



Data Gap

Moderator



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Marcel works as executive director for the Erasmus Centre for Data Analytics (ECDA), center of expertise and community on data, AI and immersive technologies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. We hold the belief that data, algorithms, and AI act as vehicles to bring the necessary changes and transitions required to confront current and future societal challenges and to move closer to achieving objectives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Marcel also has an advising role to the Erasmus Centre for Energy Transition. This centre of expertise helps students prepare for a leadership role in the energy transition and collaborates with companies and public organizations on research projects that help accelerate the energy transition.

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Here's some background to our discussion of filling the Data Gap:

There exists a persistent perception that we don't know enough facts to engage in adequate – evidence-based – action on many dimensions of sustainable development. As a result, the debate with academics, and also in board rooms and media focuses what to measure and how to define progress. 'What we would like to know cannot be measured, and what can be measured we don't want to know' seems to be the platitude.

Nevertheless, scholars and executives are increasingly using big data to document changes; meanwhile others complain about information overload, about selective data being used to produce alternative truths, or about the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The availability and accumulation of reliable and robust data has become an area of serious contention. There are plenty of questions here:

- open or closed data provision?
- voluntary or mandatory reporting – and what data to use when there's a risk of box ticking?
- which datapoints are most relevant?
- how far can we harmonise or standardise datapoints between countries and industries?
- what's better – to choose one datapoint that summarises everything, but has biases (such as GDP), or adopting a dashboard approach that includes more datapoints but leaves it up to strategists and policy makers to prioritize combinations (nexus) of data (see for instance the discussion in the Netherlands on the meaning of '[brede welvaart](#)' and the link with the SDGs)?
- how can we measure the intangible prerequisites that are essential for progress?
- how can data-driven decisions become part of strategy instead of just an exercise in ticking boxes?
- how can we include measuring the [social benefits that business creates when we measure](#) negative externalities? Social benefits were put on the agenda by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

The SDG approach has been to adopt the holistic approach of using a dashboard, with 17 goals, 169 targets and 230 indicators, spread over four clusters of datapoints: social, economic, ecological and institutional.

These have been criticised from the start as being too many, too few or too biased. [A detailed [summary of that discussion](#): resulted into the translation of the 169 macro-economic targets into 58 actionable and interconnected targets for companies.]

Leaving the details aside, the existence of a Data Gap clearly presents a problem. The UN acknowledges that data is critical for tracking progress, predicting challenges, prioritising efforts, mobilising resources, and tailoring solutions.

And they say that if applied correctly, data is a catalyst for progress – driving more effective, efficient, equitable, timely and transparent action for people and the planet.

Without a centralised power, the UN's forced adoption of a hybrid governance approach to the data challenge of the SDG agenda has resulted in two tracks in the discussion: custodian agencies on one hand, and on the other a large number of platforms, company initiatives and frontrunner countries that all use the frame of the SDGs to harmonise efforts around a common agenda. Right now, it's possible to profit from a substantial '*data dividend*' along these two tracks.

[1] Custodian agencies like the World Bank, the International Labour Organization, and the OECD have been very important in collecting, harmonising and guarding data quality in coordination with Member States and have made considerable progress. For example, between 2015–202, the number of data in the SDG framework for which there was no international or harmonised methodology or standards declined from 40 per cent to nil. Notorious data gaps and blind spots still exist according to a report of the state of data availability in 2023; they are in energy (SDG7), health (SDG3), industry (SDG9), life on land (SDG15), partnerships (SDG17), and water and sanitation (SDG6).

[2] An abundance of platforms, initiatives, and databases has created additional insights but also confusion. Data collected by the UN's initiatives between 2015–2023 is only partly coordinated and/or triggered by the UN – this includes platforms like the UN's Data Commons and its World Data Forum as well as practical guides for data gathering techniques like data storytelling and evidence-based voluntary national reviews. Of the hundreds of other initiatives aimed at accumulating relevant data and insights, some explicitly try to overcome one dimension of the data gap: that we have an overly negative perception of some trends. These include the [SDG Knowledge Hub](#), the [SDG Global Dashboard](#), and [Our World In Data](#). [GapMinder](#), an independent Swedish educational non-profit initiative, aims to

fight global misconceptions. Others focus on collecting and harmonising data on specific targets that have the greatest effect on all other dimensions of sustainable development. An example is the [Living Wage estimates](#) from the Wage Indicator Foundation. These zoom in on SDG8 from the understanding that addressing this target has immense spill-over effects on the rest of the economy.

So, the Data Gap presents a particular paradox:

- On the one hand: considerable advancements in the collection and harmonisation of data on important parts of the SDG agenda make it possible to assess *how far off track we are* from achieving the SDGs. Here's a summary of the main conclusions of the [Sustainable Development Report 2023](#):

Halfway to the deadline for the 2030 Agenda, we are leaving more than half the world behind. Progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; it has stalled or gone into reverse for 30 per cent of targets – these include key targets on poverty, hunger and climate. Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda could become an epitaph for a world that might have been. The COVID-19 pandemic and the triple crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are having a devastating and lasting impact. This has been amplified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has driven increases in the prices of food and energy and in the cost of access to finance, creating a global cost-of-living crisis affecting billions of people.

- On the other hand: the data dividend that has been achieved also makes it increasingly possible to define *why* we are off track, and what interventions to prioritise in which contexts, and what kind of data gathering and harmonisation is needed to achieve progress. What datapoints should we concentrate on, and how can this be organised on a global and local scale?