DEVPOLICYBLOG

Gaining insights across development silos

By Jessica Taaffe
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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the most comprehensive and expansive development goals the world has ever had. There are 17 goals, covering 169 targets, and guiding global action towards an equitable, healthy and prosperous planet. The goals span across all sectors, are inter-related and their outcomes mutually influence each other. Achieving them will clearly require integrated, interdisciplinary collaboration. With this reality in mind, an article in *Nature* has suggested a method for mapping interactions between the individual Goals.

The SDGs have to be cross-cutting because global development issues have to be seen in the context of an increasingly complex world. Solutions must also be inter-connected.

Take, for instance, HIV prevention and girls' education – evidence shows that keeping girls in school is linked to positive HIV prevention outcomes in some contexts. A major concern of the global health community is the impact of climate change on human health. Disturbances in water security can affect agriculture which then can jeopardize food security. The wood product industry has recently been shown to strengthen wildlife conservation and support economic development. The list goes on… and at first glance, what may seem like unrelated or incongruent silos are intricately intertwined.

Unfortunately, this is not yet part of how we think, organize or implement in the development sector. Instead, we follow a traditional, super-fragmented silo-by-silo approach where each specialized sector focuses narrowly on immediately relevant issues, priorities, data sources and stakeholders. This is epitomized by the familiar 18-box graphic used to typically illustrate the SDGs, and the current competition among development sectors to place their respective goal at the top of the heap.

Siloization creates unnecessary duplication of effort and lack of awareness of collaborative opportunities between disparate actors with similar goals or with valuable knowledge to share. It may also be beyond the processing powers of our brains. Given the potentially mind-boggling permutations for combining of 17 goals and 169 underlying targets it's little wonder we rely on established connections and luck.

However, even before setting out to *work together*, hitting on the most productive areas of collaboration first requires that people and organizations within disparate sectors must first *think together*, starting by collectively acknowledging the urgent and strategic need for more effective, integrated approaches.

How can we improve this, to ensure greater knowledge of activities within and collaborative thinking among currently divergent silos? One way might be to deliberately increase our exposure to 'intel' from neighbouring silos, intentionally engineering our own luck and those serendipitous moments when we juxtapose issues in newly productive ways.

A new digital platform may help with this: [SDGInsights](#) is a digital briefing platform that turns classical search engine thinking on its head. Instead of following literal content trails deeper into the rabbit holes of individual silos, this novel tool links users to new ideas and content through 'lateral search', helping users explore the broader 'horizontal' sustainable development context surrounding their areas of interest.

For example, I typed "conservation" and SDGInsights chanced upon an article on how the forest product industry may be helping wildlife conservation. Searching for "malaria" took me to a number of articles about malaria science, control, partnerships and costs, many falling under the 'Good Health and Well-Being' (SDG 3) category. It also served up articles about gene-editing for sickle-cell disease, other vector-borne diseases, as well as recent news on Silicon Valley health/research philanthropy. Terms not that intuitively linked to the SDGs led to some interesting results: "space" and "Hollywood" led me to headlines about dementia risk among Mars mission astronauts, and bridging the cultural and market gap between film industries in the USA and China. The platform has been specifically designed to provide SDG-related briefings, which explains why some of my exploratory searches produced some peculiar hits.

Not every hit in my search seemed to be a winner, or at least showed no discernible link to SDGs. A "dogs" query brought up a report on *Killer rabid dog on the prowl in Lagos*, and I will let you work out for yourself why it also linked to a comment from Philippines President Duterte to the outgoing US President! SDGInsights reports that it explores online articles from the past 96 hours, so perhaps it was a slow week for articles linking dogs to the SDGs.

Overall, I see great potential for the SDGInsights platform. As a huge proponent of interdisciplinary practice, I really enjoy how the search provides unexpected, but laterally related results, and the accidental 'a-ha' moments. In this way, it could help to spur innovation and aid in brainstorming or design activities. It also could reduce the siloed way of thinking and sharing information, especially if it included a daily automated briefing

feature, based on pre-chosen search terms. Besides the broader span of hits the platform generates, the creators of the platform also highlight that the search pulls from the 'long tail' of primary sources – government documents, research articles, NGO sites – that normally aren't represented in typical news searches, and which are not influenced or filtered as may typically be the case with most social media monoliths. An advantage of pulling primary sources is that the reader is able to draw her own conclusions, free from spin.

I'm looking forward to seeing this platform grow with additional features and in particular how others may use the platform in unpredicted ways. It's already a great tool for development professionals, especially those who don't need more information about what they already know, but are looking for relevant forays into what they don't know. SDGInsights enables this by encouraging a broader and more expansive way of thinking about individual issues, challenges or solutions: exactly what achieving the SDGs will require.

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