सत्यमेव जयते

Insee
Mesurer pour comprendre
Direction générale

Dr. T. C. A. Anant and Mr. P. Cuneo
Co chairs of the Friend of the Chair Group
on broader measures of progress

to

Mr. G. Schmidt-Traub
Executive Director
Sustainable Development Solutions Network

March 28, 2014

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment on your proposal for sustainable development indicators. We are writing to you on behalf of the UN Statistical Commission Friends of the Chair Group on broader measures of progress (FOC). This group has been tasked, among other things, to lend its support to ensure that a robust measurement approach is followed in the preparation of the goal, target and indicator framework for the post-2015 development agenda.

The community of official statisticians has been working on the measurement of sustainable development and human well-being for a long time, as indicated in the recent report to the Commission (E/CN.3/2014/4). We would like to highlight the *"Recommendations for measuring sustainable development"* recently adopted by the Conference of European Statisticians as well as the system of sustainable development indicators adopted by the European Union, as inputs to the elaboration of an indicator framework for sustainable development. The Commission itself is the intergovernmental focal point for the elaboration and review of the indicators used in the United Nations system and has been providing guidance and leadership in monitoring progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

As input to the OWG process and specifically concerning the identification of appropriate indicators, the national statistical offices participating in the FOC, in collaboration with many international organizations, have been producing statistical notes on all issues discussed by the OWG. These notes elaborate on measurement issues and the availability of statistics and methodologies for existing or possible indicators in the various areas and hereby inform the discussion of goals, targets and indicators for post-2015. These notes should be considered in the review and further development of your proposal.[1]

We view the concrete indicator proposal of the SDSN as a very useful and timely initiative in the iterative process of arriving to a set of sustainable development indicators for post-2015 monitoring. Some organizations and statistical offices might have provided you with specific feedback or might do so within the available time.

We would like to provide the following general comments which in parts reiterate some of the considerations contained in your proposal:

1) Goals and targets have not been agreed on yet. Eventually, the target selection will shape the selection of indicators which need to satisfy certain quality criteria and at the same time form jointly a coherent, integrated and comprehensive set for the measurement of sustainability.

2) The post-2015 agenda will need to take into account national circumstances, capacities and priorities which will affect the indicator selection; there may be a list of indicators for global monitoring and a list of indicators for national monitoring, and individual countries will only implement sub-sets of those lists;

3) The measurability of indicators will also depend on the prioritization of statistics at national level and on the international support for building the required national capacities – the means of implementation available for statistics;

4) The measurability of development indicators is often different for national and for global monitoring. National monitoring and ownership should form the basis for global monitoring and there should be no difference between both; however, in the case of the MDGs, the absence of data across all countries resulted in many cases in separate global monitoring efforts, frequently relying on estimates for individual countries; in some cases countries may not fully accept these results.

5) Measurability will also depend on the development of adequate statistical concepts, methods of data collection and quality improvements in the areas that are currently not well covered by existing statistics;

[1] See http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broaderprogress/work.html.

6) One very critical consideration and challenge for the indicator selection in the post-2015 development agenda will be the stated need for disaggregation by gender, age, income, location, disability etc. which has not been comprehensively discussed yet;

7) Indicators will have to be established at the beginning of the monitoring process; however, as the experience in the case of the MDGs shows, the relevance of indicators might be changing over time; as a consequence, the monitoring framework should allow for some flexibility over time without, of course, endangering continuity.

8) We fully agree and support your proposal to keep the list of indicators limited as additional indicators will also increase the capacity requirements and costs, potentially making their monitoring infeasible for many or most countries. Already, the proposed number of 100 indicators is much higher than the number of MDG indicators, obviously due to the increased scope of monitoring.

9) We should point out that in the absence of a clear nationally accepted and globally coherent monitoring strategy, achievements of these goals might remain a distant dream.

In order to address these challenges for indicator selection, the FOC will engage in a consultative process with all stakeholders, in particular countries and international organizations. In the meantime, we like to offer an initial assessment of the 100 indicators in terms of measurability from the national and the global monitoring perspective categorizing them as (A) "feasible", (B) "feasible with effort" and (C) "very difficult/not feasible within the available time".

Thirteen countries that are members of the FOC, three regional organisations as well as thirteen international organisations participated in this assessment, often providing detailed comments on some individual indicators.[2] In summary, 27 out of the 100 indicators were assessed as not feasible (rating "C") by the majority of countries (50 per cent or more) that replied. A similar number of indicators were considered as not feasible (rating "C") by three regional and thirteen international organisations that responded. It should also be pointed out that countries did not consider all indicators as relevant for their country and that some indicators were considered as not being subject to national compilation.

We would like to stress that this assessment should be only considered a first response as the time available did not allow a more in-depth assessment. Also, the individual indicators are only assessed in respect to their feasibility, not in respect to their relevance, quality, cost-effectiveness or other criteria (see report of the IAEG-MDG on "Lessons learned from MDG monitoring"). Furthermore, all indicators will need to be evaluated not only individually but also in the context of the goal, target

[2] The following countries and organisations contributed to this assessment: Australia, Botswana, Brazil, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Norway, the Netherlands, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, EC (Eurostat), FAO, ILO, IPU, ITU, OECD (IAEG-MDG), UNAIDS, UNECE-IAEG, UNESCAP, UNESCO, UNFCCC, UNFF, UNIDO, UNOHCHR, WHO, and World Bank (IAEG-MDG).

and indicator framework, to ensure their coherence and comprehensiveness. We are looking forward to receiving the results of your exercise.

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Yours sincerely

Secretary and chief statistician of India

Director of Methodology and
Statistical and International Coordination