

UN Women's evaluation of gender in the SDGs What's the role for the CGIAR?

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Key messages

- The UN Women's 2018 report on gender equality within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the importance of monitoring the SDGs in order to: translate global commitment to results, foster public debate and democratic decision-making, and strengthen accountability for actions or omissions.
- The report serves to demonstrate the inadequacies of the current Global Indicator Framework for gender responsive monitoring of the SDGs. It highlights that women and girls face multiple forms of disadvantage and calls for recognizing, redistributing and reducing the paid and unpaid burdens women face, so as to overcome structural barriers to gender equality.
- The CGIAR gender research community is uniquely positioned to contribute by tracking progress against the goals, identifying achievements and gaps, and highlighting implementation challenges. However, the report does not significantly showcase CGIAR gender research and research publications.
- Looking forwards, the CGIAR can play a bigger role in the 2030 Agenda by leveraging its globally comparative, high-impact and innovative research to contribute to global and national efforts to monitor the SDGs. This will necessitate seizing opportunities to inform future reports as well as consolidating and harmonizing our research and findings to have a bigger voice and effect.

The highest echelons of the United Nations have hailed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development "a victory for gender equality" (Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women) in UN Women 2018, 18). According to Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, gender specific Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 5, and the mainstreaming of gender across the 17 other goals is evidence that "gender equality is a goal in its own right and a powerful force for upholding the main promise of 2030 Agenda: to leave no one behind" (UN Women 2018, 2). Concerns are, however, mounting over how the SDGs will be interpreted and implemented, and whether they will make a difference to the lives of women and girls the world over (Esquivel 2016; Esquivel and Sweetman 2016; Ponte and Enriquez 2016; Razavi 2016; Willis 2016).

Meanwhile, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women) released the report 'Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. The report establishes a framework to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective; and takes a stock of performance against each of the 17 SDGs. According to the report, such monitoring is essential to: translate global commitments to results; offer space for public debate and democratic decision-making; determine everyone's roles and responsibilities; and strengthen accountability for actions or omissions (UN Women 2018, 24-25).

The report calls for greater collaboration among governments, researchers and women's rights organizations to realize the 2030 Global Agenda. It proposes doing this by tracking progress against the goals,

identifying achievements and gaps, and highlighting implementation challenges and opportunities.

As a global collective focusing on agriculture and natural resource management research in multiple countries and contexts across Africa, Asia and Latin America, the CGIAR gender research community is uniquely positioned to contribute to such endeavors.

This info brief highlights key and noteworthy messages from the report, some of its limitations, and the role of the CGIAR gender community in this report. It also reflects upon how the CGIAR gender research community can contribute towards future global efforts to monitor the SDGs from a gender and social inclusion perspective.

Summary and highlights

The report makes a strong case for leveraging data, evidence and analyses, to inform the duties and performance standards of those in positions of power, and to help assess compliance and enforcement of sanctions and remedies where required. "The ultimate test for the 2030 Agenda will be whether the SDGs are achieved by 2030" (43).

The report's excellent assessment of the current 'Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals' offers strategic entry points for CGIAR to address current limitations in data, methods and analyses. The Global Indicator Framework comprises 232 indicators to track and monitor progress against the SDGs. The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development is the inter-governmental body responsible for developing and providing technical support for implementation of the framework. The UN Women report also offers conceptual, methodological and policy directions for future CGIAR research.

Some key messages and highlights from the report are listed below:

Strategic entry points: Although gender equality matters to all 17 goals, the current Global Indicator Framework is inadequate for gender responsive monitoring of the SDGs because:

- Only 6 out of the 17 SDG goals are gender sensitive (SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 16); 5 goals are gender sparse (SDG 2, 19, 11, 13 and 17) and the remaining 6 are gender blind (SDGs 6, 7, 9, 12, 14 and 15).
- Gender data available presents gaps.
- There is inadequate investment and funding for additional or quality data collection.
- Data collection methodologies present deep biases (e.g. censuses, labor surveys).

Upon assessing all 54 gender-specific indicators and analyzing one indicator per goal in detail to illustrate progress, gaps and challenges to date, the report calls for: “serious analytical work that sharpens our understanding of how to capture, measure and monitor meaningful change for women and girls” (73). The report suggests this gap is particularly clear in new and emerging areas, such as understanding the gender implications of climate change.

Commitment to intersectionality: The report highlights that focusing on women as a group is insufficient to measure progress. Gender inequalities only acquire meaning and significance when they interact and intersect with other social relations. Many women and girls face multiple forms of discrimination – e.g. accessing resources, services and opportunities – based on aspects of their identity that differentiate them from more advantaged groups. It is critical to move beyond averages and to identify and compare how the most marginalized fare on key well-being markers in relation to other groups. Through four country study summaries (see Chapter 3), the report shows how average aggregate figures on women’s wellbeing often mask significant variations across regions, ethnic, racial and income groups. This is a considerable departure from previous reports that had given lip service to ‘differences among women’ and treated women as a group (UN Women 2014; Asher and Sijapati Basnett 2016). This is also the first time that a high-profile global report has engaged seriously with feminist concerns with ‘intersectionality’ in a substantial way. While ‘intersectionality’ has long been considered a ‘gold standard’ for analyzing experiences of identity and oppression in feminist and gender theories, scholars have been concerned that ‘gender’ and ‘gender inequalities’ are simplified, both in policy and practice (Nash 2008; Arora-Jonsson 2014; Ihalainen et al. 2016; Colfer et al. 2018).

Spotlight on structural barriers to gender equality: The report devotes two chapters on structural barriers to gender equality: a) eliminating all forms of violence against women (Chapter 5) and, b) addressing unpaid care and domestic work (Chapter 6). The Millennium Development Goals, predecessor to the SDGs, was heavily criticized for omitting these dimensions of inequality (see Razavi 2016, Chant and Sweetman 2012, Kabeer 2003). Chapter 6 of the report highlights that women perform the vast majority of unpaid and care work across the world. The distribution of such work remains the same, despite women increasingly joining the labor force through formal employment. Policies and interventions aimed at empowering women economically (e.g. through greater involvement in value chains, financial literacy and new livelihood opportunities) must go hand in hand with initiatives to reduce women’s paid and unpaid work burden, recognize their work and redistribute it within the family, as well as among the family and wider institutions.

Policies and accountability: The report clearly highlights what actions are needed, as well as who should be responsible for implementation and accountable for action/inaction. It suggests that governments should prioritize universal systems that are financed and used by everyone, and simultaneously target efforts towards ensuring access for historically excluded groups. This approach offers a stance on a long-standing debate within social policy on ‘universal’ or ‘targeted policies’ for addressing poverty reduction and social inequalities (see Mkandawire 2005). The report also highlights that governments are primarily responsible for implementation, because other actors cannot be held accountable in the way that governments can (see Chandhoke 2003). The report seeks to temper current enthusiasm around the private sector’s role in realizing SDGs, drawing attention to the fact that private businesses are not yet bound by any global set of rules on business and human rights, and their actions do not always align with objectives of sustainable development and gender equality (Kabeer 2017).

Pitfalls and limitations

The report also presents pitfalls and limitations from a methodological, conceptual and policy application perspective.

Methodologically, the report mainly privileges quantitative methods over qualitative and mixed methods. The risk here is to imply that any research seeking to monitor the 2030 Global Agenda must comply with pre-existing national datasets (such as national census data and demographic health, labor and living standard measurement surveys) rather than additionally take advantage of the wide variety of other research available.

Conceptually, Chapter 3 on ‘Moving beyond the averages’ provides only lip service to the risks of using pre-existing categories to identify who the marginalized are and what sustains their marginalization. The chapter does not adequately consider the reality that ‘targeting the poor and the marginalized’ is an inherently political and contested process. Likewise, it presents just one methodological approach (the ‘inter-categorical approach’, see McCall 2015 or Colfer et al. 2018) for examining the intersection between gender and other axes of social difference. Chapter 6 on ‘Unpaid and care work’ demonstrates this report was written by a committee of writers who do not always write with one voice; this makes the report lack coherence in many places. As such, while most of the chapters point to knowledge and data gaps, Chapter 6 reads more like a definitive guide on how to address women’s unpaid work and care burdens. Likewise, the report’s overall stance against the private sector or corporations is rather dogmatic, and does not offer a realistic way of engaging with them and/or holding their actions to account.

On the question of the potential impact of such reports, the report was published by UN Women rather than by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development or the UN Statistical Commission for the Global Monitoring of 169 SDG Targets. It is therefore unclear whether (and if so, how) the analyses and recommendations offered by the report will inform broader SDG monitoring efforts. Given the global scope of the report, the findings only provide broad brushstrokes of key challenges and opportunities. They must be validated and strengthened through national and locally relevant monitoring too.

Notwithstanding these limitations and thus the need to interpret it with caution, the report is an impressive first attempt at taking stock of performance against each SDG goal from a gender and social inclusion perspective. It also calls for more concerted SDG monitoring efforts by different actors, including research organizations.

What is the role of CGIAR gender research in this effort?

The report does not significantly showcase CGIAR gender researchers and research publications, despite its inclusion of impressive numbers of academics, practitioners, policy makers, both within and outside the UN and UN Women. These have played a role as team members writing the report, background paper authors, advisory members and reviewers. The report also features an comprehensive reference list combining both foundational and recent publications.

A quick word search through the report returned only one CGIAR gender researcher (Sophia Huyer), acknowledged for her contribution as a report reviewer. Prominent CGIAR gender researchers are scarcely referenced: Cheryl Doss is referenced twice; Agnes Quisumbing once; Carol Colfer, Cynthia McDougall, Lone Badstue, Anne Larson, Esther Mwangi, Margaret Zwartveen and Paula Kantor receive no mention. These however are among many CGIAR gender researchers who have contributed high quality publications on topics that are relevant for SDGs from a gender perspective – i.e. poverty, food security, inequality, land and water. That said, direct participation of researchers and/or citation of their work may not be an effective way of measuring CGIAR research's influence. Despite Ruth Meinzen-Dick not being directly cited in the report, one of her well-recognized arguments that women's land rights must be measured in terms of a 'bundle of rights' (comprising documented ownership, ability/right to sell land and ability/right to bequeath land to others) (Meizen-Dick et al. 2014; Meizen-Dick et al. 2018; Ribot and Peluso 2003) is included, under sub-section on 'Spotlight on women's equal rights to land' (111).

As a gender researcher from the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), working on the CGIAR research program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA), I was particularly drawn to SDG 15 - 'Life on Land'. One of CIFOR and FTA's flagship publications on the gender dimensions of palm oil expansion in West Kalimantan, Indonesia (Li 2014, 2018) is featured as Case Study Box 3.3. This publication also contributes to the report's broader argument that SDG implementation cannot be left to the private sector, and that governments need to drive the agenda, with civil society organizations supporting these efforts and holding government representatives to account.

However, the CIFOR study is (mis)presented in a way that pits local women against men. The report wrongly suggests that the deforestation and dispossession resulting from palm oil expansion in West Kalimantan have harmed local women and benefitted local men. The differentiated effects of palm oil expansion on diverse categories of women (painstakingly documented in the CIFOR publication) are not mentioned at all. This is unfortunate, given that Chapter 3 ('Moving beyond averages') makes a case for examining the intersection between gender and other social difference axes so as to get to the roots of marginalization.

Suggestions and future directions

The CGIAR gender community could intervene in various areas:

- CGIAR research can be leveraged to monitor against multiple SDGs, as CGIAR research programs focus on climate action (SDG 13), water (SDG 6); land, forests (SDG 15), fishery (SDG 11) and energy (SDG 7). Poverty (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2 and 3), inequalities (SDG 10), employment and livelihoods (SDG 8) are cross-cutting issues concerns across all CGIAR research programs.
- Guidance notes and training products developed by CGIAR gender researchers can be used to transform existing data collection methods to better capture lived realities of women. This could include the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions and Markets 'Standards for collecting sex-disaggregated data' (Doss and Kieran 2014); the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry's 'Practical tips for conducting gender responsive data collection' (Elias et al. 2014); and the CGIAR Aquatic Agricultural System's publications on measuring gender transformative change (Hillenbrand et al. 2015).
- Innovative, cross-CGIAR research methodologies (such as the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) and GENNOVATE) and their research results can complement the data presented.
- Emerging research on intersectionality can help better target policies and efforts.
- Current data collection and collation initiatives (including through the CGIAR Platform for Big Data in Agriculture) may help identify broader patterns of gender inequalities and reform opportunities.
- CGIAR gender researchers could play a role in generating synergies between SDGs and other global initiatives, such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

CGIAR gender researchers may also consider different ways of working so as to play a more prominent role in the 2030 Agenda, for example through:

- Actively seizing opportunities to inform future reports, including through a Memorandum of Understanding with the UN Women team that produces such reports;
- Capitalizing on relationships with governmental agencies, national statistics offices, and women's organizations in the countries where we operate, so that we are routinely consulted in national efforts to monitor the SDGs;
- Demonstrating how our current research contributes to the SDGs, through mapping whether, to what extent and in what ways CGIAR gender research contributes to each of the SDGs;
- Going beyond binary analyses of 'women versus men' to also account for differences within women and men - and broadening our gaze to consider disabilities, sexuality and masculinities in CGIAR gender research;
- Moving beyond the confines of our specific sectors (agriculture, forestry, water) or commodities (rice, maize) to inform cross-sectoral and national/regional/global efforts;
- Consolidating and harmonizing our research, research methodologies and findings to have a bigger voice and effect.

The CGIAR community could start by prioritizing CGIAR-wide deliberations as to if and how the CGIAR could play a more meaningful role in the 2030 Global Agenda.

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