



The Role of National Statistical Offices in the Arab Region on SDGs

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals are divided into several levels of attention, international, regional and national levels. In this context, it is worth noting the need to take into account the current situation in the Arab Region.

1. **Measuring Progress:** A multidimensional-based indicators are more appropriate to measure progress and make relevant comparisons across countries with different development stages. Qualitative and quantitative indicators should be used to measure progress.

2. **Core issues:** Five core issues need to be addressed in the Arab region. This includes political situation, high economic variation, social variation, environment and natural resources, and human rights-democracy and governance modalities.

3. Scope of work

1. Developing a road map to involve decision makers, engage civil society as well as media and society at large in the statistical work.

2. Assessment of data availability and survey quality (ADP) and develop techniques to collect data in the framework of measuring progress indicators.

3. Highlighting the capacity building needs for the region; and design and implement a technical assistance program including training for statisticians, users, decision makers and journalists.

4. Setup a system to monitor and report about progress in the Arab region, and establishing a central repository information system as a tool to report and monitor progress in the Arab region. LAS and UNESCWA are requested to take the lead in this matter.

5. Advocacy campaigns and awareness-raising efforts to ensure wider participation at the grass root level.

4. **Partners, counterparts and stakeholders:** The statistical work should be cooperative across different players including: Public sector, Civil society, etc. At the regional level, UN agencies and other regional commissions and international organizations involved in measuring progress and capacity building should be identified as partners of the initiative at the Arab region.

5. **Cost Assessment:** Measuring progress is focused on the measurement and understanding of progress rather than achieving specific targets, this measurement requires costing as well. This includes need assessment of the current statistical systems and availability of data sources and then technical assistance to learn more about methodologies in the region. A costing for specific targets is then needed if we decide to follow the approach of the MDGs in transferring the society from certain position to another.

6. **Steps Forward:** At the practical level, "Arab Steering Committee for Measuring Progress" have to be established at the regional level. The mandate of the committee is to make sure that the Arab region is fully integrated in the follow up activities of SDGs. The committee will call for a task force to work on finalizing the position paper and propose a list of indicators for the Arab region.

Key words: measuring progress, Arab region, sustainable development



Introduction

This paper is focusing on the process of measuring the development indicators in term of the responsible body or bodies and the role of the national statistical offices rather than assessing the progress of the development in the Arab countries or the level of success or failures in creation the development. Based on our experiences as a national statistical office and through many existing assessment of Arab MDG monitoring and evaluation experience; we can assure that over the last 15 years, the process of measuring the development indicators didn't go perfectly worldwide specially in the developing countries including within the Arab states.

In principle, the level of the progress in development is mainly based, in addition to the polices and the taken interventions on the national level, will significantly based on the measuring process and the used tools. Therefore, the critiques in the process leading us to have questionable progress. Since the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals "MDG's, long and hard debate took place on the role of the national statistical offices in the process of measuring the progress of MDG's; due to the lack of capacity in some statistical offices, or the shortage of the resources to deal with the measurements, in the best cases the international agencies replaced the official statistics and the national institutions in providing the data sets on the progress of the MDG's: *"None of the countries we reviewed produces official statistics for any more than 27 of 45 of the MDG indicators for which national statistics might reasonably be expected to exist. The remaining indicators must either be compiled by international agencies using non-official statistics or cannot be compiled at all, On average, something like one-third of the MDG indicators could be measured in the region if only official statistics were used"*¹.

This given description had led to more dependency on the international sources in reporting against the MDGs and relying on them for providing the data, which resulted less ownership by the governments and states that doesn't mean necessarily full commitment to the recommended interventions or policies. Furthermore, and to have high commitment and strong ownership, there is a high need for building a broad consultations with main stakeholders at national level considering its context and local circumstances through participatory processes with clear vision on "who should be responsible for what", in alliance with the regional and global discussion and coordination through formatting a concrete goals, targets and indicators.

Although the International organizations can help in filling the data gaps in the short term but it will not necessarily help in building the national capacities on measuring sustainable development. There is a need for designing effective international statistical assistance to ensure that it results sustainable capacity building through participatory process and on job training or learning by doing. Moreover, a crucial need for regional cooperation to take a significant role as it is potential to be more effective to help in building the capacity developments entirely within Arab countries, it also assist filling the gap in heterogeneity of reporting approaches and particularly in defining the minimum set of indicators that measuring sustainability. In this regard, it is worth raising the lessons to be learnt from the process of the weak influence of the Arab Sustainable Development Indicator Framework (ASDIF's) in the region. Although the reasons of such weak influence is not clear enough, but may refer to developing the indicators that were never adopted as the official indicator set for monitoring and evaluating progress. In addition that may be

¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia , 2015. Measuring Sustainable Development in the Arab Region: A Review of Country Experience and Recommendation for Monitoring and Evaluation in the Post-2015 Era.



that the SD indicator sets, lacks a clear conceptual underpinning; as the proposed indicators contain wide range that share little in common except that they all touch upon issues related to the “three pillars” of sustainable development: economy, environment and society. So, countries first efforts should concentrate on aligning own indicators with SDGs to clearly identify volume of work needed to produce the "additional" set of indicators that more closely to their own priorities. In addition, there is a preferable need to use a range of indicators and all available information (subjective as well as objective; qualitative as well as quantitative) to help the monitor progress.

This diagnostic arena leads us to question the region’s readiness for monitoring and evaluation the SDGs in post-2015 era. The United Nations’ so called “Open Working Group” (the body charged with developing the initial proposal for the SDGs that will replace the MDGs) has proposed an initial set of 17 goals. This is more than twice the number of MDGs. If the MDG ratio of indicators-to-goals holds for the SDGs as well, this would mean measuring the SDGs could involve some 145 indicators. Even if the final number of SDGs is reduced from the OWG’s initial proposal (it may also be increased), the post-2015 era is likely to require measurement of 100+ indicators on an annual basis, which to present a significant challenge for every Arab country².

The main concerns to be taken on the technical issues related to the collected data include the missing data as some data is simply not available from any source. while some other are available but only for a limited number of points in time rather than with a regular periodicity which normally lead to gaps in time series. Other additional technical issue is, the changes in concepts, definitions and methods as it will be difficult to differentiate the changes due to statistical artifacts from those due to the prevailing social, economic or environmental conditions of the country.

Beside the existing tools and methodologies for measuring MDGs and then, the availability of the data on the indicators, the human resources and professional capacity is a main factor in producing high quality monitoring reports. Therefore, it is most likely to have national central body to tackle this task with less turnover ratio of its adequate skills as many of it left their countries to work elsewhere; the national statistical offices could be the most right agencies as most of it work closely to the planning departments or ministries. So it could be complement the efforts on providing the required data and reporting since the National statistical offices are viewed as the most useful sources of data but not as agencies that should play key roles in the compilation and reporting of the indicators.

To take this role, there is a need for statistical capacity review in the Arab countries which may lead to develop a national statistical plan rather than regional or international activities that aim to improve the countries’ capacities on reporting against the SDGs based on the weaknesses that encountered the experience of MDGs monitoring process; the expected plans should take the opportunity of exchanging the concepts and methodologies in the region as well as worldwide. One more main issue to be well considered is sharing the best practices as successful stories of the national statistical offices to highlight the advantages of statistical agencies in the field of ensuring the quality reporting against the development indicators.

Of course some expected difficulties may encounter number of Arab countries in implementing the outcomes of such review and then the SDGs monitoring process due to the lack of their financial resources to build their capacities or run the needed plans or monitoring activities, this bring again the need for the coordination and the intra-cooperation among the Arab countries in the region in light with the international technical and financial support with special focus on the statistical offices rather than other governmental institutions unless otherwise a clear reason beyond any exception. In addition, the start or a kick off proposing a minimum set of indicators, those fall within the capacity of the majority of the Arab countries to be

² United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia , 2015. Measuring Sustainable Development in the Arab Region: A Review of Country Experience and Recommendation for Monitoring and Evaluation in the Post-2015 Era



compiled. On the other side, and without any contradictions, “greater attention should be given to: i) data disaggregation to monitor progress among vulnerable groups; ii) to qualitative dimensions; and iii) to interdependencies across the goals”³. This direction is a lesson to be learnt from the MDGs although it need more financial requirements, but it is an important one to be considered in the design of proposing the final list of SDGs indicators especially with the variation among countries in the mean demographic characteristics particularly the countries with rapid population growth and the changes in the main indicators such as unemployment, poverty, within this framework.

Conclusion

The success of the statistical offices in the Arab region to achieve the expected “ambitious” role is conditioned to have full transparency in accessing the collected data from public and private institutions by strengthened laws governing access to information were required , and all of that to be within a cooperative framework to achieve a realistic development progress. Moreover, there is a crucial need to use the new technologies and adopt others to utilize it for significant progress and better reporting.

In this context, the instability and the “civil wars” in many Arab countries is a main challenge for monitoring developments indicators as creating development itself is become a problematic due to the loss in humans and resources. This challenge seems to be the wider gate for such issue which bring strongly the fact of “either good governance or no comprehensive development”⁴. The proposed SDGs cover the principle rights and the social justice. This developmental challenge will be reflected on the need to develop suitable measurement tools and methodologies to monitor the SDGs.

Starting from scratch in monitoring the SDGs is not seen to be possible in the Arab region. Whatever reporting is done, it must begin from the structures that have been put in place for the MDGs and national SD reports. And then the statistical offices to take their role effectively.

³ UN system task team on the post-2015 UN development Agenda, 2012. Review of the contributions of the MDG Agenda to foster development: Lessons for the post-2015 UN development agenda

⁴ UN Arab Human Development Report 2013



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