

The [SDG Index](#) has measured progress at the level of countries, sub-national states and cities.

But is it possible - or worthwhile - to attempt to measure SDG progress at the level of the individual?

Could the SDG Index [methodology](#) have application from the scale of countries to its respective citizens?

Is there benefit to rank the progress toward SDG achievement of individuals against one another, within and across countries?

From a technical point-of-view, is it possible to emulate the procedure used by the SDG Index's authors? A primary inspiration of their methodology was the [OECD Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators](#), also co-authored by the [European Commission's JRC](#), the [same agency which audited the SDG Index](#).

Utilising an OECD guide also drew upon the earliest iteration of the SDG Index, [authored by Christian Kroll on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung](#), ahead of the adoption of the SDGs. This proto-SDG Index focused on the high-income countries to measure their preparedness for the Goals at their outset. Further, the current lead of the SDG Index team, and head of the [SDSN Europe](#) office in Paris, is [Guillaume Lafortune](#), former OECD employee.

Though the indicators of a personal SDG index would differ from the original, many of the methodology's assumptions abide, and the five-step decision tree used by the Index authors remains useful.

To enumerate each step in the context of adapting the indicators, the use of absolute quantitative thresholds in SDGs and targets is consistent at a personal level.

The second step in the decision tree invites more complexity, but also an opportunity to identify and address the most intransigent indicators to adapt. It states:

*"Where no explicit SDG target is available, apply the principle of 'leave no one behind' to set the upper bound to universal access or zero deprivation for indicators measuring extreme poverty, public service coverage and access to basic infrastructure."*

The handful of SDG Index indicators measuring infrastructure or provision of government services pose the greatest challenges to personal-scale indicators, and these may need to be omitted.

For some indicators, a science-based target is used as the 100% upper bound, which poses no issues at the individual level.

The latter two steps of the decision tree, which draws upon averages of top performers of an indicator, ought to be feasible, depending on how individuals shared the data of their progress.

Which elements of the SDG Index methodology are feasible for adaptation in calculating index scores?

The criteria for indicator selection from the original methodology is consistent with the prospect of personal indicators.

These indicators tailored for individuals would still need global relevance and applicability to a broad range of country settings, as well as personal differences.

The need for statistical adequacy, timeliness and data quality endures. A possible threshold for acceptance of an indicator could be the availability of data coverage for 80% of the 149 UN Member States with a national population greater than 1 million, consistent with the original Index methodology.

It would still be possible to normalise each indicator from 0-100, allowing for a personal index score measuring progress toward individual achievement of the SDGs, with 0 denoting worst performance, and 100 describing the optimum. For this rescaling of data to ensure comparability across indicators, the min/max equation could continue to be appropriate.

Outliers could continue to be censored as extreme values from the distribution of each indicator. The equal weighting of each Goal per the SDG Index methodology would remain, consistent with the equal importance given to each Goal at the UN level.

The four colour bands for prioritisation in the form of a Dashboard is still suitable, along with the colour scores being based on the averages of the two worst-performing indicators within a Goal. For the trends, the 5-arrow system is also still useful for individuals to visualise progress.

The data sources of individuals would differ compared to the official data of national and international agencies or NGOs used by the DR.

The outdated and missing data for certain indicators across individuals could pose similar issues as faced in the original SDG Index methodology. It's feasible it could be addressed in a similar manner, whether imputation or thresholds of data gaps in any reporting.

For the purposes of this essay, we'll omit acknowledging the consideration of statistical soundness, including sensitivity & robustness. These may only be worthwhile to examine further, should it be deemed developing a personal SDG Index was a worthy pursuit.

Now we understand the technical considerations, how many of the indicators in the SDG Index can be measured at the individual level, consistent with the above?

My book, [You and the Global Goals](#) suggests individual actions for all indicators included in the [2022 Sustainable Development Report](#).

Using the codebook from the [2023 Sustainable Development Report's data](#), I've compared which of the individual [actions proposed in You and the Global Goals](#) could be suitable for quantification for the purposes of a personal SDG index. Each indicator is linked in the codebook data to the suggested action from *You and the Global Goals* for easy reference.

I found most indicators were suitable for action at the individual level, when using the suggested individual action. The exceptions were measures relating to the quality of infrastructure (e.g. SDG #9), those at the level of industrial production (SDG #12), and government policy and service provision. Another exception is for or those with occupations or shareholdings in certain industries e.g., arms production, hazardous pesticide export.

For any indicators for which the SDR's results show [Least Developed Countries](#) are far off-track, scoring red according to the colour-coded Dashboards, the approach of *You and the Global Goals* is for OECD country readers to fulfil their country's commitment to donate 0.7% of personal gross income to charities alleviating poverty.

This is treated as an international spillover effect, a trend emphasised in the 2023 SDR. Of the 124 indicators of the SDR, 52 of the indicators in *You and the Global Goals* have a suggested action inverting the responsibility from OECD citizens to LDCs, or otherwise within a country to redress inequalities.

I found 105 of the 124 SDR indicators were suitable for individuals to quantify for the purpose of a composite index, based on the suggested actions in *You and the Global Goals*.

I deemed 41 indicators to be suitable on a conditional basis, most often due to the indicators being only relevant for OECD citizens, although 26 of these were because the original indicator in the SDR wasn't global.

Several of the suggested actions in *You and the Global Goals* which I considered not suitable for quantification were because they offered only the possibility to write a letter to a government representative on the matter of the respective topic, which if included, could be quantified as a binary action.

*You and the Global Goals* drew upon the 2022 SDR, so omits the five new indicators in the 2023 SDR.

One of the key considerations against the value of an SDG Index adapted to individual scale is whether there would be enough difference among the individuals within a country (or a state or city) to justify disaggregating its citizens for the purpose of comparison.

To compare the aims of the Sustainable Development Report from a personal SDG index, the objective of creating a policy tool would be of lesser use, and better suited for individual accountability and tracking.

A personal index would continue to aid prioritisation if the results were also presented as colour-coded Dashboards.

It's possible it could spark useful comparison of individual results within those measuring their progress, stimulating a sense of competition among peers. This mightn't inform how an individual seeks to implement action toward each indicator, but at least allows prioritisation of where one's own data gaps exist.

To draw upon the pros and cons of composite indicators, as articulated in the OECD Handbook, they allow for summarisation of complex issues, to help people make decisions about their own impacts. Composite indicators are easier to interpret than a hundred separate measures, and help provide accountability of oneself in relation to the SDGs.

Could the use of judging one's own progress - observing improvements, declines or stagnancy - foster similar behaviours tho those observed via activity trackers and the phenomenon of the quantified self?

Is it possible to gamify SDG progress among individuals, helping hasten the data revolution necessary for SDG progress?

A personal SDG index could be feasible. But whether the variation within countries justify an individual composite index remains an open question? One of the most crucial answers to this consideration, however, is whether such a proposed index could be sufficiently well-constructed.

Data: [📄 Personal SDG Index codebook](#)