

The SDGs Made Simple - A Systems Thinking Approach

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The idea for this paper was triggered by a comment made by the Minister of Education of an African Country. The author had been having discussions with the Minister on the possibility of the Minister going into the classroom in a school of his choice and delivering a 40 to 45 minutes lesson on the SDGs under the World's Largest Lesson Initiative. The Minister had graciously agreed to deliver the lesson; but then, as if as an after-thought he added: "I will deliver the lesson at a school in the capital, but such a lesson must be delivered in at least one school in every region of the country. Better still, every child should receive this lesson". He then went on to add that the children should understand what the SDGs mean for them, and only then should the world expect them to act. The idea of the study was thus sowed.

The study is based on extensively examining (review and analysis of) various SDG documentation and lengthy discussions with professionals working with the SDGs. This was in order to figure out the types of achievements and challenges they associate with the SDGs. Achievements highlighted included: (i) the universal nature of the SDGs, being applicable to both developing and developed countries; unlike the MDGs that were directed mostly at developing countries, and (ii) the recognition of the interrelations between the various SDGs. The challenges highlighted by some professionals included the view that the SDGs are 'too ambitious', meaning that unconsciously they are not expected to be achieved fully. Secondly, there was the ever present question: 'how are we going to successfully monitor and evaluate implementation, and report on a timely basis?'

The ordinary professional or worker (or student) going about his/her daily business wonders what the SDGs are all about, and what are they expected to do? This last challenge in particular dictated the title of the paper. The SDGs has to be made simple if, to paraphrase the Minister, people (children) are to understand what they mean and to act upon them. This implies completing the view from the 'demand side'.

The paper presents a simple robust Results Based Management (RBM) tool - the RBM Logical ScoreCard (RBMLSC), which captures the 'performance profile' of a development intervention in just one page. Applied to the SDGs it gives the results framework of the SDGs (in one page) showing the 'big picture' of the hierarchy of results (results-chain) reflecting the theory of change / logic underpinning the SDGs. This allows everyone - supply professionals and demand implementers alike - to read from the same page, thus enhancing the chances of successful implementation.