



INSTITUT DE HAUTES
ÉTUDES INTERNATIONALES
ET DU DÉVELOPPEMENT
GRADUATE INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AND
DEVELOPMENT STUDIES



Improving UN Effectiveness

FROM RESEARCH AND WORKSHOPS TO POLICY AND ACTION

14.06.2024

Authored by:

Franziska A. Köstler

Angello A. Leon Mejía

Michael A. Chiribau

Applied Research Project (ARP) in partnership with UNaccountable as part of the Master in International and Development Studies at the Geneva Graduate Institute.

The Accountability Maturity Assessment Model (AMAM), introduced by UNaccountable, an organization that engages with and supports public and private actors for a more effective, accountable and impactful multilateral and consensus-based international cooperationⁱ, provides an easy-to-understand tool for assessing the accountability of United Nations (UN) entities in a structural manner. Doing so is crucial for building stronger trust and improving effective collaboration on global issues. As UNaccountable advances the development of the AMAM, one option is to turn it into a composite indicator (CI). This would allow synthesizing various indicators into a single score (or scoreboard) to capture the complex concept of accountability in one place. Hence, this Applied Research Project critically examined the soundness of the existing methodology for developing CIs by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC)ⁱⁱ, considered the ‘gold standard’ and assess its application in the case of the AMAM against other studies. The research process first conducted a literature review to identify strengths, weaknesses, and potential for improvement in the methodology. Then, a focus group discussion was organized with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) stakeholders to understand which proposed metrics would respond to their needs and recommendations. This report is the outcome of said research process and summarizes main findings and recommendations to the AMAM.

A) Results of the Literature Review

The Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators (henceforth “CI Handbook”) was jointly prepared by the OECD and the JRC in 2008, in response to the rising popularity of CIs with media and policymakers alike.ⁱⁱⁱ The CI Handbook reviewed various techniques to build CIs and structured the development process into ten practical steps which only went through minor adjustments following the extensive subsequent work of the JRC (see illustration 1).^{iv}

1. Developing a theoretical framework	1. Theoretical framework
2. Selecting variables	2. Data selection
3. Imputation of missing data	3. Imputation of missing data
4. Multivariate analysis	4. Multivariate analysis
5. Normalisation of data	5. Normalisation of data
6. Weighting and aggregation	6. Weighting
7. Robustness and sensitivity	7. Aggregating Indicators
8. Back to the details	8. Sensitivity analysis
9. Links to other variables	9. Link to other measures
10. Presentation and dissemination	10. Visualization

Illustration 1: The ten steps in the CI Handbook (left) and their subsequent evolution on the JRC website (right). Marked in red are the steps reviewed for this report.

Since UNaccountable has already determined a theoretical framework and identified suitable indicators, the decision was made to focus the review on steps 4-8 and 10. In this part of the process, the gathered data is brought to a common scale. Then, the importance of each indicator for the overall concept must be determined before combining them to a common score. Finally, the data is statistically analyzed at various stages of the process before the final product is visualized and disseminated.

The AMAM consists of multiple levels which progressively aggregate a wide array of indicators. Specifically, accountability is assessed along eight dimensions, and each dimension is in turn composed of its own set of indicators (see illustration 2). Thus, weighting and aggregation decisions are inevitable, even as a final composite score of the eight dimensions may not be necessary, as illustrated in the spider diagram below.

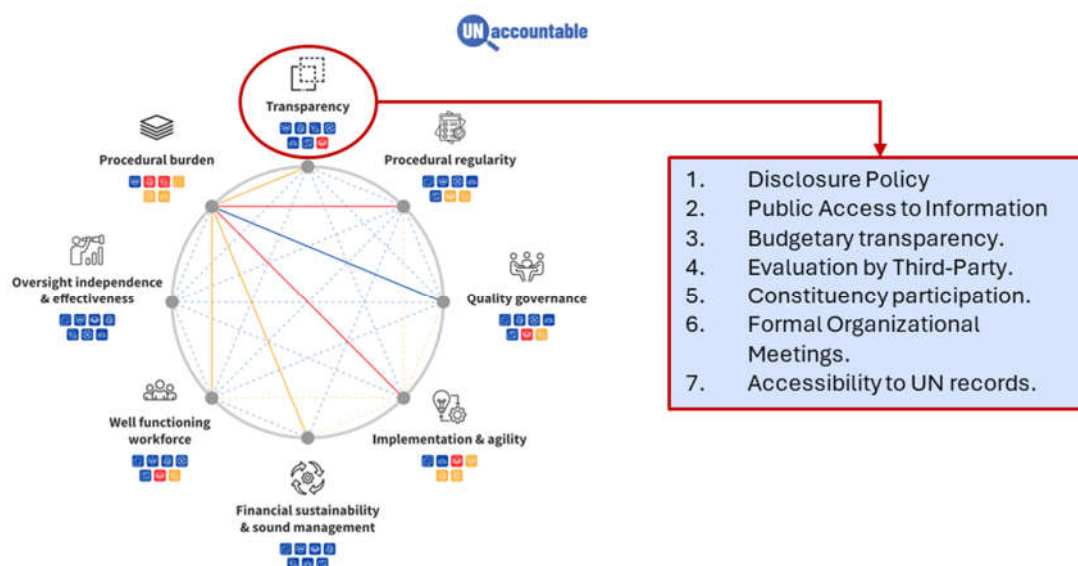


Illustration 2: Composition of the AMAM along the example of Transparency.

In reviewing various pieces of research, including systematic overviews and specific applications, this report concludes that the core process – normalizing, weighting and aggregating data – stays the same and is regarded as crucial for making decisions in organizations, not just creating scores.^v No fundamentally different methodology was found that worked better than the established process.^{vi} Thus, this well-respected guide is suitable as the foundation of the AMAM, keeping in mind the following recommendations:

1. Balancing Method Diversity with Simplicity: The CI Handbook does not provide much practical advice on which method to use, pointing out that the most important thing is how well it fits the theory behind the assessment. Notably, the number of available methods to undertake a given step has grown exponentially since CI Handbook publication. Particularly for normalization, the normalization method should respect the conceptual framework and the data properties.^{vii} So, the AMAM must balance using the diversity of methods available with keeping things simple and easy to understand, especially when communicating to the main groups involved: the Member States, UN administrations, and non-state actors (“the three UNs”)^{viii}. **Recommendation: The AMAM’s future CI should prioritize balancing methodological diversity with clear and simple communications.**
2. Addressing Uncertainties and Engaging Stakeholders: Although a CI can meet high standards of statistical coherence and robustness, creating one involves making certain assumptions and choices that introduce inevitable uncertainties and intersubjective realities^{ix}. This emphasizes the importance of addressing these uncertainties thoughtfully and strategically.^x Ensuring clear and transparent communication of these

issues is equally important as it allows users to engage in an informed manner. Working with stakeholders closely throughout this process is crucial to maintaining trust and ensuring the CI's effectiveness. **Recommendation: The AMAM's future CI should pursue the AMAM's established approach of clear and transparent communication with stakeholders to thoughtfully engage them to address these uncertainties.**

3. **Participatory Weight Assignment:** At the stage of determining the weights to assign to different aspects of accountability, a participatory approach that involves stakeholders directly in the decision may be suitable. This approach fits well with the AMAM's goal of relational accountability and can help clarify different views on what accountability means^{xi}. It also encourages stakeholders to support the process.^{xii} To improve the methods shown in the CI Handbook, it is recommended to use statistical tools developed by Becker et al. (2017) to ensure the weights accurately reflect how important each aspect is based on stakeholder input.^{xiii} However, if involving stakeholders widely becomes impractical due to the UN's large and changing nature, a method based on data, called benefit-of-the-doubt-weights, could be used as a promising data-driven alternative.^{xiv} **Recommendation: The AMAM's future CI should use the AMAN's a participatory approach for weight assignment, using advanced statistical tools to reflect stakeholder input accurately.**
4. **Aggregation Methods and Essential Elements:** Although combining indicators in a linear way of simple addition is popular, it does not fully match the idea of accountability because it suggests one aspect can completely replace another. However, this method does help demonstrate some existing trade-offs and connections that might otherwise be missed.^{xv} Therefore, the choice of either aggregation by multiplication ('geometric') or a mixed approach that penalizes substitution can be recommended^{xvi}. Additionally, one consideration that is not made in the CI Handbook, is to check the model for any essential elements before combining the indicators^{xvii}. If these are missing, the overall accountability score would not make sense. **Recommendation: The AMAM's future CI should use geometric or mixed aggregation methods and ensure essential elements are identified before combining indicators.**
5. **Importance of Advanced Statistical Analyses:** Using advanced statistical analyses^{xviii} to understand how different modeling assumptions affect the results is a key best practice. These techniques allow CI developers to understand how changing parts of the model might change the final scores. However, from the literature reviewed, not every developer uses these methods yet. The review highlights how crucial it is to apply these analyses. **Recommendation: The AMAM's CI should consistently apply advanced statistical analyses to understand the impact of different modeling assumptions.**
6. **Improved Visualization and Sharing Tools:** Since 2008, the ways to visualize and share results have significantly improved. Now, interactive, personalized, or even AI enhanced tools that help people understand the AMAM better can be leveraged. These tools not only present the main findings but also let users explore how different modeling choices can affect the outcomes. This could be key to helping more people grasp and use the AMAM effectively. **Recommendation: The AMAM's CI should leverage advanced visualization and interactive tools to enhance understanding and engagement.**

7. **Maintaining Adaptability and Relevance:** Finally, because global challenges keep changing, it is important for the AMAM to retain its current consultative practices to stay adaptable and receive updates regularly. This will help to ensure that it stays useful and up-to-date in the constantly shifting world of international governance and accountability. **Recommendation: The AMAM should retain its adaptability and be regularly updated to stay relevant in a changing global context.**

B) Stakeholder Workshop on Transparency in CSO's interactions with UN entities

Having identified these methodological recommendations, the research team organized a stakeholder workshop on the specific dimension of transparency in CSO's interactions with UN entities to explore which metrics would respond to their needs. CSOs in Geneva were chosen as the target population. The workshop was set up as a focus group to capture the dynamics and discussions between participants.^{xix} This study incorporated two exercises adapted from Bloor et al.^{xx}, where participants were tasked to first evaluate specific transparency interactions and then rank the various subdimensions of transparency. The seven participants consisted of three men and four women, from Global North countries who represented international CSOs. All participants had experience interacting with the UN at a headquarter level. For some, this also extended to regional, national and field levels. The majority of participants work with multiple UN entities, usually in an advocacy capacity.

The CSO participants highlighted the following needs sorted around the 7 subdimensions of transparency:

Public Access to Information

Public access to information was a central theme throughout the workshop. Participants underscored the difficulties they face in obtaining necessary documents and updates from the UN. The complex bureaucracy and lack of user-friendly access systems were major barriers, making it challenging for CSOs to navigate and utilize available information. The importance of enhancing public access to documents and proceedings was emphasized to reduce reliance on informal channels and ensure that CSOs can participate effectively. This includes the need for user-friendly archiving methods and the use of data visualization tools to make information more accessible and understandable.

Budgetary Transparency

There was little comment or objection in ranking this dimension last as the personnel present did not handle budgetary concerns closely, making it difficult to address the topic. One participant additionally noted that due to the scarcity of resources in the UN system, it is difficult to financially cover even basic program items such as humanitarian aid.

Evaluation by Third-Party

The importance of third-party evaluations was strongly emphasized by the workshop participants. CSOs expressed frustrations with the lack of feedback mechanisms within the UN system and highlighted the need for independent evaluations to ensure accountability. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) was cited as an example where member states are monitored for compliance, suggesting that similar mechanisms could be beneficial for other parts of the UN. Independent evaluations can provide objective assessments of the UN's performance and help address issues of credibility and respect that CSOs often face.

Constituency Participation

Participants highlighted the need for more inclusive and representative decision-making processes. The workshop discussions revealed dissatisfaction with formal channels, often viewed as inaccessible and ineffective. Participants stressed the importance of involving CSOs early in the decision-making process and ensuring that their contributions are valued. This includes establishing formal structures for engagement and reducing reliance on informal relationships, which can be exclusive and unpredictable.

Formal Organizational Meetings

The role and effectiveness of formal organizational meetings were critically examined during the workshop. Participants noted that while these meetings are essential for structured interactions, they often fall short in terms of inclusivity and effectiveness. Many CSOs rely on informal channels to gain access to information and influence policy, which can lead to ethical and hierarchical issues. The need for more transparent and accessible formal meetings was highlighted, ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity to participate meaningfully. In a post COVID-19 world, the use of webinars and online meetings saw a rise, allowing for worldwide access without facing issues like visa procedures, the burden of travel and urgency.

Accessibility to UN Records

Accessibility to UN records was another major concern discussed during the workshop. Participants pointed out significant challenges in locating and using UN records due to the fragmented and complex nature of the current system. There were calls for better archiving methods and simplified access to ensure that CSOs can easily find and utilize the information they need. This includes the need for translating documents into multiple languages and using user-friendly digital platforms. Improved accessibility to UN records would greatly enhance.

C) Findings and Recommendations for the AMAM's Composite Indicator Methodology.

Through this research, particularly through the workshop with CSOs, the scope of the needs of participating stakeholders was narrowed down and clarified. The findings include reasoning as to why a participatory approach for assigning weights is recommended; why some trade-offs are acceptable when choosing an aggregation method; that 'necessary elements, which are essential conditions critical for improving transparency were identified in the project, and the importance of visualization, dissemination of information, and adoption of new tools. This section presents the main discoveries from the research and offers suggestions for enhancing the AMAM CI approach. These include a participatory approach for assigning weights, acceptable trade-offs for aggregation methods, identified necessary elements for transparency, and the importance of visualization, dissemination, and adoption of new tools.

1. Participatory approach for assigning weights

A participatory approach for assigning weights is recommended, although it comes with challenges that need addressing. The ranking exercise conducted during the workshop demonstrated that participants could find common ground, despite not reaching a unanimous decision. Participants prioritized the transparency dimensions according to urgency over relative importance. Nonetheless, the exercise proceeded without fundamental objections. The constructive nature of the discussions highlighted the value of participatory methods.

Participants advocated for their early and meaningful contribution to decision-making processes and emphasized the need for trust. They also stressed that CSO involvement is crucial for transparency within the UN system. However, the difficulty to go beyond the confines of Geneva-based CSOs to encompass a representative selection of global stakeholders must be noted. This challenge arises as a result of variables such as physical distance, limitations in resources, different languages and cultures, and unequal degrees of access to technology and communication infrastructure among CSOs around the world. Furthermore, the intricate logistical challenges and expenses involved in coordinating and involving a genuinely worldwide collection of stakeholders further complicate the process.

2. Trade-offs for aggregation methods

Some trade-offs are acceptable when choosing an aggregation method, as evidenced by the discussion around constituency participation, formal organizational meetings, and budget transparency. During the workshop, participants indicated a preference for constituency participation over formal organizational meetings, suggesting that certain trade-offs can be permissible to a specific acceptable threshold. For instance, a geometric aggregation method might be suitable to balance these trade-offs effectively. This approach allows for a nuanced evaluation that respects stakeholder preferences and the complexity of the issues at hand.

3. Identified 'Necessary' Elements

During the discussions, participants highlighted many crucial conditions such as access to data as an improved system for disseminating information that would significantly help NGOs. Moreover, easy-to-use archiving methods and effective visualization techniques were also deemed critical to enhance understanding and usability of information. Defining these concerns as 'necessary' provisions for a meaningful transparency score may prove challenging as CSOs also evidenced great resourcefulness in adapting with informal methods. These have, however, important ethical and hierarchical implications, as participants acknowledged. Therefore, this report suggests that it would be beneficial to include broad access to information and ease of understanding as necessary components. This might involve capacity-building for stakeholders to better navigate the system. Moreover, lowering the barriers to access even for those without specialized training or networks, is essential to address local and global hierarchies and ensure inclusivity. This approach would help bridge the gap between well-connected CSOs in Geneva and those from the Global South or other regions with fewer resources.

4. Importance of Visualization, Dissemination, and Adoption of New Tools.

The needs around visualization, dissemination, and adoption of new tools highlight several key points. Firstly, there is a strong demand for clear and simple visualization methods, such as flowcharts, which can make complex information more accessible to a wider public without the need to reinvent the wheel. Returning to basic principles and leveraging existing frameworks was also seen as valuable by participants. Innovative dissemination strategies, including creative campaigns and the use of informal channels, were highlighted as crucial for effective communication. Trust in the process is important, with participants noting they were sometimes positively surprised by innovations of formal systems. Interactive presentations and tools that allow experimentation with different weights and aggregations could enhance understanding and engagement with methodological choices. While there is enthusiasm for AI tools, such as

chatbots, there are concerns about potential biases and limitations, including access to technology and resources. Additionally, stakeholders may face challenges in adopting new tools due to time constraints and the habit of neglecting continuous training for capacity enhancement. These insights underscore the need for practical, inclusive, and user-friendly tools and methods to improve stakeholder engagement and capacity building.

D) Recommendations for Future Research

1. Expanding Global Stakeholder Engagement: Innovative and cost-effective ways to incorporate a larger and more diverse group of global stakeholders, particularly from marginalized places, should be the focus of future study. To get beyond geographical and resource constraints, online engagement tools, regional seminars, and collaborations with local groups could be effective.

2. Addressing Uncertainties in CIs: Further studies to figure out how to communicate and handle the unknowns while making composite indicators are needed. Among these tasks is figuring out how to be open and honest with stakeholders about the uncertainties in the outcomes and how various assumptions and choices affect them.

3. Leveraging Technology for Visualization and Engagement: Analyze, in relation to existing research, how new technology, including AI and interactive tools, could change the way accountability data is presented, shared, and used.

4. Regular Updates and Adaptability: Research on the best method to update the AMAM CI regularly to meet the changing needs of stakeholders and adapt to new global issues. To achieve this goal, it may be necessary to establish periodic evaluations, incorporate new data sources and processes, and build up ongoing feedback loops, all of which are part of Unaccountable's existing approach.

E) Conclusion

The AMAM, and its work on creating a CI, is an innovative and necessary approach to making UN agencies more accountable, and more successful because of this accountability. This report has shown how important it is to construct composite indicators in a fair, open, and inclusive way. Simple and clear language should be prioritized, uncertainties should be addressed, sophisticated statistical tools should be used, and new ways of visualizing and disseminating information should be developed to increase stakeholder engagement. The AMAM CI can contribute by offering a more precise, comprehensive, and practical framework for evaluating and enhancing accountability within the UN system by implementing these suggestions and conducting future study in the indicated areas. More trust and better cooperation on global issues will be the end result of these endeavors.

ⁱ see here for more information on UN accountable: <https://un-accountable.ch/what-we-do/>

ⁱⁱ OECD, European Union, and Joint Research Centre - European Commission, *Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators: Methodology and User Guide* (OECD, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264043466-en>.

ⁱⁱⁱ OECD, European Union, and Joint Research Centre - European Commission, *Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators*, 13.

- ^{iv} Cf. “Step 1: Theoretical Framework | Knowledge for Policy,” accessed March 6, 2024, https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/composite-indicators/10-step-guide/step-1-theoretical-framework_en#:~:text=The%20theoretical%20framework%20provides%20the,which%20is%20fit%20for%20purpose.&text=What%20is%20badly%20defined%20is%20likely%20to%20be%20badly%20measured.
- ^v cf. Gilberto Montibeller and Alberto Franco, “Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis for Strategic Decision Making,” in *Handbook of Multicriteria Analysis*, ed. Constantin Zopounidis and Panos M. Pardalos, vol. 103, Applied Optimization (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2010), 25–48, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-92828-7_2.
- ^{vi} For a fundamentally different approach see: Filomena Maggino, ed., “Evaluation of Life Satisfaction in Italy: Proposal of a Synthetic Measure Based on Poset Theory,” in *Complexity in Society: From Indicators Construction to Their Synthesis*, by Giovanna Boccuzzo and Giulio Caperna, vol. 70, Social Indicators Research Series (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 291, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60595-1>. More commonly studies or applications might not explicitly follow the ten steps but nonetheless adopt the same logic, e.g. Helmut K. Anheier, Markus Lang, and Edward L. Knudsen, “Introducing the Berggruen Governance Index I: Conceptual and Methodological Framework,” *Global Policy* 14, no. S4 (October 2023): 5–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13278>.
- ^{vii} OECD, European Union, and Joint Research Centre - European Commission, *Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators*, 20.
- ^{viii} Caryannis, Tatiana & Thomas G. Weiss, *The “Third” United Nations: How a Knowledge Ecology Helps the UN Think*, Oxford, 2021.
- ^{ix} Andrea Saltelli and Michaela Saisana, “Rankings and Ratings: Instructions for Use,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 3, no. 1 (2011): 249, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S1876404511200058>; Bjørn Høyland, Karl Moene, and Fredrik Willumsen, “The Tyranny of International Index Rankings,” *Journal of Development Economics* 97, no. 1 (January 2012): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2011.01.007>.
- ^x Michael J. Burgass et al., “Navigating Uncertainty in Environmental Composite Indicators,” *Ecological Indicators* 75 (April 2017): 268–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2016.12.034>.
- ^{xi} cf. Andrea Saltelli, “Composite Indicators between Analysis and Advocacy,” *Social Indicators Research* 81, no. 1 (January 19, 2007): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-006-0024-9>.
- ^{xii} Xiaoyu Gan et al., “When to Use What: Methods for Weighting and Aggregating Sustainability Indicators,” *Ecological Indicators* 81 (October 2017): 443, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2017.05.068>.
- ^{xiii} William Becker et al., “Weights and Importance in Composite Indicators: Closing the Gap,” *Ecological Indicators* 80 (September 2017): 12–22, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2017.03.056>.
- ^{xiv} Gan et al., “When to Use What,” 499; Laurens Cherchye et al., “An Introduction to ‘Benefit of the Doubt’ Composite Indicators,” *Social Indicators Research* 82, no. 1 (March 30, 2007): 111–45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-006-9029-7>.
- ^{xv} cf. Salvatore Greco et al., “On the Methodological Framework of Composite Indices: A Review of the Issues of Weighting, Aggregation, and Robustness,” *Social Indicators Research* 141, no. 1 (January 2019): 86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-017-1832-9>.
- ^{xvi} Issaka Dialga and Le Thi Hang Giang, “Highlighting Methodological Limitations in the Steps of Composite Indicators Construction,” *Social Indicators Research* 131, no. 2 (March 2017): 443, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1263-z>.
- ^{xvii} Gregory Michener, “Policy Evaluation via Composite Indexes: Qualitative Lessons from International Transparency Policy Indexes,” *World Development* 74 (October 2015): 187–89, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.04.016>.
- ^{xviii} i.e. Multivariate, Uncertainty and Sensitivity Analysis.
- ^{xix} Andrew Parker and Jonathan Tritter, “Focus Group Method and Methodology: Current Practice and Recent Debate,” *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 29, no. 1 (2006): 23–37.
- ^{xx} Michael Bloor et al. *Focus Group in Social Research*. Sage Publications. London. 2002: 44-45. https://kmtlw.edu.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Michael_Bloor_Jane_Frankland_Michelle_Thomas_KBookFi.pdf.