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Charting Progress Towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

by

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Introduction

Seven years ago, with the Millennium Declaration, world leaders committed to eradicate extreme poverty and to promote sustainable development for all. Since then, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), derived from the Declaration have become a truly shared framework for development. The Goals are now broadly understood as the tool to assess the international system's ability to set and follow-through on practical targets for global partnership. This is the main purpose of the monitoring at the global level.

The MDG framework has made an invaluable contribution to the discussion on development priorities and helped maintain the focus on these priorities over this first period of implementation. Also, the MDGs have established a clear link between the commitments made and the measurable target and quantitative indicators, helping translate the commitment into actions and into measurable outputs.

Global monitoring has also informed global campaigns, turning the goals and targets into widely recognized measures of successful international cooperation in support of sustainable development and keeping the spotlight firmly on the goals.

But the MDGs have also provided the political momentum for statistics to assume a critical role in the development agenda. There has been increased global attention and recognition of the importance of evidence-based policy making. It is now fully and widely recognized that a lot more needs to be done if adequate data are to be available for national and international monitoring and reviews of progress towards all development goals and for designing and implementing the policies and programmes needed to achieve them.

MDGs as national goals: country level monitoring

The millennium development goals have also become, to different degrees and often adapted to local circumstances, national goals. In many case, they have helped increase the coherence and consistency of national policies and programmes. By adapting the global

MDG framework to national priorities and circumstances and mobilizing local representatives to prepare the necessary data and analysis, the national monitoring of the MDGs, including the preparation of country reports, has emerged as a more general result-oriented counterpart to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and Country Assistance Strategies (CASs). They provide a concise overview of objectives and results for intra-government mobilization and analysis and public understanding and debate.

The MDG country reports provide the operational framework and key benchmarks for describing and monitoring local progress towards these objectives. Even in countries in special circumstances, such as conflict and post-conflict situations and countries affected by humanitarian, refugee and displaced persons crises, the MDG framework has proven useful for planning assistance, support and redevelopment.

Within most countries, there is substantial social and geographical inequality which creates pockets of deprivation. To address this, some countries have taken the MDGs to the community level, i.e., have set disaggregated targets for sub-groups or sub-regions within the country; some have set targets for reducing disparities within the country. MDG indicators have been disaggregated to address these priorities, by geographical areas and by population groups.

Global monitoring versus national monitoring: bringing the national and international statistical systems closer together

The global monitoring of the MDGs is based on data and analysis prepared by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators, a group of over 20 international agencies, coordinated by the United Nations Statistics Division.

One important aspect of this work has been bringing together the international statistical community to work on a set of unanimously agreed indicators. Also, monitoring at the global level has required full collaboration among international agencies and continuous consultation with national experts and statisticians. This process has uncovered a number of data gaps and inconsistencies between national and international sources and has contributed to initiate a very important dialogue between the international and the national statistical systems.

As the global goals have become national goals, the global monitoring and the national monitoring have increasingly come together. By keeping the two processes

constantly linked, the statistical community has gone a long way in setting strategies and recommendations on ways to bridge the gap between national statistical sources and international statistical data sets.

The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators has increasingly involved national statisticians in the process of defining indicators and metadata and in establishing procedures for data reporting. At a higher level, national statistical authorities within the UN Statistical Commission, have discussed shortcomings in the production of national data for the MDGs and in the reporting systems to the international sources. The debate has been very intense and productive and has resulted in a number of very concrete and effective actions, including the adoption of a resolution by the Economic and Social Council, in July 2006 to address issues related to national statistical capacity building and transparency and adequacy of metadata and methodologies for MDG indicators.

Within the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators, the work for the improvement of data available in international sources, the transparency of methods used and the consistency with national sources has intensified over the years. The participation of national statisticians in the work of the group has expanded and over the last three years, extensive consultations with a large number of countries were held yearly on these issues.

The agencies and countries members of the IAEG have reviewed and identified countries' priorities and suggested ways to improve the production and analysis of MDG and development indicators at the national level and reviewed agencies' mechanisms to gather data from countries, their methods for compilation of international data series and imputation techniques used to calculate regional and global estimates for MDGs indicators.

Some important recommendations have resulted from these consultations mainly related to the improvement of the reporting mechanisms from national statistical systems to international agencies—including strengthening coordination within the national statistical system—and the review of current methodologies for imputations and/or adjustment of data in international sources. One important aspect raised in relation to the latter was the urgent need to strengthen the mechanisms of consultation with concerned countries and to fully involve national statistical agencies in the process. Important recommendations have also been made on ways to improve methodologies and their transparency.

The basis for the global monitoring

To ensure comparability across countries and regions, the data used to track progress at the global level are those compiled by international agencies within their area of expertise. For each indicator, one or more agencies were designated to be the official data providers and to take the lead in developing appropriate methodologies for data collection and analysis.

Data are typically drawn from official statistics provided by governments to the international agencies responsible for the indicator. This is done through a mechanism of periodic data collection. In the case of data on employment, for example, the International Labour Organization collects labour force indicators from labour ministries and national statistical offices in every country; in the area of health, the World Health Organization gathers administrative records and household survey data on major diseases from ministries of health and national statistical agencies around the globe.

To fill frequent data gaps, many of the indicators are supplemented by or derived exclusively from data collected through surveys sponsored and carried out by international agencies. These include many of the health indicators, which are compiled for the most part from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and Demographic Health Surveys.

In some cases, countries may have more recent data that have not yet become available to the specialized agency in question. In other cases, countries do not produce the data required to compile the indicator, and the responsible international agencies estimate the missing values. Finally, even when countries regularly produce the necessary data, adjustments are often needed to ensure international comparability. The United Nations Statistics Division maintains the official website of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators and its database – accessible at mdgs.un.org – containing the aggregated data as well as the country data series as provided by all partner agencies.

The analysis is presented on the basis of regional data. Aggregated figures are a convenient way to provide an overall assessment and track advances over time of progress under the eight goals. However, the situation in individual countries within a given region may vary significantly from the averages.

Progress at the MDG mid-point

The 2007 progress report on MDGs was released in June by the Secretary-General. It is a testament to what the UN system can deliver given strong unity of purpose and results-oriented coordination of our diverse efforts. But the report also testifies to the improved collaboration and coordination being achieved across the international statistical community.

The Millennium Declaration set 2015 as the target date for achieving most of the Goals. We are now approaching the midway point of this 15-year period. For the first time since the monitoring started, sufficient data are becoming available for most of the indicators that provide an indication of progress since the Declaration was signed.

The results are, predictably, uneven. There have been some visible and widespread gains. Encouragingly, the report suggests that some progress is being made even in those regions where the challenges are greatest. These accomplishments testify to the unprecedented degree of commitment by developing countries and their development partners to the Millennium Declaration and to some success in building the global partnership embodied in the Declaration.

Some signs of progress:

- The proportion of people living in extreme poverty fell from nearly a third to less than one fifth between 1990 and 2004. If the trend is sustained, the MDG poverty reduction target will be met for the world as a whole and for most regions.
- The number of extremely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa has levelled off, and the poverty rate has declined by nearly six percentage points since 2000. Nevertheless, the region is not on track to reach the Goal of reducing poverty by half by 2015.
- Progress has been made in getting more children into school in the developing world. Enrolment in primary education grew from 80 per cent in 1991 to 88 per cent in 2005. Most of this progress has taken place since 1999.
- Women's political participation has been growing, albeit slowly. Even in countries where previously only men were allowed to stand for political election, women now have a seat in parliament.
- Child mortality has declined globally, and it is becoming clear that the right life-saving interventions are proving effective in reducing the number of deaths due to the main child killers – such as measles.

- Key interventions to control malaria have been expanded.
- The tuberculosis epidemic, finally, appears on the verge of decline, although progress is not fast enough to halve prevalence and death rates by 2015.

By pointing to what has been achieved, these results also highlight how much remains to be done and how much more could be accomplished if all concerned live up fully to the commitments they have already made. The projected shortfalls are most severe in sub-Saharan Africa. Even regions that have made substantial progress, including parts of Asia, face challenges in areas such as health and environmental sustainability. More generally, the lack of employment opportunities for young people, gender inequalities, rapid and unplanned urbanization, deforestation, increasing water scarcity, and high HIV prevalence are pervasive obstacles.

Moreover, insecurity and instability in conflict and post-conflict countries make long-term development efforts extremely difficult. In turn, a failure to achieve the MDGs can further heighten the risk of instability and conflict.

The following are some of the key challenges that have to be addressed:

- Over half a million women still die each year from treatable and preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth. The odds that a woman will die from these causes in sub-Saharan Africa are 1 in 16 over the course of her lifetime, compared to 1 in 3,800 in the developed world.
- If current trends continue, the target of halving the proportion of underweight children will be missed by 30 million children, largely because of slow progress in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.
- The number of people dying from AIDS worldwide increased to 2.9 million in 2006, and prevention measures are failing to keep pace with the growth of the epidemic. In 2005, more than 15 million children had lost one or both parents to AIDS.
- Half the population of the developing world lack basic sanitation. In order to meet the MDG target, an additional 1.6 billion people will need access to improved sanitation over the period 2005-2015. If trends since 1990 continue, the world is likely to miss the target by almost 600 million people.
- To some extent, these situations reflect the fact that the benefits of economic growth in the developing world have been unequally shared. Widening income inequality is of particular concern in Eastern Asia, where the share of consumption of the poorest people declined dramatically between 1990 and 2004.

- Most economies have failed to provide employment opportunities to their youth, with young people more than three times as likely as adults to be unemployed.
- Warming of the climate is now unequivocal. Emissions of carbon dioxide, the primary contributor to global climate change, rose from 23 billion metric tons in 1990 to 29 billion metric tons in 2004. Climate change is projected to have serious economic and social impacts, which will impede progress towards the MDGs.

During this mid-point year, governments and the international community have taken practical steps to accelerate implementation of the MDGs. Examples are the recent initiatives by the Secretary-General to establish the MDG Africa Steering and Working Groups and the recently launched task force to assess gaps in the MDG implementation.

With adequate support from the international community and comprehensive national strategies, the MDGs are still achievable in all countries. In general, strategies should adopt a wide-ranging approach that seeks to achieve pro-poor economic growth, including through the creation of a large number of additional opportunities for decent work. This, in turn, will require comprehensive programmes for human development, particularly in education and health, as well as building productive capacity and improved physical infrastructure. In each case, an effort should be made to quantify the resources required to implement these programmes. Implementation should be based on a medium-term approach to public expenditure. A sound national statistical system and enhanced public accountability are necessary to support all these efforts.

And systematic and sustained tracking of progress both at the national and global levels, will continue to be the prerequisite to ensure the success of the MDGs.