National Audit Office

Measuring Up

How good are the Government's data systems for monitoring performance against Public Service Agreements?

PSA 29: 'Reduce poverty in poorer countries through quicker progress towards the Millennium Development Goals'

A review of the data systems underpinning the Public Service Agreements led by the Department for International Development under the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE

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Validation of the data systems for the PSA 29, Spending Review Period 2008-11

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Executive Summary

Introduction
1. This report summarises the results of our examination of the data systems used by the Government in 2008 to monitor and report on progress against PSA 29.

The PSA and the Departments
2. PSAs are at the centre of Government's performance measurement system. They are usually three year agreements, set during the spending review process and negotiated between Departments and the Treasury. They set the objectives for the priority areas of Government's work.

3. The Department for International Development (the Department) is the lead Department for reporting performance against PSA 29 –'Reducing poverty in poorer countries through quicker progress towards the Millennium Development Goals'. Each PSA has a Senior Responsible Officer who is responsible for maintaining a sound system of control across Departmental boundaries that supports the achievement of the PSA. The underlying data systems are an important element in this framework of control.

4. The most recent public statement provided by the Department on progress against this PSA was included in the Department's 2008 Autumn Performance Report.

The purpose and scope of this review
5. The Government invited the Comptroller and Auditor General to validate the data systems used by Government to monitor and report its performance. From September to December 2008 the National Audit Office (NAO) carried out an examination of the data systems for all the indicators used to report performance against this PSA. This involved a detailed review of the processes and controls governing:

- The match between the indicators selected to measure performance and the PSA. The indicators should address all key elements of performance referred to in the PSA;

- The match between indicators and their data systems. The data system should produce data that allows the Department to measure accurately the relevant element of performance;

- For each indicator, the selection, collection, processing and analysis of data. Control procedures should mitigate all known significant risks to data reliability. In addition, system processes and controls should be adequately documented to support consistent application over time; and

- The reporting of results. Outturn data should be presented fairly for all key aspects of performance referred to in the target. Any significant limitations should be disclosed and the implications for interpreting progress explained.

6. Our conclusions are summarised in the form of traffic lights (see Figure 1). The ratings are based on the extent to which Departments have:

(i) Put in place and operated internal controls over the data systems that are effective and proportionate to the risks involved; and

(ii) Explained clearly any limitations in the quality of its data systems to Parliament and the public

7. The remaining sections of this report provide an overview of the results of our assessment, followed by a brief description of the findings and conclusions for each individual data system. Our assessment does not provide a conclusion on the accuracy of the outturn figures included in the Department's public performance statements. This is because the existence of sound data systems reduces but does not eliminate the possibility of error in reported data.

Figure 1: Key to traffic light ratings

Rating	Meaning …
GREEN (fit for purpose); or	The data system is fit for the purpose of measuring and reporting performance against the indicator
GREEN (disclosure)	The data system is appropriate for the indicator and the Department have explained fully the implications of limitations that cannot be cost-effectively controlled
AMBER (Systems); or	Broadly appropriate, but needs strengthening to ensure that remaining risks are adequately controlled
AMBER (Disclosure)	Broadly appropriate, but includes limitations that cannot be cost-effectively controlled; the Department should explain the implications of these.
RED (Systems); or	The data system does not permit reliable measurement and reporting of performance against the indicator
RED(Not established)	The Department has not yet put in place a system to measure performance against the indicator

Overview

8. PSA 29 is based on the internationally adopted Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which aim to eradicate poverty, increase gender equality and promote peace and development in the developing world. The Department

has reflected its commitment to achieving the MDGs through adopting eight of the MDG indicators as PSA 29 indicators 1-8.

9. The Department's assessment of the validity of the data set used is based on assurances taken from the systems employed by the United Nations Statistics Department (UNSD) to collect and process the data in countries. The UN set out the data sources, collection and computation methods and the limitations of the data for each MDG indicator in an extensive MDG handbook. This handbook has been developed by international experts and the MDG indicators and underpinning data have been agreed by the international community. The Department is a member of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group (IAEG) on the MDG indicators and therefore has an input into any revisions of the Handbook. Alongside this the Department also carries out work to strengthen the statistical systems at a country and an international level to help increase the quality of the data. Details of this work, such as helping countries to produce and implement their own plans to improve statistical systems, are set out in an explanatory note to the APR.

10. The Department also draws on its specialist teams to carry out quality reviews of the UNSD data. Details of the quality assurance process are provided in paragraphs 25-35. We consider that the Department's system of quality assurance is a good approach to the difficulties faced with the weaknesses in the MDG data.

11. The deadline for the achievement of the MDGs is 2015, which exceeds the PSA period by four years. To address this, the Department has developed a methodology to predict whether the PSA indicators will be achieved in the PSA countries by 2015. The methodology was reviewed and endorsed by Oxford Policy Management (OPM) and a summary has been included in the Autumn Performance Report (APR). We found that the methodology has been embedded in the PSA system and that the APR provides a good summary of the methodology. We consider there to be some minor weaknesses in the system, these are set out in our main conclusions and recommendations, paragraph 17.

12. There is a strong control environment operating in the Department, which provides a good level of support to the PSA system. Reporting to the Management Board takes place on a quarterly basis. For the quarters ending in June and December, the report focuses on management information associated with improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation with any key items relating to the PSA targets being reported on

an exception basis. For the quarters ending in September and March, a full review of the Corporate Performance Framework is carried out and the APR and Annual Report are subsequently produced. The Management Board uses the bi-annual performance review meetings to hold Divisions to account for their contribution to delivery of the PSAs and DSOs. Our review found that staff have a good understanding of their role in the PSA process and that there is appropriate segregation of duties between the collection of data by the UNSD, the quality assurance process and the final agreement of the traffic light assessment. We also examined lower level controls such as those operating over the spreadsheets used to calculate short term trends. Although we received assurances that the controls are operating, there was no evidence to support this.

13. The Department places a strong emphasis on the importance of data quality and this is communicated to staff at all levels. The main difficulty faced by the Department is the inherent weakness in the quality of data collected from the PSA countries. Awareness around the limitations of the data is high and sufficient, appropriate disclosures have been made in the APR to draw attention to the weaknesses in data availability, reliability and timeliness. In the APR, the Department has also made reference to the work it is doing to improve the quality of data and its collection methods. We recognise the importance of this work and support the Department's commitment to improving data quality overseas.

14. PSA29 differs from the previous PSA targets (2005-2008) in three key respects: the indicators which are reported; the countries monitored; and the methods used for calculating and reporting progress. We consider that these changes have been sufficiently disclosed in the APR.

15. Since our last PSA validation exercise in 2006 the Department has taken action to implement our recommendations. Our work found that the Department had in the past relied significantly on assessments made by project teams on their own projects rather than using a level of independent assessment. The Department has subsequently introduced improvements to the scrutiny of its project scoring systems, to its methodology for assessing the quality of project portfolios and to the level of assurance provided on its data systems.

16. Figure 2 summarises our assessment of the data systems.

Figure 2: Summary of assessments for indicator data systems

No	Indicator	Rating
1	Proportion of population below $1 (purchasing power parity, PPP) per day.	**Red (Not established)**
2	Net enrolment in primary education	**Green (Disclosure)**
3	Ratio of girls to boys in primary education	**Green (Disclosure)**
4	Under 5 mortality ratio	**Green (Disclosure)**
5	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) per 100,000 live births	**Green (Disclosure)**
6	HIV prevalence rate, 15-49 years old, in national based surveys	**Green (Disclosure)**
7	Proportion of population with sustainable access to an improved water source (urban and rural)	**Green (Disclosure)**
8	The value (in nominal terms), and proportion admitted free of duties, of developed country imports (excluding arms and oil) from low income countries	**Amber (Systems)**

17. Our main conclusions on the PSA are:

- There is a good match between the indicators and the data being used to monitor their progress;

- The short term trend analysis has been endorsed by an independent consultant as statistically valid and seems to be well understood and applied by the Department's staff;

- The Department has made adequate disclosure of the inherent weaknesses in the data they are using. There is scope for the Department to be more explicit about the countries it is reporting against for 29.8, and the rationale behind the final traffic light assessments;

- The spreadsheets used for calculating the traffic light assessment for each country were designed by one statistician in the Department and checked by another to confirm the formulas were accurate. We reviewed the formulas in a sample of spreadsheets and we were satisfied that the traffic light assessments were calculated accurately and transferred to the APR correctly;

- The data entered into the spreadsheets by one CPG member is cross checked to the UNSD database by another member of CPG. However, the Department need to ensure that this control is evidenced;

- The Department should introduce an extra control for indicator 29.8 to ensure that the data they are using is the most up to date data available;

- The data extracted from the database on the UNSD website is unusable until the Department carries out some formatting. This is not the case when data is requested directly from the UNSD. The Department is liaising with the UNSD to improve the quality of data extracted from the website as well as trying to set up an arrangement so the Department can have access to the data before it is published on the website;

- One of the aims of the Department's Global Statistics Partnership (GSP) team is to help improve the effectiveness of the international statistical system through, among other things, liaison with the UN. Similar work is also carried out by the CPG which means there is a risk that the Department is duplicating its efforts to improve the statistical capability of the UN; and

- The Department does not carry out an assessment of the risks around the supply of data needed for reporting progress against the PSA indicators. An example of this would be the risk of a restriction of their access as to the MDG and trade data.

18. We recommend that the Department:
- Carries out an internal risk assessment to consider the risks to the supply of data it uses. This would identify mitigating actions to changes in data sets or other areas of that may influence the data;

- Ensures that adequate disclosures are made about the countries reported against for PSA 29.8 and the rationale behind the final traffic light assessments;

- Continues to build strong relations with the UNSD and continues to support the UN in improving the quality of data. We recommend that the Department consolidates its efforts internally to ensure that the CPG and the GSP are coordinating their work to avoid duplication;

- Continues to request data from the UNSD directly to ensure that the PSA data is subject to the least amount of formatting as possible. This should be requested by the team best placed to do so, either the CPG or GSP; and

- Ensures evidence is available for the data controls which are in place. This could include a sheet in the calculation spreadsheet that states who carried out the data entry and who carried out the cross-check to the UNSD database;

Assessment of indicator set

19. In undertaking the validation we reviewed the documentation associated with the PSA, including the Delivery Agreement and considered whether the indicators selected to measure progress are consistent with the scope of this PSA. We conclude that the indicators selected afford a reasonable view of progress.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL DATA SYSTEMS

The following sections summarise the results of the NAO's examination of each data system.

Indicator 29.1: Proportion of population below $1 (purchasing power parity, PPP) per day

Conclusion: Red – Not established

20. The Department has not been able to report against this indicator in the APR due to the fact that Country level data is not yet available to an appropriate standard. Adequate disclosure has been made to this effect.

Characteristics of the data system

21. The Department intends to use the same system for PSA 29.1 as they use for indicators 29.2, 29.3, 29.4, 29.6 and 29.7 as set out below.

Findings

- At the time of our audit it was not possible for us to validate PSA 29.1 data systems due to the fact that the data was unavailable and therefore the progress against this indicator had not been established. We have been informed that new data has since become available and that the Department intends to report progress against PSA 29.1 in the 2008-09 Annual Report.

Indicators:

29.2   **Net enrolment in primary education**

29.3   **Ratio of girls to boys in primary education**

29.4   **Under 5 mortality ratio**

29.6   **HIV prevalence rate, 15-49 years old, in national based surveys**

29.7   Proportion of population with sustainable access to an improved water source (urban and rural)

22. The systems used to collect and analyse data and then measure progress for the PSA are the same for these five indicators.

Conclusion: Green - Disclosure

23. The systems in place for the reporting against these indicators are robust. The Department has made adequate disclosure of the weaknesses associated with the data used for monitoring progress against the MDG targets and disclosure has been made where reporting is not possible.

24. Details of the UN definitions for each of these PSA indicators are set out in Annex A. There is a good match between these indicators and the source data being used to measure their progress. However, the Department recognises that the weak national statistical systems in PSA countries have resulted in weaknesses in the internationally published data. This data underpins all of the PSA indicators, but disclosures have been made in the Technical Note to the Autumn Performance Report (APR) to raise awareness of these weaknesses. The Technical Note also outlines the work carried out by the Department and the wider international development community to improve the availability and quality of data. Such actions are limited by the cost of implementing better data collection systems; therefore the Department continues to focus its efforts on supporting statistical capacity building initiatives in developing countries.

Characteristics of the data system

25. A number of UN agencies collect data which is used for monitoring progress against the MDGs; these agencies are outlined in Annex A. The relevant data is submitted by the agencies and fed into the UNSD owned MDG database. The Department is a "user" of this database and is able to request downloads of the data from UNSD or extract data directly from the database on the website.

26. The Department's Corporate Performance Group (CPG) can receive the data in one of two ways; extracting the data from the website and then formatting it to allow it to be entered into the calculation spreadsheets, or by requesting a download from the UNSD that can be entered straight into the calculation spreadsheets without the need for formatting.

27. Calculation spreadsheets are maintained for each indicator. These have been specifically developed to calculate the progress towards achieving the 2015 MDG target based on short term trends. The formulas in the calculation spreadsheets are password protected and only the CPG are able to alter the formulas.

28. Once the data is entered into the calculation spreadsheets it undergoes an internal quality assurance process. The CPG will send the calculation spreadsheets to the Department's Regional Statistics Advisors. They provide support advice and statistical support to country offices.

29. The Regional Statistics Advisors are asked to look at the data in the spreadsheets and comment on;

   - Whether there are any more up to date figures available in the countries that have not reached the international series; and

   - If the figures in the spreadsheets are different from those used in the countries.

30. The Regional Statistics Advisors use their knowledge of the countries they cover to provide advice. They are also able to use knowledge of the Department's staff based in the Country Offices, particularly in countries where there are internal statisticians. If they find that the data is out of line with their understanding, the Regional Statistics Advisors can contact the UN to question the methods used and raise their concerns. However, in the majority of cases the CPG will provide the UN with a coordinated response that brings together all of the questions and concerns.

31. Once the data has been checked by the Regional Statistics Advisors they will make a recommendation on the best course of action as follows;

   - CPG should use the data received from the UNSD; or

   - CPG should use another source of data which is based on internationally comparable definitions to the UNSD data; or

   - If there is no alternative data and the UNSD data is not suitable then the CPG should not use any data set.

32. This recommendation will be given in a section at the bottom of the calculation spreadsheet and, if the second recommendation is made, the new data will also be included at the bottom of the calculation spreadsheet.

33. Once the CPG team have finalised the data sets to use, they make the necessary adjustments to the calculation spreadsheet and the traffic light assessment is automatically calculated.

34. The next step is the comparison of this traffic light assessment, for each PSA country, under each indicator, to the baseline. Thresholds are used to assess the direction in which each country is moving to feed into the final assessment in the APR.

35. The final point of assessment for each PSA indicator is the overall traffic light assessment of progress against the target e.g. for PSA 29.2 the target is to maintain the traffic light assessment for those 12 countries judged to be on-track at baseline with accelerated progress in at least 4 of the remaining countries that were off-track at the baseline.

Findings

- The quality assurance structure within the Department provides a sound response to the weaknesses in the source data. As part of our work we have seen examples of feedback to UNSD and the World Bank which further supports the commitment of the Department to improving data quality.

- The Department may not always have a statistician in each of the PSA countries; this reduces the level of quality assurance that can be given in regions;

- At the moment the Department can not guarantee that it will be automatically informed when the UNSD database is populated with new data. This could pose a risk to the accuracy of data used in PSA performance reporting. The Department has sought to address this through relationship building with the UNSD and through the use of its own quality assurance processes;

- The Department does not carry out an assessment of risks around the supply of data needed for reporting progress against the PSA indicators. An example of this would be UNSD restricting access to the MDG database. Although the Department considers this particular risk to be low, there are other risks that could pose a greater threat, such as an IT failure in the UNSD database;

- The statistical validity of the short term trend assessment has been endorsed by an independent consultant engaged by the Department. The

Department's staff have a good understanding of the methodology and how to apply it to the MDG data. Our review gave us a clear understanding of the way the Department applies the traffic light assessments to the overall indicator progress based on progress in each of the PSA countries. We consider that this could be explained more clearly in the APR to reflect the fact that the target is set over the PSA period;

- There is a weakness with the controls operating over the spreadsheets used to determine the traffic light assessments for each country. The data is entered into the spreadsheets by one CPG member and cross checked to the UNSD database by another member of CPG; however, the Department needs to ensure that this control is evidenced; and

- We found that sufficient disclosures were made for individual indicators as follows;

  o The Department has not been able to report progress against indicator 29.1 as there is insufficient data to allow this; and

  o The Department has also made disclosures where local data sources have been used in place of the international data sources. This is the case for indicators 29.2 - 29.7.

Indicator 29.5: Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) per 100,000 live births

Conclusion: Green - Disclosure

36. The systems in place for the reporting against this indicator are robust. The Department has made adequate disclosure of the weaknesses associated with the data used for monitoring progress against this MDG targets.

Characteristics of the data system

37. There is a good match between indicator 29.5 and the source data being used to measure its progress. Details of the UN definition for this PSA indicator are set out in Annex A. However, the Department recognises that the weak national statistical systems in PSA countries have resulted in weaknesses in the internationally published data.

38. UNICEF is responsible for collecting the data for this indicator and submitting it to the UNSD. When the Department receives a download from the UNSD the data is subject to an internal quality assurance process, similar to that described above in paragraphs 21 to 31 above.

39. The spreadsheet which has been specifically developed for indicator 29.5 identifies which band each country falls into according to UNICEF's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) thresholds of very high, high, moderate or low, and then ascribes a traffic light based on these categories.

40. The PSA countries are then extracted from the spreadsheet and reported in the APR. The final point of assessment for each PSA indicator is the overall traffic light assessment of progress against the target e.g. for PSA 29.5 the target is to maintain the traffic light assessment for the only country judged to be on-track at baseline with accelerated progress in at least 10 of the remaining countries that were off-track at the baseline.

Findings

- The quality assurance structure within the Department provides a sound response to the weaknesses in the source data. As part of our work, we have seen examples of feedback to UNSD and the World Bank which indicates the commitment of the Department to improving data quality.

- The Department does not carry out an assessment of risks around the supply of data needed for reporting progress against the PSA indicators. This finding has also been raised for the five indicators above.

- We found that sufficient disclosures were made for indicator 29.5 as follows:

o   to draw attention to the fact that estimates for 2005 were based on a different methodology and assumptions. This has meant that they are not comparable with previous estimates;

o   highlighting where local data sources have been used in place of the international data sources; and

o   to define the thresholds for the MMR thresholds as very high, high, moderate and low.

Indicator 29.8: The value (in nominal terms), and proportion admitted free of duties, of developed country imports (excluding arms and oil) from low income countries

Conclusion: Amber - Systems

41. The method of extracting the trade data for this indicator is strong. However, our walkthrough testing identified that the data had changed between the extraction date and the drafting of the Autumn Performance Report (APR).

42. In this case it was the absolute values of imports admitted free of duties which were affected and not the percentages which meant that the baseline data was not affected. However there is a risk to accurate bi-annual reporting if the Department is not informed of changes to the trade data.

Characteristics of the data system

43. This indicator looks at the value (in nominal terms), and proportion admitted free of duties, of developed countries' imports (excluding arms and oil) from low income countries. We found that there is a good match between indicator 29.8 and the source data the Department intends to use to measure its progress. Details of the MDG-Trade definition for this PSA indicator are set out in Annex A. The Department has made several key disclosures with regards to this indicator: firstly, to recognise that the same data quality weaknesses, as mentioned in the section above, will also affect this indicator; secondly, to make reference to the fact that the countries monitored for this indicator are different to those for indicators 1-7; and lastly to identify the fact that the 2007 baseline has been set but there is insufficient data to measure performance until 2009.

44. We were able to review and test the system used by the Department to collect and analyse baseline data for indicator 29.8. We understand that the same process will be used to extract data for performance measurement; however we were unable to test the process for measuring performance against the baseline due to the lack of progress data as noted above. We are satisfied that the disclosure in the APR is appropriate.

45. The MDG-trade website contains country level export data which can be directly extracted by the Department for indicator 29.8. Once the export data is extracted it is entered on to a spreadsheet and the Department can carry out simple calculations to identify the percentage of exports which are free trade exports. The data is sent to an economist in the Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) who advises the CPG on

the data's suitability. Once this is assured the data is used to produce a three year rolling average.

Findings

- We found that the close working of the Department with BERR enables the quality assurance to take place by a specialist working in this field.

- Our walkthrough testing of this process identified that the data on the website had changed since the Department extracted data. Although our sample did not identify a variance in the percentages of free trade exports, we did find that the absolute numbers had changed by over $300,000 in some cases. We therefore recommend that the Department and BERR should pursue the owners of the trade data so that they are notified when changes are made.

- We also found that the APR contained no explicit reference to the difference between the countries reported in PSA 29.1-29.7 and the low income countries reported in 29.8. We recommend that the Department's APR makes this clear and states that the definition of a Low Income Country (LIC) is based on the World Bank/OECD DAC definition. We also recommend that the APR makes reference to the PSA Technical Annex that contains the two lists of countries reported for PSA 29.1-29.7 and PSA 29.8

Annex A

PSA Indicators and the Millennium Development Goals

No	Indicator	UN Definition (taken from UN MDG Handbook)	Data Collection
1	Proportion of population below $1 (purchasing power parity, PPP) per day.	The percentage of the population living on less than $1.08 a day at 1993 international prices. The one dollar a day poverty line is compared to consumption or income per person and includes consumption from own production and income in kind. This poverty line has fixed purchasing power across countries or areas and is often called an "absolute poverty line" or measure of extreme poverty.	World Bank Development Research Group Household budget surveys Other surveys covering income and expenditure.
2	Net enrolment in primary education	The ratio of the number of children of official school age (as defined by the national education system) who are enrolled in primary school to the total population of children of official school age. Primary education provides children with basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills along with an elementary understanding of such subjects as history, geography, natural science, social science, art and music	UNESCO Country's ministry of education records United Nations population estimates. Household surveys
3	Ratio of girls to boys in primary education	The ratio of the number of female students enrolled at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in public and private schools to the number of male students.	As per 29.2 above.
4	Under 5 mortality ratio	The probability (expressed as a rate per 1,000 live births) of a child born in a specified year dying before reaching the age of five if subject to current age-specific mortality rates	UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys Demographic and Health Surveys National Family Health Surveys
5	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) per 100,000 live births	The number of women who die from any cause related to or aggravated by pregnancy or its management (excluding accidental or incidental causes) during pregnancy and childbirth or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and site of the	As per 29.4 above.

		pregnancy, per 100,000 live births. The 10th revision of the International Classification of Diseases makes provision for including late maternal deaths occurring between six weeks and one year after childbirth.	
6	HIV prevalence rate, 15-49 years old, in national based surveys	The UN handbook has a number of HIV/AIDS targets it hopes to achieve. These vary from HIV/AIDS prevalence among pregnant women aged 15–24 years and Contraceptive use rate by women aged 15–49 years. There is no explicit target relating to HIV/AIDS prevalence in 15-49 year olds as shown for the PSA target. However, the UNSD database uses the national surveys for HIV/AIDS prevalence among 15-49 year olds as an official measure.	UNAIDS AIDS Indicator Surveys Demographic Health Surveys
7	Proportion of population with sustainable access to an improved water source (urban and rural)	The percentage of the population who use any of the following types of water supply for drinking: piped water, public tap, borehole or pump, protected well, protected spring or rainwater. Improved water sources do not include vendor-provided water, bottled water, tanker trucks or unprotected wells and springs.	WHO/ UNICEF National Risk and Vulnerability Assessments Household Health Surveys
8	The value (in nominal terms), and proportion admitted free of duties, of developed country imports (excluding arms and oil) from low income countries	Market access indicator 8.6 has been defined by the ITC, UNCTAD and WTO partnership to reflect target 8.A of MDG 8: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system.	International Trade Centre UNCTAD World Trade Organisation