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Thank you very much).
Title: Tracking the (Well-Intentioned but Complex) Sustainable Development Goals: Emerging Measurement Challenges and Further Reflections

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a major step by the global community to identify shared development goals for the next 15 years. Yet, the stated goals may not be straightforward and easy to interpret as they appear on the surface. Many targets are complementary, but many run in contradictory directions. Complicating matters further, there are inadequate data to measure progress. We discuss various issues related to the SDGs including identification, measurement, and data challenges. We offer below a brief discussion of these issues.

Some indicators can strongly overlap with each other (Table 1). Goals can even be conflicting, raising questions over potential tradeoff between strong economic growth (Goal 8) and deteriorating environmental quality (Goal 11). For example, while China’s GDP solidly climbed up the past 25 years, its environmental quality also steadily gone down in this period. This stands in sharp contrast to the opposite pattern of good economic performance and improved environment of Norway (Figure 1).

Missing data also pose serious challenges to monitoring country progress. Figure 2 examines the different patterns of several countries’ GDP per capita growth during 2011-2015. Although for most readers, the notion of increasing (or decreasing) GDP growth is perhaps regarded as linearly continuous and positive (or negative) growth over all these years (Figure 2, solid lines), the real growth patterns in practice can including nonlinear, zigzagging patterns (dashed lines). Consequently, a cursory examination may lead to incorrect findings about the trends, depending on the specific years for which the data are analyzed.

Other issues are no less challenging. Should we follow a “dashboard” approach or should we aggregate indicators to judge overall progress? If following the latter approach, how best to weigh indicators when aggregating them? Given the different types of targets (e.g., absolute, relative, or simply some qualitative change), is the trend or the present level of achievement more important? Are there certain key “lead” indicators that capture the overall development landscape? Finally, how to deal with missing data? We discuss these and several other issues, and offer further reflections on future data collection efforts, particularly the role of international organizations.