

Measuring Accountability in Sustainable Development Target 16.6 with V-Dem Data

Key messages

- Currently proposed indicators for monitoring progress of target 16.6 – effective, accountable and transparent institutions- capture only limited aspects of this ambitious target;
- An independent research institute such as V-Dem can provide valuable additional information on democracy-related SDG 16 and its sub-targets to supplement the proposed official indicators;
- V-Dem data with world-wide coverage can reliably measure accountability aspects of target 16.6 based on the assessments of multiple independent experts;
- Proposed indicators include legislative oversight, election quality, judiciary and media independence and CSO freedom.

Introduction

At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September, world leaders endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 goals will be central development priorities in the next 15 years. For the first time, global targets related to democratic governance are included in a development framework. Democracy, good governance and human rights are highlighted in this vision¹. Goal 16 aims at the promotion of “just, peaceful and inclusive societies.”

The adoption of the SDGs has been met with great enthusiasm. How effective the SDGs will be, however, depends on how they are implemented and monitored during the years to come. Negotiations concerning indicators to measure SDG targets are in full swing. In March 2016, the UN Statistical Commission will decide on indicators for individual sub-targets, which will be used to implement and monitor the SDGs until 2030.

The V-Dem Institute has been involved in the process of developing suitable measures for Goal 16 as part of the virtual network of stakeholders and experts convened by the UNDP to provide input for the identification of suitable indicators to monitor SDG 16. The network is in the process of producing a sourcebook listing potential relevant indicators, including several from the V-jDem data set for the democracy related goals. This policy brief highlights how V-Dem data can be used to monitor Target 16.6, which aims at developing “effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.”

Measuring the SDGs: The State of the Debate

The SDGs target not only development countries, but are set to encourage changes in all countries of the world. The 17 goals with 169 targets reflect a comprehensive understanding of development encompassing social, economic, environmental and governance aspects. Five of these targets relate to core features of democratic governance such as fundamental freedoms (16.10), responsive and participatory decision-making (16.7) and accountable and transparent institutions (16.6). Furthermore, rule of law (16.3) and the reduction of corruption (16.5) are integral features of modern democracy.

As result of the Millennium Development Goal process, governments and UN officials have gained substantial experience in measuring social and economic goals but not targets related to democracy. In addition the SDGs encompass several important topics but are relatively broadly formulated. This further motivates the need for precise indicators in order to properly implement and monitor the targets.

¹ UN General Assembly (2015)

The outcome document of the World Summit on Sustainable Development emphasizes that “[q]uality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data will be needed to help with the measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind.”² Based on broad stakeholder consultation, the UN Statistical Commission has compiled a list of indicator proposals³. This list is the basis for further deliberations about the indicators until a decision will be made by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2016.

Spotlight on Target 16.6: Effective, Accountable and Transparent Institutions

Target 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels:

Currently proposed indicators:

- Primary government expenditures as a percentage of original approved budget
- Percentage of recommendations to strengthen national anti-corruption frameworks implemented

Target 16.6 aims to achieve effective, accountable and transparent institutions, which is a very ambitious, complex and far-reaching goal. There are great methodological challenges to developing a single measure that can encompass this multifaceted target. Currently two indicators are proposed to capture it.

The first suggested indicator is primary government expenditures as a percentage of the originally approved budget. Although budget transparency and efficiency in budget implementation is important, this indicator does not capture how accountable or transparent state institutions are. In order to achieve accountability, stable mechanisms to hold the decision-makers responsible for their actions need to be in place. Thus, a focus on additional measures capturing whether there are ways for citizens and other public institutions to oversee the government is required.

The second indicator relates to the implementation of recommendations to strengthen national anti-corruption frameworks. However, corruption is also the focus of Target 16.5, suggesting that this indicator is more suitable for measuring that goal. Although corruption is indeed a central aspect of efficiency, transparency and accountability, there are more accurate measures capturing these concepts as discussed later in the brief.

Hence, to capture the breadth of this target, complementary measures could be used to provide a more comprehensive picture. Measuring institutional accountability based on factual data is challenging. For analyzing accountability, one needs to go beyond formal regulations and assess how well such regulations are implemented in practice. In recent years, it has become common practice in social sciences to rely on expert assessments when factual data is not available⁴. Hence, expert assessments collected by independent research institutes can provide additional measures to capture the democracy-related aspects of SDG 16 – if they are compiled in a reliable and unbiased way

The Role of Independent Research Institutes

Data collected by independent research institutes can play an important role in providing a more comprehensive and nuanced picture in the process of monitoring the set global goals. This could complement data collected by governments by providing consistent, impartial and transparent data with solid coverage. In addition, local ownership and dissemination of the SDGs, scholars and civil society activists across the world should be encouraged to monitor their implementation.

Providing non-biased, transparent data is especially relevant when approaching complex issues such as accountability or rule of law. Complementary data from independent sources could increase the reliability of the measurement of the targets, and in a longer perspective enhance the legitimacy of the monitoring process as a whole. In addition, inconsistencies in definitions of concepts, methods and sources between countries can be avoided by using data from independent institutes based on standardized definitions and methods for all countries. Finally, many of the targets listed under SDG 16 rely on official statistics provided by governments. In many countries of the world, basic information is not systematically collected. Hence, complementary data from independent sources can assist by providing reliable data with solid coverage.

² UN General Assembly (2015) ³ UN (2015) ⁴ Schedler (2012)

The V-Dem Approach

V-Dem's multidimensional and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. The V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points with more than 400 distinct and precise indicators of democracy. From January 2015, the database is available free of charge online as global public good.

The V-Dem dataset covers 174 countries and dependent territories from 1900 to 2012 and provides an estimate of measurement reliability for each rating. Updates up to 2014 for 60 countries have already been implemented and continuous updates for all countries are currently planned.

Unlike extant data collection projects, which typically use a small group of experts who rate all countries or ask a single expert to code one country, the V-Dem project has recruited over 2,600 local and cross-national experts to provide judgments on various indicators about democracy⁵.

V-Dem Indicators for Target 16.6

V-Dem data can be used for providing valuable supplementary information for all democracy-related SDG targets. Here, we focus on target 16.6, because accountable institutions are at the core of democratic governance. Political accountability ensures that public institutions are subject to oversight by citizens as well as other public institutions⁶. Political accountability is commonly divided into vertical and horizontal mechanisms:

Horizontal accountability captures the formal relationships between institutions that ensure checks and oversight processes within the state. Thus, abuses of political power by one branch of government can be constrained by another.

Vertical accountability allows citizens to hold governments and politicians directly accountable. This includes mechanisms such as free and fair elections, use of mass media to monitor politicians' actions and civil society organizations to engage directly in politics.

The figure below displays the suggested V-Dem indicators capturing these two dimensions of accountability on a global average at three different points in time.

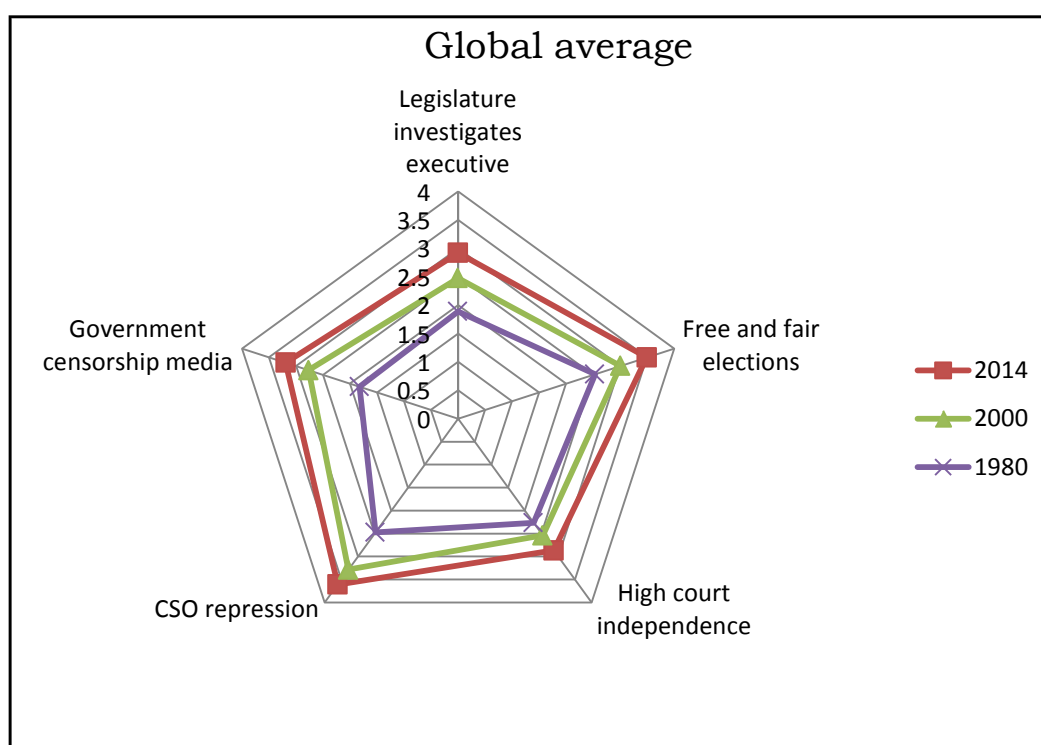


Figure 1: V-Dem measures of vertical and horizontal accountability

Note: Scores increase with higher democratic quality.

⁵ For further details and information about the V-Dem methodology, see <http://v-dem.net>.

⁶ For further discussion of the concept and measurement of accountability see Lindberg (2013) and Schmitter (2004).

A strong legislature and independent judiciary branch are considered key components for ensuring horizontal accountability. To capture this notion, the following two V-Dem indicators are suggested⁷:

- **Legislature investigates in practice:** This indicator captures if the executive were to be engaged in unconstitutional, illegal, or unethical activities the likelihood that a legislative body would conduct an investigation that would result in a decision or report that is unfavorable to the executive. Figure 2 illustrates selected regional averages for this indicator. It shows that since the 1990s, on average in many world regions legislative oversight has increased⁸. However, there is still room for improvement for all regions.

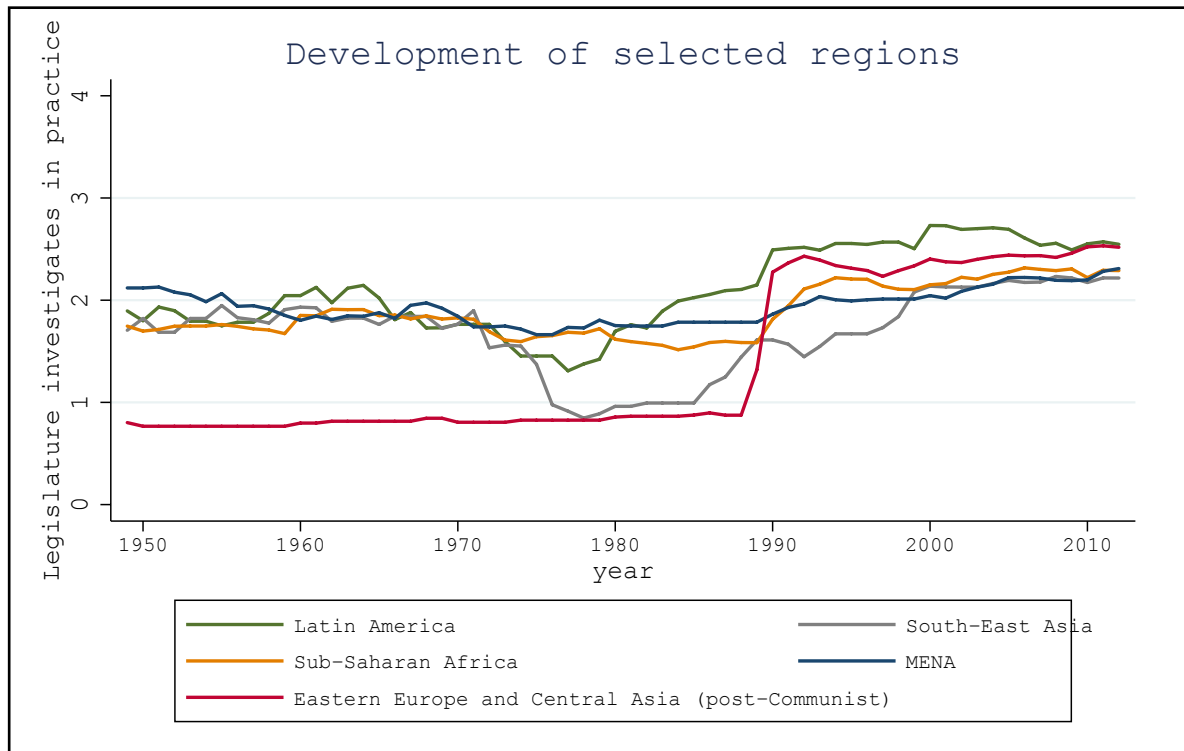


Figure 2: Legislature investigates in practice

- **High court independence** is measured based on the high court's likelihood to make decisions that do not merely reflect government wishes. Figure 1 illustrates that on global average high courts have become more independent during recent decades.

Key components for vertical accountability include the ability of citizens to hold politicians accountable through free and fair elections, to be able to engage in civil society organizations and the presence of a free media.

To capture these aspects, three V-Dem indicators are proposed:

- **Free and Fair Elections** takes all aspects of the pre-election period, election day and the post-election process for national elections into account. Figure 3 displays the average quality of elections for five regions in 2012⁹.

⁷ Information about the indicator scales and the exact wording of the question can be found in the V-Dem codebook (Coppedge et al 2015).

⁸ A score of 0 corresponds to an extremely low probability of an investigation of the executive by the legislature, whereas a score of 4 indicates that it is nearly certain.

⁹ Score 0 corresponds to fundamentally flawed elections while score 4 corresponds to largely free and fair elections.

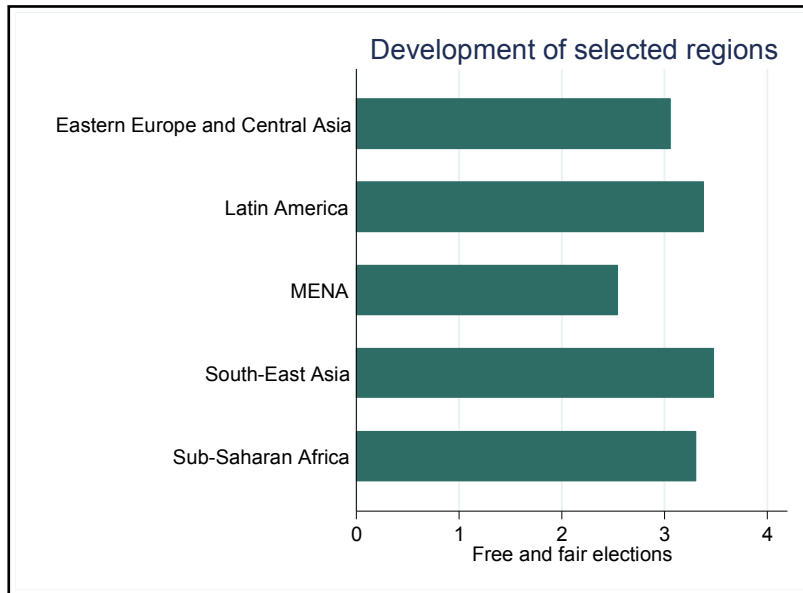


Figure 3: Free and fair elections (2012)

- Government censorship effort – Media** reflects if the government directly or indirectly attempts to censor the print or broadcast media. The development over time from 1950 is demonstrated in Figure 4 for selected regions¹⁰. In the 1980s and 1990s, media freedom improved considerably in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. In other world regions – such as MENA and South-East Asia – improvements can be noted but the averages in 2012 remain lower than in other regions.

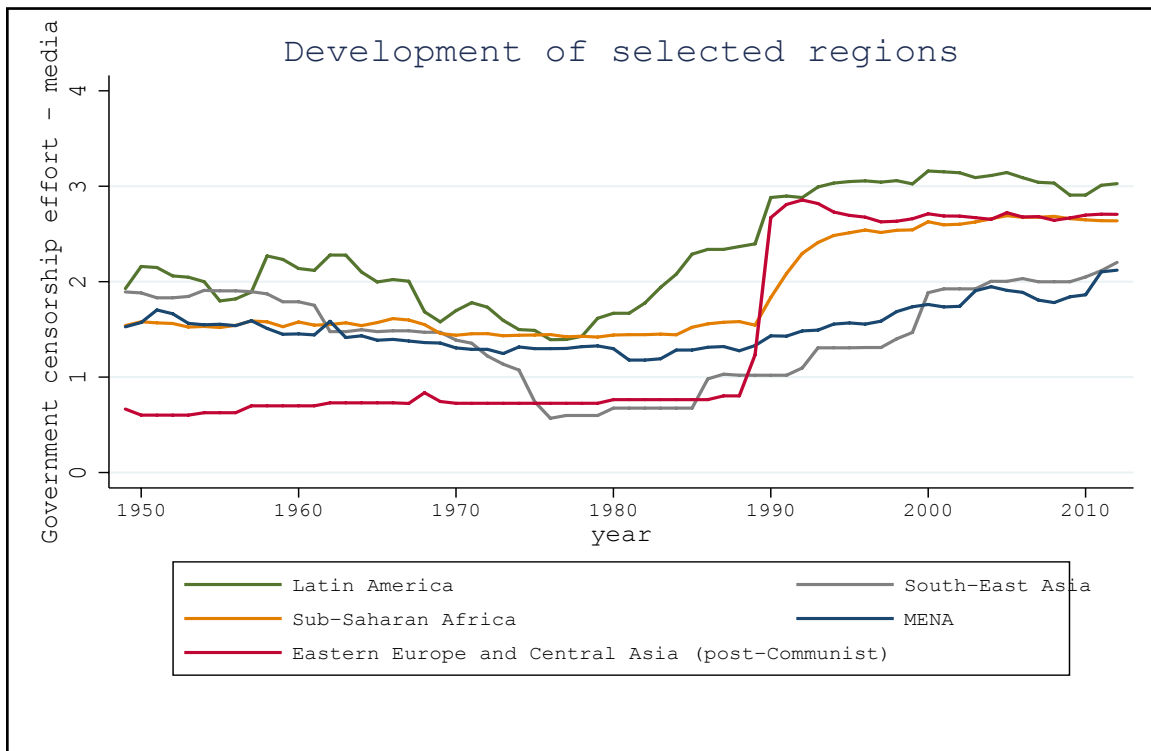


Figure 4: Government censorship effort - media

- CSO repression** captures if governments attempt to repress civil society organizations (CSOs). Figure 1 illustrates that- on global average – the freedom of CSOs from repression has improved considerably during recent years.

¹⁰ Score 0 corresponds to direct and routine censorship of the media while score 4 corresponds to a situation in which the government overall respects media freedom.

Overall, the suggested accountability indicators record considerable improvements in global and regional averages during the last decades. However, between countries considerable variation in accountability mechanisms remains, which can be captured with V-Dem indicators. Furthermore, the five proposed indicators could also be aggregated to a single accountability index. Hence, V-Dem data on vertical and horizontal accountability provides valuable additional information for monitoring target 16.6.

This brief has outlined how complementary data sources, including expert surveys, could be used for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goal 16 and its sub-targets. V-Dem data is also available for tracking progress related to the other democracy-related targets of Goal 16.

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