influencing_Change/World_Statistics_Day_statement.aspx