Measuring Accountability in Sustainable Development Target 16.6 with V-Dem Data

KEY FINDINGS

- Currently proposed indicators at the IAEG-SDG meetings for monitoring progress of target 16.6 – effective, accountable and transparent institutions - capture only limited aspects of this ambitious target;
- An independent research institute such as V-Dem can provide valuable additional information on democracy-related SDG 16 and its sub-targets to supplement the proposed official indicators;

- V-Dem data with world-wide coverage can reliably measure accountability aspects of target 16.6 based on the assessments of multiple independent experts;
- The indicators include measures of horizontal accountability (legislative oversight of the executive and judicial independence), vertical accountability (election quality, media independence and CSO freedom.

Introduction

At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September, world leaders endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These seventeen goals are now central to development priorities. For the first time, global targets related to democratic governance are included in a development framework. Democracy, good governance and human rights are highlighted in the vision.[1] Goal 16 aims at the promotion of "just, peaceful and inclusive societies."

The adoption of the SDGs has been met with great enthusiasm. How effective the SDGs will be, however, depends on how they are implemented and monitored. Negotiations concerning indicators to measure SDG targets are in full swing. In March 2016, the UN Statistical Commission will decide on indicators for individual sub-targets for monitoring of the SDGs until 2030.

The V-Dem Institute has been involved in the process of developing suitable measures for Goal 16 as part of the virtual network of stakeholders and experts convened by the UNDP to provide input for the identification of suitable indicators to monitor SDG 16. The network is in the process of producing a sourcebook listing potential relevant indicators, including several from the V-Dem data set for the democracy related goals. This policy brief highlights how V-Dem data can be used to monitor Target 16.6, which aims at developing "effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels."

Measuring the SDGs: The State of the Debate

The SDGs are to encourage improvements in all countries of the world, not only in development countries. The 17 goals with 169 targets reflect a comprehensive understanding of development encompassing social, economic, environmental and governance aspects. Five of these targets relate to core features of democratic governance such as fundamental freedoms (16.10), responsive and participatory decision-making (16.7) and accountable and transparent institutions (16.6). Furthermore, rule of law (16.3) and the reduction of corruption (16.5) are integral features of modern democracy.

The Millennium Development Goal process produced substantial experience in measuring social and economic goals, but not targets related to democracy. In addition, the democracy-related targets of the SDGs are broadly formulated. This motivates the need for supplementary, precise indicators in order to properly monitor these SDG targets.

The outcome document of the World Summit on Sustainable Development emphasizes that "[q]uality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data will be needed to help with the measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind."[2] Based on broad stakeholder consultation, the UN Statistical Commission has compiled a list of indicator proposals.[3] This list is the basis for further deliberations about the indicators until a decision will be made by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2016.

[1] UN General Assembly (2015)

Spotlight on Target 16.6: Effective, Accountable and Transparent Institutions

TARGET 16.6: DEVELOP EFFECTIVE, ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT INSTITUTIONS AT ALL LEVELS

Currently proposed indicators:

- Primary government expenditures as a percentage of original approved budget
- Percentage of recommendations to strengthen national anti-corruption frameworks implemented

Target 16.6 aims to achieve effective, accountable and transparent institutions, which is a very ambitious, complex and far-reaching goal. There are great methodological challenges to developing a single measure that can encompass such a multidimensional target. Currently two indicators are proposed to capture it.

The first is primary government expenditures as a percentage of the originally approved budget. Although budget transparency and efficiency in budget implementation is important, this indicator does not capture how accountable or transparent state institutions are. In order to achieve accountability, stable mechanisms to hold the decision-makers responsible for their actions need to be in place. Thus, a focus on additional measures capturing whether there are ways for citizens and the media (vertical accountability), and other public institutions (horizontal accountability) to oversee the government is required.

The second indicator measures the implementation of recommendations to strengthen national anti-corruption frameworks. Corruption is the focus of the separate Target 16.5. Although corruption is harmful to transparency and accountability, more adequate indicators capturing these concepts are direct measures of vertical and horizontal accountability that in themselves requires transparency.

Hence, to capture the breadth of this target, complementary measures could be used to provide a more comorehensive picture. Measuring institutional transparency and accountability is challenging. One needs to go beyond formal regulations and assess how well such regulations are implemented in practice. In recent years, it has become common practice in social sciences to rely on multiple expert assessments when factual data is not available or adequate.[4] Provided by independent university-based research institutes such measures compiled in a reliable and unbiased way and capturing critical aspects of SDG 16.6 can have significant value as monitoring tools.

V-Dem Indicators for Target 16.6

V-Dem provides precise supplementary indicators for all democracy-related SDG targets. Here, we focus on Target 16.6. Accountability ensures that public institutions are subject to oversight by citizens as well as other public institutions.[5] It presupposes a good measure of transparency and is commonly divided into vertical and horizontal mechanisms:

- Horizontal accountability is ensured by oversight, and checks and balances relationships between different state institutions preventing abuses of political power.
- Vertical accountability allows citizens to hold governments and politicians directly accountable. This includes mechanisms such as free and fair elections; that mass media is free to monitor politicians' actions, and that CSOs are allowed to operate.

The figure below displays changes in global averages from 1980 to 2012 on five V-Dem indicators capturing these two dimensions of accountability.
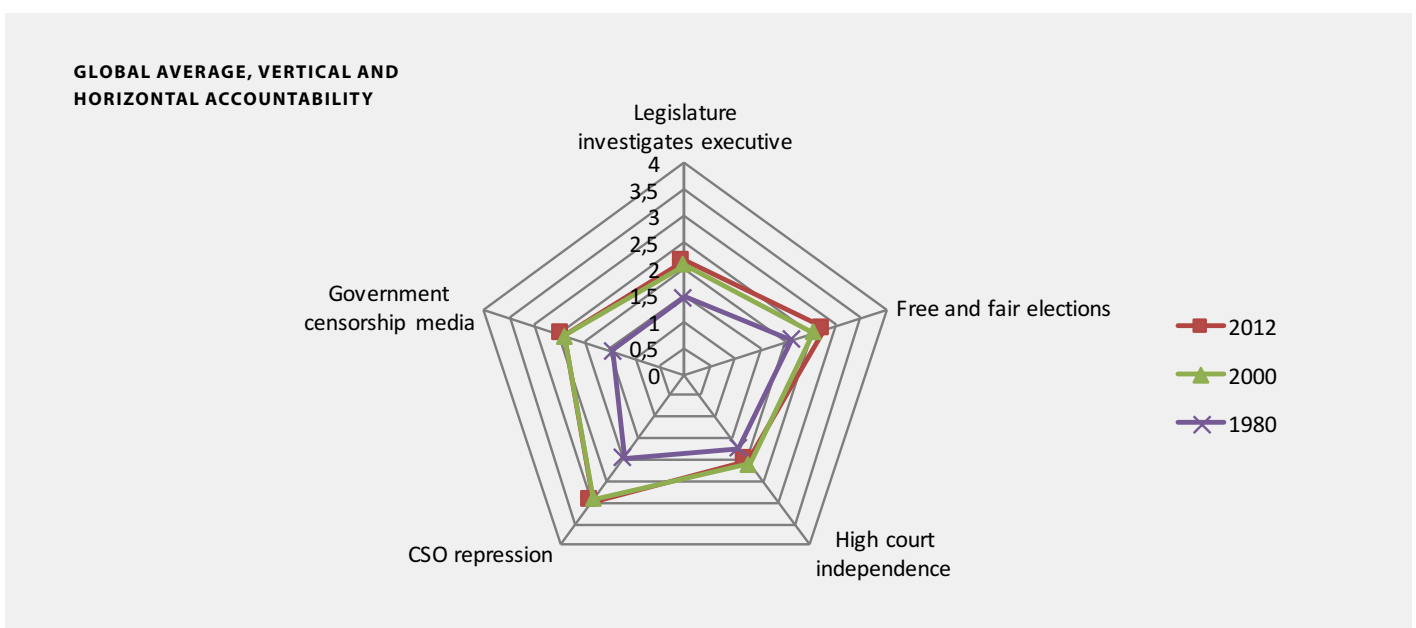

GLOBAL AVERAGE, VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Figure 1: V-Dem measures of vertical and horizontal accountability. Note: Scores increase with higher democratic quality.

DEVELOPMENT OF SELECTED REGIONS
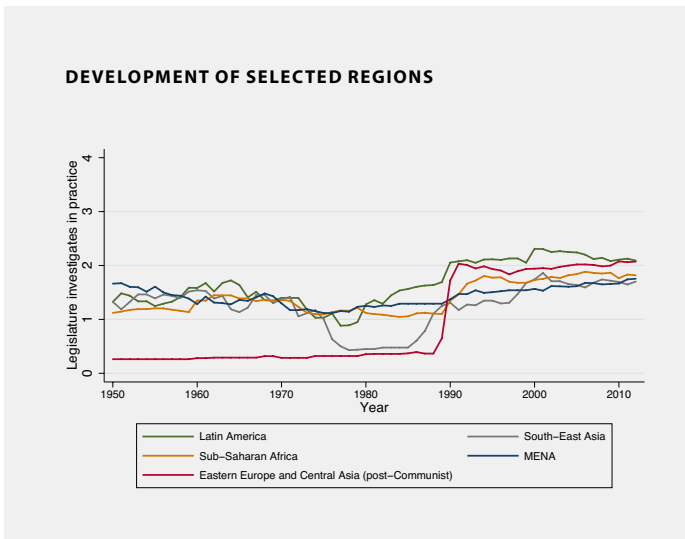
Figure 2: Legislature investigates in practice

DEVELOPMENT OF SELECTED REGIONS

Figure 3: Free and fair elections (2012)

A strong legislature and independent judiciary branch are key to ensure horizontal accountability:[6]

- High court independence measures the high court's likelihood to make decisions that do not merely reflect government wishes. Figure 1 illustrates that on average high courts have become more independent during recent decades.
- Legislature investigates in practice: This indicator measures the likelihood that the legislature would conduct an investigation that results in a decision or report that is unfavorable to the executive if the executive engages in unconstitutional, illegal, or unethical activities. Figure 2 display selected regional averages showing that legislative oversight has improved since the 1990s.[7] However, there is still substantial room for improvement.

To monitor vertical accountability three V-Dem indicators are suggested below:

- **Free and Fair Elections** takes all aspects of the pre-election period, Election Day and the post-election process at the national level into account. Figure 3 displays the average quality of elections for five regions either in 2012 or the most recent election before 2012. [8]
- **Government censorship effort** – Media reflects if the government directly or indirectly attempts to censor the print or broadcast media. The development over time from 1950 is demonstrated in Figure 4 for selected regions[9]. In the 1980s and 1990s, media freedom improved considerably in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. In other world regions – such as MENA and South-East Asia – improvements can be noted but the averages in 2012 remain lower than in other regions.
- **CSO repression** captures if governments attempt to repress civil society organizations (CSOs). Figure 1 illustrates that - on global average – the freedom of CSOs from repression has improved considerably during recent years.
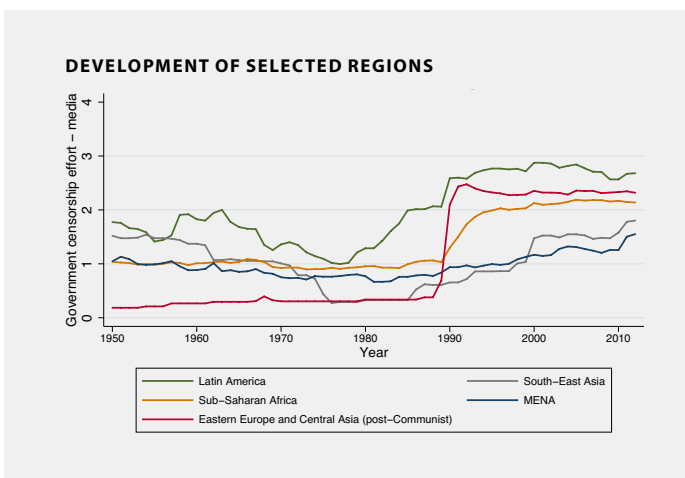

DEVELOPMENT OF SELECTED REGIONS

Figure 4: Government censorship effort - media

Overall, the suggested accountability indicators record considerable improvements in global and regional averages during the last decades. However, considerable variation in accountability mechanisms remains between countries, and V-Dem indicators can be used to track such variation, and with high precision monitor developments over time for each country in the world. V-Dem data on vertical and horizontal accountability provides valuable additional information for monitoring target 16.6. V-Dem indicators are also available for monitoring all other democracy-related targets of Goal 16.

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[6] Information about the indicator scales and the exact wording of the question can be found in the V-Dem codebook (Coppedge et al 2015). [7] A score of 0 corresponds to an extremely low probability of an investigation of the executive by the legislature, whereas a score of 4 indicates that it is nearly certain. [8] Score 0 corresponds to fundamentally flawed elections while score 4 corresponds to largely free and fair elections. [9] Score 0 corresponds to direct and routine censorship of the media while score 4 corresponds to a situation in which the government overall respects media freedom.

The Role of Independent Research Institutes

Data collected by independent research institutes can play an important role in providing a more comprehensive and nuanced picture in the process of monitoring the set global goals. This could complement data collected by governments by providing consistent, impartial and transparent data with solid coverage. In addition, local ownership and dissemination of the SDGs, scholars and civil society activists across the world should be encouraged to monitor their implementation.

Providing non-biased, transparent data is especially relevant when approaching complex issues such as accountability or rule of law. Complementary data from independent sources could increase the relia-

bility of the measurement of the targets, and in a longer perspective enhance the legitimacy of the monitoring process as a whole. In addition, inconsistencies in definitions of concepts, methods and sources between countries can be avoided by using data from independent institutes based on standardized definitions and methods for all countries. Finally, many of the targets listed under SDG 16 rely on official statistics provided by governments. In many countries of the world, basic information is not systematically collected. Hence, complementary data from independent sources can assist by providing reliable data with solid coverage.[10]

THE V-DEM APPROACH

V-Dem's multidimensional and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. The V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points with more than 400 distinct and precise indicators of democracy. From January 2015, the database is available free of charge online as global public good.

The V-Dem dataset covers 174 countries and dependent territories from 1900 to 2012 and provides an estimate of measurement reliability for

each rating. Updates up to 2014 for 60 countries have already been implemented and continuous updates for all countries are currently planned.

Unlike extant data collection projects, which typically use a small group of experts who rate all countries or ask a single expert to code one country, the V-Dem project has recruited over 2,600 local and cross-national experts to provide judgments on various indicators about democracy.

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[10] For further details and information about the V-Dem methodlogy, see http://v-dem.net.

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ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The project's multidimensional, nuanced and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. With four Principal Investigators, two Project Coordinators, fifteen Project Managers, more than thirty Regional Managers, almost 200 Country Coordinators, several Assistant Researchers, and approximately 2,600 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points.