

Statistics and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda

Side event during the 5th session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 26 November 2013, 1.15 – 2.30 p.m., UNHQ CR A

Background and introduction

Statistics and indicators have been identified as critical for the post-2015 development agenda. On 26 November 2013, members of the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda organized a side event during the fifth session of the Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals. The side event facilitated an interactive dialogue on lessons learnt from the MDG monitoring framework and discussions on indicators for issues that are reflected in post-2015 deliberations. Presentations during the side event highlighted key messages from the report: [Statistics and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda](#). Panelists included Stefan Schweinfest, Acting Director of the UN Statistics Division, and Robert Johnston, lead author of the report. The event was chaired by Diana Alarcon, Senior Economic Affairs Officer in the Development Policy Analysis Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Fostering a dialogue between statisticians and development practitioners

In his presentation, **Mr. Schweinfest** stated how important a constructive dialogue between development specialists and statisticians was. It will be crucial to foster this dialogue in the post-2015 deliberations through events such as the informal meeting of the Open Working Group on measuring progress on 17 December. In 2000, when the MDGs were conceived, there was a feeling of a top-down statistical framework with no opportunity for further inputs among the statisticians community. Despite a negative start, the MDGs were good for official statistics in many ways. They led to the creation of the Inter-Agency Expert Group which formed an unprecedented collective effort to build and internationally comparable repository of data for MDG monitoring, which was the basis to prepare the annual report by the Secretary-General on MDGs. The MDGs helped to improve the production and availability of data and focused attention on the importance of statistical capacity building. Donors and international organizations improved coordinated efforts to support statistics. In spite of these efforts, one

third of countries still have difficulties reporting on half of the MDG indicator series, particularly least developed and countries in conflict.

Designing good indicators

Mr. Schweinfest referred to the UNTT report on monitoring and indicators that classifies MDG targets into different types, namely percentage targets (50 per cent reduction in absolute poverty), complete achievement (full employment, gender equality), improvement in a negative rate of change (“significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss”) and change in direction of change (“reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS”; “reverse the loss of environmental resources”). Indicators are crucial for a global development agenda as they provide elements of accountability and, as long as they can be easily communicated and are clear, allow the public at large to follow the indicators.

He then outlined criteria that are important for the design of good indicators: indicators should be, as much as possible, outcome indicators with a clear link to the target and they need to be well-defined in statistical terms. Statistics require international norms and standards for data to be aggregated and disaggregated at the global, regional and sub-regional levels to be comparable while also allowing for the inclusion of vulnerable groups. In order to describe trends, indicators must be measurable over time. Data, especially good data, is expensive, so indicators should be as cost-effective as possible, for example by building on existing data bases. Given current capacity constraints in so many countries, the statistical community has asked for a limited number of indicators to avoid overburdening the national statistical systems.

Some elements of the data revolution associated with the discussion of the post-2015 development agenda should include a focus on investments in national statistical systems to strengthen national infrastructure, expand capacities to collect and use statistical tools such as censuses and surveys, improve capacities for data disaggregation and to formulate quality thresholds. In a similar vein, data availability is not a necessary condition for the incorporation of new themes in the development agenda. Issue that have policy relevance and are important can be measured. The statistical community will find ways and means to measure it provided there are additional investments to support data production. The process of data collection to support new indicators takes time and is costly.

The engagement of the Statistical Commission in post-2015 deliberations

The Statistical Commission, as **Mr. Schweinfest** explained, has been around since the founding days of the United Nations and is the primary intergovernmental body responsible for the development of indicators, especially those used in MDG monitoring. With its member States representation, the Statistical Commission brings together experts from capitals and covers all statistical fields. Its main mandate is to develop statistics, serve as a mechanism for quality control and coordinate the statistical programs from different UN agencies. In order to be involved in the ongoing post-2015 deliberations, the Statistical Commission created an inter-sessional ‘Friends of the Chair’ mechanism with 20 chief statisticians from member countries. It engages in close dialogue with the OWG and is preparing the [statistical notes](#) which accompany the issue briefs prepared by the Technical Support Team for the OWG.

Mr. Johnston added that in resolution A/RES/57/270B of 3 July 2003, “Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcome of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic social fields”, the General Assembly reiterated that the Statistical Commission is the intergovernmental focal point for work on indicators in the context of follow-up to major United Nations conferences at all levels. The Commission has been concerned particularly with harmonizing and streamlining data sources and support to developing countries statistical services in various critical fields of development. In 2005 the Commission approved a resolution “Strengthening statistical capacity,” subsequently adopted by the Economic and Social Council (2006/6).

Building on the lessons learnt from the MDGs

Mr. Johnston provided participants with an understanding of how the statistical indicators and monitoring infrastructure were organized for reporting on implementation of the 2000 Millennium Declaration. The road map was prepared by the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, drawing on wide, informal consultations with Member States, United Nations system agencies and the UN Secretariat (A/56/326 of 6 September 2001). It grouped the 18 targets from the Millennium Declaration into eight goals and provided an annex with 48 statistical indicators to measure achievement of the targets. The General Assembly recommended “that

the ‘road map’ be considered a useful guide in the implementation of the Declaration by the United Nations system” (A/RES/56/95 of 30 January 2002).

Creation of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on MDGs

Based on the road map an expert group was organized to review technical issues for the implementation of the proposed indicators. It brought together national offices of statistics and UN agency statisticians in March 2002 and was followed in April by an inter-agency and expert meeting to prepare a programme of indicator reporting. This group became the Inter-agency and Expert Group on MDGs (IAEG), comprising statisticians in the United Nations departments and programmes and a small number of invited outside experts and national statisticians. Meetings are entirely technical in nature and run informally. The chair rotates informally among the primary concerned agencies, by consensus, and all UN agencies and programmes are welcome to attend, while core participation has generally comprised senior statisticians of the agencies and programmes with agreed responsibility for the various targets and indicators.

The IAEG prepares the official global and regional estimates of indicators of progress in achieving the MDGs submitted annually to the General Assembly since 2003. These include the annual publication (since 2005) for general distribution, the *Millennium Development Goals Report* and *Progress* chart, ad hoc charts and reports, and the on-line database of MDG and related indicators with source notes and metadata at the Statistics Division Web site. Robert Johnston noted several features of the IAEG that have greatly contributed to the success of its work:

- Discussions are limited to technical issues in compiling and presenting statistics and indicators agreed in the road map;
- Outside experts and national statisticians are invited to participate and share their views and experiences;
- A competent agency or small coalition of agencies working in the same field is assigned responsibility for compiling and reporting on each indicator and analyzing

trends. Each agency has a long history of statistical work in its field, developed and ongoing in collaboration with senior scientific specialists;

- Agency-compiled data and analyses are discussed by the full group prior to finalization for publication;
- Statistical methodologies for the indicators are fully documented in a published *Handbook* and on-line, and often discussed in small technical groups;
- All of the country data and estimates and supporting technical notes prepared by the agencies are compiled into an on-line, fully documented database administered by the [Statistics Division](#);
- For data compilation, agencies rely exclusively of established statistical sources in national and international statistical services. No new requests were made to countries to supply data or establish new data collection programmes;
- From the beginning the work of the Inter-agency and Expert Group has enjoyed the strong personal support of the Secretary-General, the President of the World Bank and the Chairman of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, and the UN system Executives Board for Coordination.

Open Discussion

Participants flagged important aspects of designing indicators for the post-2015 development agenda. They highlighted concerns about the extent to which outcome indicators are appropriate to inform issues related to the most excluded versus process indicators that can be collected at shorter intervals. They reiterated Mr. Schweinfest's call for a structured cooperation between statisticians and the representatives in the OWG, also asking whether the Statistical Commission will contribute to the discussions on the eventual content of the post-2015 agenda, and welcoming the information about the statistical annexes. Participants also reinforced the importance of statistical capacity building and accountability.

Mr. Schweinfest explained that output rather than input indicators can help to measure progress on different themes, including aspects such as wellbeing which are more difficult to measure. The 'Friends of the Chair' group is putting together an inventory of the incentives in

countries and groups in countries going beyond the GDP indicators. Making concrete recommendations on goals or targets is a political question; statisticians produce the building blocs for measurement of agreed goals. One major concern in the next months will be to build a meaningful dialogue between statisticians and the representatives from member States engaged in crafting the post-2015 development agenda.

In his answer, **Mr. Johnston** referred to the need to address certain goals and targets from a qualitative angle, such as the education goals for example. Whereas developed countries are using international testing measures to examine the quality of education, further thinking is needed on how to take quality measurements to the global level. Input indicators can be helpful if they are aligned to a clear action-oriented issue-related concept. It is difficult to say whether certain indicators are better than others because the usefulness of an indicator depends entirely on what one is trying to measure. However, one thing he stressed is that the post-2015 development agenda should go beyond GDP indicators.

Background Documents

Report by the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda: Statistics and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda (July 2013). Available here: http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/UNTT_MonitoringReport.shtml

Statistical notes prepared by experts from member States through the UN Statistical Commission Friends of the Chair Group on Broader Measures and relevant UN agencies. Available here: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1549>