

Article

Sustainable Development Goals: progress and possibilities: November 2017

Our first report on progress made towards measuring the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators in the UK.

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1 . Foreword

Welcome to our first report on measuring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Alongside our progress and plans, we are also delighted to launch our new reporting tool, which will help us engage with a wider audience as we build our ability to provide insight to the UK through this work.

Alongside the UK Statistics Authority's objective of [Better Statistics, Better Decisions](#), we are embracing the SDG principle to "Leave no one behind". Since the 2015 UN resolution when the UK government signed up to this programme, we have seen the goals gain ground with businesses, academics and citizens who care about the future of our planet and its people, as well as other governments across the globe. This is brought home to us more and more as we meet people at home and abroad and hear about the real value to increasing measurement and transparency across each of the goals.

Today, we have data for 41% of the 232 global SDG indicators. Whilst progress has been made and we have set out the way in which we want to develop further in collaboration with others, there is still much more to do.

Our team is committed to exploring existing data to identify gaps that need to be filled and increasingly making the indicators relevant to all communities. We will have greater impact when information is personalised and people see themselves reflected back in the data we share with them. To this end, we are forging strong links with our data science experts to fully exploit the data revolution. Reporting on the SDGs will take us to new areas of knowledge and open new possibilities. We must be open to a variety of novel ideas and applications.

It is the responsibility of Office for National Statistics (ONS) to report on UK progress towards the global goals in a way that is meaningful and supports decision-making. To achieve this agenda, we must work together with a wide community, many of whom have already contributed through supplying data and advice. We'd like to thank all those that have helped us get this far. We will continue to rely on many of you to achieve our ambition to report on all goals and we look forward to seeing these new opportunities and developments take shape.

Emma Rourke
Director, Public Policy Analysis

2 . Main points

- This is Office for National Statistics' (ONS's) first report outlining our plans and progress towards measuring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- We are launching our [national reporting platform](#), where you can view the indicators in chart or table format, or download the underlying data.
- To date we have collected data for 96 of the 232 global SDG indicators (41%).
- This report is separate to the consultation on our approach to SDGs that ran until late September 2017; we are analysing the results of this, and will publish our response in December 2017.

3 . Introduction

This is our first report on the progress we've made towards measuring the global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators in the UK; it will look at the work we have been doing to be able to measure our progress. It will also explain how we are already sharing the data we have.

This report will set out:

- the work we've done with colleagues and interested parties across the UK and further afield – remembering that this Agenda is global, collaborative and universal
- how we're planning to put the numbers into context
- how we're identifying appropriate data sources and our plans to look at new data sources
- how we make the data available to all

Background

The SDGs are a universal call to action to [end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030](#). They are a set of ambitious goals and supporting targets, agreed at the United Nations' Sustainable Development World Summit in September 2015, and are the result of over two years of extensive consultation. The goals are universal, for all countries and people, and aim to ensure that we leave no one behind as we strive for progress.

The Global Goals "Agenda 2030" is hugely ambitious; there are 17 goals underpinned by 169 targets agreed at the political level. To show what progress the world is making towards the targets, there are 232¹ indicators to be measured and reported, proposed by the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDGs (UN IAEG), and agreed by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) as a [practical starting point](#) (PDF 658.12KB). One of the core principles of the agenda is "Leave no one behind"; each of the 232 indicators should be disaggregated so that we can account for everyone. There are eight main disaggregations to be measured for all indicators² (where applicable), plus additional disaggregations where needed. Our challenge is to source and interpret data for those that relate to the UK.

As the UK's national statistics institute, Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for monitoring the UK's progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. We will:

- source the appropriate UK data for the global indicators
- provide data to the international organisations responsible for each indicators, known as Custodian Agencies, who will report them to the United Nations
- analyse the data so that we can put it into context
- make the data available to everybody using an online tool and supporting reports

Over the summer, we ran a public consultation asking for feedback on our approach to reporting and prioritising data development for the SDGs. We are currently analysing the results and will publish our response in December 2017.

Notes for: Introduction

1. The total number of indicators is 244. However, because nine indicators repeat under two or three different targets the actual total number of individual indicators in the list is 232. For more information, see the [SDG Indicators framework](#).
2. Income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. For more information, see paragraph 74.g in [Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, published October 2015](#).

4 . International collaboration

We are in good company as we face this challenge; all of the countries who signed up to this agenda will need to deal with the same issues. A survey of UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) countries in 2017 showed that, on average, countries estimate that they currently have data or proxy data for just over half of the global indicators. Across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) we will work with our international colleagues to develop new data sources and methods, to agree best practices, and, wherever possible, to harmonise our statistics to improve the aggregation and comparison of country data.

During the early development of the global indicator framework, the UK had an ex-officio ¹ position on the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group (UN IAEG) because the UK's National Statistician, John Pullinger, was the chair of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) at that time. We are no longer a member of that group, but we continue to be involved in a number of international initiatives. For example, the UK is a Steering Group member of the Conference of European Statisticians' (CES) Expert Group on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)², and contributed to the development of a "roadmap for the development of official statistics for monitoring SDGs", which was launched in June 2017. The roadmap provides a strategy on how to implement a monitoring system for SDGs under the CES; it is a living document and will continue to be updated to take account of developments around statistics for SDGs. It sets out what needs to be done, who needs to be involved and where there are opportunities for co-operation.

The UK is also a member of a Task Force on Reporting SDG indicators using National Reporting Platforms ³ (NRPs). The Task Force is working on a document that maps the main features across several existing NRPs and includes case studies showing how different countries have approached reporting their data.

As described in the section "Other developments", the UK is also involved in international work looking at geospatial data, as well as leading on the development of harmonised standards for ageing, having proposed the Titchfield City Group on ageing and age-disaggregated data.

Notes for: International collaboration

1. An ex-officio member is a member of a body (such as a board, committee or council) that is part of it by right of position or office.
2. Along with the United States (co-chair), Switzerland (co-chair), Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Sweden, Turkey, UNECE, Eurostat and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). For more information, see the [terms of reference of this group \(PDF 126.16KB\)](#).
3. Along with Poland (chair), Canada, Germany, Mexico, Sweden, United States and the UNECE. For more information, see the [terms of reference of this group \(PDF 22.4KB\)](#).

5 . Global indicators

When the global indicators were agreed by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC), we began a "stock take" to see where the UK already had data available and where we had data gaps. Some indicators are easily identifiable as existing National Statistics, such as [Gross domestic product \(GDP\) per head](#), the [unemployment rate](#), or [mortality rates by cause of death](#). However, this is a global agenda and the methods we use do not always align with the methods suggested for the global indicators. For some indicators, there are no universally agreed methods at all.

The 232 global indicators have been divided into tiers, depending on the existence of agreed standards or methods and the availability of data:

- tier 1: indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, and data are regularly produced by countries for at least 50% of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant
- tier 2: indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, but data are not regularly produced by countries
- tier 3: no internationally established methodology or standards are yet available for the indicator, but methodology or standards are being (or will be) developed or tested

As at April 2017, there were 82 tier 1 indicators, 62 tier 2 indicators and 84 tier 3 indicators, as well as a further five indicators that can be assigned to [multiple tiers](#). The tier classifications will be reviewed at the sixth meeting of the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group (UN IAEG) in November 2017.

To date, we have acquired data for 41% of the global indicators (96 of the 232 indicators). The total number of indicators is 244. However, because nine indicators repeat under two or three different targets the actual total number of individual indicators in the list is 232. For more information, see the [SDG Indicators framework](#). By tier, we have:

- 51 tier 1 indicators (62% of tier 1)
- 31 tier 2 indicators (50% of tier 2)
- 14 tier 3 indicators (17% of tier 3)

[Annex A](#) shows how many indicators for which we have data, including the extent to which it is disaggregated.

6 . The challenge of disaggregation

The 232 global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators “should be disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location, or other characteristics, in accordance with the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics”¹.

The UK’s Government Statistics Service (GSS) routinely collects and publishes statistics related to the economy, population and society at national, regional and local levels; we have long established statistical systems that provide rigorous, comprehensive and independent statistics for the UK. Despite all this, the challenge ahead is enormous.

But we are ready! We are committed to the “Leave no one behind” principle. We will seek to identify those furthest behind and to develop data that tracks their progress – or lack thereof – so that our governments have the information they need to make better decisions around policy evaluation and formation. The National Statistician, John Pullinger, was recently quoted as saying “good data makes it intolerable to ignore”; we accept this challenge to draw out disparities so they cannot be ignored.

For some indicators, we may have data at the national level but our existing data sources, many of which are survey based, don’t always allow us to disaggregate by all main groups. This means looking for new data sources, linking existing ones, or modelling. For example, the mortality team in Office for National Statistics (ONS) are looking into the possibility of linking death registration data to 2011 Census or Hospital Episode Statistics data so that we can report on deaths from suicide by ethnic group. This will provide disaggregated data for the suicide mortality rate indicator under Target 3.4, which is about ending premature mortality and promoting mental health and well-being.

Target 17.18 is about enhancing capacity-building support to significantly increase the availability of high quality, timely and reliable data fully disaggregated by the relevant characteristics. To achieve this will require a radical shift to global systems. The UK GSS is represented on an international expert group on disaggregation and, through the Department for International Development (DFID), has published a [Data Disaggregation Action Plan](#) on actions they will take to work towards addressing disaggregation in the SDGs both internally and working with the international community. This includes the idea for a [City Group](#) on ageing and age-disaggregated data.

Preparing for an ageing population is integral to the achievement of the integrated 2030 Agenda, with a particular emphasis on SDGs related to poverty eradication, good health, gender equality, decent work, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and peaceful and inclusive societies. To better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by older persons and to assess their economic, social, health and cultural conditions, systematic data analysis, data disaggregation and data collection approaches and methodologies need to be developed to fill these data and evidence gaps. This is why, at the 48th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) in March 2017, ONS proposed the establishment of the Titchfield City Group on ageing and age-disaggregated data.

To help lay foundations for the group we hosted a technical workshop in Winchester in August 2017. More than 50 representatives of national statistical offices, the United Nations system, other international organisations, civil society organisations and academia attended. Participants shared knowledge and experience on the core issues of age-disaggregated data and ageing statistics, and sought to advance consensus on the objectives, organisation, activities, expected deliverables and timeline for the proposed city group. Terms of reference for the group will be put forward for consideration at the 49th session of UNSC, proposing they contribute to the following development outcomes:

- improved and harmonised statistical measurement and dissemination of information about the life course, enabling evidence-based policy-making in relation to ageing
- greater awareness among policy-makers and development practitioners about the importance of the ageing agenda, and the 2030 Agenda pledge to “Leave no one behind” and to reach the furthest behind first
- greater availability of tools and guidelines to increase capacity and facilitate understanding and action on ageing issues

As further affirmation of our commitment to the “Leave no one behind” agenda, we are also working to develop a new global Inclusive Data Charter together with the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD) and their partners. The Inclusive Data Charter is expected to be launched at the UN General Assembly in September 2018 and then at the World Data Forum in October 2018. This multi-stakeholder charter is expected to recognise the need to build data disaggregation into country systems including civil and vital registration systems, administrative data systems and censuses.

Following the introduction of [new data sharing legislation](#) this year, we will also be working with colleagues to explore the new opportunities this offers to access and link different admin datasets that will allow us to fill some of these disaggregation gaps.

We hope to publish our data development roadmap and progress towards these projects via the [ONS website](#) and our [National Reporting Platform](#). In the meantime if you would like to get in touch with us to discuss these projects or suggest ways that we could collaborate, please contact us by emailing SustainableDevelopment@ons.gsi.gov.uk.

Notes for: The challenge of disaggregation

1. For more information, see paragraph 26 of the [Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators \(PDF 930.06KB\)](#), published February 2016.

7 . Publishing the data

We have been developing our own [online reporting platform](#) for disseminating UK data for the global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators. This reporting platform will have a dual purpose – to make UK data on SDGs publically available to those with an interest in the progress the UK is making towards achieving the SDGs and to provide a “one stop” collection point for the Custodian Agencies who need UK data to prepare the aggregated, global figure to report to the UN. Our reporting platform is still a “work in progress” and we are currently testing the latest version with potential users of UK SDGs indicator data. Feedback on the tool is welcome – please send your comments to sustainabledevelopment@ons.gsi.gov.uk.

The UK SDGs reporting platform was originally based on an open source version created by the US Government. We then developed the platform further, for example, adding improvements in how disaggregated data could be visualised. We continue to collaborate with the US on developments and on promoting the platform to other countries.

A main focus of the collaboration is co-ordinating support for developing countries introducing their own SDGs reporting platforms. To achieve this we are working closely with UK International Development teams and with the US [Center for Open Data Enterprise \(CODE\)](#) through their [SDG National Reporting Initiative](#).

8 . Other developments

It is not currently possible to report against all 232 indicators using official statistics. The total number of indicators in the final indicator proposal is 244. However, since nine indicators repeat under two or three different targets the actual total number of individual indicators in the list is 232. For more information, see the [SDG Indicators framework](#). When the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators framework was developed, the experts were asked not to be restricted to indicators where data already exists, but to consider what information is needed to measure progress towards the targets. This is why there are so many “tier 3” indicators.

Plans for these are being developed, with the Custodian Agencies – such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), UN Women, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank – leading the work on indicators that fall into their areas of expertise. Where we can, we will work with the Custodian Agencies to influence these work plans. For example, we recently met with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to discuss some of the issues surrounding a number of Goal 16 (peace, inclusivity and justice) indicators.

In the UK, we have been involved in development work for some time. This includes developing measures of time use and unpaid work, and development of natural capital measures that will help populate some SDG indicators. Other development work programmes, such as geospatial and earth observation data programmes, are still in their infancy.

Established development work

Target 5.4 is about recognising the value of unpaid work, an area which is important to help us gain a deeper understanding of the substitution of activities between the household and the market. This is a field where the UK has been making good progress, having published a number of articles this year on unpaid work, including a look at the [changes in the value and division of unpaid care work](#) and the [unequal distribution of unpaid work between men and women](#).

ONS has been working with the UN to produce guidelines on measuring unpaid work and these are due to be published in the next few months. Having robust guidance for measuring unpaid work has the potential of producing reliable data for developed and developing countries, which can then be used to strengthen the economic case for gender equality and develop relevant policies.

We are also leading on the development of Natural Capital Accounts, which link to many of the targets, particularly those in Goal 15, which are about protecting and promoting sustainable use of our terrestrial ecosystems and forests, and halting biodiversity loss and reversing land degradation. We are following our [2020 Roadmap](#), which sets out our plans to develop the accounts. Many of the most valuable services provided by natural capital are intangible and so can easily be overlooked when making policy decisions. Natural capital accounts mean that environmental concerns can be taken properly into account when forming and evaluating policy.

Partial [UK natural capital accounts](#) and habitat-based accounts for [freshwater, farmland and woodland](#) have been published to date. Some natural capital is being degraded, with negative consequences on the services that capital provides. To provide estimates for policy-makers of the costs of restoring degraded natural capital, we are running a pilot project, which is close to completion, and have produced a parallel roadmap for work to begin next year.

New development work

The Data Science Campus

The Data Science Campus (the Campus) remit is to explore innovative new data sources, new tools and new technologies, to inform our understanding of the UK economy, people and society. It carries out short (six months or less) prototyping projects. The Campus is supporting the UK's work on SDGs by exploring the potential of new data sources and techniques to fill the data gaps in the SDG indicators, where more traditional approaches or data sources are not available.

The initial project focuses on the investigation of the use of satellite images as a source of data for land use, for example, estimating the forest coverage of the UK from the images to measure indicator 15.1.1. Satellite data has the potential to provide a number of the SDG indicators, particularly those dealing with land use such as indicator 2.4.1, the proportion of agricultural area under productive and sustainable agriculture, or indicator 15.3.1, the proportion of land that is degraded over the total area. The Campus will also continue to work with the ONS SDG team to identify novel solutions for other data gaps.

Geospatial data

Work has begun evaluating the global indicators to identify the role that geospatial data could play in filling data gaps as well as augmenting, validating, disaggregating, disseminating or visualising sustainable development data. Part of this has included evaluating the spatial disaggregation methods used by the [World Pop Project](#), a project that aims to provide detailed and open access population distribution datasets. ONS has also taken part in a global project to evaluate the feasibility of using the Esri geospatial platform as a reporting mechanism for SDGs, which would allow the UN to pull data directly from member states.

ONS is a member of the Geospatial Working Group of the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group (UN IAEG), which is considering the availability of global geospatial datasets and identifying spatial methodology that could be used to provide disaggregated data. ONS also worked on the development of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework – a set of principles developed by the UN Expert Group on the Integration of Statistics and Geospatial Information (UN EG-ISGI) to support the use of geospatial data within the sustainable development agenda.

9 . Further reporting and next steps

Plans for future publications will be informed by the results of our recent consultation on the approach to reporting and filling data gaps, to which we received over 100 responses. Our initial analysis has told us that people are interested in seeing Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) analysis in a range of formats to reach the broadest possible audience; that they would like the analysis to be supported by easily accessible data; and they highlighted the importance of having clear governance of this work. We are in the process of analysing these results in more detail and will publish a formal response in December.

As well as making the data available for people in our online reporting platform, we will be putting the data into context in a series of narrative publications. Our first publication, on 13 October 2017, looked at the two indicators in Goal 3 that relate to child mortality. We reported that although the UK has seen big improvements in [under five and neonatal mortality rates](#), surpassing the UN targets of 25 and 12 deaths per 1,000 live births over 40 years ago, the rate of progress has slowed in recent years, with many EU countries now recording lower mortality rates than the UK.

This publication was a small piece, looking at two indicators; we have plans for similar pieces later this month. At the moment our vision is to release a series of short pieces using a variety of mechanisms to target different audiences and users. This will lead on to more detailed, thematic analysis, and cross-cutting analysis looking at relationships between indicators, targets and goals. We are keen that our narrative reporting should be collaborative and will be reaching out to partners across government and beyond to look for opportunities to work together.

It is important to remember that the SDG targets are not national targets, they are global, and all countries must strive to make improvements so that we reach the global targets collectively. What we can do in the UK is measure our position in 2015 and monitor any changes over time to see whether or not we are making progress in the right direction. In the meantime, we will make our reports on specific indicators and themes available on our [National Reporting Platform](#).

10 . Where can I find out more?

All of the data will be made available through our [National Reporting Platform](#), which also includes a [Publications page](#) where we will provide links to our narrative reports.

Information about the goals, targets and indicators from a global perspective is available on the [UN's sustainable development website](#), and the UN publishes an annual report outlining progress towards achieving the goals as well as making the international data available online.

The UK government published a document earlier this year explaining their [approach to delivering the goals at home and abroad](#).

If you have further questions, or would like to provide feedback on our reports or our National Reporting Platform, please contact us at sustainabledevelopment@ons.gsi.gov.uk.

11 . Annex A: Data acquired for global Sustainable Development Goal indicators

Table 1 shows how many of the global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators we have acquired for each goal, and whether or not we have disaggregated data. The total number of indicators is 244, as shown in the table below. However, since nine indicators repeat under two or three different targets the actual total number of individual indicators in the list is 232. We have data for 96 indicators, which is 41% of 232 and 39% of 244 indicators. For more information, see the [SDG Indicators framework](#).

Table 1: Data acquired for global Sustainable Development Goal indicators, by disaggregation, UK, 2017

Goal	Number of Indicators for the Goal	Number of Indicators for which we have data	Age	Sex	Income	Geography	Ethnicity	Disability Status	Migratory Status	Other Characteristics
1	14	4	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	
2	13	5	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	
3	27	18	8	9	1	8	0	0	0	
4	11	6	1	4	0	1	0	0	0	
5	14	8	3	2	2	3	2	2	0	
6	11	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	
7	6	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
8	17	13	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	
9	12	9	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	
10	11	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	
11	15	4	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	
12	13	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
13	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
14	10	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
15	14	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	
16	23	6	4	5	0	1	0	0	0	
17	25	5	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	
All Goals	244	96	24	32	4	19	3	3	0	

Source: Office for National Statistics

This information is correct at the time of publication. However, data collection is ongoing and more indicators will be added to our reporting platform as they are identified, acquired and quality assured.