

LATIN AMERICA - The Challenge of Gauging Progress Towards Millennium Development Goals

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[IPS](#) - Almost halfway to the deadline for meeting the U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), some of the targets are still out of reach of many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. And there is another challenge: strengthening statistical capacity to measure progress.

In September 2000, the United Nations member countries made a commitment to reaching eight MDGs by 2015, such as halving the proportion of people suffering extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, and promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Other goals were to reduce infant mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases, guarantee the sustainable use of natural resources and form a global partnership for development.

To measure progress towards these goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators were established. These were the same for all countries, which agreed to present at least one report on their advances or setbacks in 2005.

None of the region's countries possesses information on each and every MDG indicator, but most have reported results from a related instrument of measurement where more specific information is lacking, according to a study by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which released its preliminary results in late 2006 in Santiago.

Self-evaluation of each country's statistical capacity to monitor the MDGs was included in the study, and the results were revealing: 52 percent of countries rated their capacity as weak or low, 30 percent said it was good, medium or satisfactory, and only 18 percent said it was high or strong.

At the bottom of the list is the Dominican Republic, which said that 99 percent of its statistical capacity was low or weak, and at the top is Chile, which said that 93 percent of its statistical work was strong. Generally, the weakest areas were monitoring and statistical analysis, and the skills to apply the results to policies and plans for assigning resources.

The ECLAC study is part of a project for "Strengthening the capacity of Latin American and Caribbean countries to fulfil the Millennium Development Goals", financed by the U.N. Development Account (2004-2006).

The study also compared the follow-up reports on MDGs from 34 countries of the Americas with U.N. databases, and concluded that only 11 percent of the sets of information were the same, 25 percent were different or not comparable, and for the rest information was not available.

"Comparing the national reports with the international database, the figures match in only 11 percent of the cases. This is a very low percentage, but there are a lot of allowances that have to be made. We don't think that they should necessarily be identical," since it all depends on what is being monitored, Simone Cecchini, a researcher at ECLAC's Social Development Division and one of the authors of the study, told IPS.

To illustrate, she pointed to the challenge of estimating poverty levels. "The World Bank has a global measure for the MDGs, defined as the percentage of the population living on less than a dollar a day, which is necessary for comparisons between all the world's countries, but it's not relevant in Latin America because it draws the line too low," Cecchini said.

"In Latin America it's important to use ECLAC figures, which are national sets of data that are comparable within the region, as distinct from the information handled internally within the different countries," she said.

However, she warned that not enough data is available yet, and said the U.N.'s records were more complete than those of the countries themselves.

Cecchini attributed this situation to the lack of budgetary resources and qualified personnel. "As the national statistics offices lack political visibility, they don't get enough resources to monitor development," she said.

Nevertheless, she said that the region is committed to the MDGs, as every country has presented a national report, and some have submitted more than one.

"Latin American countries have an advantage over the small island states of the Caribbean, because their national statistical systems are more developed," particularly in South America, where Argentina, Brazil and Chile especially stand out.

The ECLAC study found that countries where self-evaluation reported an average of low or weak statistical capacity in the follow-up reports included several Central American nations, such as Guatemala and Nicaragua.

The director of Guatemala's National Institute of Statistics, Sigfrido Lee, told IPS that his country has been contemptuous of statistical information until recently.

During the 1960-1996 armed conflict, many items of information were state secrets, and others were distorted. After the peace accords were signed in 1996, reconstruction began, but the distrust continues, he said.

"We provide the basic information, but to do the job properly we need a budget increase. We are creating systems to generate statistical data periodically, as required," said Lee, adding that the next general census will not take place until 2012.

In Nicaragua, meanwhile, data handling is widely dispersed among a number of state institutions, and one body should be appointed to be responsible for MDG statistics, according to María Rosa Renzi, who works for the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) and is head of the section serving MDGs in Nicaragua.

"The Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Censuses is an institution with few resources, and has a low place in the government hierarchy, so it cannot fulfil its role," which means that "official data always has a wide margin of uncertainty," Renzi told IPS.

But according to Cecchini, "the amount of data available to measure poverty, education, gender parity, infant mortality and maternal health is reasonably good, although there are big problems in measuring HIV/AIDS, access to technology and environmental protection."

There is also not enough information to calculate specific indicators like "the poverty gap, or the percentage of the population with less than the minimum calorie intake," or unemployment among young people, she said.

"When the information isn't available anywhere, the primary sources must be improved: censuses, household surveys, administrative records, and specific monitoring systems, such as for the environment," the expert said.

Cecchini said she hoped for improvements in the transparency of reports, which should give details of their methodology and the information sources used, and for progress in the homogeneity of indicators, by following examples of best practice.

In her opinion, the key is coordination between the bodies collecting information and drawing up the reports, and the leadership role played by the national statistics office.

But in some countries, not all the information is reported to the official institute in charge of national statistics, as for example in Venezuela, where the social programmes created by the Hugo Chávez administration were implemented outside the structures of the state, and therefore are not measured by the official institute.

Consequently in 2005, when international organisations like ECLAC or the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation reported social indicators for Venezuela, Chávez's government protested loudly and asked for corrections, to incorporate the positive impact of the social programmes, especially on health and education.

"We believe that coordination at the national level can be improved," said Cecchini, citing the examples of Mexico, where one person in each ministry was designated to find the information and pass it on to the president's office, and Paraguay, where those in charge of each sector have worked together to set up a database.

Additional reporting by José Adán Silva (Nicaragua), Paco Fion (Guatemala) and Humberto Márquez (Venezuela).

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