



DATA FOR DEVELOPMENT

V I E W P O I N T P A P E R

Benefits and Costs of the Data for Development Targets for the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Serge Kapto

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Post-2015 Consensus

Serge Kapto
UNDP

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Introduction

Proposal of The Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals

17. In order to monitor the implementation of the SDGs, it will be important to improve the availability of and access to data and statistics disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts to support the support the monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs. There is a need to take urgent steps to improve the quality, coverage and availability of disaggregated data to ensure that no one is left behind.

After months of intense and difficult discussions, the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals, an inter-governmental body mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to propose a successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals, settled on a 17 goals and 169 targets. In contrast, the MDGs included 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. It is too early to tell how many indicators the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will have. There is still a year of intergovernmental negotiations to go. However, if the current trend hold, and assuming an average of 3 indicators per target, there could be upwards of a staggering 500 indicators!

Measuring such a large number of indicators would require a significant scaling up of statistical capacity, infrastructure and resources. Considering the limited amount of funding for development statistics so far, and the slow progress to meet the global partnership for development targets (MDG8), Morten Jerven in his paper for the Post-2015 Consensus, raises the very valid question of how to pay for it all, one that deserves the attention of diplomats, policy-makers and development stakeholders.

As Jerven points out, the MDGs targets, indicators and measurements have their own share of gaps and flaws, scientific and statistical. The quality, availability and disaggregation of data are far from ideal. This time around, the call for a Post-2015 data revolution, much like the SDG agenda itself, faces significantly more scrutiny from stakeholders than the MDGs and choice of related indicators did. Political commitment to stronger accountability of the SDG agenda provides a powerful incentive for choosing indicators more rigorously and devoting more resources to quality data. The Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals held a one-day informal on measuring progress in December 2013, jointly with the Friends of the Chair Group of the United Nations Statistical Commission. At the request of the co-chairs of the Open Working Group, the Statistical Commission produced statistical notes on what was then known as focus areas, assessing the feasibility, measurability and data availability of proposed goals. Moreover policy makers are waking up to the fact that the new agenda will come at a cost, and they are demonstrating willingness, despite the difficult political negotiations, to confront the issues of funding that the new agenda will require. It is a welcome sign that the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals identified data-related targets as part of the Means of

Implementation goal, through which the development community is expected to commit funding, technical assistance and other resources to enhance statistical capacity for monitoring the SDGs.

Outcome Document - Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals

Proposed goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Data, monitoring and accountability

17.18 by 2020, enhance capacity building support to developing countries, including for LDCs and SIDS, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts

17.19 by 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP, and support statistical capacity building in developing countries

Measuring What We Want Vs. What We Can Afford

It can be argued that the MDGs were instrumental in laying the groundwork and foundation for the Post-2015 data revolution. Despite its flaws, the MDGs framework led to improvements to national statistical capacity as countries sought to measure their progress against the global targets. Donors and policy-makers started engaging more with national statistical offices as they sought to monitor the impact of development assistance. The MDGs also raised the profile of development statistics at global level, with policy makers paying a lot more attention to the workings of the UN Statistical Commission which sets a global normative framework for development data and measurements. The positive spillover effects can be felt at the regional level as well, with the Strategy for Harmonization of Statistics in Africa (SHaSA) for example going even further than the MDGs in developing standards for measuring areas such as Governance, Peace and Security.

The SDG framework is expected to be universal, transformative and inclusive. Those characteristics will not be met with a business-as-usual approach focusing only on what we can do now or what we can afford. The cost of measuring the SDGs, particularly as it potentially affects policy-making and resource allocation, should be weighed against expected benefits. While the costs might be relatively easier to estimate, quantifying benefits will be harder/impractical given the complexity of development. Yet the transformative potential of the data revolution can't be ignored. The impact of more and better data on expected development outcomes should be prime consideration of policy-makers, donors and stakeholders.

The SDGs framework can help set the level of ambition and raise the bar for national statistical offices and development data stakeholders. The increased demand for data in Post-2015 can potentially strengthen policy commitment to statistical capacity, leading to more investment. The question should not be “what can we afford?” but “what do we need?” followed by “how do we pay for it?”

How to Cover the Costs

The cost of a national population census cost can range from very expensive (\$42/capita in USA) to very cheap (\$0.40/capita in India). It would be wrong to assume that funding for the data revolution should come only from official development assistance. Although discussions on effective development cooperation, financing for development and in the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing are not yet concluded, they already point to the potential of other sources of development financing that dwarf ODA. Analyzing the cost of development data relative to the size of the economy would reveal a different picture from when compared to ODA only. With an estimated GDP of \$509bn, the projected cost of the 2016 census in Nigeria, at N17bn (or \$100m), is but a drop in the bucket. A high-level political commitment of policy-makers, which concretely translates into a stable appropriation in national budgets, would provide a predictable and sustainable source of funding for development statistics. It remains the case that lower income countries will be more dependent on ODA for their statistical needs. However, Jerven rightfully cautions against the risk of donors’ preferences overtaking national priorities. Countries should heed the lessons from the MDGs and ensure that local statistical capacity effectively serves to meet local needs instead of the demands of donors who are “paying for the results”.

Thanks to a much broader consultative and participatory process, the SDGs so far seem to have even more mobilization power than the MDGs. Numerous stakeholders have already initiated projects and resource mobilization in response to the call for a Post-2015 data revolution. These early initiatives serve as testbeds for exploring innovative approaches to delivering the Post-2015 data revolution in a cost-effective and outcome-oriented manner, as they explore the potentials of partnerships, citizens generated data, technological progress such as mobile telephony, big data, cloud computing and crowdsourcing.

Latest estimates from the International Telecommunications Union indicate that by the end of 2014 there will be as many mobile cellular subscriptions as people on earth. Developing countries experience the strongest growth globally, driven by simpler physical infrastructure requirements, portability, affordability and accessibility of the technology. The penetration rate of mobile telephony, currently at 90%, should reach saturation well within the timeframe of 2030 envisaged for the SDGs. Such ubiquitous availability and affordability of mobile technology, combined with its geographic spread, open up opportunities for innovative, cheaper and scaled up data collection. For the cost of an SMS, citizens can become active partners and agents in crowdsourcing reporting and monitoring of Post-2015 implementation, complementing official efforts. Mobile devices are fast becoming the primary tool for accessing the Internet in developed and developing

countries alike. As people top up their minutes, “beep” relatives, share status updates on social media, use search engines or access banking services through their mobile devices, they leave behind a digital treasure trove of data that can provide policymakers with valuable insights about their socio-economic conditions. Big data hints at some tantalizing potential for harnessing such data for development purposes that initiatives such as the United Nations Global Pulse, the Orange Data for Development Challenge, and others, are only beginning to explore. Innovative partnerships with the private sector, often the custodian of such data, will be key to the success of the Post-2015 data revolution.

As noted above, diplomats and policy-makers negotiating the content of the next development framework have acknowledged the importance of quality, available and disaggregated data for monitoring the implementation of the SDGs and ensuring that the benefits of development reach everyone. The Post-2015 Data Revolution has a strong momentum behind it. The challenge now is to ensure that the level of political interest remains high, that the level of ambition is not weakened in the quid pro quo of intergovernmental negotiations in the year ahead, and that the political commitment lead to concrete funding allocations, partnerships and cooperation for strengthening data for development capacity across the board.

And for that, all hands are needed on deck!

This paper was written by Serge Kapto, Policy Specialist, UNDP. The project brings together more than 50 top economists, NGOs, international agencies and businesses to identify the goals with the greatest benefit-to-cost ratio for the next set of UN development goals.

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Copenhagen Consensus Center is a think tank that investigates and publishes the best policies and investment opportunities based on how much social good (measured in dollars, but also incorporating e.g. welfare, health and environmental protection) for every dollar spent. The Copenhagen Consensus was conceived to address a fundamental, but overlooked topic in international development: In a world with limited budgets and attention spans, we need to find effective ways to do the most good for the most people. The Copenhagen Consensus works with 100+ of the world's top economists including 7 Nobel Laureates to prioritize solutions to the world's biggest problems, on the basis of data and cost-benefit analysis.

