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Title: Keeping out Extreme Inequality out of the Agenda: SDGs and the Politics of Measurement tools

Global goals have discursive effects; they frame a social problem in a particular way that makes certain solutions obvious while keeping out others. Framing is a useful strategy for powerful actors to exercise hegemonic power over a field. At face value, the 2030 agenda would appear to contain a strong commitment to reducing inequality; while its overall commitment is to ‘leave no one behind’, it include a clear stand-alone goal (10) to “Reduce inequality within and among countries”. However, the SDG framework does not include a target or indicator on the distribution of income and wealth such as the gini coefficient. Of the 10 targets and 11 indicators, the most prominent indicator tracks whether the income of the bottom 40% of the population is growing faster than that of the national average, the World Bank’s flagship indicator for ‘shared prosperity’. Thus the measurement tool chosen creates a narrative of inequality as a problem of ‘inclusive growth’, not one of distribution.

The paper provides a case study of the politics of indicators and dynamics of governance by indicators: indicators reinterpret important social objectives through simplification and abstraction; actors who opposed including inequality in the SDG agenda frame it as a problem of exclusion and poverty, keeping out the concern with ‘extreme’ inequality and the concentration of income and wealth which undermines both development and democracy. The ‘technical’ process of indicator selection effectively obscures the politics of contesting policy agendas.