Measuring Progress Toward the Sustainable Development Goals in Urban Contexts in Colombia

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Abstract:

The Red de Ciudades Cómo Vamos (RCCV) and Fundación Corona, with the support of the authors of the paper as graduate students from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), developed a public online data tool that will track SDG indicators and goals for 19 Colombian urban agglomerations (over 35 municipalities), covering over 40% of the country's population. The tool, which will add and contribute to national and sub-national data initiatives led by the national government, provides a unique example of a civil-society-led project to create a common set of sub-national indicators, which must reconcile local variances in capacity and development across numerous locations within a country, while providing citizens the opportunity to learn, track and monitor SDG progress at the local level. The following paper is part of extensive work and aims to describe the rational for the tool creation, the design process, and the implications of the tool in the Colombian and international contexts.

Introduction

Colombia is one of the leading countries in SDG implementation in Latin America. The primary reason for its success has been the highly active participation of the public and private sectors, as well as civil society. This led to the early adoption of the SDG framework as part of the country's national development plan. However, not all of the SDG indicators are applicable at the city level, making it necessary to adapt the metrics to the local context. As a result, a large number of metrics have been developed by each city to better adapt to the SDG targets and indicators. This process of adapting targets and indicators to make the SDGs relevant at the subnational level is referred to as "SDG localization." While this has enriched the process of development measurement in general, it has made it more challenging to establish uniform indicators that can be widely used by all cities.

Municipalities across Colombia have very different levels of development based on their varying levels of resources and capacity. The majority of the governments do not possess readily available data that will enable them to evaluate their SDG baseline, nor their progress in subsequent years. Moreover, cities have new development plans every four years in conjunction with mayoral turnover, making it a challenge to sustain efforts over the long term. Despite this, there is generally a high level of support for localizing the SDGs and aligning local development plans with the national agenda, creating an opportunity to improve data and monitoring and evaluation systems to enable cities to measure their progress and engage civil society in sustainable development efforts.

Between 2016 and 2017, Fundación Corona—a civil society organization based in Bogotá—and the Red de Ciudades Cómo Vamos (RCCV) launched its SDG project to identify how cities in Colombia are advancing and to gather baseline data. In March 2017, Fundación Corona published its baseline study in partnership with RCCV and United Nations Development Programme and uploaded the data to their Ciudatos platform to make the information available to all cities. Over the past six months, Fundación Corona, RCCV, and students from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) have worked to expand the baseline data and develop a tool that will support the measurement and evaluation of cities' progress in localizing and aligning their development plans with the SDGs. While there have been regional efforts to localize the SDGs, there have been no other city-level efforts in Colombia, creating a unique opportunity for this project to serve as a model for other global cities.

Challenges

Currently, the majority of local governments do not possess sufficient data to evaluate their current level of SDG localization and alignment with the national development agenda, nor their progress in subsequent years. In addition, the local governments do not have enough indicators in place to measure the 17 SDGs. Wealthier local governments are able to measure more indicators or have access to indicators from the private sectors that governments with fewer resources do not have. To add another layer of complexity, indicators need to be reliable, constant, and consistent. Currently, the private sector collects some indicators that align with particular SDGs; however, the lack of consistency in collecting the data across cities in Colombia makes long-term and sustainable monitoring and evaluation unreliable.

A second challenge local governments face is there is not enough buy-in from political leaders to push for the SDGs, despite existing momentum and positive feeling towards the preceding Millennium Development Goals. Significant interest in the SDGs has not yet percolated to the citizen level, and they are therefore not demanding alignment with the SDGs from local politicians. In addition to inadequate and insufficient data, not all local governments are meaningfully incorporating the SDGs into their four-year development plans. Local governments with more resources have more capacity to incorporate the SDGs; however, the way they set the goals is not consistent across the different municipalities, with some goals much more challenging to achieve than others. In addition, the disparity in the goal setting and data collection does not allow for a fair comparison across local governments in terms of progress and SDG achievement.

A third challenge specific to Colombia is that there is currently no institution working on compiling and organizing the data coming from all local governments using the SDG framework. So far there has been an attempt by the central government to establish national and regional goals, but many times these goals do not consider local municipalities' more limited capacity.

These challenges highlight an overarching problem for Colombia: a lack of a uniform SDG framework across cities that 1) defines a set of prioritized indicators, 2) compiles reliable data consistently, 3) can be used by all local governments, and 4) has defined goals for classified groups of cities to motivate cities to progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

Solution

To address these challenges, the RCCV network, with the support of Columbia SIPA, developed an SDG localization tool that could be adopted by each local government in RCCV cities across Colombia. The framework for the tool is outlined in Figure 1. The tool is divided in two sections: section A, a questionnaire about cities' progress in localizing the SDGs, and section B, a tool to measure cities' progress in achieving the SDGs and to compare progress across cities.

The proposed solution was conceived under the notion that if Colombia has a centralized information platform run by a legitimate institution that is able to set standardized indicators, compile reliable data, set ambitious goals for cities grouped by level of development, and engage civil society and the public and private sectors in the efforts, Colombian cities will be better positioned to successfully localize and align development plans with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.
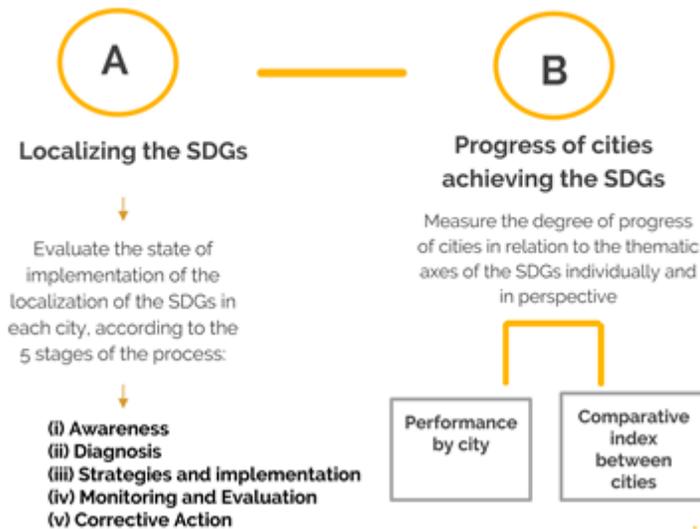
Figure 1: SDG tool framework

Section A: Localizing the SDGs

Section A aims to evaluate the state of localization of the SDGs in each city. To assess the localization component, the authors developed a questionnaire, which is a hybrid between the Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs developed by the Global Task Force and UCLG's "SDGs in the municipal map" framework and incorporates feedback from stakeholder engagement. The questionnaire identifies five stages for localizing the SDGs:
1. Awareness: How much does the local government raise awareness of the SDGs among the local population?
2. Diagnosis: Does the local government use the SDG framework to assess the city's development status?
3. Strategies and Implementation: Does the local government consider the SDGs in its strategies and have enough resources to implement the SDGs?
4. Monitoring and Evaluation: Does the local government have enough resources to monitor and evaluate the city's SDG performance?
5. Corrective Action: Are there feedback mechanisms in place to make changes and continually revise SDG implementation strategies?

Section B: City Progress

Section B aims to measure the progress of cities in implementing the SDGs, both by city and across cities in a comparative index. To accomplish this, the authors of the paper followed three phases of work:

1. City Grouping: The first task was to group the cities according to their level of development. The purpose of this was to generate relatively homogenous groups that are more easily comparable and set goals that are fair and appropriate for the varying levels of development across cities.

2. Indicators and Data Source: The second task was to develop an indicator framework to measure the SDGs. To do this the authors conducted a benchmark

analysis of the tools used to measure the SDGs around the world and the indicators being measured in Colombia. After cross referencing the different frameworks of indicators, the authors identified 89 indicators overall that should be used in Colombia to measure the SDGs. The indicators were divided in two categories: existing and aspirational. The first category contains 59 prioritized indicators. With these 59 indicators, Fundación Corona will initiate the project by the second semester of 2018 using existing reliable data currently collected to establish an updated baseline and set goals for each city. For the second category, the authors expect to increase the number of indicators by 30, including indicators for which data is not currently collected but should be. These new 30 indicators are directed at the SDGs 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17. The idea behind the aspirational indicators is that even though Colombia currently does not have adequate data to measure them by city, the data for the new indicators can be collected in the next four years. The national, regional and local governments can actually work toward to developing the data and the capacity to measure those indicators in the future.

3. City Index: The third task was to develop a city index to allow comparison across groupings of cities in regard to their level of development and progress in implementing the SDGs at the local level.

For the tool to be functional and sustainable, it must be managed by a local legitimate institution that has a strong relationship with the RCCV cities and the resources and capacity to input data on a regular basis and maintain updated and reliable information.

Process

The efforts of Fundación Corona, RCCV and SIPA have been focused on the localization of the SDGs at the city level across six cities in Colombia, including Bogotá, Cali, Cartagena, Manizales, Medellín, and Quibdó to work toward the solution outlined above. This project gathers information from 19 chapters of RCCV (35 of the largest municipalities) and over 20 million people, which is 41% of the population. By engaging with various stakeholders across the public and private sectors and civil society, efforts have aimed to include diverse perspectives in the development of actionable tools and encourage citizen participation as a way to push for local governments to pursue SDG localization more actively.

The project consisted of four key phases: 1) Benchmark analysis; 2) First draft of actionable tool; 3) Stakeholder engagement; and 4) Tool refinement.

1. Benchmark analysis. A benchmark analysis was developed to compile global best practices and concrete instruments that have been used by subnational actors to generate and use reliable SDG-related local data. A variety of cases from the reports of leading organizations on local development were evaluated, as well as individual cases of governments at all levels, looking at examples of activities aligned or implemented in the context of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The benchmark report highlighted five key areas: 1) the general process that local and regional governments should follow in order to successfully implement the 2030 Agenda; 2) a summary of principal actors and organizations working on SDG local indicators; 3) examples of specific tools and platforms that have been developed to manage, present, and compare local SDG data;

4) an overview of best practices that have been developed at the national, regional, and local level in relation to SDG localization; and 5) a list of additional resources related to general sustainability metrics. Key takeaways included the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation, institutional legitimacy, and the national capacity to evaluate cities; the need for standardized, constant, and updated data; the need for a commitment and political participation from civil society; and the opportunity for a digital platform to compile information to make data transparent and easily accessible to diverse stakeholders.

In order to construct the benchmark analysis, the authors of the paper conducted a three-phase analysis. First, they defined "SDG localization," the process and frameworks guiding successful localization; and which conditions must be met in order to be successful. In the second phase, they concentrated on monitoring and evaluating the SDGs at the local level with the objective of identifying which organizations were working on this topic, plus which indicators are being used on a global level. Finally, in the third phase, the authors looked at specific examples of SDG localization and the tools that have been developed for this purpose.

Based on the benchmark analysis, SDG localization primarily referred to a concept developed by the Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) organizations. This was further validated by SDSN, which defined localization as the process of implementing the SDGs at the local level. For this, it is necessary to look at four key stages: (1) raising awareness; (2) diagnosing the territory's current SDG implementation context and its ability to collect data; (3) developing strategies and plans for SDG implementation; and (4) establishing a monitoring and evaluation system.

The authors of the paper conducted further research on the fourth stage of monitoring and evaluation to identify organizations that had established global frameworks to measure the SDGs at the local level and that could be easily replicated. The authors looked at the work of the World Council of City Data (WCCD) ISO 37120, SDSN "Cities SDG Index," the Urban City Lab SDG Dashboard, and the SPI-SDG classification, all of which have developed a list of potential indicators that can be measured by cities across the globe.

Finally, having a comprehensive theoretical understanding of global SDG localization efforts, the authors explored relevant examples of public and private organizations and networks that have carried out evaluations at the national level. Through this exercise, the authors of the paper learned that it was important to not only look at general examples of SDG implementation but also to look at cases where a specific tool had been developed. The main examples consulted were the Brazilian Mandala, the Swiss Cercle Indicators, the Mexican SDG information system, and the Hawaiian "Aloha Challenge Dashboard." Other significant findings involved the importance of including a city classification system, of civil society engagement, and of moving from monitoring and evaluation to action.

2. First draft of tool. Based on the findings of the benchmark analysis, an offline tool was developed in a digital spreadsheet to compile and analyze baseline data provided by Fundación Corona. Two needs were identified to be met by the tool: 1) the ability to evaluate the state of SDG implementation in each city, based on level of awareness raising, diagnosis, strategies and implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and

actions taken; and 2) the ability to measure through defined goals and indicators the degree of cities' progress in achieving the SDGs, and to measure this progress by city and across cities. To develop the tool, the authors compiled lists of indicators used by SDSN, Urban Institute, World Council on City Data, and United Cities and Local Governments, and crossed this list with Fundación Corona's baseline data. Indicators were prioritized based on relevance to the SDGs, relevance for Colombian cities, and availability of data. This list was sent to Fundación Corona for validation, and the indicators were used to create the first draft of the tool.

3. Stakeholder engagement. The primary objective of the tool is to be usable by municipal government actors to ensure local appropriation of the tool and consistent and long-term monitoring and evaluation of development progress. Key partners and stakeholders were identified, and in March 2018 the authors conducted 17 interviews and 10 workshops with members from the public and private sectors across the six covered cities. This was done to better understand the needs of the potential users of the tool, gather feedback on the first draft of the tool, and map potential partners for implementation of the SDG localization project. Main topics of focus during these interviews and workshops included indicators, goals, visualization, city classification, and localization. Through this effort, the tool was able to be validated and garnered positive feedback from public and private sector stakeholders. The authors of the paper received valuable feedback and input to incorporate into the revision of the tool to make it more accessible, visually representative, and relevant for users. Across cities, key findings included the overall interest of the municipalities in working toward the localization of the SDGs; a strong dependence on the national government for data and goal-setting; and the desire to have information systems that enable measuring and comparing progress.

Besides testing and validating the tool, through the interviews it became clear that Fundación Corona is in a unique position to become the hub for SDG localization in Colombia, as no other actors are currently working on a similar project with local governments. Rather, other stakeholders can meaningfully contribute toward strengthening this project—including CEPEI and its Data Republic Initiative (which provides information on new alternative indicators). Stakeholders can also promote its replicability and scalability in other countries in Latin America, for example through the SDSN Regional Lab in Universidad de Los Andes. Furthermore, stakeholder engagement helped gain broader support from the government at its highest levels for the project as a tool that can help carry out public efforts.

4. Tool refinement. After the first set of indicators were sent for validation to Fundación Corona, indicators from the national guideline for SDG implementation (CONPES) were sent to RCCV cities across Colombia for their prioritization, as well as to consult with experts from the national government and civil society. They voted on indicators identified as most important and relevant for them. However, for many of the indicators there is no data available to track them at the city level. Based on feedback received during the stakeholder engagement and recognizing the importance of civil society engagement in the process, the authors developed a revised list of 86 prioritized indicators comprised of 1) indicators that RCCV prioritized (regardless of data availability); 2) indicators prioritized based on the original benchmark analysis; 3) indicators with data available from Fundación Corona's baseline; and 4) a second review of the CONPES document, as well as additional indicator databases identified during the stakeholder engagement phase–primarily TerriData indicators developed by the National Planning Department–in order to incorporate the ones that were relevant and filled an

information gap. This refined tool will ultimately be scaled up to a digital platform accessible by the public and private sectors and civil society to encourage action toward localizing and aligning with the SDGs.

Results

Having an adaptable SDG localization framework will enable diverse cities to align their development plans with the SDGs. This project has the potential to become an important management tool for local governments to use not only in aligning their development plans with the 2030 Agenda but also measuring their progress toward achieving important goals. Because the tool accounts for differences in resources, capacity, and development level across the cities, it supports a framework that each of the municipalities can adapt to their local context. This will be the first time that such a comprehensive framework will be implemented at the local level in Colombia as part of a nationwide development strategy. This strategy will bring the international development agenda down to the local level, where it can have real influence.

This tool can ensure the sustainability of local development efforts beyond government turnover. This framework will be useful for both current and future political leaders and candidates at the municipal level as guidance for structuring their development plans and navigating the 2030 Agenda. Since the SDG framework works outside the limitation of cities having four-year development plans, leaders will be able to refer to the municipality's past performance and evaluate where they should invest effort and resources, and candidates will be able to frame their proposals based on the SDGs. In this way, the municipalities can be aligned with regional, national, and international development priorities. This strategic engagement is of extreme relevance for the success of the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, it will provide local governments with a tool to measure their progress, as well as enable civil society to monitor the progress of cities towards the 2030 Agenda. Consequently, this will strengthen Colombian local institutions by providing a higher level of transparency and continuity.

Public sector, private sector, and civil society have expressed interest in localizing the SDGs. In Colombia and across the RCCV cities, there is demonstrated interested from the public and private sectors and civil society to implement the 2030 Agenda at the local level. Their experience with the MDGs was positive and there is a strong interest in pursuing the SDGs more actively. This tool is an opportunity for all sectors to collaborate on building sustainable development solutions to address key challenges facing Colombia.

Introducing a new SDG monitoring tool for local governments requires resources and capacity. To successfully collect and compile reliable data from all participating municipalities, maintain an updated baseline, and disseminate information and results consistently and regularly, moderate capacity of the managing institution is required. As a result, the project relies on a centralized institution to collect and update the data and manage the list of prioritized indicators. In addition, the tool requires local leader buy-in through raising awareness and framing the SDGs as a relevant development issue across sectors, all of which requires time and resources. At this point in time, Fundación Corona will take on this responsibility as the centralized institution in charge of managing the project and engaging civil society while exploring opportunities for another organization with a high level of resources and capacity to undertake the management of the tools and framework in the future.

Local level data for many indicators is still not available or accessible. While many of the selected indicators for this project were prioritized by RCCV cities, the current level of data availability at the local level is limited, creating a challenge for actually tracking those indicators. As a result, not all indicators can currently be measured or are using data that is not the most up to date. To address this weakness, a first set of mandatory indicators has been developed and prioritized, with a set of aspirational indicators that will be used in the second phase of the project when data capacity can be increased.

Improving Political Decision Making

With the new tools completed, Fundación Corona will request the final approval from city mayors and other high-level political figures in order to consolidate the project, and finally run a test to see what the progress of the RCCV municipalities has been with regard to SDG implementation. The main objective of this will be to provide current and incoming politicians with information on what main challenges and opportunities each territory has, and which should be taken into consideration for subsequent administrations.

The tool is designed to not only provide the relevant data for any given year, the historic trend, and how far a city is from the target. It also provides indexed information in order to allow cities to visualize how they are performing in each SDG area and compare themselves with other cities. This will allow civil society and other political actors to monitor and evaluate the progress of each city and identify the key success and areas of opportunities. In addition, as political succession is expected to happen, incoming politicians will have a tool to determine what has been successful and what areas require more investment, and subsequently shape their development plans to better fit the specific needs of the city.

Strategizing into the Future

The tool has been designed as universal as possible by incorporating the best practices of the currently operating SDG localization tools. Thanks to this, both the mechanics of the tool, as well as the input data, can be readily adapted and used in different contexts within Colombia, as well as in other municipalities in Latin America that have similar structures and functions.