

Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring From A Statistical Perspective

Report of the Task Team on Lessons Learned
from MDG Monitoring of the IAEG-MDG*



United Nations

March 2013

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the IAEG-MDG members and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations. The paper is published without formal editing.

Introduction: Learning from the experiences since 2000

The adoption of the Millennium Declaration in 2000 and the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework have brought global attention to some of the most pressing development challenges of our time, helped to galvanize development efforts, helped to implement successful targeted interventions, improved statistical methodologies and information systems, and draw increased attention to the need for strengthening statistical capacity at both national and international levels.

The United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators (IAEG-MDG), consisting of international agencies, regional organizations and national statistical offices, has been responsible for the global and regional monitoring of progress towards the MDGs. As mandated by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC), the IAEG-MDG also helps to improve data and methodologies for the monitoring of the MDGs and define priorities and strategies to support countries in data collection, analysis and reporting on MDGs. The IAEG-MDG has worked efficiently over the last ten years to ensure that the monitoring of development goals be firmly grounded on statistical sound principles and to provide the latest and most reliable data from official statistical sources.

To support the Rio+20 follow-up and the post-2015 processes, the IAEG-MDG created a Task Team on Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring to share its experiences from the monitoring of the MDGs and to provide technical support to guide the formulation of a new development agenda. This paper summarizes the major lessons learned in MDG monitoring since the early 2000s based on the contributions and discussion of the Task Team and IAEG members during meetings in 2012 and 2013. It focuses on the lessons learned from the technical perspective of the experts involved in the MDG monitoring. A comprehensive evaluation of the development agenda, including the MDG agenda and framework, from the policy perspective has been conducted elsewhere by the UN System Task Team on the Post 2015 UN Development Agenda.¹

The Task Team on the Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring examined four issues which are covered in the subsequent sections of the report: 1) the strengths and shortcomings of the current framework, 2) the criteria for target setting, 3) the criteria for indicator selection, and 4) the role of the statistical community in the process of the selection of the goals, targets and indicators for the new development framework.

¹ United Nations System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (2012). "Review of the contributions of the MDG agenda to foster development: lessons for the Post 2015 UN Development Agenda", available from: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/beyond2015.shtml>

1. Strengths and shortcomings of the current MDG framework

Strengths as a monitoring framework and impetus for capacity building

Use of statistics for monitoring and decision making. The format of the MDG framework brought together an inspirational vision with a set of concrete and time-bound goals and targets that could be monitored by statistically robust indicators. The concept of monitoring concrete goals with statistically robust indicators is a clear strength of the framework from the policy and the statistical perspectives. The framework reinforced the importance of robust and reliable statistics for development policy decision making.

Improvement of statistical capacity and data availability. The MDG framework fostered the strengthening of statistical systems and the compilation and use of quality data to improve policy design and monitoring by national governments and international organizations. The advantages of having an agreed framework for monitoring the development agenda include the following:

- (1) Increased attention to the need for strengthening statistical capacity on development indicators, including the MDGs indicators.
- (2) Development of a strong partnership between the national and international statistical systems for the production of statistics for development indicators, including the MDG indicators, and for the improvement of statistical capacity and other reporting issues.
- (3) Improved coordination within countries between different government offices for better reporting at the national and sub-national level, and strengthened coordinating role of the national statistics offices.
- (4) Improved data availability and quality on development indicators, including the MDGs indicators, in the national and international statistical systems.
- (5) Development of new statistical methodologies to address challenges of data availability, quality and comparability, and promotion of the adoption of internationally agreed statistical standards.
- (6) Identification and explanation of differences between national and international MDG data series.

Weaknesses from statistical but also policy perspective

The MDG framework has received critiques from countries, civil society and academia. The main issues raised on the current monitoring framework are:

- (1) Targets and indicators were perceived by national statistical systems and other development partners primarily as an international agency driven “top-down” initiative.
- (2) There are inconsistencies between goals, targets and indicators. Some goals, targets and indicators are not well-aligned, and some goals are not adequately addressed by existing indicators.
 - ✓ For example, “the elimination of gender disparity in school enrolment” is the only target for MDG 3 - Promote gender equality and empower woman.

- ✓ The indicator 3.2 “Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector” does not have a clear link with the target for MDG 3.
- (3) There was no clarity on how the targets were set and the targets took various forms. Some targets have clear numerical yardstick (e.g. “halve”, “reduce by two thirds”), while others are ambiguous and vague (e.g. “achieve full and productive employment and decent work”, “universal access to reproductive health”).
- (4) Some of the numerical targets were too ambitious or poorly specified.
 - ✓ For example, the target under MDG 4 - reduce under five child mortality by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015 - is not achievable. If the annual rate of decline over the 2000-2010 period continues, the world will not reach MDG 4 until 2037.
 - ✓ For example, the target of improving the lives of slum dwellers under MDG 7 was not well-specified.
- (5) Global targets were incorrectly interpreted as national, even sub-national targets, which distorted analysis, priority setting and statistical development efforts in many countries.
- (6) Trends at global and regional level tend to be dominated by a few countries with large population.
- (7) The baseline year was set too far away from the adoption of the framework.
 - ✓ For example, 1990 was used as the baseline year for MDG 4, while the goals, targets and indicators were developed in 2002. In Africa, the child mortality in a number of countries went up between 1990 and 2000, which makes it harder for these countries to reach the target.
 - ✓ The availability and quality of baseline data are problematic in some countries.
- (8) The framework does not adequately address inequality issues, such as inequalities between men and women, rural and urban areas, rich and poor, and among specific population groups.
- (9) Although we have seen improvement, the statistical capacity in many countries is still limited. Data availability and data quality still remain a big challenge for the MDG monitoring. In addition, the time lag between data collection and data dissemination is normally 2-3 years for most MDG indicators, which affects accountability and policy making.
- (10) Discrepancies between national and international data, due to, among others, different methodologies, definitions, different choice of data sources, or time gap in release dates, created problems at the national level and tension in the international statistical community.

2. Criteria for setting targets

Criteria for target setting. As indicated above, many concerns about the current MDG framework are related to target setting. To respond to these concerns and guide the target setting for a new development framework, the following criteria should be considered:

- (1) Targets should have a clear connection with the goals and be expressed in a clear and easy to understand language.

- (2) Targets should be consistent and coherent with existing targets or commitments in other international frameworks and agreements.
- (3) Both absolute and relative changes should be measured to give a complete picture of performance.
- (4) To the extent possible, targets need to be quantifiable and clearly time-bound.
- (5) Numerical targets should be realistically set – ambitious but achievable, based on assessments of historical and current trends of progress. It is important to distinguish targets and long-term vision.
- (6) Targets should be set in consultation with the countries. A balance between the bottom-up approach and top-down approaches in target setting should be pursued. Flexibility and guidance should be provided for countries to define and set up their own targets according to their development needs.
- (7) Baseline year should be explicitly set and be set as close as possible to the adoption of the framework, no more than five years before the adoption of the framework. For national monitoring, countries can set their own baseline year according to data availability and national circumstances.
- (8) The time-span for the new development framework should be 10-15 years, depending on the time-span selected, intermediate targets should be considered.
- (9) National statistical capacities, data quality and availability should be explicitly incorporated into the new development framework in order to facilitate the monitoring process.

3. Criteria for indicator selection

Principles for indicator selection. Indicators should flow naturally from goals and targets and be directly relevant to a sound and relevant monitoring system for the new development framework. The information requirements should not be taken as establishing new objectives, either globally or for individual countries. The national statistical development strategies should govern the work on indicators. The cost-benefit of any centralised collection of indicators needs to be carefully considered.

Statistical criteria for indicator selection. The selection of indicators is crucial for the new development framework. A potential set of criteria for indicator selection based on the MDG monitoring experience is proposed below.

- (1) Relevance
 - The indicator should be clearly linked to the target and provide a robust measure of progress towards the target.
 - The indicator should be relevant to policy making and sensitive to policy interventions at the appropriate level (global, regional, national, and local).
 - Empirical analysis showing that the indicator is valuable has been undertaken and results have been documented.
- (2) Methodological soundness
 - The indicator should be based to the greatest extent possible on existing internationally agreed definitions, classification, standards, recommendations and best practices.

- For global monitoring, the indicator is recommended by a well established and recognized peer review mechanism with representatives from both the national and international statistical communities.
- The methodology behind the indicator (data sources, method of computation, treatment of missing values, regional estimates, etc.) should be well documented and readily available.

(3) Measurability

- The indicator can be measured in a cost-effective and practical manner by countries. A regular data collection mechanism has been or can be developed with reasonable costs and by involving the official statistical system. The statistical capacity in countries should be considered.
- A meaningful trend analysis is possible.
- It should be possible to disaggregate the indicator by geographical region, sex, income, or special population groups where applicable and relevant.
- For global monitoring, there is a responsible agency for the production of the indicator and for undertaking the related analysis, including the production of country-level data, regional aggregates, related metadata and analysis describing the assessment of progress made globally and by regions. In addition, the agency should provide guidance and/or assistance to countries to strengthen their capacity to produce the indicators.

(4) Understandability

- The indicator is clear and easy to understand for policy makers, the general public and other stakeholders

Important additional criteria for the set of indicators. The performance of indicators can be assessed with respect to each criteria mentioned above. Furthermore, the whole set of indicators should meet the following characteristics:

(1) Coherence

- The indicators should be consistent with and complementary to each other. It will be useful to develop an inter-dependency map to show the information required and the relationship between the indicators.

(2) Be limited in number

- The number of indicators at international level should be minimum and the indicators should be mainly outcome indicators, supplemented by process indicators in the absence of reliable outcome indicators.

Continuity and change. Continuity with the current set of MDG indicators is preferable where the indicators have worked well and are still relevant. Changes are needed when some concepts are no longer sufficient/relevant and new areas are included in the framework.

4. The role of the statistical community in the process of the selection of the goals, targets and indicators for the new development framework

Lack of consultation in the past. The process of selecting the current MDG targets and indicators was perceived by countries primarily as a “top-down” initiative, without

involvement and consultations with a wide range of stakeholders. The absence of the consultation with national statistical systems is one of the main causes of numerous conflicts and inconsistencies between national and international data systems on MDG monitoring.

Open, transparent and inclusive consultation for post-2015. The Secretary-General and Member States recommended an open, transparent and inclusive consultation process to formulate the post-2015 development agenda with early and broad participation by all stakeholders.²

Involvement of the statistical community. Early engagement of the national and international statistical community in the process of formulating the targets and indicators is necessary to ensure that the monitoring is firmly grounded on established principles and sound statistical practices. The authoritative and leadership role played by the global statistical community on technical matters should be acknowledged to ensure that the best options in terms of indicators, related data sources and data compilation are considered. Moreover, an inter-agency and expert group mechanism—as was established for MDG monitoring—is critical for coordination of global monitoring activities of the new post-2015 development goals and targets once they have been set.

Role of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC). The UNSC is the apex entity of the global statistical system and the intergovernmental focal point for the elaboration and the review of the indicators used in the United Nations system as indicated by Resolution A/RES/57/270 B of the General Assembly in 2003. The UNSC has been providing guidance and leadership in monitoring progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals from the outset.

Formation of a Friends of the Chair group³. At its 44th session in 2013, the Commission insisted that the statistical community needs to be adequately involved in the discussion on new development frameworks, in order to advise early on any formulation of targets and indicators. The Commission supported the formation of a Friends of the Chair group to undertake an active dialogue with UN bodies and with the policy sphere to ensure that a robust statistical measurement approach is incorporated, from the outset in the preparation of the post-2015 development agenda. The Friends of the Chair group is also tasked to build a work programme to develop broader measures of progress, in line with the mandate given by Rio+20.

² See 2011 Annual report of the Secretary-General on “Accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals: options for sustained and inclusive growth and issues for advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015” (A/67/257).

³ Decision 44/114 of the Report on the 44th Session of the UNSC (E/2013/24 and E/CN.3/2013/33).

Potential role of the statistical community in the process of the development of the new development framework. The chart below indicates on how and when the statistical community should play its role in the process for goals, targets and indicator selection for the new development agenda.

Figure 1: The role of statistical community in the process for goals, targets and indicator selection

