

AFRICA STATISTICS DAY

18 November 2003

Monitoring progress in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals: the challenge for statistics

Every year since 1993, the statistical community in Africa has celebrated Africa Statistics Day on 18 November. As before, the main goal of this commemoration is to promote awareness among political decision-makers, the private sector, civil society and the general public concerning the fundamental role of statistics in the formulation of economic and social development policies, their implementation strategies and their monitoring and assessment.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) summarize the political consensus on the conclusions and recommendations agreed on at global conferences and summits held during the 1990s on world economic and social development. They were reaffirmed at the September 2000 Millennium Summit and endorsed in the frame of reference of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Lastly, they provide quantitative and qualitative support for the elaboration of poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs).

The eight MDGs are a coherent set of priority objectives and quantified targets, each having a deadline (mostly 2015), and monitoring tools based on 48 indicators and 18 targets relating to various aspects of human development. They are formulated as follows:

1. Reduce extreme poverty and hunger in the world
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Intensify the fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other major endemic diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership to support development.

The monitoring of the MDGs is conducted at the country level by the public authorities of the various countries; at the regional level, by United Nations regional commissions; and at the global level, by the United Nations Development Group. An overall picture is provided by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in his report on the implementation of the goals contained in the Millennium Declaration.

The timely availability of relevant, quality statistical data, together with good management of the means of production and dissemination of derived indicators, are indispensable for successful monitoring of progress in the implementation of the MDGs. It is therefore essential to strengthen countries' statistical capacities and establish an infrastructure for quantitative analysis, monitoring and assessment of the impact of policies adopted to help the poor and the most vulnerable groups.

The importance of the theme chosen for this year's Africa Statistics Day is mainly based on two issues. The first of these is the relevance of the MDGs in relation to the socio-economic situation prevalent in Africa. According to statistics published recently by international organizations, 38 of the world's 63 poorest nations are in Africa, and 47 per cent of the continent's population live below the absolute poverty threshold of one United States dollar a day. Of the 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the world, 30 million, or more than 71 per cent, are in Africa; and the same sources forecast that by 2020, the number of AIDS deaths will total 68 million, of which 55 million, or 81 per cent, will be in Africa.

The second issue underpinning the relevance of the theme is related to the weaknesses and deficiencies in national statistical systems. The findings reached in the assessment of the implementation of the Addis Ababa Plan of Action (AAPA) for Statistical Development in the 1990s stigmatize the growing delays in statistical development in most African countries, as well as the perverse effects which even extend to traditional, routine productions, although significant progress has been achieved in some places.

It is here that we see the challenge facing the African statistical community in seeking solutions which will enable it to respond appropriately to the pressing, sustained and durable demand for data and indicators entailed by the follow-up to the MDGs. The following are some of the many issues to be faced by the statistical community in Africa in monitoring progress towards the realization of the MDGs.

In today's socio-economic environment, characterized by globalization and the advent of the new economy and of information and communication technologies, the first condition for the efficiency and sustainability of any statistical activity is to define a clear vision of the role of statistics in decision-making and the strengthening of anticipation capacities. This is necessary, indispensable even, for the strategic processing of new demands for statistical data and information. The member States of the Economic Commission for Africa must therefore establish strategic frameworks and plans for the development of statistical infrastructures which will be sufficiently robust, stable and independent to respond to this challenge.

The primary statistical function to be fulfilled in this framework will be the production of reliable, relevant and timely data for the formulation and monitoring of policies in the interests of the poor and the most vulnerable groups. It will facilitate decision-making, the coordination of available resources and the detection of financial and institutional obstacles.

Harmonizing the MDGs with national realities and priorities is another component of the challenge facing the statistical community in relation to the monitoring of the MDGs. The latter are not uniform goals and targets appropriate for the situations of all countries; they are recommendations and suggestions. The global objectives should therefore be translated into intermediate goals corresponding to each country's development situation and priorities. Statisticians are important actors in this task of disaggregation, quantification and adaptation.

It is therefore vital that indicators relating to the MDGs should be based on development strategies adopted as part of national development plans, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) for those countries which have them, and national human development reports. This also entails strengthening capacities for the processing of microdata and for statistical disaggregation, particularly in relation to gender.

Being based on a worldwide view, the MDGs present problems in relation to data comparability for trend analysis and to aggregation at the subregional, regional and global levels. These activities can be conducted only in a normalized, harmonized and standardized statistical environment. This entails the need for African statistical services to (i) take an active part in international statistical programmes such as the International Comparison Programme (ICP), the 2000 World Population and Housing Census Programme (1995-2004), the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) programme, the General Data Dissemination System (GDDS), and (ii) apply internationally adopted reference frameworks and systems such as the basic principles of official statistics, international economic and social classifications, the System of National Accounts 1993 (SNA 1993), and Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) standards.

Lastly, without attempting to be exhaustive, we might mention the need for African statisticians and their partners to work in close cooperation, maintaining and reactivating collaborative structures among statisticians established at the subregional and regional levels, such as the Committee on Development Information (CODI) and the Advisory Board on Statistics in Africa (ABSA).

We hope this year's Africa Statistics Day will once again help to promote awareness among public and private authorities and civil society so that increased efforts will be made for the development of statistics in Africa. The monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals must be included among the priorities of the statistical community, together with the preparation and timely dissemination of sufficiently documented, quality data for the preparation of national reports.

The Economic Commission for Africa wishes every success to the ceremonies marking Africa Statistics Day 2003.
