



**Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN) Public Consultation on  
Indicators for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

**NORRAG commentaries related to livelihoods and skills for employment in the  
proposed indicators**

March 2014

---

**Commentary # 5. By Trey Menefee, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.**

[>> Read the longer paper](#)

**Out of Place: Education and the Political Economy of Sustainable Development  
Goal Six**

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, proposed by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, is an odd goal; it calls for the 'sustainable intensification of agriculture' by closing 'yield gaps.' It is odd in the first sense because it is the only consumer product whose increased production, and efficiency of production, has been called for as a development goal. While there is certainly room to question the role of market fundamentals in guiding public policy, the question is rarely asked why supply isn't being met for a product that is supposedly in such high demand without employing simplistic teleological notions of 'poverty traps.' The answer offered here, and in numerous other works, is that supply is being met and that indeed there is a glut in the market for the same staple grains SDG 6 demands the 'sustainable' intensified production of. This glut means margins are low and farmers often use the most productive land to grow other cash crops or, when the land is more marginal, refrain from farming as a source of income generation altogether.

These are fundamental dynamics that SDG 6 proposes no way to overcome this obstacle. In fact, the issue will worsen if and when grain production increases. Nor is there reason to believe that increasing grain production has done much to solve food security issues. As Sen (1991) showed nearly two decades ago, food insecurity is linked to available entitlements to food, not supply. In fact, global food consumption today averages nearly 2800 calories per capita. SDG 6 instead represents what could be called 'trickle down food security' – a race to the bottom with food prices to create a world where there is enough cheap food for any conceivable use: whether for a mother in a Manila slum finding rice for her children, or an oil company looking to turn maize into automobile fuel, or for the enormously inefficient act of turning grain into meat.

Secondly, SDG 6 is odd because it is no meaningful sense sustainable. Though it is masked in technical language, what the authors of SDG 6 aim for are the increased use of land used today for monocropping and for more productivity from land that is



already used in this way. The transformed landscapes are thirsty for water and highly dependent on chemical inputs in the form of fertilizers and biocides. Fertilizer, it should be noted, is the largest source of non-point source water pollution in the world. Further, monocropped landscapes are far more vulnerable to climatic shocks than the biologically diverse systems they displace.

The educational dimensions of SDG 6 come in two forms. On the higher education and research end, there would be need for more research and development to localize and modify high-yielding seed varieties. It is a nearly endless task, as the 'improved' seeds become more vulnerable to pests and disease with time. Below that, in so much as governments take up the task of SDG 6 and set up policy and economic environments to reach it, there is often a lack of expertise in managing these crops and irrigations schemes generally.

At the level of farmer training, some of the most promising programs are either politically marginalized or in their infancy. For instance, a program in the Philippines helps farmers (re)learn the value of diversifying production has been overshadowed by the political goal to ramp up rice production. Other programs, like Climate Field Schools, are still in development but show progress. The bulk of modern extension, however, is based on scaling up the laboratory-like 'miniatures' found at research stations that isolate most cultural, economic, and ecological variables to focus exclusively on high yields. In this sense, the efficacy of these programs is questionable.

*Trey Menefee, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. Email: [trey.menefee@gmail.com](mailto:trey.menefee@gmail.com)*

[>> Read the longer paper](#)

---

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 2014, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) released [a draft report for public consultation](#) on proposed indicators for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We asked several NORRAG members to comment on these proposed indicators; these commentaries are the views and opinions of individual NORRAG members and are not intended to represent the view of all NORRAG members.

NORRAG (Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training) is a focus and a forum for the analysis of international cooperation in the education and training field. Website: [www.norrage.org](http://www.norrage.org) Blog: [www.norrage.wordpress.com](http://www.norrage.wordpress.com)