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How do global development goals translate into local action?

What you need to know:

Global goals are potentially powerful tools for mobilization of common and sustained effort for measuring abstract aims, and for accountability. This research considers the on-the-ground consequences of global development planning and, in particular, the measurement and accountability demands associated with such initiatives, especially for women.

What is this research about?

Progress toward global development goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is measured through data from an array of reporting processes, monitoring systems, and paper trails that profoundly impact people on the ground.

This research examines the experiences of a women's cooperative vegetable farm in rural South Africa – Hleketani Community Garden. The researchers consider the impact of demands for development planning and accountability on the needs of the people on the ground, focusing on the consequences of such processes for resource-poor women.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers focused on the broad aims of SDGs 2 (to end hunger) and 5 (to achieve gender equality

and women's empowerment). They explored women farmers' responses to external demands for measurement and accountability, some of which farmers are not well equipped to meet and others of which collide with their own priorities to support their households and wider community.

The article briefly overviews recent efforts at global goal setting. It then offers the case study of Hleketani Community Garden, a small women's farming collective. The researchers examine the farm's experience to understand how measurement demands related to global goals impact local priorities.

What did the researchers find?

The case study of Hleketani Community Garden shows a major problem of translation between the SDGs and the goals and needs of people on the ground.



Farmer Mhlava N with vegetables to take home, Hleketani Community Garden (Photo credit: E. Vibert with permission from farmer).



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The state's demands for productivity (measured narrowly as output), measurement, and quantification hold back the farmers' ability to realize their own plans of socially and ecologically sustainable development. For instance, the state's emphasis on yield and sales prioritizes financial management over social aims like feeding the vulnerable. Metrics such as sales revenues fail to recognize women's diverse labour, including provisioning work for households and care of children and elders.

The state puts a great burden of accountability on small-scale farmers by requiring onerous record keeping in return for access to grants and assistance. Institutional expectations often do not align with local capacity and experience. For example, grant applications use inaccessible language and require costly documentation (e.g., travel to obtain multiple quotes for services).

The state and funding agencies generally determine what kind of assistance is on offer – for instance, providing chemical fertilizers rather than money to purchase better products (e.g., chicken manure) rooted in local cultural knowledge of sustainable food productions. State agencies push for industrial methods instead.

The state's fixation on production and measurement throws up daily obstacles to the women's efforts to achieve the things they define as valuable. Yet despite such obstacles, these women have sustained Hleketani Community Garden across three decades, in line with their collective vision and in resistance to a global economy that fails to recognize the value of their work.

How can you use this research?

This case study provides a real-life example for policymakers and other stakeholders of how global development goals translate into local action, and how they may support – or undermine – existing efforts on the ground. The researchers show how the measurement demands of the state collide with the human dimensions of community development, and how “measurement mania” is

blind to the accomplishments of a collective enterprise like Hleketani Community Garden.

About the researchers

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[*Four Stories About Food Sovereignty*](#) is a research network for small-scale producers to learn from each other, for researchers to learn from small-scale producers, and for the public to access information about food security and food justice challenges in the era of climate crisis.

Keywords

Capabilities, gender, human development, human rights, measurement, sustainability, global goals, SDGs, small-scale farming.

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We acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.