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Update on the work by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on MDG indicators

**Complement to the *Secretary General's Report on
Development Indicators (E/CN.3/2006/14)***

Prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division

Introduction

The present document is a complement to the *Secretary-General's Report on Development Indicators* (E/CN.3/2006/14) and describes recent work undertaken by the Inter-agency and Expert Group (IAEG) on MDG Indicators to improve the compilation and presentation of MDG indicators and related metadata. This report also outlines the work plan for this year's activities of IAEG.

1. Improving mechanisms of communication and reporting from countries to the international statistical system

The review of the assessment of country capacity to produce MDG indicators by National Statistical Offices has revealed discrepancies between data available at the national level and those reported by international agencies for international data compilation and comparison.

Shortcomings and ways to improve communication and reporting of national data from national statistical authorities to international agencies were reviewed at the latest meeting of IAEG and at workshops with national statistical offices in order to identify ways to improve reporting mechanisms.

The Inter-agency and Expert Group Meeting held in Rome in October 2005, attended by 14 representatives of national statistical offices, and the workshop with all 15 national statistical offices from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region, held in Cape Verde in December 2005, produced useful recommendations and set the directions for future work by IAEG.

National representatives identified the need to improve the use of national official statistics in international sources and reduce discrepancies between data used and published at the national and international levels. In particular, they agreed that the time-lag between the production and presentation of data at the country level and the reporting to the international statistical system should be reduced.

The main problems identified in relation to the reporting to international agencies are mainly linked to the lack of coordination: (i) among various statistical agencies within countries (administrative data from line ministries and national statistical offices); and (ii) between national statistical agencies and country offices of international agencies.

Some ways to improve the reporting mechanism from countries to agencies were identified as follows: (a) periodic consultations between NSOs and other data producers at the national level; (b) data dissemination training for National Statistical Offices (NSOs); (c) the establishment of a national focal point to facilitate the dissemination process of MDG indicator data.

Also, as agreed at the 8th meeting of IAEG in October 2005, all partner agencies have provided - by the agreed deadline - a full description of:

- the mechanisms they have in place to gather data from national statistical authorities,
- their methods to achieve comparability across countries,
- their methods of imputation to fill in data gaps, and

- their modalities of consultation with national statistical authorities to verify the validity of their estimates and to obtain countries' approval for their use.

This is seen as the first step in a process to address concerns in relation to the production and use of international data sources to monitor development trends. Further work will be done by IAEG, including international agencies and national statistical offices, to identify ways to improve data reporting from countries and reduce discrepancies between national and international sources.

It is also important to note that the use at national level of internationally recommended standards and guidelines would simplify the task of “adjusting/standardizing” country level data by international agencies for inter-country comparability. It would probably also reduce the reporting time of official statistics from countries to the international statistical community.

2. Improving metadata supporting the MDG database

Following the discussion and agreement at the IAEG meeting of October 2005, UNSD has been working to redesign the MDG indicators website and database, in consultation with a committee formed within IAEG and composed of UNSD, the World Bank, ESCAP, ILO and the National Statistical Office of Mexico. A prototype has already been developed for final review by IAEG.

The approach of the new website is to optimize accessibility to its main product: data on the MDG Indicators. The website combines an innovative data search engine and a user-friendly, flexible web-based interface to empower the user to easily find and preview the data before choosing to download it.

The new structure of the database is intended to satisfy the requirement for improved access to definitions and sources of indicators, full transparency about the type of data presented - whether they originate from national sources, are adjusted for international comparability, or are modelled estimates - and improved systems of data retrieval.

A complete revision of the metadata presented in the database is in progress. All specialized agencies have provided additional information on the methodology used for their estimates. This information, together with other relevant metadata, will be easily accessible in the new website. In addition, each figure (cell) presented in the database will be accompanied by a code specifying the nature of its data source (“C” for country data, “CM” for country data modified by the designated international agency and “E” for international agency estimates).

Also, a complete revision of the current version of the Handbook on MDG Indicators has been agreed at the IAEG meeting in October 2005. The committee formed with the purpose of overseeing the drafting and production of the manual met in January 2006 and will present its recommendations and proposed work plan and budget to IAEG in March 2006.

3. Work of peer-review groups and expert groups on indicators and measurement issues

Most of the MDG indicators are under the “supervision” of peer review groups. These groups, composed of experts from national and international statistical systems, have the

major tasks of periodically reviewing selected indicators in terms of availability and periodicity of data, interpretation of trends over time and relevance/validity of sources, concepts and definitions. These groups also coordinate and harmonize estimates used for the regional and global monitoring of MDGs.

The major peer review groups are the following:

- (a) The Malaria Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (MERG)
- (b) The WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply and Sanitation
- (c) The Child Health Epidemiological Reference Group (CHERG)
- (d) The HIV/AIDS MERG
- (e) The Coordinating Group on Mortality Estimation
- (f) The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) Monitor and Evaluation Task Force
- (g) The Child Survival Countdown Effort
- (h) The Maternal and Newborn Health MERG
- (i) The “Ending Child Hunger” Strategic Information Task Force

In addition, recently, a peer review group has been established to assess and validate the methodology for the production of the indicator on “population living in slums”. The group will hold the first meeting to review the assessment prepared by the experts, on 5-6 April 2006 in New York.

The six thematic sub-groups of the Inter-agency and Expert Group have also the mandate of looking at methodological issues related to indicators under the following areas: poverty and hunger, gender, employment, environment, education and slums. More specifically, the members of sub-groups review methods, standards and available data for the agreed indicators and review and analyse trends for each of the quantifiable goals and targets.

4. IAEG work plan for 2006

The 9th meeting of the Inter-agency and expert Group on MDG indicators will be held in Washington DC from 27 to 29 March 2006. The meeting will cover the following issues: (a) the Secretary General’s report for 2006 and other 2006 reporting outputs; (b) update on the framework for the global monitoring of MDGs in 2006; (c) the revision of the handbook on MDG metadata; (d) the revision of the UNSD MDG indicators database and website and contributions from international agencies; and (e) update on data availability by data providers and related analysis (storylines). The meeting will also address ways to facilitate the coordination of technical assistance activities; and how to strengthen the link between the global and national monitoring.

The 10th meeting of the Inter-agency and expert Group on MDG indicators will be held in the fall of 2006, date and venue to be decided.