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**Toward the Improvement of MDG Reporting:
A Regional Perspective**

**United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
African Centre for Statistics**

Toward the Improvement of MDG Reporting: A Regional Perspective

The African Centre for Statistics

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Acronyms

ACBF	African Capacity Building Foundation
ACS	African Centre for Statistics
AfDB	African Development Bank
ASCC	African Statistical Coordination Committee
AUC	African Union Commission
CoM	Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
FASDEV	Forum on African Statistical Development
IAEG	Inter Agency and Expert Group
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NSS	National Statistical System
NSDS	National Strategy for the Development of Statistics
NSO	National Statistical Office
PARIS-21	Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21 st Century
RRSF	Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity Building in Africa
SADC	Southern African Development Community
STPA	Statistical Training Programme for Africa
StatCom-Africa	Statistical Commission for Africa
ToRs	Terms of Reference
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNSD	United Nations Statistics Division
WG	Working Group

1. Introduction

The Millennium Declaration has contributed to the observed increase in the demand for quality information in many countries across the world. In Africa, the monitoring, evaluation, and tracking of progress or lack thereof towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has not only put a lot of pressure on already weak and vulnerable national statistical systems (NSSs), but has also provided them with the opportunity to develop their capacity to deliver the required information to monitor development initiatives in general.

The international process put in place to collect and transfer information aimed at monitoring the MDGs is a commendable initiative as it allows for cooperation between several stakeholders from national producers, via regional and international organizations, to the global database based at the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD). In this regard, the Inter Agency and Expert Group (IAEG) on the MDG Indicators plays a central role in the smooth functioning of the process of tracking progress towards the MDGs.

Despite this commendable collaboration between countries and international organizations, many challenges still hamper the capacity of countries to report on progress or lack thereof toward the MDGs. These include - but are not limited to - lack of data on some indicators, data discrepancies between national and international organizations, methodological issues, capacity building, and statistical coordination within NSSs and between those systems and international organizations.

In its quest to address challenges related to monitoring the MDGs, the IAEG on MDG Indicators, during its 12th meeting held in Paris on 14 November 2007, noted that one of the first challenges in building a reporting mechanism on MDGs has been met: coordination among international agencies and full use of available data at the international level. However, it was recognized that strengthening of this mechanism was necessary and that its sustainability was hampered by many challenges, including the existence of discrepancies between national and international estimates. The IAEG therefore recommended that the United Nations regional commissions should review the issue of discrepancies between national and international estimates, in close collaboration with UNSD. Accordingly, the African Centre for Statistics (ACS) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) undertook a study as a regional contribution to the report to be presented by all regional commissions to the October 2008 meeting of the IAEG on MDG Indicators.

This report builds upon two major activities, namely a workshop and two case studies in African countries. The first activity consisted of a *Workshop on Coordination of Reporting Mechanisms and Data Discrepancies in MDG Monitoring* held in Kampala, Uganda, from 5 to 8 May 2008 and organized by UNSD, ACS and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) secretariat. The workshop was meant to identify potential sources of discrepancies between national and international data sources in MDG monitoring and to explore ways to reconcile them. In addition to SADC member States (14 countries), it was also attended by representatives from other African countries, including Cameroon, Ghana and Uganda and international organizations, including the World Bank, The United Nations Children's Fund

(UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

The second activity consisted of an in-depth review of data availability for each MDG indicator at the national level compared with the information available in the global MDG database, identification of potential sources of discrepancy between the two sources, and proposal of potential remedial measures for reconciliation of national and international data on MDGs. This was done in two countries: Ethiopia and Uganda.

In general, the following major sources of discrepancy between national and international sources were identified: definitional problems, methodological issues, lack of recent data at international level, lack of coordination at national level, difference between the population estimates used at the international level and those used in national statistics offices (NSOs), lack of transparency in the estimation and modelling procedures of international organizations, delay in publishing results by NSOs, and lack of coordination within and among international agencies.

Presented below are the main findings of the two activities with respect to addressing data discrepancies between national and international sources and the proposed remedial measures.

2. Discrepancy between national and international data

2.1 Discrepancies

It is worth mentioning that data discrepancies occur in many African countries in almost the same set of MDG indicators (2.3, 3.1, 4.1-4.3, 5.1, 6.1, 6.2, 8.14, 8.16); 4 of these (2.3, 5.1, 6.1, and 6.2) having their roots mainly in model-based estimates¹. These discrepancies between national and international data sources might emerge from a number of factors, including the following:

Definitional and specification problems

A number of indicators can be variously interpreted namely in indicators 3.2, 5.2, 6.3, 6.5, 6.8, 7.8, 7.9 and 8.13. For example, “*improved drinking water*” in indicator 7.8 may lead to subjective interpretation and availability may vary significantly over seasons. The same holds for indicator 7.9, which contains the phrase “*improved sanitation facility*”. One has to be clear on the definitions so that the terms do not give rise to different interpretations in the various countries. These two indicators are among those showing discrepancies with UNSD data.

Inadequacy of estimates from sample surveys

Some survey estimates may not be accurate enough to serve a useful purpose for international comparisons or for monitoring progress in MDG implementation. Many non-

¹ See E/CN.3/2008/29: Report of the Secretary-General on the Indicators for Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals.

statisticians are often tempted to simply grab survey estimates and use them without a critical examination of the scientific soundness of the data collection and processing; still fewer may ever look at the relative errors of estimates. For example, in Ethiopia's Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2005, estimates for "*HIV prevalence ratio*" and "*condom use at last high-risk sex*" had relative errors which were larger than 11 per cent, and such errors suggested that the estimates had to be used with considerable caution. Indeed, survey estimates may be far from useful for comparison, for various reasons, including large sampling and non-sampling errors, lack of comparability of methodology over time, poor coverage and changes in study populations.

Inadequacy of coverage

MDG indicators can have more credible estimates from sample surveys or from administrative records only when the former are well designed and implemented, and the latter ensure full coverage and good quality. Unfortunately, good sample surveys or records are often too expensive for most countries in developing regions. In fact, some areas are inaccessible and sizable populations are nomadic, as in Ethiopia. Hence, there is a tendency for national and international agencies to resort to short cuts to fill data gaps, making adjustments for under-coverage that may not correct the problem. This practice appears to be common in the absence of suitable sample surveys, or a credible vital registration system, or other reliable alternatives. Further, since surveys are done every 3 to 5 years, there may be a strong tendency, both in-country, in United Nations agencies and in other international organizations, to resort to expert opinion or the available administrative statistics or international sources to arrive at national and/or sub-national estimates. When this happens, the nature of the study population may change significantly and the estimation methodology may also be suspicious. When estimates are so derived, they may then be inaccurate, and far from credible.

The reference year

The reference period for administrative statistics is often the financial year, and adjustments may then have to be made to get estimates for a calendar year. Such adjustments may introduce errors.

Model-based estimates

Model-based estimates are reported to be common for several indicators in Goals 1, 5, 6 and 7. These estimates are derived (*See E/CN.3/2008/29*) by a number of UN agencies for several indicators, and their estimates are invariably used in important decision-making. The relevance of the models to developing regions and the quality of the inputs for the models are always of some concern.

Differences in methodology

It is also possible for study populations and questionnaires used in one survey to be different from those in another, and the survey design, including the estimation technique, may also change over time for various valid reasons. In addition, the nature of parameters may also

change over time, and that is also evidenced in the MDG indicators revised since 2007. Hence, discrepancies may arise over time both within country and between estimates of international agencies that may also find it proper to change their methods and data-processing procedures over time. Such practices may breed discrepancies. For example, a discrepancy is likely to arise as a result of the perception of “primary” and “secondary” education in Goal 2 and in indicator 3.1. In official publications by the Ministries of Education, “primary” is understood differently from that of being grades 1 to 5; Uganda’s “Primary” is from P1 to P7, and that of Ethiopia goes from Grade 1 to Grade 8.

Differences in population estimates

Several MDG indicators require the use of population estimates for inter-census periods, and these are invariably made using various assumptions about population growth based on further assumptions regarding trends in birth rate, death rate and net migration. UN agencies often use such estimates made either by the United Nations Population Division or by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). In the absence of data from civil registration, such assumptions may be too strong. On the other hand, institutions within a country often use estimates established by the NSOs. Hence, different sets of assumptions are bound to lead to discrepancies between in-country estimates and those in the UNSD database, in terms of those MDG parameters that make use of inter-census population estimates.

2.2 Data gaps

If data had been reported and recorded in the UNSD database for the 48 indicators (out of the current set of 60), excluding 12 on global partnership in Goal 8, then there would have been 384 data-points in all for the period 2000-2007. However, it turns out that only 24 per cent and 32 per cent of these are available in the UNSD database, and 36 per cent and 34 per cent have been collected from official government reports during this study in Ethiopia and Uganda respectively. The latter percentage can only be the lowest possible since there other sources may exist that have not been accessed during the study mission in the two countries. In addition, those in the UNSD database are likely to include model-based estimates. It clearly appeared in the discussions from the workshop as well during the in-depth review of the two countries that the UNSD database does not have all the data available at national level.

While several factors might contribute to the observed data gaps, special attention will be paid to the following as far the African region is concerned:

Frequency of the updates

A close examination of the two country cases shows that only 30 indicators have been updated in the UNSD database up to April 2008. Of these, 28 were updated in August 2007 or earlier, and only two were updated early in 2008. Further, out of the 30 indicators updated so far, only four have data for 2006, and the rest have data for years before 2006.

Adjustments in the MDG framework

The ages of the indicators may have also been a factor in the data gaps. Out of the 60 indicators in use today since early 2007, excluding 12 indicators that deal with global partnership in Goal 8, there are 15 new indicators, 13 modified since 2007, and only 20 that have been around since before 2007. Hence, one cannot expect much for the 28 indicators which are either new or modified since 2007.

National priorities

There may have been lack of in-country capacity to collect data on account of cost, and some indicators such as CO₂ emission and ozone depletion in Goal 7 may not be quite in line with the national priorities of many African countries.

Periodicity of sample surveys

Several indicators are dependent on sample surveys and such surveys are carried out only every 3 to 5 years. Thus, inter-survey and inter-census periods tend to lead to data gaps; such problems are observed in the data from Ethiopia and Uganda as well as in many African countries.

3. Proposed potential remedial measures

The proposed remedies are grouped under the principal stakeholders: (a) IAEG, (b) Governments, (c) NSOs and the NSS, (d) United Nations agencies excluding ECA, and (e) ECA and emerged from the discussions held with stakeholders during preparation of the case studies as well as at the workshop.

Inter Agency and Expert Group

At present, there are 60 indicators and some require further review. Data on MDG indicators will be consistent and accurate only if they are explicitly defined to ensure there is a common global understanding of what exactly they are designed to do. In addition, some indicators, especially those under Goal 7, need to be re-examined against the priorities of developing countries in close collaboration with experts from developing countries. In general, it is not useful to keep indicators that have not been useful in tracking progress in achieving the MDGs.

Governments

African governments are clearly committed to the improvement of their respective statistical services. Some governments have gone a long way, enacting suitable statistical acts, and ensuring the effectiveness of the NSOs through generous organizational and institutional support. Others, on the other hand, need assistance to develop a stronger legal framework in line with the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDSs), which are under preparation in accordance with the principles developed by PARIS-21.

National Statistical Offices and Systems

Given an appropriate legal framework that empowers them to operate independently and effectively under a competent and professional policy board, NSOs should be strong enough to coordinate and harmonize the nation's statistical activities, and ensure the production of useful, usable and timely data for all stakeholders, including United Nations agencies. Such data may be conveniently shared by all stakeholders if an MDG database is created and managed for that purpose by each NSO. The effective organization and utilization of legally constituted Producer-Producer and Producer-User Committees would enhance data quality, and facilitate data production and dissemination. NSOs also have the responsibility to coordinate their activities and harmonize their methods and procedures with those used by the international community. Such steps help to ensure elimination of conflicting and discrepant data and facilitate timely data transfer to stakeholders.

United Nations agencies

They have made significant contributions to the development of statistics in their respective areas of responsibility. For example, UNESCO has been instrumental in the progress achieved with educational statistics; UNICEF has been a driving force in the creation of *DevInfo* and shows strong and continued interest in establishment of credible vital registration systems. However, there is still room for more cooperation and collaboration. The recommended inputs from United Nations agencies towards improvements in the UNSD MDG database can be classified as short term and long term.

In the short term, these agencies may need to re-examine their respective data needs in relation to MDG indicators, review their experiences of credible data availability over the last 17 years and come up with realistic data collection goals and strategies for discussion and joint action with NSOs in developing countries. They can also work more closely with NSOs on the methods and procedures they use for imputations and estimates, including those used to make model-based estimates, so as to ensure that the estimates are also useful and agreeable to member governments. This is one way of removing discrepancies between estimates on MDG indicators. However, periodic data collection and modelling by United Nations agencies cannot be a lasting solution to the problems of data gaps in developing countries, and they are very unlikely to have a useful role in tracking progress in the implementation of MDGs.

In the long term, United Nations agencies can be actively involved in capacity-building of the NSOs, ministries and agencies that have significant responsibility in implementing the MDGs. These include Ministries of Finance, Ministries of Health and Ministries of Education and Sports, in addition to the NSOs. Such capacity-building must also include creation and maintenance of a suitably structured database in each country, to serve UNSD and other stakeholders. Such a database must be freely accessible to all stakeholders, as with the UNSD database.

These agencies can also assist with establishment of an effective *Vital Registration System*, which can make significant contributions to the production of well informed and credible population estimates, for use with many MDG indicators during inter-survey and inter-census

periods. The existing local government frameworks in a number of African countries are such that its realization should not be a problem.

An equally important area for assistance is in the area of human resources development, by facilitating establishment of statistical training centres within NSOs, to ensure that the NSOs and the entire NSS will continue to have well-trained staff able to carry out NSS activities efficiently.

Economic Commission for Africa

ECA can look into capacity-building needs in statistical methods in NSOs and assist in developing efficient and modern systems for administrative statistics, to feed both national databanks in each member country and a regional databank at UNECA/ACS that will be easily accessible to member countries, divisions of UNECA, other United Nations agencies and departments, and to various international researchers. UNECA/ACS has convening power to bring Heads of NSOs together to: screen out purposeful and useful MDG indicators for Africa; define them meaningfully in the African context to ensure regional and global comparability; discuss the problem of data gaps and discrepancies; set a timetable to bring about effective solutions; agree on a mechanism and timetable for data transfer from NSOs to a database management address in UNECA/ACS responsible for preparation and management of the UNECA MDG database; and to discuss and chart a capacity-building programme for NSOs in relation to the MDGs, in close consultation and collaboration with United Nations agencies and other development partners.

UNECA/ACS can also create a forum for Heads of NSOs to discuss the issue of establishing Vital Registration Systems, to serve as a catalyst for preparation and launch of projects for funding by relevant agencies and other development partners, to agree on formats, contents, and frequency of periodic reports on vital statistics to UNECA/ACS, and to agree on mechanisms for following up implementation of collective decisions.

4. Opportunities at regional level

At the regional level, existing initiatives can offer benefits to the activities and programmes aimed at enhancing member-country capacity to produce and disseminate improved, accurate and comparable data on MDG indicators, and at reducing data discrepancies between national and international data:

The Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity Building in Africa (RRSF)

To overcome the shortcomings of past efforts aimed at enhancing statistical capacity in Africa, the major sponsors of the Forum on African Statistical Development (FASDEV) namely the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), and the World Bank, agreed to launch the production of the RRSF under the leadership of the UNECA, expected to create synergies, avoid duplication of effort and lead to sustainable capacity for statistical development in Africa.

The RRSF is a broad framework rather than a specific set of activities and policy prescriptions, recognizing that most actions will need to take place at the national level, and that countries face different problems and have different priorities. The RRSF, the overall objective of which is to strengthen NSSs, is built around three themes: meeting user needs; improving management of statistical systems and ensuring the sustainability and irreversibility of statistical development. The NSDS is the backbone of the RRSF at the national level.

Following the meeting of the representatives of AfDB, ECA, the African Union Commission (AUC), and the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) held in Tunis, Tunisia, from 23 to 25 September 2007 to discuss coordination of statistical capacity-building work in Africa, it was decided that an African Statistical Coordination Committee (ASCC) be established with the objective of leading coordination of statistical activities in Africa within the RRSF framework.

The production of improved, accurate and comparable MDG indicators would benefit a great deal from the activities under the RRSF. In fact, a well-designed NSDS includes coordination of statistical activities, up-to-date legal frameworks, legally constituted Producer-Producer and Producer-User Committees, among others, as key elements for enhancing data quality, facilitating data production and dissemination, and reducing discrepancies between national and international MDGs data sources.

The Statistical Commission for Africa

Following the re-establishment of the Statistics Division at ECA, it was imperative that a new subsidiary body specifically devoted to statistics and statistical development should be put in place on the continent. The last Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (CoM) held in Addis Ababa from 2 to 3 April 2007 endorsed creation of this subsidiary body in charge of statistics- the Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa). The latter has been established as the apex entity in statistical development on the continent. It provides a forum for discussions and decisions on all aspects of statistical development that are of interest to its members, acting within the framework of the policies and procedures of the United Nations and subject to general CoM supervision.

During its first meeting, StatCom-Africa set up a number of working groups according to priority needs in statistical development on the continent, including one on MDG monitoring. The main objective of the group is to support StatCom-Africa in its quest to address the challenges facing African countries on MDGs monitoring.

The MDG Africa Working Group

There has been much concern about the capacity of Africa as a region to reach the MDGs by 2015. Taking cognizance of this, leaders of multilateral development organizations convened in September 2007 in what was known as the “*MDG Africa Steering Group*”, to identify the practical steps needed to achieve the MDGs and other internationally agreed development goals in Africa. To achieve its objectives, the Steering Group has been supported by the MDG Africa Working Group, which is chaired by the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General and

comprises representatives of the United Nations System and other major multilateral organizations. The Working Group met for the first time on 20 September 2007 and frequently thereafter. In conjunction with the Steering Group, it has identified a set of key recommendations and initiatives that, if implemented, would support African countries in achieving the MDGs.

The MDG Africa Working Group has established 7 technical thematic groups to inform the work of the Steering Group. One of the thematic groups deals with statistics and is led by ECA and the World Bank and comprises AfDB, OECD/DAC, United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The objectives of the Statistics Cluster of the MDG Africa Working Group include:

- Assist countries to build statistical capacity on a sustainable and scaled-up basis within the RRSF to collect, manage and use statistics for evidence-based policy and decision-making and tracking progress made towards the achievement of development goals including the MDGs;
- Accelerate the design and implementation of the NSDSs, ensuring that they cover all sectors and are mainstreamed into national policy, development and budget processes; and
- Strengthen data systems, to increase the quantity and quality of development statistics and their use to: manage for results in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the MDGs, set targets and monitor outcomes, design development policies, make evidence-based decisions about allocation and management of scarce resources, and enable the private sector and general public to make informed choices.

5. Most important accomplishments

ECA, in collaboration with UNSD, has undertaken a number of activities aimed at strengthening statistical capacity-building of African countries to produce quality information on MDGs. This was successfully accomplished with the countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) during the 2004-2006 period. Building on this successful experience, the exercise is being repeated within SADC, covering the 2006-2009 period.

The overall goal of the projects is to strengthen NSSs within SADC, to enable member countries to meet their statistical needs and to improve the availability and quality of data required for MDGs monitoring. It also aims to promote inter-Africa cooperation in the field of statistics and to establish a platform for communication and data exchange. The substantive focus of the programme lies in the areas of development, production and analysis of development indicators including the MDG indicators; methods of data collection: censuses, vital statistics systems, household surveys and how these impact on the final monitoring capacity of countries; organization of integrated statistical systems and user-producer relations; and use of information and communication technology (ICT). Advisory services and a series of subregional events including expert groups and training workshops constitute the core activities of the project.

The project's achievements include: noticeable improvement in the capacity of NSOs to provide reliable data for economic and social policy formulation and management to national and international users in a timely manner, and in particular, to develop and disseminate data for national and international progress reports on the MDGs; improved organization of the statistical systems and user-producers relations; strengthened communication and coordination among countries and between the NSOs and regional cooperation in the area of statistics; upgraded ICT to promote networking among statistical offices in the region; and enhanced and strengthened linkages and synergies among subregional institutes in Africa such as SADC and ECOWAS.

6. Next steps

In terms of strategy and programme for regional-global statistical conciliation on MDGs, ECA in collaboration with regional partners, has set up a number of initiatives that form a framework for future work in this regard. These include the Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA), the StatCom-Africa Working Group on Development Indicators, and the Joint Regional Publications and Databases Working Group of the ASCC.

The Statistical Training Programme for Africa

Recognizing the criticality of statistical training for the production of quality statistics, a working group led by ECA/ACBF was set up to propose a strategic programme on human resources and training in statistics. Building on the proposal presented to the last coordination meeting, ACS is finalizing a draft of the detailed proposal for the STPA. The key elements of the programme are: support to Regional Statistical Training Centres, establishment/support for In-Service Training Centres as recommended by the RRSF and the Induction-Tutorage-Mentoring Facility. This programme can be used to strengthen the capacity of African countries in their quest to produce and disseminate quality statistics for MDGs monitoring.

The StatCom-Africa Working Group on MDG Indicators

During StatCom-Africa I, participants agreed that there was a need to set up a working group (WG) on development indicators. The rationale behind this was that many challenges were hampering the capacity of African countries to report on progress or lack of progress in reaching the MDGs. The main objective of the group has been to support StatCom-Africa in its quest to address challenges facing African countries on MDGs monitoring.

The WG agreed on a number of deliverables for 2008 including development of detailed terms of reference (ToRs) by the end of March 2008, one annual meeting of the group, support some members to attend the IAEG on MDG Indicators and any other international MDG meeting, and setting up an online discussion forum by August 2008 to involve members in active discussions. Many of the recommendations emanating from this report will be implemented through the work of this group.

The Joint Regional Publications and Databases Working Group of the ASCC

In order to minimize duplication of effort and dissemination of conflicting data on African countries, it was agreed that a working group on databases and joint statistical publications led by AfDB/ECA be set up to harmonize regional statistical databases and publications. The WG envisages development of a regional database including a MDGs component. It would also help African countries to develop national databases that feed the regional one.