Background note and template

Second GMG retreat on indicators on migration for the post-2015 UN development agenda

United Nations, New York, 17 October 2014

Criteria for indicators

- Indicators of progress towards targets may take various forms; changes in rates, ratios, percentages and differences are the most common.
- Indicators should be mainly "outcome" indicators to keep the focus on long-term results. They should be clearly linked to the targets, measurable over time using data collected in countries in a cost-effective and practical manner, helpful in informing policy, and clear and easy to communicate to the general public and civil society.
- Capacity or potential capacity for data collection and analysis to support the indicator must exist at both national and international levels.
- Time scales and benchmark dates for targets and indicators should take account of the rates of change currently observed and the present and potential availability of data to measure and compare levels and trends.
- The number of indicators for global monitoring should be kept strictly limited. The development of indicators and indicators to support national monitoring should fit within countries' own statistical development strategies. Indicators for national monitoring should also be limited in number and consistent with internationally agreed standards and, to the extent possible, with definitions used in each country.
- High priority must be given to continuity and consistency over time of statistics to be used for indicators and to their scientific and technical soundness, using international guidelines and standards and subject to peer review for indicators and data sources. Small-scale and ad hoc statistical sources which have not been tested over time cannot be relied on for trend analysis or representativeness.
- Innovation is critical in developing new topics and methods of data collection. Application of innovation must be based on adequate testing in countries, and necessary national and international support, time and resources must be allocated to develop new programmes.
- MDG indicators have been useful tools in analyzing the realization of the social and economic rights conveyed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Methodologies and data have also been developed on issues of civil and political rights, such as personal security, political participation and administration of justice. Target-setting and the formulation of indicators in these fields should be consistent with norms set in international human rights treaties and other country-agreed instruments.

Numerical aspects of target-setting and criteria for indicators

Sixteen MDG target indicators state or imply numerical targets of 100 per cent or 1 to 1 equality. The gender goal for example uses wording such as "universal access," "boys and girls alike". Only six target indicators give a numerical target on a numeric scale. Two of these date to the 1990 World Summit for Children (under-five mortality and maternal mortality), but there is no record of how the target numbers were arrived at. For the poverty target, the United Nations Summit for Social Development in 1995 called for "eradicating poverty by a target date to be specified by each country

in its national context". Later, 50 per cent reduction in poverty was specified in the OECD Development Assistance Committee report Shaping the 21st Century (OECD/ DAC 1996) and applied to the target of extreme poverty in the Millennium Declaration.

The remaining indicators call for or imply desirable directions of change, based on measured rates, ratios, percentages and the like. Where these have related to reversing undesirable trends, as in "reverse the loss of environmental resources" and "have halted and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis", they have set up significant milestones for monitoring achievement. It is notable, for example, that of the environmental resources targeted, "reverse the loss" has been achieved at the global level for only one—proportion of terrestrial and marine areas protected, itself a programmatic indicator for species protection.

The concept of "access" in target setting puts a greater burden on the statistician to select appropriate indicators, as neither the target addressed nor numeric scale is clearly formulated. "Access" has been interpreted as "take-up", or use of a service, with the implicit assumption that 100 per cent use is the aspirational target. This can lead to ambiguity as to the exact content of the indicator and what realistic time-bound targets might be. It has been difficult to operationalize, for example, the target "access to affordable essential drugs".

In summary, for quantitative interpretation of a target the minimum criterion for target wording is to identify the desired direction of change. Targets described as "universal" or "equal" can be measured if a numeric scale is specified. Reversing a direction of change has also been an effective wording for several targets. Vaguer but still operational if a numeric scale is specified are targets described in terms such as "universal" or "equal". While this latter approach runs the risk of being perceived as more aspirational than practical, ambitious targets which are numerically clear can set a high bar that inspires more highly focused and dedicated efforts to show some significant rate of progress.

Criteria for indicators and lessons learned

In examining implementation of the MDG framework indicators, the following criteria for indicator selection have been identified.

Indicators must be clearly linked to the target, be easy to understand and unambiguous for interpreting positive and negative change relative to the benchmark and target by policymakers, Governments, civil society and the public;

Capacity or potential capacity for data collection and analysis to support the indicator must exist at national and international levels, with requisite levels of long-term support;

Indicators for global monitoring must be strictly limited in number, following globally agreed priorities expressed in the goals and targets. From 50 to 75 indicators was considered a practical limit in establishing the MDG framework, to achieve maximum and sustained impact among governments, civil society, and the public;

Most developing countries have limited internal resources, human or financial, to support compilation and analysis of indicators, or of innovative studies, but are keen to take advantage of innovations that have been proven effective, such as UNICEF's DevInfo;

Indicators where methods and data are at an early stage of development will require at least 3-4 years to implement for global monitoring, at least in most developing countries, and necessary resources must be available;

Pilot projects are needed and must be supported with necessary resources to test new indicators and data collection methods and their methods and results fully documented;

International organizations must fully support the development of indicators at national and international levels within their spheres of competence while recognizing the value and importance of indicators in their fields for cross-sector use and analysis of interconnections. Inter-agency monitoring groups to develop and reach agreement on methods and results in areas where several agencies have common concerns have been very effective in harmonizing and improving methods, availability and consistency of results and trend analysis for a number of targets and indicators;

Indicators and data collection must be built using harmonized, recognized international recommendations and guidelines, where they exist, as benchmarks, and new recommendations and guidelines developed where needed, to ensure general harmonization and consistency among the indicators, international comparability and reliability over time to assess trends. These methodologies and best practices, comprising data sources, methods of computation, treatment of missing values, regional estimates, and so on, must be fully documented and readily available;

Indicators should be "actionable," that is, go beyond advocacy to policy, providing support for the debate, implementation and assessment of policy;

Indicators of trends cannot be based on ad hoc data collection or data which are not statistically representative of an entire country;

For global monitoring a competent agency or agencies must be agreed for each indicator and for drafting the related analysis, including the compilation of country-level data, regional aggregates, development and dissemination of concepts, methods and analyses used to assess progress made globally and in regions. In addition, the agency should provide guidance and assistance to concerned countries to strengthen their capacity to collect and compile data relevant to the indicator.

(Sources:

- Indicators for Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals--Definitions, Rationale, Concepts and Sources. Available from:
http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/Handbook.htm

- Statistics and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda, UN system task team)

Indicators should:

- Provide relevant and robust measures of progress towards the targets

- Be clear and straightforward to interpret and provide a basis for international comparison

- Be broadly consistent with other global lists and avoid imposing an unnecessary burden on country teams, Governments and other partners

- Be based to the greatest extent possible on international standards, recommendations and best practices

- Be constructed from well-established data sources, be quantifiable and be consistent to enable measurement over time

For each indicator, the following information is required:

- A simple operational definition
- The goal and target it addresses
- The rationale for use of the indicator
- The method of computation
- Sources of data and references, including relevant international Web sites
- Periodicity of measurement
- Gender and disaggregation issues
- Limitations of the indicator
- National and international agencies involved in data collection, compilation or dissemination

Entity submitting the indicator: _____

Indicator

Definition

Goal and target addressed

Rationale

Method of computation

Data collection and source; references

Periodicity of measurement

Gender and disaggregation issues

Comments and limitations

National or international agency