Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Session 2:
Discrepancies between national and regional/global data: the perspective of a custodian agency

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Outline of the presentation

- Importance of alignment between National and Global Indicator Framework
- Overview of FAO data collection modalities
- Types of data discrepancies (extended definition)
- Why data discrepancies occur
- Challenges faced by NSOs in dealing with data discrepancies
- Potential solutions to address data discrepancies

Alignment between National and Global Indicator Framework

According to the report "Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring from a Statistical Perspective", 'discrepancies between national and international data … created problems at the national level and tension in the international statistical community'.

FAO has provided assistance to numerous countries and some regional organizations to foster greater alignment between national/regional and global indicator framework. There are a number of benefits to be gained:

- ✓ Clear, consistent assessments of progress, which can lead to effective evidence-based policies;
- ✓ Benchmarking of performance with other countries, guiding national policy decisions and attracting development assistance;
- ✓ Monitoring global SDG indicators does not preclude the possibility of monitoring also national indicators, however, the greater the alignment the lower are data requirements and reporting burden on countries;
- ✓ Possibility of benefitting from technical assistance programs of international agencies.

Overview of FAO data collection modalities

- For most SDG indicators, when official data are consistent with agreed international definitions and statistical standards, FAO collects data directly from national institutions, through designated focal points, using standard questionnaires or online platforms.
- For selected SDG indicators, FAO collects data directly from international/regional organizations (e.g. UNPD, IMF, ECLAC, AUC, etc.)
- When this is not possible, FAO seeks to generate its own country estimates, based in most cases on national data sources. When this happens, FAO seeks to validate these estimates with national authorities prior to their publication, following the IAEG-SDG guidelines.
- In any case, FAO does not publish estimates that have been refused by countries. Moreover, in disseminating SDG data, FAO distinguishes between missing values because "data do not exist" and missing values because data may exist but "have not been validated".
- This is a provisional, stop-gap solution, whereas in parallel, FAO invests major efforts in providing technical assistance and capacity development support so that countries are able to generate the indicators themselves with minimal additional reporting burden.

Types of Data Discrepancies (extended definition)

- Adoption by countries of proxy indicators (national indicators different from global indicators)
- Global indicators not included in the National monitoring framework (as 'not relevant')
- Data available at country-level, but not published and/or reported to custodian agencies
- Same national and global indicators (both following agreed international standards) but:
  - ✓ Minor methodological differences in terms of definitions, data sources, compilation procedures
  - ✓ Data revisions released at a later date (not different reference periods)
  - ✓ National estimates not considered reliable by custodian agencies.

Types of Data Discrepancies

Adoption by countries of proxy indicators (national indicators different from global indicators)

An extremely common phenomenon – many countries have substituted official global SDG indicators with incomparable national proxy indicators

For example, many countries substitute SDG indicator 2.1.1(prevalence of undernourishment) with:

- The percentage of people with **Average per capita daily dietary energy consumption** below thresholds based on Average Recommended Dietary Intake (ADER), usually set at 2,100 kcal
- the "**Food poverty ratio**" that measures the percentage of households who cannot afford to purchase a food basket able to provide a minimum of 2100 kcal per day.
- **Per capita annual consumption of meat**

This practice manifestly contravenes paragraph 75 of the UN Resolution on the 2030 Agenda

Types of Data Discrepancies

Global indicators not included in the National monitoring framework (as not relevant)

Also a widespread phenomenon – many countries invoke the non-applicability of a given SDG indicator to the "national context" and do not monitor & report it, without engaging in a consultation process with the custodian agency

- Example 1: A country in West Africa declared SDG indicator 14.b.1 (small-scale fisheries) non-relevant, even though a 2016 census of artisanal fishing vessels provides details on 1,048 such vessels.
- Example 2: A Gulf country declared SDG indicator 14.6.1 (international instruments to combat IUU fishing) non-relevant, even though it has itself ratified several of the instruments within the scope of the indicator

Types of Data Discrepancies

Data available at country-level, but not published and/or reported to custodian agencies

A more subtle phenomenon that is more difficult to detect – usually is discovered by chance

- For SDG indicator 2.a.1 (Agricultural Orientation Index), this type of discrepancy is systematic: 2.a.1 is based on National Accounts figures that the vast majority of countries disseminate, and Government Finance Statistics, generally reported to the IMF (Statistics Department). Yet only about half of the countries in the world report to FAO systematically
- In fact, in recent years FAO has increased the country coverage of the indicator by about 65 countries by doing its own research to extract the figures from official databases, or country publications. However, this is a cumbersome and non very sustainable approach, so countries should make a more serious effort of reporting their data to FAO through the designated annual questionnaire

Types of Data Discrepancies

Same national and global indicators (both following agreed international standards) but…

A broad category of discrepancies involves ostensibly the same indicator reported at national and international level, but with incongruent figures, for various reasons:

- *Different source*: A widespread case: national indicators using as denominator population figures derived from national sources vs. international organizations using UN Population Division estimates
- *Different definitions*: national figures for forest coverage often differ from SDG indicator 15.1.1 (% of forest cover), because countries use their own definitions of forests whereas SDG indicator 15.1.1 relies on one standard, universal definition
- *Slight differences in methodology*: figures for Government Expenditures in Agriculture reported under the Malabo framework differ from those reported officially to FAO or the IMF (Malabo methodological documents recognize the source of discrepancy as the non-systematic application of the COFOG classification)
- *Different figures with no apparent reason*: Prevalence of Undernourishment figures (SDG indicator 2.1.1) reported for many countries under the Malabo framework differ from the figures reported by FAO, even though the methodology is ostensibly the same

Why data discrepancies occur

- An underlying reason for many discrepancies is a understatement of the trade-offs between "country ownership" and international comparability. This is particularly the case for discrepancies due to the use of proxies or to global indicators not included in national indicator frameworks

- A more immediate reason for many discrepancies is a lack of capacity by national reporting entities to report the SDG indicator in compliance with the established international methodology, standards and classifications

- Lack of coordination at national level and between national, regional and global levels are also important reasons why certain discrepancies occur. At national level, the NSO may not be sufficiently empowered to fulfil its quality assurance role over other reporting entities. At regional level, for example, FAO was not allowed to review country data under the Malabo framework before their publication to try to pre-empt discrepancies, with the African Union Commission invoking "confidentiality concerns".

Challenges faced by NSOs in dealing with data discrepancies

- Discrepancies between national and international indicators are the main threat to international comparability, and undermine the credibility of both national and international statistical agencies.
- Weakened international comparability and credibility, in turn, undermine the system of mutual accountability on which the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development relies.
- Addressing discrepancies in a systematic way requires a concerted effort and renewed commitment by all involved parties, as well as targeted measures to address the various specificities of each type of discrepancy

Proposed solutions to address data discrepancies

- A clear and unambiguous commitment by the UN Statistical Commission for countries to report on the global SDG indicators
- A stronger advocacy effort under the auspices of the UN Statistical Commission targeted to national statistical systems discouraging the use of proxies that replace official global SDG indicators and emphasizing the benefits of greater alignment
- Revamped capacity development approach by custodian agencies that not only focuses on the methodology and data collection aspect, but also includes:
  - an advocacy component targeted to decision-makers promoting greater alignment between national and global SDG monitoring frameworks
  - a TA component supporting the Data Stewardship role of the NSO within the NSS
- Strengthen coordination between countries and custodian agencies: appointment of designated national focal points for each SDG indicator, with which custodians can enter into direct communication to try to get to the bottom of any data discrepancies
- Joint data collection of SDG data by custodian agencies and regional organizations; or regional organizations allowing custodian agencies to access their SDG database to review country data, before their publication

Thank you!

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