Data for Development

An Action Plan to Monitor the Sustainable Development Goals
And Fulfill the Hopes of the Data Revolution

April 17, 2015
The Financing for Development Conference hosted in Addis Ababa in July will be the key forum to secure the necessary means to meet the challenge of the SDGs. With clear commitments from member states,
international financial institutions, and the private sector, the FFD Conference could lay the ground for a meaningful partnership for development data, backed up by adequate resources.

**Building Strong National Statistical Systems**

The advent of the MDGs in 2000 drew attention to many gaps in the statistical record. In 2003, PARIS21 formed a task team to examine ways to improve support to the statistical systems of developing countries for monitoring development goals. They found national statistical systems characterised by “under-funding, reliance on donor support, particularly for household surveys, and very weak administrative data systems.” More than ten years later, much progress has been made. Over 100 countries produced national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDSs). National data archives have been established in about half of the IDA countries. The frequency and coordination of internationally sponsored surveys has improved. Ninety-three percent of the world’s population was enumerated during the 2010 census round. However, as recognized by the UN Secretary General’s Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution, national statistical systems are still beset by challenges.

Many national statistical offices lack sufficient capacity and funding, and remain vulnerable to political and interest group influence (including by donors). Data quality should be protected and improved by strengthening NSOs, and ensuring they are functionally autonomous, independent of sector ministries and political influence. *A World That Counts*

At the 46th Session of the UN Statistical Commission and the Intergovernmental Negotiation on Post-2015, governments agreed that strong national statistical offices and cross-governmental statistical systems are needed for monitoring the goals. Stronger, open data systems will also improve decision-making, program design, and service delivery, as well as transparency and accountability to citizens. To realize the opportunities of the data revolution, governments need to embark on comprehensive programs of modernisation that bolster administrative data collection across all ministries, encourage greater frequency and disaggregation of data, and encourage the adoption of new methods, such as geospatial monitoring to track social and environmental dimensions of the goals, as well as boosting statistical capacity and literacy within both government and civil society.

**Revitalizing Financing For Statistics**

International assistance will be crucial to support countries’ modernisation efforts. The study prepared by SDSN, ODW, and a broad coalition of data for development experts estimates that a total of US$1 billion per annum will be required to enable 77 of the world’s lower-income countries to put in place statistical systems capable of supporting and measuring the SDGs.

We recommend … a new funding stream and innovative financing mechanisms to support the data revolution for sustainable development. *A World That Counts*

We focus our analysis on 77 countries that currently qualify for concessional borrowing through the International Development Association (IDA) and are therefore likely to be in need of external assistance, and we cost a selection of core statistical products that will be essential for monitoring the social, economic
and environmental dimensions of the SDGs. These products include surveys, census, civil registration and vital statistics systems, education management information systems, and select economic and environmental statistics, inclusive of geospatial data. We also allow an overhead for human resource investments and policy and legislative reforms based on current and planned expenditures.

The estimates provided in this study are conservative. We have not included the costs of monitoring and evaluation systems in each sector, which will be needed for effective program design. Nor do we look at the costs of modernization over time. New methods of data collection and analysis based on new technologies may replace or reduce the cost of traditional methods, but they will require additional investments. Should they become available, countries may realize savings or they may seize the opportunity to go beyond the basic functionality assumed here. We also recognize that other investments in the data ecosystem will be essential to underpin a more fully developed culture of statistical literacy, and for a more sophisticated government approach to data analytics, visualization, and communication. This study is focused on the core components of an effective national monitoring system and the resources required bringing low and lower-middle income countries up to this basic level.

To meet the $1 billion per annum requirement, donors will need to maintain current contributions to statistics, of approximately US$300 million per annum, and go further, leveraging up to US$ 200 million more in official development assistance (ODA) to support country efforts. For their part, developing countries must commit to make up the rest, mobilizing domestic resources to fund their statistical development plans. vi Positively, we have observed an increase in recent years in domestic allocation of funds to statistical data plans. Donors should ease countries’ access to funding by creating a new funding stream to support the data revolution for development.

Resources must also be better coordinated. Donors should align their contributions behind national strategies for the development of statistics, which highlight key priority investments. To ensure maximum coordination and coherence, this funding stream could be a multi-donor trust fund, administered by the World Bank but governed by a broad range of stakeholders, including the UN. This fund should seek to align with similar endeavours, such as the WHO and WB Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Scaling-Up Investment Plan, but also direct resources towards underfunded areas, such as gender statistics and management information systems in the education and health sectors. The fund should also seek to drive improvements in monitoring over time and to foster innovation.

**Embracing The Data Revolution**

As highlighted by the Secretary General’s IEAG, new data collection and monitoring technologies are rapidly becoming available. These innovations will dramatically advance national statistical offices’ and the international communities’ ability to monitor the impact of development programs and will in form the way they are designed and implemented. High-resolution satellite imagery, mobile devices, biometric data, and crowd-sourced citizen reporting will change official data collection processes and the operation of programs they monitor. Take for example, satellite imagery. The cost of high-resolution image acquisition is falling while the availability of images and capacity for automated processing are increasing. There are many applications for earth observation data: predicting harvests, disaster response, and food security situations; monitoring geographic patterns and likely transmission corridors of diseases that have geospatial determinants; measuring population density and the spread of new settlements; and mapping and planning transportation infrastructure.
Similarly, many surveys are now being conducted on digital mobile platforms. This practice reduces the time and cost for data collection, improves accuracy, simplifies collection of GIS and image data, streamlines integration with other information streams, and opens up the possibility of incorporating micro-chip based sensors into survey processes. Innovation is not just about adopting new technologies. Many countries are also innovating by expanding the use and impact of data through open data. Others are innovating in setting up partnerships for groups with different skill sets to work together from research to data production towards a common goal. These and other innovations will drive new approaches to achieving the SDGs, from pinpointing specific communities and households for health initiatives to integrating real-time monitoring of natural resources into allocation schemes and tracking government and donor investments. In spite of initial upfront costs for software, hardware or training, such innovations have huge potential to lower the cost of SDG monitoring over time.

**A CALL FOR ACTION**

Since May 2013 when the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda called for a data revolution, there has been an outpouring of reviews, studies, and blog posts. The Secretary General’s IEAG, *A World That Counts*, issued at the end of 2014 is the most comprehensive. There has also been follow up work led by the UN statistical community as well as donor-supported special studies, such as the PARIS21 review of the status of the data revolution in developing countries. The most recent contribution is the SDSN-coordinated Needs Assessment. There is much energy and enthusiasm among stakeholders for a data revolution in support of development, and in particular, to support SDG monitoring. Now is the time to build on the work done and chart a path for action. These are the critical players who must take responsibility for making the development data agenda attainable:

0 The United Nations should lead the development of standards for new indicators and coordinate the monitoring of the SDGs. As the convener of the UN Statistical Commission it should advocate for principles of equity and data privacy and propose statistical and technical standards to encourage innovation and facilitate openness and information exchange.

0 The World Bank should be encouraged to establish new funding or re-purpose existing sources for the development data agenda, governed by a broad coalition of actors, working in partnership. The World Bank has demonstrated its ability to manage multi-donor trust funds for statistical capacity building. The World Bank working with other donors (traditional and new ones) should help with channeling funding to developing countries and provide a mechanism for better coordination among the donors with varied interests. The new funding stream should also be prepared to provide resources for critical data gaps not covered elsewhere.

0 Countries must prioritize improvements to their national statistical systems. Well-articulated plans accompanied by realistic budgets are needed to enlist domestic support and to coordinate with donors. As full partners in the international statistical system, they should define their own
development plans and advocate for innovative approaches to producing statistics that meet their needs.

Regional entities should prioritize and encourage improvements in data and statistics, as demonstrated by the recent Africa Data Consensus.  

International agencies, think tanks, NGOs, donors, and others who have been instrumental in the work of the development data agenda so far can add value through knowledge, resources, and partnerships. It is important to strengthen the involvement of these stakeholders and harness their interest and know-how for the future.

A World That Counts recommends the creation of a World Forum on sustainable development data to kickstart national, regional, and global actions and look for ways to better coordinate them, an idea that has been endorsed by many of stakeholders and key players. The World Forum could bring together the critical ecosystem to share ideas and experiences for data improvements, innovation, advocacy and technology transfer. Such a gathering could mark the beginning of a new global partnership for development data to make the data revolution a sustainable revolution for all.

Prepared by SDSN and Open Data Watch with inputs from ODI, PARIS21, UN Foundation, and The World Bank.
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iii Accelerated Data Program Central Catalogue is available at http://adp.ihsn.org/survey-catalogs.

