The TOSSD mirage

by Simon Scott

TOSSD – Total Official Support for Sustainable Development – is a proposed new measure of "the full array of resources to promote sustainable development in developing countries", based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It presents itself as "a statistical framework agreed by a large, diverse group of countries and organisations [that] aims to ensure a coherent, comparable, unified system to track SDG-related investments".

However, upon inspection, one finds that TOSSD is not a *statistical* system at all. It is just a collection of notifications of individual expenditures. Each TOSSD provider makes its own decisions on what to report, and most providers report little or nothing above their standard statistical reporting to the OECD on Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Other Official Flows (OOF). All TOSSD "totals" are therefore unreliable.

The basic problem is that TOSSD contains no provision for aggregate reporting. There are no aggregate tables to fill out. No one certifies that any TOSSD aggregate is complete. Each statistical reporter just looks around for activities that appear to fit TOSSD definitions, and reports them.

As a result, TOSSD totals are bound to be short of the true figures. But how short? For its latest reporting year, 2022, TOSSD states that it added "$81 billion in official support compared to OECD statistics on development finance".[1] To assess the adequacy of this number, we need to estimate the true totals for the items TOSSD aims to add to standard OECD reporting. These include:

- *Official spending on climate mitigation*: This alone was recently estimated at $536 billion in 2022 – more than 6 times what TOSSD in total added to OECD figures.
- *R&D on global health issues:* The World Health Organisation estimates that high-income countries spend 0.27% of their GDP on health R&D. This equates to $174 billion in 2022.
- *Other R&D activities carried out in the provider country:* OECD countries (not counting several that are still to report) spent $541 billion on official R&D in 2022, though these figures may include health research and some spending may not meet TOSSD conditions.

Other "big ticket" items in TOSSD but not part of ODA or OOF include "support to…migrants for their integration into the economy of the provider country", and "environmental protection activities in the provider country…with spillover effects".

All in all, TOSSD's target expenditures must run into trillions of dollars annually, yet it is only capturing $81 billion beyond standard ODA and OOF reporting to the OECD. TOSSD's additions to ODA and OOF are "short" by one to two orders of magnitude.

So what exactly does TOSSD add to standard OECD reporting? Among the largest items have been France's domestic subsidies to renewable energy projects, building insulation, and electric cars and bicycles; as well as various providers' peace and security operations. But each provider makes its own selection of what to report. And while the vast bulk of TOSSD-eligible expenditures is missing, some providers have been assiduous in winkling out R&D activities on topics such as:

- a "Novel Evolutionary Model for the Early stages of Stars"

[1] As total TOSSD was $441 billion, this means that $360 billion, or 82%, of TOSSD, was "borrowed" from standard ODA and OOF reporting to the OECD.

- a workshop on military applications of artificial intelligence
- a hate speech monitoring platform; and
- "Contacts between Romano-Byzantine and barbarian worlds in the light of die-linked gold coins found in Europe and Central Asia".

These items may seem far-fetched, but they could well fit within TOSSD's wide categories. Indeed, the categories are so wide that one wonders whether, even if reporting were complete, the totals would have much meaning or be of real use. In any case, the *statistical* value of all existing TOSSD notifications is negligible, since they clearly only cover a tiny slice of what could be reported.

A by-product of TOSSD's lack of aggregate reporting is a tendency for TOSSD to expand each year as reporters come across new pockets of reportable items. This annual "discovery process" of new TOSSD makes it problematic to compare TOSSD totals over time as it can give a misleading impression that governments are increasing their support for "sustainable development in developing countries" rather than just finding more things to count.

Fortunately, the use of TOSSD totals by non-TOSSD participants has so far been limited. The major use cited on its website is that "In 2023, the UN Statistical Division published for the first time TOSSD data submitted for the SDG indicator 17.3.1." However, these "TOSSD data" are basically just OECD data on ODA or OOF, since they exclude almost everything that TOSSD adds to them, including all the global environmental and research activities listed above. And no TOSSD data are used in any of the other 230 official indicators of SDG progress and financing. So TOSSD's extreme under-reporting of its target expenditures is not yet posing any serious misinformation problems at global level.

Conclusion

TOSSD has published information on hundreds of thousands of government activities related to sustainable development, and to that extent it is, as it says, "enhancing visibility and transparency" about these particular actions. However, given that no reporters are certifying any aggregates, TOSSD does not meet its claim to be a "statistical measure". Its published totals on the items it adds to standard development finance reporting to the OECD are massive underestimates, and it is difficult to imagine any sound *statistical* use of TOSSD data in the foreseeable future.