



The Interagency Expert Group on the Sustainable Development Goals (IAEG-SDG) Evaluation

Executive Summary

Mothers First is a small field based organisation working in the area of targeted nutrition in Northern India for the Past 15 years. Using an incentivised results based distribution system, we target undernourished pregnant mothers with locally available foods. A substantial part of our work is acting as nutrition advocates on the strong mandate we have received from mothers in the communities that we work in.

We undertook a review of the indicator selection process for the Sustainable Development Goals in an effort to understand why SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) has no indicator to monitor the nutritional status of women. That review was sent to the *United Nations Statistical Division* (UNSD) who act as secretariat for the *Inter Agency Expert Sustainable Development Goals* (IAEG-SDG) in November 2018. We have reformulated that report to form part of this submission for the Comprehensive Review. The purpose of the first part of the Comprehensive Review is to help the IAEG-SDG decide on which additional indicators need to go through to the Global Consultation in July.

Our findings are based on our methodological review of video evidence and relevant documentation pertaining to SDG 2.1 and 2.2 from the second IAEG-SDG meetings in Bangkok in 2015. It was at this meeting that the current indicator framework was decided upon. This review provides the evidence behind our findings and can be found at the end of this submission.

Contents:

Executive Summary	1
Our Findings	2
Primary implications and recommendations of our review/submission	2
Analytical Review of Bangkok Process:	2
Background to our concerns	2
Our Review-based Recommendations for the Comprehensive Review	3
Overall conclusion and recommendations	3
How we undertook our analysis	4
Nature of the analysis of both the video evidence and documentation	4
Process and criteria for indicator selection	4
Time spent discussing SDG2.1 and 2.2 and the first key conclusion	5
Chairmanship of the relevant 37 minute period	5
Knowledge deficits among IAEG members	6
Indicators that were poorly understood by IAEG members	7
Additional indicator which were not adequately discussed	8
Broader implications of our review	8

Our Findings

We found that despite a comprehensive and transparent process 5 key indicators that were selected to be discussed at the Bangkok meetings were never discussed. A sixth indicator was discussed but did not receive the due process of a vote by the IAEG members. Despite SDG 2.2 explicitly mentioning the nutrition status of adolescent girls and pregnant women, the only indicators presently in the framework to monitor these targets relate to children under 5. It is worth noting that all of the omitted indicators pertain to the nutrition status of women.

Our evidence clearly shows that this has occurred not as an informed decision, but due to incompetent chairmanship and equally poor comprehension levels by the IAEG-SDG and Secretariat on nutrition, as it pertains to these two targets. We assert that the IAEG-SDG members are not currently in possession of technical knowledge to decide, by the end of July, which indicators for SDG 2 should be included in the Global consultation (as part of the 2020 Comprehensive Review).

Primary implications and recommendations of our review/submission

The first and most profound implication is that we have no indicator included in the framework to monitor the nutritional status of adolescent girls and pregnant and lactating women which Target 2.2 calls for. We are asking that the same due process that all other indicators received at the Bangkok meetings be given to these six indicators. Inclusion into the Global Consultation will allow submissions to be made on these indicators and, most critically, give an opportunity for these indicators to be discussed at the 10th IAEG meetings in November.

Analytical Review of Bangkok Process:

Background to our concerns

In 2015 the Inter Agency Expert Sustainable Development Goals (IAEG-SDG) were charged with the task of developing an indicator framework to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals. The IAEG-SDG are made up of lead stations from over 20 countries which operate on a rotation process.

The IAEG-SDGs terms of reference state that developing an indicator framework should take place in a clear and transparent way. Set with a very difficult task, a global consultation took place which formed the basis of the second IAEG-SDG meeting in Bangkok in November 2015. Over 500 possible indicators were selected for discussion with the IAEG SDG expert agencies and stakeholders. At the end of these 3-day meetings, the current indicator framework was finalised. This comprises 230 individual indicators to monitor the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs. The upcoming Comprehensive Review offers the first opportunity since 2015 to add, modify or delete, indicators.

Our Review-based Recommendations for the Comprehensive Review

We reviewed the indicator selection process for the SDGs in Bangkok. This review is based on video evidence and relevant documentation pertaining to two targets of SDG 2. The main finding of our review was that the process for the targets concerned was poorly chaired, which exacerbated the poor knowledge levels by the IAEG members on the issues involved. This directly led to six key indicators for the SDG 2 which were inadvertently not given any discussion time and in the case of Food Consumption Score, while those discussed did not receive the due process of a vote by the IAEG members.

To highlight how inefficient the process was, it is important to note that 35 minutes were spent discussing target 2.1 while one indicator was not discussed at all and another indicator did not receive the due process of a vote. Furthermore, target 2.2 received less than 2 minutes discussion time and four indicators were given no discussion time.

1. Percentage of women 15 to 49 who consume less than 5 out of 10 defined food groups (2.1)
2. Prevalence of Anaemia in women (2.2)
3. Body Mass Index for adolescent girls and pregnant mothers (2.2)
4. Women's Dietary Diversity Score (2.2)
5. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first 5 months (2.2)
6. Food Consumption Score (2.1)

As a consequence of the omission of these indicators from the discussion, the only indicators to monitor these two very important targets pertain to children under 5. Bear in mind that our review was sent to the IAEG-SDG Secretariat in November 2018. The review was acknowledged and, while we have been verbally informed that it "has been taken very seriously," no steps as far as we know, have been taken to rectify our concerns.

Overall conclusion and recommendations

We have attempted to bring coherence to what are the obvious conclusions when reviewing the video evidence and associated documentation on the discussions of target 2.1 and 2.2. We are not seeking to attribute blame, since this was a well-coordinated collective approach. But it should have, and could have, been more successful. The reasons for lack of success can most likely be put down to the excessive amount of complex issues the IAEG-SDG members were expected to grasp across all the goals, combined with poor chairmanship. In our opinion, the experts in the nutrition community could have presented a more unified approach to indicator proposals and rationales.

The upcoming Comprehensive Review presents an opportunity for the same due process that all other indicators received at the Bangkok meetings be given to these six indicators.

Inclusion will allow submissions to be made on these indicators and, critically, give an opportunity for these indicators to be discussed at the 10th IAEG meetings in November. Given the knowledge shortcomings we have found, we further conclude that the IEAG are not in a position, without expert council, to propose or limit indicators for the SDG 2 in the upcoming Comprehensive Review.

The omitted indicators pertain to the nutritional status of women. It is estimated that 154 million women are malnourished and 30 million of these women are suffering from what the UN has called lack of human growth. There is a direct correlation between maternal nutrition and the 20 million babies born low birth weight each

year. The interlinkages extend to areas of infant, child and maternal mortality, cognitive function and lifelong health.

How we undertook our analysis

This part of the submission outlines how we undertook our analysis and provides the evidence to back up the findings that we have outlined above. We began our review over 18 months ago. We undertook this review as nutrition advocates, seeking to understand why it was deemed so few indicators could adequately monitor SDG 2 and in particular target 2.1 and 2.2. We have had discussions with many organizations within the nutrition community and we found that our concerns have been strongly validated. There remains a deep pessimism of acceptance of *“this is the way that it is”* and *“we tried our best”*.

This analysis looks retrospectively at the IAEG SDG conference in 2015, in order to understand the selection process of indicators. We reviewed the meeting’s supporting documentation, available before and after the event, using the publicly available video recording. This video was the key component that made this review possible. The video in question is the first session of day 2 of the event which is available [here](#). A full transcript of this portion of the conference is available [here](#).

Nature of the analysis of both the video evidence and documentation

This analysis looked at two key aspects of the 37-minute video, when 2.1 and 2.2 were discussed. It looks at how the meeting was chaired and the manner in which the IAEG members, taken as a whole, understood the complex issues under discussion and voted upon. It also highlights the five indicators that were not discussed and the one indicator that was discussed, but not given the due process of voting on the custodian agencies recommendations. It will conclude by setting forth the serious questions that our review has found and outline our recommendations which directly pertain to the 2020 Comprehensive Review.

Process and criteria for indicator selection

The process for indicator selection was straightforward. In an open consultation process experts and stakeholders were invited to make submissions for what indicators they believed needed to be included to monitor the goals. This process was set up to inform the IAEG Members of the issues pertaining to monitoring each of the goals.

On the basis of this consultation a synthesis report was produced which concisely outlined a summary of all the expert submissions and the proposed additional indicators. The report was called ‘Summary of Comments’. This report also outlined which of these indicators were supported by the various countries and stakeholders. In order to further streamline the selection process at the Bangkok meetings, a questionnaire was sent to all the IAEG country members which asked three questions, in relation to the ‘Summary of Comments’ document.

Based on the results obtained from the questionnaire, a key document was produced for the meetings which outlined what indicators were to be discussed for each goal and what issues remained for each goal to be discussed. All participants were given printed copies of the summary of comments and the results of the

questionnaire for all the goals. Target 2.1 and 2.2 cover 1 page in each document. Please find these two pages [here](#). These pages are vital to understanding the process of indicator selection and this review.

Time spent discussing SDG2.1 and 2.2 and the first key conclusion

The overall length of time discussing both SDG2.1 and 2.2 targets was 37 minutes. Within that time frame 35 minutes were taken up by SDG 2.1 and less than two minutes for SDG 2.2. We assert that a mere two minutes is completely inadequate to discuss the complexities of SDG 2.2. One of the key findings of the review is that this poor time management led to five key indicators for these targets not being discussed and one indicator being inadequately discussed. These indicators, we, and other experts, consider critical to monitoring the SDG 2.1 and 2.2.

The consequence of this lack of discussion has been the failed inclusion, without due consideration or due process, from the current indicator framework. This has led to the inclusion of only the indicators monitoring targets relating to 2.2, for children under 5.

It is worth noting that target 2.2 states: “By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older people”.

Chairmanship of the relevant 37-minute period

The Chairmanship of the two targets was very poor. The chair failed to demonstrate a clear understanding of the indicators selected and failed to capture the points raised in the process. There were times when indicators were being voted while there was a clear lack of understanding on what indicators they were actually being voted upon. The chair on one occasion read out two indicators believing that they were one. The inability of the chair to understand the indicators led to widespread confusion in the process. It is a basic requirement of any chair to “acquire sufficient knowledge of the issues you have been asked to address through the meeting objective so that your request for attendees will be seriously considered”

In a particular example, both the FAO and the WFP clearly requested that Food Consumption Score which had been proposed as an additional indicator be made grey for further deliberation. Both outlined separately that the IAEG members may not have had the opportunity to review the literature given This proposal was never even acknowledged. Despite the in-depth discussions the outcome document of the event showed only 2 changes to SDG 2.1 and 2.2 and they were the addition of wasting and moving from yellow to green 1 existing indicator.

While poor chairmanship was a key problem it served only to exacerbate the fundamental underlying problem of knowledge deficit, and capacity to understand core fundamental principles of the indicators. Despite a determined and coherent effort by the experts. The knowledge deficits will be discussed in more detail in the next part of this review.

The frustration of all was perhaps best expressed by the passionate pleas from the IAEG member of Cuba when she said:

“I can see that international organizations in our countries or some countries and they have developed a new index new indicator or new models but the problem is that many of them or I will say some of them in some countries they don’t exchange information with the national statistical office and sometimes we don’t know the methodology, we don’t know the indicator and we cannot prove anything that we don't know. Sometimes it can be better and we can move to a better indicator. If the national statistical office has the main responsibility of official statistics in a country and we don’t know what the indicator or model or any multi-dimensional index is we cannot approve. We cannot approve anything that we don’t know and say that ok later on we will show you. We don’t have another chance the chance is today it is here it is in the statistical commission”.

“We have to be clear on that, some international organisations have approached us. I say ok, I don’t accept any pressure. I am open to listen to everything. If I agree, I understand I will support you. if I don’t we cannot do it, this is the point. This is something that we can move on and do better in the future, I think. We have to reflect, perhaps, on the international environment, because this is something that is lacking and it is wrong. Before I came, I said I would like to exchange experiences with international organizations, but it was not possible. There was no time. We cannot support anything that we don't know. I would like to remark that it is a pity.”

- (Time on video 1hr .06 seconds)

In many ways, Cuba observations at the meetings confirm and articulate our core findings.

Knowledge deficits among IAEG members

Despite some notable exceptions, the IAEG members at the meetings in Bangkok lacked very basic and fundamental knowledge on the indicators that related to nutrition. What transpired as a result was a process that in our opinion was flawed and embarrassing. There was a clear problem with the knowledge transference between the IAEG members and submissions made by the various experts and stakeholders, informing the discussions in Bangkok. The IAEG members on numerous occasions in the discussions on SDG 2 made remarks such as: “I don't understand”.” I will need more information”; “clarity is required”; “not sufficient information to make a decision”. On review of the video, it was clear that there was a lack of understanding on basic concepts of nutrition or of the indicators or the proposed indicators by the majority of the IAEG members.

*The process was clearly set up in a way which intended that the IAEG Members should have had a good conceptual grasp of the indicators prior to the meetings. Allocating a time frame of just 7 minutes per target allowed an opportunity for clarification from the experts in the room, from the assumption of an initial understanding of the expert submissions in preparation for the IAEG-SDG conference. To streamline the Bangkok meeting a questionnaire was sent to IAEG members regarding the ‘Summary of Comments’. Three questions were asked of each of the targets and related to the proposed indicators and proposals for additional indicators. This formed the basis of a new document called “*Results of Questions on ‘Summary of Comments’*”.

We conclude that the results of this questionnaire may be intrinsically flawed, based on the premise that IAEG did not have sufficient knowledge of the indicators they were being asked to vote on. This means that the discussion agenda for the meeting was also fundamentally flawed. Given these knowledge deficits we further

conclude that the IEAG are not in a position without expert council to propose and limit indicators for SDG 2 in the upcoming Comprehensive Review.

Indicators that were poorly understood by IAEG members

Our assessment is based on knowledge levels that would be expected to be required to make an informed decision on indicator inclusion or exclusion. It is an evaluation based on language used by members at the meeting on the Indicators themselves as well as knowledge level pertaining to interlinkages between nutrition targets and other goals. As well as conceptual knowledge deficits for indicators we found very poor knowledge where comprehensive data was being collected on proposed indicators in countries by outside agencies as they were not going through national statistical offices. From the 3 most recent IAEG-SDG meetings that we have attended as stakeholders this appears to be an issue that has still to be resolved. As we have outlined previously this was the basis of Cuba intervention. Our assessment is a subjective view based on video evidence. We are confident that our findings will be upheld in any subsequent critique of this work.

The first part of this assessment is based on the indicators that were discussed at the meeting. We will deal with target 2.1 and 2.2 separately and subjectively evaluate knowledge levels. We will also outline what indicators were not discussed.

Target 2.1

Comprehension level

- Prevalence of undernourishment: Poorly understood.
- Food Insecurity Scale: Very poorly understood.
- Prevalence of Underweight in Children Under 5 years of Age: Poorly understood
- Global Hunger Index: Very poorly understood

Target 2.2

Naturally, with only two minutes given to discuss all the issues of 2.2, it is difficult to assess knowledge levels. However, concepts and methodology were well established already for some of the indicators.

- Stunting in children: Good comprehension
- Wasting in children: Good comprehension
- Obesity in children: Poor understanding.

Main additional indicators which were not discussed for 2.1 and 2.2

Target 2.1

- Percentage of women 15 to 49 who consume less than 5 out of 10 defined food groups was not mentioned at all at the meetings and was supported by 2 countries.

Target 2.2

- Body Mass Index for adolescent girls pregnant mothers and older people.
- Prevalence of anemia for women of reproductive age.
- Women's Dietary Diversity Score.
- Exclusive Breastfeeding among 0 to 5 months.

Additional indicator which were not adequately discussed

Food Consumption Score proposed was discussed but poor chairmanship meant due process was not established as no voting took place on the recommendations of the custodian agencies. *(Please see * above under 'Knowledge deficits among IAEG members', page 6)*

Broader implications of our review

On a less detailed review of many of the other goals, we found evidence that would suggest the knowledge deficit persisted in respect of other goals. It is therefore up to the custodian agencies and subsequent evaluations of the other goals to ascertain if a similar review such as ours may be worthwhile.

About Mothers First

Mothers First is a community based targeted nutrition project in India. Its mission is to provide nutrition to malnourished pregnant mothers and their children, breaking the cycle of malnutrition in communities. It advocates for the inclusion of maternal nutrition in global nutrition policy and global targets. It was established in 2004 as the Varanasi Children's Hospital. Mothers First is a registered charity, number CHY 19325.

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