

**Note on progress in the implementation of the recommendations by
the Friends of the Chair on MDG Indicators and the ECOSOC
resolution on Statistical Capacity Building**

Prepared by UNSD

A. Introduction

1. Since the reporting on progress achieved in the MDGs was initiated at the request of the General Assembly in 2002, shortcomings in the availability of country data have been a concern of the international statistical community and the international agencies mandated to provide the aggregate figures and related analysis to inform the report by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly. The Statistical Commission, at its 36th session, in March 2005, requested that a report be prepared on the ability of countries to produce individual indicators and on how metadata should be presented to accompany the indicators. The report was presented to the Statistical Commission in 2006 at its 37th Session by the Friends of the Chair on MDG Indicators. The Commission took note of the report and requested the Inter-agency and Expert Group (IAEG) on MDG indicators to take into account the relevant recommendations of the Friends of the Chair to improve further the compilation of the indicators used in the monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals and report back to the Commission at its thirty-eighth session.

2. The Statistical Commission also proposed a resolution, approved by ECOSOC in July 2006, on the strengthening of statistical capacity in countriesⁱ and included a set of recommendations to improve the coverage, transparency, and reporting on all indicators.ⁱⁱ

3. This note presents a brief overview of the work undertaken by the IAEG to implement the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair and those contained in the ECOSOC resolution to improve the compilation of the indicators for the global monitoring and the countries' reporting on MDG indicators, and to coordinate capacity-building activities where needed.

B. Improving the data and metadata in the MDGs Indicators international database

4. At its 10th meeting, the IAEG group and the representatives from about 20 national statistical offices reviewed the work done by UNSD to address the concerns of the FOC and the recommendations contained in the ECOSOC

resolution. This includes the complete redesign of the database and website on MDG Indicators and the inclusion of both cell-level and indicator-level metadata.

5. The experts from countries and international agencies made important recommendations for further improving the metadata, including:
 - a. Adding a detailed explanation of the difference between global and national monitoring and related implications on methods and data presentation.
 - b. Adding metadata on population estimates used to calculate indicators.
 - c. Including in the website a mechanism for users to provide feedback to better understand users' needs and to request additional information.
 - d. Including three new categories of metadata to provide users with more detailed information on agencies responsible for the compilation of data and on sources used.
6. The new website and database will continue to be upgraded, including based on the latest recommendations made by the IAEG and on users' suggestions. (see <http://mdgs.un.org>)

C. Improving reporting mechanisms from national statistical systems to international agencies

7. IAEG reviewed and discussed existing mechanisms for agencies to gather data from national sources, and made suggestions for their improvement. One of the major problems identified relates to the fact that, in many countries, existing reporting mechanisms are decentralized, with each data producer (in line ministries) communicating directly with their own counterpart in the international agencies.
8. Country participants and international agencies recommended the following:
 - (i) Involve more extensively regional commissions in data checking purposes (discrepancies between national and international data series) and in channelling and following-up on specific queries on data and metadata between national statistical systems and international agencies;
 - (ii) Identify a focal point inside the national statistical system, for the coordination of official statistics. This could be the national statistical office or a statistical board/committee composed of all statistical stakeholders, with the national statistical office as member and secretariat;
 - (iii) Improve data sharing at the international level and better identify the leading agency and their specific data requirements for each substantive topic. Specific requests of data or information would then be better channelled from countries to the international community and vice versa. In addition, countries need more timely and accurate

information on data requests by international agencies so that such requests could be incorporated into their strategic planning processes;

- (iv) Establish a national statistical system website/database providing a single set of data (after reconciliation of all possible data sources in the country including administrative records) and a calendar of dissemination of official statistics. This would facilitate the use of official statistics in the international community and reduce burden on countries and international agencies.

D. Improving methodologies for the production of MDG Indicators for global monitoring

9. Since the 8th session of the IAEG in October 2005, partner agencies have agreed to provide a complete description of the way estimates and imputations are produced. The IAEG at its November 2006 meeting reviewed these methodologies and made recommendations on further work. Country representatives pointed out that some of the indicators still lack an accurate description of the methods used in their compilation. They urged agencies to provide the missing metadata to UNSD so that the available information on indicators would be harmonized and standardized.

10. Participants agreed that imputations, if accompanied by clear and transparent metadata, are useful for two main reasons: (a) they can be used by countries in case no official statistics are available; (b) they make the global monitoring process more transparent by providing the user with the underlying imputed data used to estimate regional and global aggregates. Participants stressed the need for clear explanation of the entire process leading to the imputed figure including: data, definitions and techniques used to obtain imputed data.

E. Improving statistical capacity in countries

11. Since the periodic assessment of progress towards the MDGs began over five years ago, a number of initiatives have been launched to address the needs of developing countries to strengthen their statistical capacity to produce, analyse and disseminate data.

12. The Inter-agency and Expert Group (IAEG) on MDG Indicators has also made statistical capacity one of its priority areas of work and has been working to define priorities and provide recommendations for actions to be undertaken at both the national and the international levels. International agencies, donors and representatives from national statistical offices have worked together to identify national priorities in capacity building and to make specific recommendations for the improvement of the delivery and coordination of statistical assistance to countries.

13. At the IAEG latest meeting in November 2006, over 60 representatives from national statistical offices, country line ministries, agencies' country offices and international agencies reviewed priorities and formulate recommendations to improve the availability of data to monitor the MDGs. They agreed that

shortcomings in the availability and quality of data to monitor the MDGs were due to the following:

- Countries often lack the capacity to apply internationally agreed definitions;
- Data on every given indicator are often available from different sources without validation from the national statistical authority;
- There is a general lack of coordination within national statistical systems and no clearly defined authority to oversee and verify data originating from the different data providers;
- In many developing countries, existing data collection programmes are not sustainable and NSOs are too dependent on survey data from surveys driven by donors, with little national ownership;
- Countries lack a focal point responsible for centralizing all requests from international agencies and reporting to the international statistical system.

14. The group agreed on steps to be undertaken to improve countries' capacity to report on MDG indicators. They stressed the need to improve coordination within countries' national statistical system, bringing all data producers together through an efficient coordination mechanism. They also agreed that this in turn would facilitate the interaction with the international statistical system and bring closer together the national and the global monitoring system (see Annex D).

15. National statisticians also recommended increasing the sense of national ownership of the internationally driven and sponsored surveys. The statistical community is well aware of this concern and the various partners are working together towards a better coordinated way of delivering technical and financial assistance and more sustainable data collection programmes. International agencies are increasing their efforts to better coordinate their initiatives and to integrate their programmes and initiatives into the existing National Strategies for the Development of Statistics.

F. Conclusions and way forward

16. The United Nations Statistics Division, in its role as coordinating agency of the IAEG, will continue to work with the responsible agencies and countries to improve the coverage, transparency and reporting on all MDG indicators. It will also make every effort to provide the necessary resources and make arrangements to allow country participants to regularly attend the fall meeting of the IAEG. Finally, the IAEG will continue to work through the existing joint monitoring groups, the thematic sub-groups and the peer review groups to ensure that experts, country representatives and international agencies work together to develop the most appropriate definitions and methods for the production of all indicators and related regional and global aggregates.

17. CCSA might wish to review the work done and advice and ensure that each responsible agency provides the necessary metadata as agreed by the IAEG and revise and refine methodologies for estimates and regional aggregates when advised by the agency and countries experts. In particular,

where indicators still lack an accurate description of the methods used for their compilation, agencies are encouraged to provide the missing metadata so that the available information on indicators would be harmonized and standardized. CCSA might wish to review progress periodically at its regular sessions.

Annex I

Summary of recommendations on countries' needs in building capacity for the production and analysis of MDG and development indicators

Inter-agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators

10th Meeting, Geneva, 15-16 November 2006

The main conclusions of the discussion on gaps and problems on data to monitor the MDGs were as follows:

1. Data on MDG indicators are often obtained from different sources and according to different definitions and methodologies, which creates difficulties in selecting and reconciling data into one official indicator.
2. Countries often lack the capacity to apply internationally agreed and recommended definitions and to understand the discrepancies in national data, due to incorrect definitions.
3. In some countries, the National Statistical Office has no authority to verify the data from other national producers and to coordinate the use of the various different sources.
4. Although in some countries coordination among different data producers is already mandated by national statistical laws, these laws are not always enforced due to lack of organization within the statistical system and pressure from donors who accommodate their requests and agendas before country's needs. There is a diversion of resources: from national to international priorities.
5. Many developing countries lack sustainability in data collection programmes. NSOs are too dependent on survey data and particularly from surveys driven by donors, with little national ownership.
6. Administrative data are not used effectively and additional efforts are needed to improve the quality of records and data generated by administrative systems.
7. Problems with reporting to international agencies are linked to the lack of coordination within countries among the various statistical agencies (administrative data from line ministries, national statistical offices, etc.) and the lack of a focal point at the country level for centralizing all requests received from international agencies.

Strategies and best practices were recommended as follows:

1. Strengthening the coordinating role of the national statistical office (NSO) within the national statistical system. NSOs should be the central office for all statistical matters in order to ensure quality of official statistics, use of agreed standards across all national data producers, and consistency and continuity in official data series.

2. Establishing a “quality system” to assess all available statistics in the country for the different topics, with the NSO as a “clearance agency” verifying the quality and production of all official statistics for the country. The secondment/deployment of NSO staff to line ministries producing statistics was indicated as a possible way to ensure statistical quality to the outputs and to facilitate coordination across data producers within the national statistical system.
3. Improving access to metadata for countries to be able to produce data according to agreed definitions and methods.
4. Establishing an inter-agency, inter-department body/committee in charge of the MDGs (monitoring, policymaking), involving all stakeholders. This would ensure an institutionalization of MDGs monitoring and establish a collaborative environment inside the country. It would also facilitate the production of single (opposed to multiple) statistics to be used as official statistics within the country and to be sent to the international agencies.
5. Establishing an improved national information system and develop an official central (single) repository/database maintained by national statistical offices or MDGs committees to provide official data to national and international partners and thus facilitate communication within the country and between the country and the international community.

Given that the ECOSOC resolution had requested the establishment of a panel of experts to prepare a set of guidelines on metadata for indicators, UNSD in its capacity as coordinator of IAEG requested the participants of the IAEG meeting to form such a group. It was decided that steps would be undertaken to maintain consistent participation of country representatives at IAEG—at least for a core group—and that electronic exchange would be used in between meetings to continuously review and improve the content and structure of the metadata. It was further agreed that each participant from national statistical offices would further consult with specialists in their office to provide recommendations and technical guidance on the metadata.

ⁱ The work undertaken by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators to address the need for statistical capacity building to produce data for MDG Indicators is presented in the Report of the Secretary-General on statistical capacity-building, E/CN.3/2007/14.

ⁱⁱ See ECOSOC Resolution 2006/6: Strengthening Statistical Capacity.