

## IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF DATA USED FOR INDICATORS FOR THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND TARGETS

Note by UNSD

### **1. Introduction**

The Statistics Division reported to the ACC Subcommittee at its 35<sup>th</sup> session, held in Vienna, 18-20 September 2001, on arrangements for the use of statistical indicators to monitor progress in achieving the Millennium development goals set out in the Millennium Declaration. This report described the action taken by the General Assembly, the Assembly's resolution on follow-up (A/RES/55/162), the preparation of the "Road Map" report of the Secretary-General (A/56/326) and agreed arrangements for the preparation of indicators for the Secretary-General's annual reports and for coordination with agencies providing data and with UNDP, which is responsible for managing the preparation of country reports on achievement of the goals and targets.<sup>1</sup>

The Sub-committee commented on the work and plans of the United Nations Statistics Division relating to the review of global progress towards the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration and reiterated the need to approach all the appropriate source agencies relevant to the targets listed in the document.<sup>2</sup>

Two inter-agency expert group meetings organized in 2001 by the Executive Office of the Secretary General, including representatives of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Statistics Division, United Nations Development Group, Bretton Woods institutions and OECD, confirmed the respective responsibilities for monitoring and reporting at the global and national levels.

### **2. Review of the process for the preparation of the 2002 Report**

Based on the inputs provided by each of the designated agencies on the relevant target/indicators and on the outcome of the discussion at the two interagency and expert group meetings held in New York in March and April 2002, the Statistics Division prepared the "Report of the Inter-agency Expert Group on MDG Indicators", for the EOSG's use in preparing the Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly.<sup>3</sup>

The final report to the EOSG was prepared according to the following schedule:

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant General Assembly resolutions and reports are available through the Statistics Division site [millenniumindicators.un.org](http://millenniumindicators.un.org).

<sup>2</sup> Administrative Committee on Coordination, Report of the Subcommittee on Statistical Activities on its thirty-fifth session Vienna, 18-20 September 2001, ACC/2001/2.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Millennium Development Goals, Data and Trends, 2002. Report of the Inter-agency Expert Group on MDG Indicators. ST/ESA/STAT/120, in <http://millenniumindicators.un.org>; and General Assembly document "Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration Report of the Secretary-General", A/57/270, also available through <http://millenniumindicators.un.org>

- 6 May – agencies submitted drafts of their inputs to UNSD
- 22 May – the draft was circulated for comments to all agencies participating in the effort and other relevant offices within the UN system.
- 31 May – the final version, incorporating all comments was submitted to the EOSG

Parallel to the preparation of the report, work has been ongoing since mid-2001 on the MDG Database of UNSD.<sup>4</sup> Data series on the 48 MDG indicators were provided by the agreed source agencies at different stages. Following the December 2001 meeting, where agencies agreed on a near-final list of indicators, agencies began work to update the needed series and sent them to UNSD. In some instances, country data series were submitted to UNSD for incorporation in the database prior to the submission of the inputs–regional/global figures and text–for the report. In other cases, while regional and global estimates were sent for inclusion in the report to the EOSG, country data were not at all available or were not submitted.

### ***Checking data quality***

One key element in preparing the quantitative assessments on developmental goals is ensuring that the data used as a basis for the indicators are the best available. The 2002 document was the first progress report in a fifteen-year process. Agencies will work together to better understand and reduce the uncertainty in the data in the coming-year reports.

The time allowed for the preparation of this year report was hardly adequate for completing the checking of data and for further exchange of information and discussion with the agencies, after the expert group meetings.

### ***MDG database and submission of data series***

The MDG database at UNSD is the focal point for interagency work on data compilation and for the improvement of data used in the reporting. It contains data series related to the 48 millennium indicators, continuously updated as new data become available, and technical notes on the indicators and the sources used.

To the extent possible, there should be consistency between the country series contained in the database and the global and regional figures presented in the annual and quinquennial reports and which will also be included in the database in the next few weeks. This is difficult for several reasons. First, country data change over time and while changes can only be reflected in regional and global values once a year in the report, the database can be updated more frequently or with a different schedule. Also, in some cases, regional estimates are not based on a specific country data series even when country data exist, due to poor quality of existing data. Finally, in this year's report, given the tight schedule for the submission of the document to the EOSG, some regional/global figures were last minute calculations, not fully consistent with the data series that had been provided earlier for the MDG database.

Some issues for discussion on the improvement of the process are the following:

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<sup>4</sup> In <http://millenniumindicators.un.org>

*Inter-agency expert discussion on data issues.* Now that the reporting process and the list of indicators have been fixed, time can be devoted to more in-depth discussion and consultation on the improvement of the data used. Also, more work can be devoted specifically to assess the quality and availability of data for some of the more problematic indicators. To this end, UNSD in close collaboration with the agencies can identify indicators for special attention. (See also section below on “Conceptual and methodological issues”.)

*Consistency between regional and country data.* One first step to increase consistency between regional and country data could be improving the mechanism of submission of data series and regional figures/estimates. There was a disconnection between the regional data sent for the preparation of the main report to the EOSG and the country data submitted earlier. To the extent possible the MDG database should contain only the data series on which the regional/global averages or estimates are based, and a description of the methodology used for estimates. For the next reports, it would be helpful to have the regional and country data sent to UNSD together, with possibly some explanation of how they relate to each other, and on the methodology of regional estimations.

*Inter-agency and expert group meetings.* The main forum for further discussion and decisions on future steps for the improvement of data quality could be, as in the past, interagency and expert group meetings that bring together the various partner agencies and the experts on selected statistical fields of interest. The possibility of having one or two thematic meetings on the more problematic indicators/data series, rather than meetings covering all 48 indicators, can also be considered, for instance, grouping together all the health indicators for one meeting and the economic indicators for the second meeting.

### **3. Coordination with UNDP work at the country level**

Country reports on progress towards the MDGs are intended to raise public awareness and help focus the national debate on specific development priorities and on the necessary action in terms of policy reforms, institutional change and resource allocation.

In its capacity as United Nations coordinator at the country level and chair of the United Nations Development Group, UNDP is supporting United Nations country teams in the preparation of national reports. Country teams generally include full representation of the partner agencies.

A necessary condition to obtain better data for the MDG indicators is to improve the capacity of countries to produce data. The preparation of the country reports represents an opportunity to help build national capacity for monitoring and reporting. In this context, coordination between global and national reporting would help identify priorities for building national capacity for the production, analysis and dissemination of data.

Finally, the country-based information compiled and analysed by the UN country teams can be used as additional inputs –beside international sources – for the report to the General Assembly, after data quality and sources are carefully scrutinized. Analysis of the data and data sources used in the country reports will provide for a further review of existing problems and data gaps in countries.

#### **4. Harmonization of regional groupings**

At the last three meetings (in 2001 and March and April 2002) partner agencies agreed to present the regional data and estimates according to the UN grouping for geographical regions and sub-regions and for developing, developed and least developed countries, as given in the Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistics Use.<sup>5</sup> However, for some agencies it was impossible to recalculate estimates or averages with a different grouping of countries in the short time available.

In order for the report to have a consistent format and to avoid confusion in the presentation of the findings, it is essential that data be presented with a homogeneous format in all sections. Also, data contained in the MDG database should be presented, to the extent possible, by region and countries. To this end, the latest regional averages and estimates for the M-49 groupings should be sent to UNSD as soon as possible in order to be posted in the website.

#### **5. Coordination of global surveys**

Data for the compilation of the MDG indicators are provided by specialized UN-system agencies, Bretton Woods institutions, OECD and the World Trade Organization. They are derived from data submitted to relevant agencies by national statistical offices or directly collected in countries through surveys sponsored and/or coordinated and implemented by the agencies. Agencies are responsible for ensuring international coordination of the content and geographical coverage of surveys and for analyzing the data for MDG reporting to the extent possible, as long as they are consistent with international standards and with the agreed indicators for the MDGs.

Some of the survey programmes pertinent to the data for the MDG indicators are the following:

- Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (UNICEF)
- HIV/AIDS, various epidemiological surveys (UNAIDS)
- LSMS (World Bank)
- TB/DOTS (notification programme); Roll Back Malaria (WHO)
- Pilot surveys in selected countries to test/improve methodologies of data collection on labour force (ILO)
- Pilot surveys in selected countries to test/improve methodologies of data collection on nutrition (FAO)
- Pilot small-scale studies on education/literacy (UNESCO)
- Access to PCs and internet (ITU)
- Secure tenure and slum improvement (Habitat)

Some issues to be considered for discussion:

- Public access to the original agency databases and technical notes drawn on for submission to the Millennium Indicators Database at UNSD

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<sup>5</sup> Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistics Use, ST/ESA/STAT/SER.M/49/Rev.4 (United Nations publication), and in <http://millenniumindicators.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49regin.htm>

- Schedule of updates
- Scope and geographical coverage of surveys
- Other surveys planned or ongoing not included in the list above
- Other issues related to the use of global surveys data for MDGs monitoring

## **6. Conceptual and methodological issues**

As part of the common effort to better understand and reduce the uncertainty in the data, partner agencies and UNSD could focus on some specific areas/indicators where, for different reasons, obtaining data has appeared to be more difficult.

### *Inconsistent internationally published series*

There are indicators where a variety of sources and published data series exist and possible confusion in their use may arise. They are generally data obtained through differences in estimate methods, basic data sources, recency or frequency. .

Examples:

- Poverty estimates: a review is needed of the different methods used by World Bank and UNCTAD, household-surveys-based estimates versus SNA-consistent estimates
- Infant and child mortality estimates: there are differences between the UN Population Division, UNICEF and World Bank data and various methodology issues that need to be clarified.

Other agencies are also publishing reports on the MDGs (for instance the UNIFEM “Progress of the World’s Women” and HDR). We should try to ensure some consistency between MDGs data series/global figures presented in the GA report and in the Web site, and those presented in other reports/Web sites.

### *Insufficient data for trend analysis*

Other estimates are produced by a single agency and represent the only international source available. They are however still in the process of being refined and have not been used consistently over time, so that trend data are not available.

Examples:

- Maternal mortality
- Secure tenure: regional and global estimates of the secure tenure index were provided for 1993 only. The methodology used to calculate the index needs to be further reviewed and discussed.

### *Insufficient coverage*

In other instances, country coverage for the underlying data is limited and therefore trends and regional analysis are difficult.

Examples:

- Women’s paid employment in non-agricultural sector

- Youth unemployment
- Ratio of children orphaned by AIDS to non-orphaned children who are attending school
- Households using solid fuels

*Problematic estimates*

Finally, there are data sets that because of poor quality of existing data in countries present a high degree of uncertainty.

Examples:

- Survival rates from grade 1 to grade 5. For some countries, data indicate drastic changes from one year to another.

**Points for discussion**

In conclusion, the meeting may wish to:

--Comment on coordination and harmonization issues which agencies may have experienced in the course of preparation of the 2002 inter-agency report on indicators for the Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly;

--Suggest indicators or topics which may need special efforts, such as a technical meeting, in order to reach a more acceptable level of reliability, especially for trend analysis, and coverage;

--Comment on complementary country programmes which can be of greatest value in meeting national and international requirements for monitoring achievement of the Millennium development goals;

--Call attention to agency programmes which are expected to yield new datasets and insights on development progress in the next year;

--Take note of the need for updating and harmonizing the Millennium indicators in the Statistics Division's Internet database according to agency schedules for completing new datasets, and in any case no later than March of 2003 for the next report of the Secretary-General.