SDSN – JICA Ogata Research Institute (ORI)

Kick-off Workshop: Toward a Post-2030 Sustainable Development Indicator Framework

Structured Summary of Key Messages

Sunway University, Kuala Lumpur, July 30th, 2026 (hybrid), 14.00 to 18.30

Full recording of the kick-off workshop
Press Release announcing SDSN-JICA Cooperation:

1. Overview

SDSN and the JICA Ogata Research Institute (ORI) convened a kick-off workshop at Sunway University, Kuala Lumpur, launching a two-year joint research partnership on the design of a post-2030 sustainable development indicator and monitoring framework. The workshop brought together close to 100 participants from 20+ countries in person and online including UN representatives, national governments, SDG negotiators, statistical agencies, business leaders, practitioners, and researchers.

Opening remarks were provided by **Dr. Akihiko Tanaka** (JICA President) and **Prof. Jeffrey Sachs** (SDSN President). Dr. Guillaume Lafortune (SDSN Vice President) moderated the discussions. Workshop speakers included:

1. Prof. Enrico Giovannini (UN High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP)
2. Prof. Phoebe Koundouri (Co-Chair of the 2027 GSDR)
3. Mr. Navid Hanif (UNDESA) (pre-recorded video intervention)
4. Dr. Ichiro Sato (JICA ORI)
5. Ambassador David Donoghue (former Perm. Rep. of Ireland to the UN & SDG negotiation co-facilitator)
6. Dr. Marianne Beisheim (German Institute for International and Security Affairs and GSDR member)
7. Prof. Huadong Guo (International Research Center of Big Data for SDGs, China)
8. Dr. Takahiro Otsuka (JICA ORI)
9. Dr. Simona Marinescu (International Data Center Authority)
10. Prof. Arunima Malik (University of Sydney)
11. Dr. Cameron Allen (Monash University)
12. Dr. Graham Long (Newcastle University)
13. Prof. Prajal Pradhan (University of Groningen)
14. Dr. Andrew Fan (SDSN Asia and Sunway University)
15. Mr. Asfazam Kasbani (Malaysia National SDG Centre)

The workshop was organized around four sessions: (1) the state of the global Indicator Framework, data challenges, and new technologies; (2) approaches to simplifying the Indicator Framework; (3) accountability and the use of indicators by governments and international review bodies; and (4) open discussion and next steps. This document summarizes the key messages from each session and sets out a proposed two-year action plan through mid-2028.

2. Opening Remarks

2.1 The state of play: SDG progress, global commitment and focus of the post-2030 agenda

- **Uneven SDG progress, real urgency.** Eleven years into the SDGs, most indicators show some progress but few are on pace to meet 2030 targets; roughly 16% are in reversal, including several environmental indicators approaching irreversible tipping points (Planetary Boundaries framework).
- **There is still near universal consensus behind the paradigm of sustainable development.** Prof. Sachs argued that combining economic, social, and environmental objectives retains strong global support; opposition is concentrated in the USA rather than reflecting a broader backlash against multilateralism or global goal setting.
- **Implementation, not redesign, should be the dominant theme.** Six priority transformations were highlighted: quality education, health, green energy and industry, sustainable land use, the future of cities, and digital/AI transformation. Sachs suggested AI is significant enough to merit consideration as an 18th goal or, alternatively, as a cross-cutting enabler.
- **Three structural priorities for implementation.** (i) greater long-term public investments; (ii) stronger regional cooperation and regionally owned infrastructure (energy grids, digital infrastructure); and (iii) reform of the global financial architecture, since roughly 40–70% of the world's population/countries by count lack credible access to affordable long-term finance despite ample global savings (approx. US$30 trillion/year).
- **A stronger and more operational monitoring framework must underpin the next era of sustainable development and implementation frameworks**: The SDSN-JICA partnership aims to combine SDSN's global network and intellectual leadership with JICA's vast operational experience.

2.2 Three structural challenges for the post-2030 Indicator Framework

Dr. Tanaka (JICA President) framed the workshop around three challenges facing the current 234-indicator SDG framework, which structured much of the day's discussion:

- **Interlinkages**: the framework is organized sectorally, but development outcomes are inherently cross-sectoral; the post-2030 framework should better incorporate interlinkages and trade-offs between goals and aim to foster integrated approaches to implementation.
- **Simplicity vs comprehensiveness:** a fundamental tension exists between comprehensiveness (>230 indicators) and the practical burden of data compilation, especially for countries with weaker statistical capacity. One option would be to identify a core set of SDG indicators applicable to all complemented by more flexible indicators tailored to specific challenges faced by individual countries and regions.
- **Data infrastructure, financing & technology**: core data systems (e.g., the Demographic and Health Surveys program) are global public goods vulnerable to funding disruption; emerging technologies (satellite data, AI-generated data) offer promise but carry bias risks, particularly from social media and digital-platform-derived data. Indicators should be scientifically sound, reliable and practical as well as cost-effective.

2.3 A decade of SDG monitoring: achievements and lessons (inputs from UNDESA & GSDR)

- **Achievements:** Mr. Hanif (UNDESA) emphasized in his intervention that coverage in official SDG indicators has grown from 115 indicators (2016) to 233 today, with 3 million+ data records (10x growth); nearly all indicators now have an agreed methodology (vs. approx. 40% lacking one at adoption); and country coverage has more than doubled to approx. 70% of indicators.
- **Lessons:** Ambition has outpaced investment, stretching national statistical systems; data gaps remain uneven — stronger for health, water, and energy, weaker for gender equality, cities, climate, and peace/justice — and

disaggregated data continues to lag; data also remains underused, often disconnected from planning and budgeting.

- **Challenges and next steps for official statistics:** Mr. Hanif framed the question as not just how to simplify the indicator framework, but how to keep it scientifically credible, statistically robust, and policy relevant. Indicators should be simpler where possible, but never simpler than the evidence allows. He called for closer integration between statistics, technology and science to inform UNDESA's preparations for the 2027 SDG Summit, and expressed UNDESA's readiness to support the SDSN-JICA partnership going forward.
- **Role of science and upcoming 2027 GSDR:** Prof. Koundouri (GSDR Co-Chair) further emphasized that the post-2030 indicator framework should support a more systemic understanding of sustainable development, capturing the interactions between nature, economy and society and helping to identify and guide integrated transformation pathways. This is closely aligned with the work of the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) - led by the Independent Group of Scientists - whose 2027 edition will focus on transformation and implementation, including overcoming systemic barriers to integrated action.
- **Connect measurement to the broader policy cycle, from planning to investment and implementation:** Prof. Koundouri also emphasized the need to better connect SDG monitoring efforts with integrated modelling, stakeholder co-design and investment frameworks. For the post-2030 framework, this implies indicators that can not only assess progress but also help identify transformation pathways, strengthen accountability and inform public and private investment.

3. Identifying key data challenges and opportunities

- **Big/Earth data as a complement to traditional statistics, not a replacement:** Prof. Guo (CBAS) presented a "full chain" model (data → algorithms → standards → validation → service) and CBAS's Digital Sustainable Development Goal Program (DSP), arguing official statistics remain the foundation while big data increases coverage, frequency, and spatial resolution.
- **Small Island Developing States face compounding data and digital infrastructure gaps:** Dr. Marinescu (International Data Center Authority) reported that data is available for only approx. 60% of SDGs and approx. 33% of collaborative indicators in SIDS; despite hosting submarine cable landing points, SIDS extract little economic value from connectivity due to the absence of local internet exchange points and data infrastructure. She recommended incorporating the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) and a Digital Readiness baseline into the post-2030 framework, and flagged data sovereignty and workforce readiness as emerging priorities.
- **Citizen-generated data adds speed, inclusiveness, and context:** Dr. Otsuka (JICA ORI) presented Japanese case studies (biodiversity observation via smartphone platforms, water-quality monitoring in Zambia) showing citizen science can fill official statistical gaps, particularly on whether infrastructure that exists is actually functional — provided it is integrated with, not a substitute for, official statistics.
- **Spillover and cross-border effects remain a major blind spot:** Prof. Malik (University of Sydney) showed that the current agenda captures only material footprint as an explicit consumption-based indicator; her multi-regional input-output (MRIO) research (160+ countries, 120+ sectors) finds that a purely production-based lens misses significant cross-border impacts of trade on SDG progress, particularly for environmental indicators. She argued that the quality and timeliness of consumption-based indicators derived from extended MRIO tables have improved significantly over the period 2015-2026.
- **Human Rights and Human Development**: Discussion converged on the need to keep people, not just metrics, at the center of the framework preserving human rights as a substantive, cross-cutting, and ensuring wellbeing is understood as tied to humans' active, meaningful participation in the economy, with AI positioned as an augmentation of human capability rather than a substitute for it.

4. Simplifying the indicator framework

Several speakers emphasized the value of simplifying the indicator framework to make it more operational, facilitate the integration of monitoring into the broader policy cycle (planning, budgeting, etc.), and enable more targeted investments in data and statistics.

Several complementary but distinct approaches to simplification were presented:

Beyond GDP (Prof. Enrico Giovannini, UN High-Level Expert Group)

- **Beyond GDP framework and indicator selection:** The HLEG's May 2026 report proposes 31 headline indicators for "equitable, inclusive and sustainable well-being," about half drawn from the SDGs. The indicator selection was guided via an overarching framework which distinguishes well-being today from well-being tomorrow, adds "foundational principles" (human rights, peace, a livable planet), and deliberately focuses on outcomes/outputs rather than inputs. Within the expert group, there were divergent views on the inclusion of subjective measures (e.g. data from large international household surveys) and heavily model-based estimates, for instance to capture spillover effects.
- **Practical implications**: Prof. Giovannini argued that the Beyond GDP and SDG frameworks should coexist rather than merge, since SDGs include policy instruments while Beyond GDP measures outcomes. He recommended the UN Statistics Division establish a working group on composite indicators and cautioned strongly against "reopening the Pandora's box" of full indicator renegotiation in the current low-cooperation political climate, since some countries would use such a process to weaken or even destroy the post-2030 agenda altogether. AI and technology was treated by HLEG as an enabler and not an outcome.

Three-tier core/optional/custom framework (Dr. Ichiro Sato, JICA ORI)

- Drawing upon several research papers, Dr. Sato proposed dividing indicators into: (i) a small set of core global indicators mandatory for all countries; (ii) a longer list of optional indicators countries can adopt based on context; and (iii) custom/local indicators set by countries or regions. He raised open questions for further research: how large a core set should be; whether some core indicators could apply only to subsets of countries (e.g., SIDS); and whether the core set should prioritize outcomes, inputs, or both. Dr. Sato suggested that a combination of multiple approaches – not only statistical approaches – might be best suited to reduce the complexity of the SDG indicator framework.

SDSN's "headline" SDG Index (17-indicator)

- SDSN's own Sustainable Development Report methodology, referenced by Dr. Guillaume Lafortune, uses 17 headline indicators that correlate significantly (both in levels and in rates of change) with the full 100+ indicator SDG Index, demonstrating that substantial simplification is statistically defensible.

A ~50-indicator single global set (Ambassador David Donoghue)

- Drawing on his experience co-facilitating the original SDG negotiations, Ambassador Donoghue expressed sympathy for simplification but suggested 17 is too small given the need to capture cross-cutting issues (synergies/trade-offs, financing commitments under SDG17, and other issues). He proposed roughly 50 indicators, opposed splitting the framework into separate regional indicator sets in favor of one global set (with optional regional layers), and noted that in practice many countries have still not developed the national priority indicator sets envisioned in 2015, largely due to capacity constraints.

Cautions on the political economy and substance of simplification

- Dr. Marianne Beisheim (SWP) echoed the "Pandora's box" warning, citing colleague Laura Powers's argument that major shifts in goals, targets, and indicators could jeopardize existing investments and data systems, especially for

resource-constrained countries; the priority should be protecting and adapting current data systems and capacities rather than redesigning them completely.

- Dr. Graham Long (Newcastle University) posed an unresolved conceptual challenge: simplification may ease integration into national policy cycles and strengthen formal accountability, but risks (a) shifting the balance from universal applicability toward greater national optionality, (b) truncating the "whole-of-society" entry points that a broad indicator set provides for civil society and business, (c) weakening the "leave no one behind" disaggregation agenda if targeted indicators for marginalized groups are dropped from the core set, and (d) tilting the framework toward high-level outcomes at the expense of the inputs/enablers needed to drive them. His central question for the initiative going forward: which metrics should be dropped, who decides, and can the "spirit" of the SDGs survive simplification?
- Prof. Prajal Pradhan cautioned against assuming governments cannot handle many indicators (Nepal, for instance, tracks approx. 400 indicators) and argued that the focus should be on action and implementation rather than on defining a core or limited set of indicators that apply across different countries and contexts.

5. Improving the effectiveness and operational use of monitoring systems at all levels

- **The HLPF was never designed as a monitoring/verification body.** Dr. Beisheim explained that member states deliberately chose "follow-up and review" language over "monitoring and evaluation" in 2015; the High-Level Political Forum functions mainly as a peer-learning platform (400+ Voluntary National Reviews to date) rather than an accountability mechanism, and three rounds of UNGA reform negotiations (2021, 2024, 2026) have produced only minor changes, largely due to sovereignty and budget disputes.
- **Transparency has increased; accountability has not kept pace.** Dr. Cameron Allen's theory-of-change analysis (published in Science, Jan 2026) found the SDGs have strengthened the supply of evidence (data coverage, statistical capacity, near-universal VNR participation) but only weakly closed the feedback loop from evidence to decisions, resource allocation, and action. VNRs have often been superficial and unvalidated (described repeatedly in the room as "selfies").
- **Recommended shift: from reporting progress to steering progress.** Dr. Allen proposed moving from status/trends/rankings toward targets, milestones and pathways; from retrospective reporting to forward-looking scenarios; from showcasing practices to assessing policy effectiveness; and from voluntary reporting cycles to structured learning-and-accountability cycles feeding into budgets and public investment decisions.
- **The national experience of Malaysia:** Mr. Asfazam Kasbani (National SDG Centre) described a governance structure led by a National SDG Council chaired by the Prime Minister, integration into the 13th Malaysia Plan, and 156 Voluntary Local Reviews (among the highest globally) — but only 84% federal-level and 33% local-level SDG data availability, and persistent silos between ministries that limit cross-sectoral use of indicators in planning and budgeting.
- **Practical proposals to strengthen accountability:** (i) increase HLPF funding and meeting time (Donoghue: the UN's budget crisis is the single biggest constraint); (ii) revise the UN Secretary-General's VNR guidelines to require reporting on systemic hurdles and evidence-based policy solutions, not just indicator-by-indicator status (Beisheim); (iii) introduce a formal peer-review mechanism recognizing top performers, similar to OECD/IEA country reviews (Allen); and (iv) revive stakeholder-inclusive review models such as the EU's 2019 voluntary review, which involved the European Economic and Social Committee (Donoghue, Lafortune).


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