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Measuring Development - from the UN's perspective

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> Never again should it be possible to say 'we didn't know'. No one should be invisible. This is the world we want – a world that counts.
>
> \- *A World that Counts*, 2014, 3

Abstract

Recipes for creating development have changed radically since the international community first thought to intervene in such historical processes soon after WWII. During this time, views about how to measure development have also changed dramatically, moving from relatively simple to relatively complex measurement systems. This paper charts these changes using both the oral interview histories and retrospective book accounts given by those involved with the UNDP, and offers an analysis of their 'political economy of numbers'. Their move from using GNP per head to the SDGs is analysed in terms of the potential performativity of those numbers in prompting development and for creating accountability

A World That Counts, a November 2014 report prepared for the UN, was programmatic in its commitment to numbers and to counting. Its significance at that moment was to point to a double sense of what counts. People count - 'no one should be invisible' in this new world - but the world itself should also count, for this document on numbers was written as a commitment to the prosecution of the then forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is not difficult to argue that the UN's development project always involved regimes of counting, but the scale of the numerical regime envisaged in the SDGs is unprecedented, if not amazing. From an organisation that privileged a single measurement of development, the Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990, it became one supporting the call for 230 or so indicators of development in 2015. This paper aims to unravel the UN's engagement with 'development' by offering a commentary that thinks seriously about its 'political economy of numbers' (Seers 1976): namely how the economic things we count, and

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the way we count them, have political implications for economic actions around the world's economies. We concentrate on how the UN organisation and its people thought about the problem of creating numbers of development that could be used for different purposes and by different groups. We intend to be careful in our terminology, for the words: numbers, counting, and accounting; and measurements and measuring, are all associated with different usages and implications. We also need 'indicators' - numbers that indicate but are not direct measurements of something (as we find in business cycle indicators for example). Numbers are also often connected to specific 'targets' and 'goals', another terminology of development agendas that weave throughout that UN history even while there are substantive changes in ambition.

We are going to present our materials by intertwining two different commentaries. In one commentary, we depend upon a set of historiographical resources created by the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP). This project, established in 1999, was set up as an independent initiative by the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies of the City University of New York (CUNY) and consisted of a set of edited books written by people who had been committed to the UN over long periods, and 76 oral history interviews of those involved with the UN that have been transcribed and made searchable. These do not constitute an 'official' institutional history, yet at the same time, they offer a set of sources with a potentially high degree of internalism. To counteract that internalist tendency, we will offer a 'between their lines' reading to abstract these UN people's thinking about numbers and their use of those numbers. Since their project was undertaken in the period 1999-2007 or so, it starts with personal experience, but as their accounts reach back in time, they become less personal reminiscences and more a mixture of inherited memory and recorded history.

Of course, as we know, the UN was not acting alone in this history of development numbers: many other agencies, and people, were involved. So, in concentrating on these UN sources we are not trying to claim dominance for the UN, nor write out any alternative and complementary histories. Nor are we trying to produce a broader history of development or its counting regimes. Rather we are trying to capture an internal picture of how those involved in this important actor-institution understood their own history of what they had done and were doing and by developing our own commentary and analysis on their choice of development numbers.

Lost and found: UN peoples' history of development numbers

One of the immediately striking aspects of this UN history is their preference to mark out time changes in neat decades as found in one of the most relevant books in the series:

Chapter titles for *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (Jolly, Emmerij, Ghia and Lapeyre 2004)

1940s and 50s: Foundations of UN Development Thinking and Practice
1960s: The UN Development Decade: Mobilizing for Development
1970s: Equity in Development
1980s: Losing Control and Marginalizing the Poorest
1990s: Rediscovering a Human Vision

In this, and their other books, we see a long-term commitment to development, but one that reflects different notions of it, and portrays their changes of heart about the scope and meaning of that term, and their feelings of success and failure. Going back to the 1940s and 50s, the focus of development thinking is shown in terms of typical macroeconomic problems as perceived from Western 'developed' eyes of that period: growth rates, employment, and the reconstruction of war economies. The 1960s was understood as the decade of 'planning' development. Development did not just happen, nor was it the result of simple recipes: it had to be planned, but those plans understood it as a growth project along normal lines, and through standard stages.[1] The 1970s are remembered for their attempt to broaden the idea of development in the collection of multiple indicators to bring the 'human and social' into the development mix. And at the same time their agenda began to focus on countries at different 'degrees' of development (e.g. 'least developed'). This flowering of the 1970s agenda wilted in the 1980s when it lost leadership to 'the Bretton Woods Institutions' (meaning the IMF and World Bank) in the competition for donors, and those institutions' structural adjustment approach to development. The 1990s and 2000s are portrayed as rediscovering the human and social agenda, re-establishing a progressive path, and making initiatives at the global level.[2]

[1] The idea of 'stages' had much to do with the popularity of Rostow's historical account (see Gilman, this volume).

[2] Different agencies had different meanings for the term development, but what was especially disadvantageous to UNDP was that it struggled to translate its policy language into monetary support - a resource only the World Bank and the IMF had (Doyle 2004, 26).

These books offer historically respectable accounts in presenting their moves along the development path as messy rather than glorious, with steps back and loss of focus and leadership, as well as moves forwards. They are more obviously faintly Whiggish when they reach the present, where they exhibit a natural tendency to stand at their endpoint in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century and look back over their histories in judgement upon their success. At this point, their perspective naturally tends to bring all the separate agencies of the UN development goals and targets together - all paths do lead to the present, even if they meandered on the way.

These histories of the UN also tell us about numerous separate UN initiatives under different labels and by several agencies directly or indirectly part of the UN. These are presented in their accounts as gradually coalescing into the wider development programme as they now understand it. Yet, we can see in this history that the current discourse of goals and targets spelt out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDGs shows considerable continuity with the earlier UN discourse of 'goals' and 'targets'. Such goals were individually set, and pursued with success measured according to targets set in separate actions: e.g. health goals and targets, education goals and targets, etc., by UNESCO, UNICEF, FAO, WHO, UNCTAD, etc., along with more recent ones on the environment. As the development agenda broadened beyond the economic into the human and social, each of these individual targets that had earlier been conceived as a set of independent UN projects of achieving 'good things' in the world, became gathered under the notion of what it meant to be developed with the aim that processes of acquiring these characteristics were to be embedded internally into each country's own agenda. A developed country became committed, for example, to universal education, and the health services to achieve low infant and maternal mortality, and even to a good statistics office and trusted numbers.[3] It is difficult perhaps to recover this difference. When Richard Jolly interviewed Hans Singer, he suggests that (with the MDGs) the UN seemed to have returned to the old targets of child mortality, education or life expectancy. But Singer explained the difference between the old social indicators (of the 1970s, which we come to below) and the ones included in the MDGs: "But even though we now use those targets and give a lot of attention to them, we are not so much

[3] Stone comments that Samoa seems to have been included in a list of underdeveloped nations because "the very fact that some of their main statistics are missing is itself proof that it is a least developed country" (Stone 2002, 53).

emphasizing them as social sector targets but as indicators for the whole process of development" (Singer 2000, 135).

Two decades are particularly relevant to our concern with numbers: the 1970s and 1990s. These UN histories treat the 1970s as a key decade in the context of the current thinking about development in a number of respects. There was first the change from assuming there was one economic development recipe and path, to seeing several, with categories of relative development, and different paths appropriate for different situations. This variety in itself required the creation of relevant sets of measurements appropriate for different levels of development (Ward, 2004). But it was also the decade which saw "the most important effort to re-think the numbers and to re-think what we meant by success and by development itself and to play down the previous emphasis on GNP and GNP growth" (Helleiner 2000, 39) and to focus on the "good life for human beings as the purpose of development" (Singer 2000, 128). This broadening of the agenda beyond the narrow economic focus was associated with serious investigation into the use of indicators and index numbers. Under the leadership of Tinbergen, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) developed a "composite and synthetic set of [18] development indicators" and "provided the most comprehensive common coverage ... about the general well-being of societies". While this was regarded as "technically sophisticated" it was also seen as "too complex and insufficiently transparent" to know exactly what it was measuring, or to be useful in policy work (all quotes Ward 2004, 159-60).[4] This broadening of the notion of development and the collection of indicator numbers in these years was not just an initiative of the UN, but was more widely shared, for example by the World Bank.

Ward's (2004) account of quantification at the UN contrasted this 1970s moment with that of the early 1950s. As he argues it, the UN charter requires it to promote "higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development" (Article 55) but it cannot interfere in member countries. In this Cold War context, there were worries about social measurements being

> seen as the Secretariat making political 'judgements' about member governments, especially because an early intention was to quantify 'development' and create an ordinal listing of countries along relevant common scales appropriate to selected social indicators. (Ward 2004,

[4] The UNRISD was created in 1963 with Tinbergen and Myrdal to construct social indicators on which UNRISD worked for 15-20 years (Ghai 2001, 80).

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These UN sources portray their project for development and its relevant numbers opening and widening in the decades from the 1950s to 1970s decades, but then they see these avenues and numbers closing down during the 1980s; the 1990s changes are recognised as a new starting point. As Ghai asserted:

> we now see development as a much more complex affair then it was thought of in the early post-war decades. Development has many dimensions. The very objectives of development are multifold. It is not GDP (gross domestic product). It is not industrialization. It is a lot more complicated. (2001, 79)

We turn now to this most recent time. The SDGs were introduced in September 2015 and are beyond the period covered by the UN histories, but as the UN websites portray them, they are regarded as a much broader (and so 'better') version of the MDGs of 2000, out of which they grew and which are very much within this UN project's historical time period. The SDGs set 17 goals, broadening the 8 goals of the MDGs by including the sustainable world along with the social and human elements. Both systems grew out of the 1990s move to see development as multidimensional in aspect, to be treated as a set of characteristics of what it meant to be developed. For example, while the MDGs' most important associated slogan was 'make poverty history' this was only one of those millennium goals. Each goal was associated with a set of targets and since development in this multi-dimensional sense could not be measured directly, numerical 'indicators' were developed for each of the targets. This multi-dimensionality was seen as an improvement on, but growing out of, the much more limited HDI of 1990, which involved just three indicators (with no goals or targets).

The HDI index numbers of the 1990s were, in their turn, seen in these UN histories as signalling a radical break with the past - indicating a rethinking of what development is, not just a replacement for earlier growth numbers (i.e. GDP). The HDI, dating from 1990, is made up of three indicators: national income per capita, infant mortality and basic education, equally weighted into a single index number for each country in each time period. As the sources report: Jolly and Sen eventually agreed with Mahbub that they "needed something equally vulgar to GDP in order to displace GDP per capita from its pre-eminence as the indicator of development" (Jolly 2005, 126). As Sen states, Mahbub was out "to get GNP" and the only way to do so was to develop "another similarly simple index" (Sen 2003, 24) and that was "better in the sense that it will focus on human lives, and not just on commodities" (*ibid*). Looking backward with these UN people: "the HDI was a bold departure … that challenged political ideologies". Their new approach "entered into what previously had been forbidden measurement territory … and invaded the political comfort zone of many national leaders" and "orthodox statisticians" (Ward 2004).

Reading between, across and beyond their lines

We see, in these historical resources, a wealth of references to numbers, in all sorts of forms and contexts. First and foremost, we observe a wavering commitment: to thick bundles of numbers that imply a dis-aggregated view of what constituted development in oscillation with thin (or 'vulgar') numbers that provide aggregate measurements such as the HDI or GNP per capita. (The HDI is also of course a mini-bundle, but is found aggregated into a single index number.) These attempts to capture development in simple versus complex numerical measures changed as the idea or concept of development changed, and along with the recipes advanced to achieve such change. And the purposes of these numbers changed as different agencies within and beyond the UN took the lead, and as economics lost its battles for dominance to social and human dimensions in the definition of development. Thus, there were false starts to both thin and thick measurements, even while a positive ambition of 'development' remains salient.

Second, politics matters: numbering systems changed also with national governments' desire and ability to limit the range of targets thought to be associated with development in contrast to the UN peoples' desire to broaden that agenda.[5] And of course much depended on the ability of development 'interests' inside the UN to force their agenda to the fore amongst the UN's other agendas. Several interviewees discussed the struggle to change the existing framework or ideas. The best way seemed to be "to understand the way Security Council members were thinking and then articulate new ideas whereby they could make linkages quickly and absorb that which is new" (Heyzer 2002, 46)].[6] There was a similar set of constraints and battles in the way that the UN development organisations operated against (or in conjunction with) alternative powerful agencies in the development industry. Interviewed in 2004, Doyle suggested that the IMF, World Bank and the UN had now decided on writing

[5] For instance, a joint project by UNESCO and UNRISD on the interaction between culture and development worried UNESCO because it could be too controversial, and was eventually abandoned (Ghai 2001, 89).

[6] For example, Heyzer explains how his team had to argue that female violence should be a priority in the Security Council by framing it as a "good indicator of human security" (2002, 46).

reports that prove that they are all on the same page. “We’ve agreed to measure progress now” (Doyle 2004, 26). As a result, Sadik describes the overall framework for development at the country level as

> an umbrella objective as the objective or the main goal, and then showing how the objective, or the core programs of the different organizations would help to achieve that objective. Also, we developed a whole set of procedures on country assessments and common data systems and so on. (Sadik 2002, 168)

Third, numbers are seen neither as an independent issue, nor merely a technical problem. Research and annual reports and data innovations prompted each other. As Streeten argued, their Human Development Reports made the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) a high profile agency in terms of generating ideas (whereas it used to be low profile), because it triggered some very important discussions and actions (Streeten 2001, 53). At the same time, the UNDP people were keenly aware of the competition between different defining measures. We already saw the battle between GNP per head vs. the HDI, but the HDI was also in competition with the World Bank’s $-a-day measure. These different measurement systems marked competition between agencies, but also between measurement systems that capture different kinds of things. Sadik discussed the conflict between UN agencies because of their need to fundraise based on the performance and results of their particular cause: “So there was a need to bring them together with a common platform. ... The experts came in and helped define targets to meet the goals and then indicators.” (Doyle 2004, 26) At the same time, as the number of indicators grew, responsibility for their definition also became diffused beyond the agency, not just to partner research institutes, or even national member agencies, but to a variety of highly specialist technical groups, often autonomous and sometimes activist NGO groups, who came to feel that they ‘owned’ the indicators even once adopted by the UN statistical office.[7]

We can see many of these elements at work in the contrast over the past quarter of a century between the HDI, the MDGs and SDGs, and in the movements over time between these systems of measuring the characteristics of development. It is important to understand that there are two related changes going on here that are rarely separated out.

[7] Doyle (2004, 26) explains how Ph.Ds in statistics and development economics were brought in to construct 47 indicators (though the eventual number was in fact 60); see also footnote 9.

The first major change is the considerable *extension of scope* of goals to go beyond the social and health to expand substantially the environmental, but also to put back the economic aspects that are, perhaps surprisingly, missing from the MDGs. But when the 2015 SDGs brought back economic they did so not as a recipe for growth, or even as growth itself, but rather in terms of the preferred characteristics of the economic elements that should be involved in developmental changes (e.g. good jobs, clean cities, etc.). Similarly, the initial battle of the HDI versus GNP denoted a replacement of an economic growth *recipe* for creating development by a focus on the associated possibilities of development in social and human terms, and not just as a *measure* of average income to the neglect of poverty. At that time, they were particularly concerned with the defect that measures of poverty, in absolute terms for part of a population, were not captured in the average income per head (see Sen 2003, 22).[8]

The HDI was a critical break point here, not just in broadening the scope, nor because it provided the starting point for this new way of thinking about development, but because it also prompted the commitment to numbering via indicators. We can point to the links in the chain towards the MDGs - the HDI was followed by a succession of poverty indexes: first the Human Poverty Index (HPI) (1997) and then the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (2010), which were supposed to better reflect the deprivation in developing countries (UNDP, 2006), but were also indices with an increasing number of indicators.[9] The 25-year expansion in indicators during 1990-2015 is well shown in the ratios involved. The SDGs'17 goals are to be met by concentrating on 169 targets associated with 230 indicators compared to the 8 goals of the MDGs with 21 targets and 60 indicators, and the mere 3 indicators for the HDI producing a single index number. Or seen more clearly in terms of the ratio of goals:indicators: HDI is 1:3; MDGs are 8:60 and SDGs are 17:230.

The second major change over those years is much less commented upon, and lies in the *increasing 'stretch'* between the characteristics of what constitutes a goal, a target, and an indicator, and so in the relationship between them. The SDG goals are broad ambitions expressed in words (sometimes using quite conceptual terms), the targets also remain to some

[8] Sen explains how in 1989 Mahbub argued they should focus "on the lives of human beings —their freedoms and well-being, their capabilities". Mahbub wanted Sen to help him construct "a powerful weapon" to demand "more attention on people's deprivations and unfreedoms." (Sen 2003, 22)

[9] These indices were developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and the UNDP together (Alkire and Santos 2010).

extent verbally expressed though they were more specific. The numerical indicators are not designed to provide numbers directly on how far the goals are met for there is no one-to-one relationships between indicators and targets, but rather to provide numbers that could indicate (in some relevant way) success in various aspects associated with the characteristics of the targets. For example, SDG Goal 1 is to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" and has 5 targets with 9 indicators. Target 1.2 is

> By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.

It does not define 'dimensions', but nevertheless is a target for which one can imagine some good numerical indicators. By contrast, consider Target 1.5:

> By 2030 build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations, and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.

As with many of the other targets, this one is difficult to characterise with a set of measurable characteristics and so indicators. In general, while the numerical indicators have some relation to their targets, they are not directly and unambiguously measurements of the elements expressed in the targets; and these targets in turn are related to their goals as multiple characteristics of those goals. Indicator numbers operate at a twice-removed level in relation to goals; they are numbers that indicate, not measure, in relation to goals and they function so only indirectly via targets.

In contrast to the SDGs, the MDGs goals were much more narrowly specified (for example: 'reduce childhood mortality', 'achieve universal primary education') so that their targets could be expressed in measurable terms, and most indicators therefore had a more unambiguous relation to their targets, and thus to their goals. This increasing stretch between goals and indicators that we find in the SDGs compared to the MDGs is also evidenced by the fact that some MDG goals became targets in the SDGs, and that the sheer number of indicators in the SDG system means that these numbers operate at a much more granular level than in the MDG system. Looking backward, some degree of stretch is also evident in the earlier move from the HDI to the MDGs and from GNP/GDP to the HDI. In that first step, when the HDI replaced GNP/GDP per capita, we can see that the first small expansion of scope (one to three measurements) was also associated with 'stretch': but in this case, those three indicators were associated with Sen's notion of human capabilities, a philosophically grounded legitimation of stretch.

There are important and underestimated consequences of this *expansion of scope in conjunction with the increased stretch: namely as the goals expand, the indicator numbers have an ever more limited overall representing power not just for individual goals but also for development as an overall 'good'*. What do we mean by this? Both MDGs and SDGs produced sets of indicators, but they cannot be combined to produce an overall index number measurement of development in the way that their HDI predecessor did. To produce an index number requires that all the numbers are in commensurable units, and that the weighting, which enables them to be spliced into one index number, is based on some principle. The HDI was based on equal one-third weights, for no good reason: the choice of weights, and elements, were both arbitrary, not principled, as was recognised by its creators (see Sen 2003, 23-24). To see why this matters, compare this HDI index number with the usual indices of economics found in CPI or RPI. These indices are well-founded on principles: the individual goods that are measured in commensurable units (money terms) and their individual weights in the construction of the index are determined by empirical survey research which gathers information on the share of each of those goods in consumer budgets. That is, both the choice of the elements and their weights/shares are based on principles derived from definitions of household spending. The impossibility, or at least immense problem, of creating an index number like the HDI out of the indicators (for the SDG or MDG systems) - until someone can have a good principled explanation for the choice of the elements (the indicators) *and* for their shares in what constitutes 'development'- is a severe limitation.[10] And without index numbers, there can be no single measurement constructed which would enable comparisons over time and over countries of the national achievements on the combined set of goals, or on some kind of 'development' scale. Index numbers and indicator systems are fundamentally different kinds of 'measuring instruments', functioning in different ways (see Morgan 2001) and with different usages and different powers to represent development.

In sum, the individual indicator numbers in both the MDGs and SDGs can hardly

[10] These difficulties may explain why the technicians of the SDGs/MDGs community worry about the sheer numbers of indicators in the SDG system(Alkire 2016, Alkire and Santos 2010). An alternative might be to apply some kind of clustering techniques, as Boumans and De Marchi (this volume) report for Adelman and Morris.

provide single measures of development, and may be remote from measuring the goals: they are only partial representations of the targets. Yet they are not without considerable potential agency to prompt lots of separate policy actions on each of these specific elements relevant for each target. We can see the potential agency working even with the historical first step. The HDI produced a single and comparable set of numbers for all countries not just with the index numbers, but with the basic three indicator elements, which could be compared over time and between countries. It was not brilliant for representing development (it was still a 'vulgar' or thin number), but because of its comparability possibilities, it allowed commentators and governments to see beyond income per head. "If you abolished the Human Development Report, you would need to find some way to keep the Human Development Indices, and all that they mean for providing ways for newspapers, media, television, as well as textbooks and academic studies, to rank countries in terms of human concerns" (Jolly 2005, 135). The HDI was also intended to change thinking about what constituted development, and to be used in top-down advocacy. Sen explained how countries then started competing against each other with the HDI, which Mahbub encouraged. Mahbub also insisted on supplying the one lean number (the HDI) with a large number of tables on different elements in human life (Sen 2003, 24).

Similarly the MDGs and SDGs helped persuade the UN clients (i.e. the developing countries) to follow their prescriptions for development and from the UN's point of view it was, and is, important that goals are associated with targets that are monitored via numbers. Just as for Tinbergen's earlier initiative at UNRISD, "we need solid data and social indicators. Otherwise, how can we measure social progress?" (Ghai 2001, 80) The UN also believes in the need for ranking countries: "Then they had a databank, and they tried to make the data comparable so that you can compare the performance of different countries." (Ghai 2001, 80) These numbers also prompted bottom-up agenda agitation for action, in line with a long UN tradition of encouraging dispersed advocacy, not just from the UN's local offices and national governments, but from local activist levels inside individual countries. Such goals also helped to activate the collaboration of other international institutions (the World Bank for example, has adopted two of the SDGs for its specific attention).

Political economy of numbers: Counting, accounting and accountability

We can see from these sources that numbers really matter, that they have agency inside and outside the institution: "There is no way that I can convince anybody to take action unless we have concrete figures" (Tolba 2001, 47). We can find evidence that data set the work programme; data provided the means to measure progress and to compare countries; and data provided a public instrument of persuasion. The debates may be politicized, but when "it comes to identifying the issue, science speaks with its own voice, and people accept this and say 'yes, we need to do action.'" (Tolba 2001, 48) It is perhaps a mark of the privileged agency of numbers that these UN people were well aware that their data could be unreliable, and even guesstimates, but still serve these purposes equally well.[11] Or, to put it into another context: they were sophisticated in terms of the sociologists' ideas of knowledge construction, for their experience told them what kind of numbers would convince and energise even if not fully accurate or objective. The institutional backing of the UN buttressed the public trust in numbers that might not have been backed up by expert 'objective' judgement (Porter 1995).

Dudley Seers, one of the most respected participants in the development debates, discussed the 'political economy of numbers' in an essay of 1976 on the system of national accounts. His questions about public and expert attention to development numbers prompts us to probe some salient similarities and contrasts between national income accounts and these later development numbers for more is involved here than 'trust'. Seers drew attention to the way our regimes of economic numbers shape our perception of the world:

> What appear to be merely technical choices in statistics are in fact often of profound importance, because published data mould our perception of reality. We cannot, with our own eyes and ears, perceive more than a minute sample of human affairs, even in our own country - and a very unrandom sample at that. So we rely on published statistics not merely for professional or political (or commercial) purposes, but in order to build and maintain our model of the world. (Seers 1973, 193)

Trust and perception are both preconditions for something else, namely for agendas of audit and accountability. The interesting literature on the sociology of accounting analyses how numbers indirectly 'discipline' people, institutions, or the state in an international environment, to behave in certain ways that would satisfy the targets set in the measuring

[11] As a member of the Planning Commission for Pakistan, Sadik remembers that the WHO did not have satisfactory data (Sadik 2002, 37-39). Consequently, Sadik had to plan without much information: "I made up all kinds of statistics, which I constructed in some way to reflect infant mortality from general mortality, and what percentage were women" (ibid, 39).

system (see Power 1997). Miller (1990) discusses the close intersection of such numbering systems and the role of the state. Numbers matter not just in the sense that they are associated with various kinds of measuring systems, but because they also double in various accountability regimes. We see this audit agenda evident in the oral interviews: Shahani explained that the Human Development Reports were welcomed "because they show governments that there are other indicators of power". The indicators help the international community and the domestic civil society to judge the government: "It's not just having a strong military or having your allies across the oceans or having your own global summits. Those days are over" (all quotes Shahani 1999, 49). This agenda was more clearly flagged for the future in the *A World That Counts* report:

> Data are the lifeblood of decision-making and the raw material for accountability. Without high-quality data providing the right information on the right things at the right time; designing, monitoring and evaluating effective policies becomes almost impossible.

Those in the UN well understood this audit and accountability regime. Targets were "an orienting, disciplining exercise and also a measurement of our success or failure" and showed "how difficult the task is." (Chidzero 2000, 127-8) While a variety of claims for the role of numbers are made in these sources, they add up to the idea that accountability can only be built through data, or rather that accountability requires the use of some kinds of numbers and numerical evidence that either initiates, or assesses, programmes of development or both.

We go back to Seers however because he was explicitly dealing with the project of numbering the economies for development actions, one in which he was an active participant, and because the national income accounts that he discussed were also a UN-owned measurement project. Those accounting measurement systems were initially developed in the 1940s by economists anxious to use the macroeconomics of growth to avoid repeating the depression of the 1930s and their standards were established and set in the context of the 1950s by the UN. The founders of that system (R. Stone and S. Kuznets) had doubts about its relevance to developing economies (see Morgan 2011), but these doubts were overruled. Seers outlined all the problems of using them as a measuring system for developing countries, and the great difficulty of thinking outside this box, which became more evident as the notions of development changed. This was indeed the background that we have already sketched for the UN's engagement during those early decades, their subsequent desire to broaden the numbering regime in the 1970s, and the replacement of the single number GNP (or GDP, based on national income accounting) with the HDI in 1990. As Seers pointed out, these GNP numbers had great influence, they were watched in and outside the public domain, but with little understanding of their drawbacks particularly for measuring developing countries and when using such numbers to *plan* or *promote* or *prosecute* development actions.

Seers ended his essay on a hopeful note: "While we should not ask too much of official statisticians, national or international, we should expect them to be as flexible and imaginative as their predecessors of three or four decades ago." (1975, 204) The new systems of indicator numbers were clearly flexible, and did allow for great imagination on the part of the UN and its partners. But, there is one other really significant difference in the new systems of indicators compared to the old system of national income accounts, and perhaps one of the main reasons that the latter have not been displaced. As a measuring system, the new indicator-based systems do not function in any formal way as systems that can be reasoned with. As already discussed, there is no set of principles that relate those indicator numbers to each other to become a meaningful index. Indeed, it is because there is nothing to hold them together, that these indicator system can be as flexible and imaginative as needed. But, that same lack of those principles of relationship also means that the indicators cannot be used to fashion development plans. To explain by analogy: accounting systems in firms are multi-purposed: they enable firms (1) to 'see' the monetary interrelations between the segments of their firm (e.g. investment in relation to output); and so (2) to use that set of relations for planning their future; but such accounting systems also enable the firm (3) to hold segments of their firm to account in their performance in a system of 'audit'. National income accounts can be used in a similar three functions.[12] Yet, even though these indicator systems of numbers do not reveal how development elements interact with each other, and so do not provide the machinery to plan such development, they do have the raw materials to provide a regime of *audit,* and perhaps, *accountability*. With the MDGs and SDGs, big goals were laid out, and targets were set, while the audit regime rests on the individual indicators not to measure the targets or goals, but to give an account of how far those targets were met in terms of their indicator numbers.

[12] See Morgan (2008) for an example of this three-fold use of the national income accounts in the Nigerian economy of the 1960s.

While indicators provide a regime of audit, there is a wavering commitment around accountability, that is, around who is responsible for what developmental actions and so which country can be judged successful or not, and by whom. To ask about accountability is to ask who carries out this audit function and so to whom are the actors responsible? Should it be individual national governments, individual groups of activists in nations, somewhere in the international arena, or even international agencies in collaboration or in competition? With the introduction of the HDI, it seemed that one of the ambitions for its introduction was that it would create the kind of public notice and so accountability via audit that was hardly imaginable in the comparison of simple growth rates undertaken by international agencies. That envisaged audit role was even more clearly specified for the MDG and SDG systems. As Doyle argued, the target-based framework of MDGs provides the "constitution" and the "agreed-upon country framework for development planning" (Doyle 2004, 27). "But it is not a street map", rather it orients the work in the right direction (Chidzero 2000, 128). It creates 'the template' for the World Bank, the IMF, the regional banks, the bilaterals, and UNDP to negotiate with a member country about its development strategy and "the template by which a country's development is measured" (Ibid). In this way, targets function as a "disciplining instrument" as Nyerere states in his book (Ibid). It is not just that indicator numbers enable the public and journalists to access the information, but rather that the public display of such numbers is designed to push the agenda from a top-down accountability regime to a bottom-up one. This bottom-up accountability is certainly the ambition of *The World That Counts*:

> As the world embarks on an ambitious project to meet new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is an urgent need to mobilise the data revolution for all people and the whole planet in order to monitor progress, hold governments accountable and foster sustainable development.

Of course, such accountability can work from both ends, and probably does, but political limits still exist just as they did in the 1950s, stemming from the fact that the UN is an organisation of national governments. The historical shifts over the decades have seen economic needs become reconceptualised as social and human needs, and thence (almost) as 'human rights' in development terms, but this does not necessarily include the formal (political or legal rights) as found in the UN commitment to human rights. For the UN, there remain three key - and separate - commitments: to peace, to human rights, and to development.

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