



Post-2015 accountability questions: Some lessons from the MDGs
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Ben Slay, Senior advisor
UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and CIS

Mr. Executive Secretary, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and honour for me to be here with you today. I would like to share some thoughts on post-2015 accountability mechanisms, which reflect my experience and perceptions regarding efforts to achieve the MDGs in the developing and transition economies of Europe and Central Asia.

In my view, efforts to enforce accountability for MDG progress have faced three challenges. These are, first: the perception by some member states that the MDGs were imposed on them by the UN system, without due process or adequate consultation. Let's call this the consultation challenge.

The second challenge lies in the absence of well defined, standardized, codified (especially in national legislation) MDG review and accountability mechanisms, with specified *ex ante* roles for governments, the UN system, and civil society. Let's call this the codification and coordination challenge.

The third challenge lies in the data, methodological, and other technical weaknesses present in the design and application of the MDGs. These lacunae complicate efforts to compare MDG progress across countries. For example, due to the "nationalization" of MDG targets and indicators, different countries are often reporting against different measurement frameworks. These weaknesses also make it difficult to determine whether a country is, in fact, meeting a given MDG—for example, due to differences between performance as measured against global as opposed to nationalized targets and indicators, or to conflicting trends among different indicators or targets for the same MDG. Last but not least, their aggregated, national character make it difficult for the MDGs to capture the absence of development progress at the sub-national level, or among vulnerable groups. Let's call this the methodological, technical, and disaggregation challenge.

In terms of lessons learned from the regional MDG experience, I would suggest the following hypotheses, for your kind consideration:

The first challenge—the consultation challenge—is, I believe, being effectively addressed. This is thanks to the extensive national, regional, and global post-2015 consultations supported by the UN system, governments, and other actors. It is also being addressed by the transparent, participatory process by which the SDGs are being designed. This is apparent in the role of the Open Working Group on the SDGs, as well as in the work of the Secretary General's High Level Panel on the SDGs. And, this challenge is being addressed by global and national NGOs, and by representatives of the private sector, who are working to ensure that other voices are heard in post-2015 debates. If greater engagement, participation, and consultations are preconditions for accountability, then we have reasons for optimism about post-2015 accountability frameworks.

However, I am a bit more worried about how the second area—the codification and coordination challenge—will be addressed.

Taking national MDG agendas beyond the declarative and into policy relevance has generally required their codification in national legislation, and in government policies and programming. When national MDG strategies were costed and aligned with medium-term expenditure frameworks; when MDG indicators were inserted into national (or sub-national) development strategies; when these strategies and their associated action plans acquired the force of law; when specific implementation tasks were assigned to specific government agencies; and when their activities were subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation exercises—in short, when the MDGs became obligations and deliverables for duty bearers—then the MDGs really mattered. This has been when someone at the national (or sub-national) level has been accountable for delivering on the MDGs.

But, sadly, such examples have been the exception, rather than the rule. In most countries, governments are quick to take credit for progress in meeting the MDGs. But are not as quick in holding public- (or private- , or third-) sector actors responsible for the absence of such progress. Should this pattern repeat itself with the SDGs, post-2015 accountability prospects are likely to suffer.

I am even more worried about how the third challenge—the methodological, technical, and disaggregation challenge—will be addressed. The MDGs—which embody a smaller number of goals than the SDGs, and which were not applied universally—had to undergo national adaptation in many middle-income countries, in order to be made nationally relevant. But even so, the level of conceptual aggregation generally remained at the national level. The rigorous disaggregation of MDG targets and indicators by geographic sub-region, or by socio-economic vulnerability criteria, has been the exception, not the rule. As a result:

- Confusion has been created by the unclear use of global versus nationalized MDG targets and indicators.
- Trends in too many indicators or targets for the same MDG are inconsistent or contradict one another—making it unclear whether, in fact, a given MDG in a given country is, or is not, being met.
- Countries have been able to claim progress on MDG achievement—even as more and more people have been left behind.

I very much hope that post-2000 improvements in national statistical capacity—combined perhaps with the advent of “big data” and other social media innovations—have reduced the difficulties posed by the methodological, technical, and disaggregation challenge. Progress has certainly been made in these areas since 2000. But I am also afraid that much of the methodological, technical, and disaggregation confusion from the MDG agenda will carry over to the SDGs as well. If so, this will further complicate question of accountability frameworks.

To end on a more positive note, I would like to suggest two forward looking and, hopefully, constructive suggestions for our collective consideration.

First: post-2000 improvements in national statistical capacity notwithstanding, much still can be done to improve statistical offices’ abilities to measure, and monitor, national progress towards sustainable development. Realizing this potential means increased support for national statistical capacity, by both governments and the international community. On this note, I would add that UNDP is pleased to be working—together with UNECE, the World Bank, and other development partners—in the Pan-European poverty monitoring group, in which national statistical offices from much of the region are represented, and which is currently led by the Central Statistical Office of Poland. Such platforms need more attention and support if aspirations for post-2015 accountability are to be realized.

Finally, we should remember that, in 2000, the smart phone had not been invented; “big data” was something that was done on IBM mainframes. The course of technological development by 2015, and its implications for data collection and analysis, could not have been fully anticipated in 2000. Likewise, we are almost certainly unable to fully anticipate the post-2015 course of technological innovation and its impact

on development data and analysis. Things that seem improbable today could become common place by 2030. It may be possible for citizens to hold their governments, UN agencies, NGOs, and businesses accountable for the development impact of their actions in ways that we can barely imagine today.

Whatever is decided about post-2015 accountability frameworks in the months to come, we should try to ensure that these mechanisms accelerate the emergence of new technologies and innovative business and development practices that can empower and engage citizens.

Thank you very much.