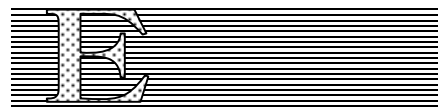UNITED NATIONS
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Millennium Development Goals Monitoring: Challenges and Opportunities for African Countries

Content

1.   **Introduction**

The last few decades have witnessed a significant increase in demand for quality information from African national statistical systems (NSSs). A number of national, subregional, regional and international development initiatives have contributed to this increase in demand for quality statistics, including the monitoring, evaluation and tracking of progress made towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This has put much pressure on already weak and vulnerable NSSs to deliver the required information to monitor development initiatives.

The increase in demand for quality information has not only challenged African NSSs, but also offered them opportunities for the production of the needed information and the development of their systems. In fact, the international process put in place to collect and transfer information for monitoring the MDGs is a commendable initiative and has allowed for cooperation among several stakeholders, including national producers, regional and international organizations and the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) with its global database. The Inter-Agency and Expert Group (IAEG) on MDG Indicators has also played a central role in tracking progress towards achieving the MDGs. It has also allowed many countries to build their capacity for collecting information in many areas related to the MDGs.

Despite this commendable collaboration between countries and international organizations, many challenges still hamper the capacity of African countries to report on progress or lack thereof in reaching the MDGs. These include the lack of data on some indicators, data discrepancies between national and international organizations, methodological issues, capacity- building and statistical coordination within NSSs and between NSSs and international organizations.

This paper presents a number of issues and challenges confronting African NSSs in the delivery of quality statistics for monitoring the MDGs and suggests some potential remedial measures for these challenges. It is organized in six sections, beginning with this introduction. The second section and third sections present the IAEG on MDG Indicators, followed by an overview of the new framework of the MDG indicators, including the new targets and related indicators. The fourth section deals with challenges and potential remedial measures, while the fifth section suggests the potential role of the United Nations regional commissions (RCs) in the MDG monitoring process. The final section concludes the paper.

2.   **The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators**

In order to support the preparation of data needed to report on the MDGs, the international community has established the IAEG on MDG Indicators, a group made up of various United Nations agencies from within the United Nations system and outside, government agencies and other national, subregional, regional and international organizations.

The Group is not only responsible for the preparation of the information required for monitoring the MDGs, but also reviews and defines methodologies and technical issues for the indicators. It also produces guidelines and helps define priorities and strategies to support countries in data collection, analysis and reporting on the MDGs. The Group has provided guidance on the smooth delivery of information from NSSs to international organizations and the UNSD global database.

The IAEG also deals with problems posed by the overall reporting mechanism on the MDGs. Even though it has been recognized that the transfer of information from countries to the UNSD database has strengthened the collaboration between stakeholders involved in MDG monitoring, countries have also raised a number of concerns in this regard. Many of the concerns were summarized in the report of the Friends of the Chair of the United Nations Statistical Commission on the MDG Indicators[1]. The report raised issues related to data comparability, definitions, metadata and data imputation by international organizations. The IAEG has discussed these issues and recommended ways to address them.

3.   Overview of the new framework of MDG indicators

Following a recommendation of the United Nations Secretary-General in September 2006[2] which led to the inclusion of four new targets in the MDG framework, the IAEG led the technical work of selecting the appropriate indicators to measure progress under these new targets. At its meeting held in Paris from 12 to 14 November 2007, a new framework was proposed, including the renumbering of the indicators. The new framework contains eight goals, 21 targets and 58 indicators as compared to eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators for the former framework (see appendix).

The following four new targets were considered:

* Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people;
* Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health;
* Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it;
* Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the loss.

4.   Challenges and potential remedial measures

African countries face numerous challenges in reporting on MDG indicators, including lack of data on some indicators, data discrepancies between national and international organizations, methodological issues, capacity-building and statistical coordination within the NSSs and between NSSs and international organizations.

4.1.   Lack of data on some indicators

Many African countries are lacking data on a number of indicators. Goal 8 (Develop a global partnership for development), in particular, is poorly monitored as a result of lack of information from many African countries. In addition, many countries lack baseline data to be used as reference for tracking progress at the national and subnational levels. This is particularly troubling because baseline information is needed to measure the progress made by a particular country in monitoring the MDGs. Moreover, there is a lack of data for monitoring the MDGs at the subnational level, leaving little room for targeted decision-making by policy makers.

Potential measures aimed at addressing the issue of data gaps should be embedded into a comprehensive capacity-building programme, as exemplified by a resolution of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This resolution calls upon stakeholders (countries, the

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[1] Report of the Friends of the Chair on Millennium Development Goals Indicators, E/CN.3/2006/15.
[2] Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization (2006), A/61/1, paragraph 24.

United Nations System, international organizations, and donors) to intensify their efforts to strengthen national statistical capacities in order to produce reliable and timely statistics and indicators for the monitoring of national development policies and strategies, the implementation of commitments and the achievement of all development goals at the national, regional and international levels.

There is a need to conduct comprehensive assessments of data availability and existing data sources at the international, national and subnational levels. This will serve as the basis for the development of an action plan on MDG data development by countries. The inclusion of MDG indicators in existing surveys and the conduct of surveys for local-level data will help provide data at lower levels of aggregation. Moreover, countries should be encouraged to use administrative records and vital registration systems as important sources of data for many MDG indicators.

It is worth mentioning that data on countries are not often missing but rather unorganized and unreported. The report of the Friends of the Chair of the Statistical Commission mentioned that, on many of the indicators, there are more data in countries than the UNSD database suggests. There is, therefore, a need to better organize country data into accessible databases that could be used by international organizations.

Countries should also consider redesigning or conducting surveys that can provide local-level data and use existing administrative data and small-area estimation techniques to generate subnational data.

4.2.   Discrepancies between national and international data

One of the recurrent concerns raised by countries in criticizing the international monitoring machinery is the difference between country data and those generated by international organizations. These concerns are raised every time regional or international reports on the MDGs are published. In fact, it is often the case that national figures diverge from those presented in international reports. Potential sources of discrepancies include inadequacy of mechanisms for validation with national statistical offices (NSOs) or national agencies, estimates made by international organizations for missing country data, and the lack of documentation and communication on the use of alternative methodologies and assumptions in adjusting or generating the estimates.

The international community could benefit from the strengthening of the role of the United Nations regional commissions (RCs) in the validation of data and resolution of discrepancies. The RCs could serve as bridges and communication links between the IAEG and the countries. They can also explore the appropriate country consultation mechanism to validate country data or reconcile country-generated and internationally estimated data in close collaboration with country stakeholders. Moreover, international agencies could involve the NSOs in their data collection even when the designated counterpart is a line ministry. There should also be transparency in the approaches and methodologies used by international organizations in estimating the figures that are transmitted to the UNSD database. Countries should build the capacity of their NSOs to implement international standards and definitions.

4.3.   Statistical coordination

The lack of statistical coordination among statistical units on the one hand and between data producers and users on the other is contributing seriously to the observed discrepancies between national data and international figures, and to the delays in the transmission of information to the global monitoring system. Generally, the more the national system is developed and coordinated, the fewer the discrepancies between its data and those of international agencies. Coordination is not only important for MDG monitoring, but also for the production of good-quality statistics in general. Countries need to improve coordination within their statistical systems and between national and international agencies, to ensure consistency between national and international data in various areas of statistics, including MDG monitoring[3].

Specialized agencies collect data from different national authorities, but in many countries there are no national focal points for all international data collection, leading to a multiplicity of sources for the same country. In addition, the lack of coordination between international organizations in collating information from countries leads to multiplicity of demand and the stretching of already weak NSSs.

International organizations need to coordinate their efforts in rationalizing and documenting the provision of technical and financial assistance to countries for the development of statistical activities for the MDGs, in order to better manage the limited resources of NSOs and to maximize their absorption capacities.

To alleviate the problem of coordination at country level, countries should be encouraged to build their NSSs and not just the NSOs. In this regard, the design and implementation of national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDSs) should be encouraged and supported, especially using the bottom-up approach. This approach consists in using sectoral strategies as building blocks for the national strategy[4]. In this context, the NSOs shall be linked to other line ministries, not only to supply data, but also to serve as focal points for MDG statistical data compilation, development and coordination and the main source of MDG data for international agencies. Countries should also strive to amend their statistics laws to establish national statistical coordination boards or similar bodies as formal coordination mechanisms or to empower NSOs to coordinate and consult with line ministries on MDG data reporting, and to advise and assist line ministries as appropriate.

4.4.   Methodologies

Many observed problems could be avoided if all countries used a common methodology. This would not only ensure comparability across countries in tracking the MDGs, but also avoid the need for international organizations to impute information or make adjustments to data received from countries.

Countries should work with all stakeholders, including development partners, to establish, expand or strengthen training programmes on concepts, data collection and compilation and analysis of MDG indicators. They also need to involve training centres and

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[3] Ben Kiregyera. Statistics for Managing for Results: Challenges, New Initiatives and Prospects for Improving Statistical Systems in Africa. *African Statistical Journal,* Vol. 5, November 2007.
[4] Manual on integrating sectoral statistical development into national strategies for the development of statistics, AfDB, PARIS21, 2007.

universities in MDG data development so as to use existing statistical techniques and methods to estimate data and to improve the presentation and communication of MDG indicators.

4.5. Resources

There is a problem of sustainability of data production for MDG indicators due to the ad hoc nature of donor-driven surveys and the general lack of resources at the country level to institutionalize these surveys. To address this issue, countries should in the short term make provision for sustainable and well-coordinated technical and financial assistance for the collection, processing, analysis and utilization of MDG data. In the longer term, they should mainstream statistics into their planning and budgeting processes, to ensure that statistics are prioritized and adequately funded from the national budget.

4.6. Capacity

The lack of human resources or statistical capacity to generate, process, package/disseminate MDG indicators to be used by policy makers is another important issue affecting the MDG monitoring process.

Countries should be called upon to provide additional human resources specifically responsible for monitoring the MDGs as well as the necessary training and skills development. This can be done in areas such as the use of standard methodology for tracking the achievement of the MDGs, reconciliation of administrative and survey data, increased analytical capacity of NSOs for monitoring the MDGs, and implementation of international standards and definitions for the production and dissemination of internationally comparable MDG data.

5. Potential role of the United Nations regional commissions

The problem of coordination between national and international MDG statistics has been recognized in many *fora*. This has been deeply analyzed in some RCs with specific studies[5]. Regional commissions can play an active role in reducing these discrepancies because they have closer ties with the countries and better knowledge of national circumstances. This is because they deal with countries that operate in similar environments. They can also serve as a bridge between the MDG international framework and the MDG national framework. They often receive feedback from countries on existing discrepancies and are already very active with national capacity-building programmes. They can therefore play a role in reducing the discrepancy between national and international data by, *inter alia,* continuing to strengthen the capacity of countries to produce and disseminate MDG statistics; continuing to build national statistical systems and reinforcing the coordination role of the NSOs; coordinating and promoting regional dialogue between countries and international organizations; and developing systems for data management and reporting.

6. The Millennium Development Goals Africa Working Group

The United Nations recently established an MDG Africa Working Group in view of the lack of progress by many African countries toward achieving the MDGs. This Group is led by the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General and comprises high-level members. It has established a number of clusters, including one on statistics.

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[5] UNECLAC. MDG Indicators in Latin America and the Caribbean: A comparison between national and international sources of information. IAEG on MDG Indicators, Geneva, November 2006.

The membership of the statistics cluster is made up of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Observatoire économique et statistique d'Afrique sub-sharienne (Afristat), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Bank and the UNSD, with UNECA and the World Bank taking the lead. The objectives of the group are to:

- Support the implementation of the various programmes and initiatives that the global statistical community has already put in place to produce data needed for country development and to monitor the MDGs. In particular, the group will support the implementation of the Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics (MAPS) in Africa, using the Reference Regional Strategic Framework (RRSF) as the implementation strategy;
- Support the integration of statistical development into country development policies and processes, and in donors' strategies;
- Support initiatives to scale up the assistance provided for statistical capacity-building; and
- Facilitate collaboration among technical and financial partners and countries.

The thematic groups will seek the working group's support on the present initiatives to scale up statistical advocacy and assistance in statistical capacity-building and the implementation of NSDSs.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented the challenges facing African countries in their quest to measure the progress or lack thereof made towards the MDGs. It has also presented some remedial measures for the identified issues and challenges. To address the challenges confronting African countries in reporting on the MDGs, several measures have been proposed, including the strengthening of the coordinating role of NSOs, helping countries to design and implement their NSDSs, improving the capacity of countries to better organize their data into accessible databases and to produce data according to agreed definitions and methods.

It is not necessarily true that country data on indicators are missing. Often, they are scattered among different sources, making it difficult to access them and leading to the modeling of country data by different international agencies. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of data availability and sources must be undertaken. Available data need to be better organized and managed, with the building of accessible databases. Where data have to be modeled by the agencies, this should be done in a transparent manner and in consultation with the countries concerned.

Data quality and availability can be enhanced with better coordination among producers, led by the NSOs. Moreover, coordination can also be engendered by designing NSDSs that cover all data users and sectors and that address main data challenges.

Data quality and comparability across countries will also be enhanced through training programmes on concepts, data collection, compilation and analysis of MDG indicators; improved and better-coordinated resourcing of data systems, including mainstreaming statistics into national planning and budgeting processes; and through increased human resources for monitoring the MDGs.

By virtue of their proximity to countries and given the various statistical programmes they are undertaking with countries and regional economic communities, such as regional training and workshops, United Nations RCs can play a big role in improving the quality and comparability of country data and in reducing the discrepancy between national and international data.

Finally, support for statistics in developing countries should be scaled up to improve the capacity to collect, manage, report and use statistics for decision-making and monitoring progress towards the MDGs. The recently established MDG Africa Working Group is expected to add impetus to this scaling-up effort.

Appendix:
Revised MDG monitoring framework, including new targets and indicators, as presented
to the 62nd General Assembly, and new numbering, as recommended by the Inter-Agency
and Expert Group on MDG Indicators at its 12th meeting, 14 November 2007

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)	
Goals and Targets **(from the Millennium Declaration)**	**Indicators for monitoring progress**
Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	
Target 1.A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day	1.1. Proportion of population below $1 (PPP) per day[i] 1.2. Poverty gap ratio 1.3. Share of poorest quintile in national consumption
Target 1.B: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people	1.4. Growth rate of GDP per person employed 1.5. Employment-to-population ratio 1.6. Proportion of employed people living below $1 (PPP) per day 1.7. Proportion of own-account and contributing family workers in total employment
Target 1.C: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger	1.8. Prevalence of underweight children under-five years of age 1.9. Proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption
Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education	
Target 2.A: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling	2.1. Net enrolment ratio in primary education 2.2. Proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach last grade of primary 2.3. Literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds, women and men
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women	
Target 3.A: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015	3.1. Ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education 3.2. Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector 3.3. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality	
Target 4.A: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate	4.1. Under-five mortality rate 4.2. Infant mortality rate 4.3. Proportion of 1 year-old children immunised against measles
Goal 5: Improve maternal health	
Target 5.A: Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio	5.1. Maternal mortality ratio 5.2. Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel
Target 5.B: Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health	5.3. Contraceptive prevalence rate 5.4. Adolescent birth rate 5.5. Antenatal care coverage (at least one visit and at least four visits) 5.6. Unmet need for family planning

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	
Target 6.A: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS	6.1. HIV prevalence among population aged 15-24 years 6.2. Condom use at last high-risk sex 6.3. Proportion of population aged 15-24 years with comprehensive correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS 6.4. Ratio of school attendance of orphans to school attendance of non-orphans aged 10-14 years
Target 6.B: Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it	6.5. Proportion of population with advanced HIV infection with access to antiretroviral drugs
Target 6.C: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases	6.6. Incidence and death rates associated with malaria 6.7. Proportion of children under 5 sleeping under insecticide-treated bednets and proportion of children under 5 with fever who are treated with appropriate anti-malarial drugs

	6.8. Incidence, prevalence and death rates associated with tuberculosis
	6.9. Proportion of tuberculosis cases detected and cured under directly observed treatment short course

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Target 7.A: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources	7.1. Proportion of land area covered by forest 7.2. CO2 emissions, total, per capita and per $1 GDP (PPP), and consumption of ozone-depleting substances 7.3. Proportion of fish stocks within safe biological limits 7.4. Proportion of total water resources used
Target 7.B: Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss	7.5. Proportion of terrestrial and marine areas protected 7.6. Proportion of species threatened with extinction
Target 7.C: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation	7.7. Proportion of population using an improved drinking water source 7.8. Proportion of population using an improved sanitation facility
Target 7.D: By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers	7.9. Proportion of urban population living in slums[ii]

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Target 8.A: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system Includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction – both nationally and internationally Target 8.B: Address the special needs of the least developed countries Includes: tariff and quota free access for the least developed countries' exports; enhanced programme of debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) and cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reduction Target 8.C: Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing States (through the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly) Target 8.D: Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term	*Some of the indicators listed below are monitored separately for the least developed countries (LDCs), Africa, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States.* Official development assistance (ODA) 8.1. Net ODA, total and to the least developed countries, as percentage of OECD/DAC donors' gross national income 8.2. Proportion of total bilateral, sector-allocable ODA of OECD/DAC donors to basic social services (basic education, primary health care, nutrition, safe water and sanitation) 8.3. Proportion of bilateral official development assistance of OECD/DAC donors that is untied 8.4. ODA received in landlocked developing countries as a proportion of their gross national incomes 8.5. ODA received in small island developing States as a proportion of their gross national incomes Market access 8.6. Proportion of total developed country imports (by value and excluding arms) from developing countries and least developed countries, admitted free of duty 8.7. Average tariffs imposed by developed countries on agricultural products and textiles and clothing from developing countries 8.8. Agricultural support estimate for OECD countries as a percentage of their gross domestic product 8.9. Proportion of ODA provided to help build trade capacity Debt sustainability 8.10. Total number of countries that have reached their HIPC decision points and number that have reached their HIPC completion points (cumulative) 8.11. Debt relief committed under HIPC and MDRI Initiatives 8.12. Debt service as a percentage of exports of goods and services
Target 8.E: In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries	8.13. Proportion of population with access to affordable essential drugs on a sustainable basis
Target 8.F: In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications	8.14. Telephone lines per 100 population 8.15. Cellular subscribers per 100 population 8.16. Internet users per 100 population

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[i] For monitoring country poverty trends, indicators based on national poverty lines should be used, where available.
[ii] The actual proportion of people living in slums is measured by a proxy, represented by the urban population living in households with at least one of the four characteristics: (a) lack of access to improved water supply; (b) lack of access to improved sanitation; (c) overcrowding (three or more persons per room); and (d) dwellings made of non-durable material.