Unlocking Resources for the SDG Data Agenda
A roundtable discussion building on the SDGs and Big Data Seminar
April 19, 2018

Summary

The data revolution offers significant opportunity to support SDG achievement. During the WBG-IMF Spring meetings, the Office of the Senior Vice President for the 2030 Agenda held a seminar on using big data to support SDG implementation. Following the seminar, the Office of the Senior Vice President and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD) convened a small group of representatives from government, multilateral organizations, and private sector to take the conversation forward. The discussion focused on how to put in place a framework to maximize the benefits of new opportunities in data to achieve the SDGs.

Scene Setting
The discussion began by reflecting on comments made during the earlier seminar, particularly those made by the UN Deputy Secretary-General who eloquently described the essential role of national statistical systems in enabling us to take advantage of big data and the opportunities it offers. She highlighted the financing, capacity and institutional gaps faced by these systems, and emphasized how important they are not just for monitoring but for achieving the SDGs.

Several roundtable participants noted that the excitement to exploit big data to make improvements across the whole data ecosystem. As such, we should be working towards "national information architectures" that support all data sources, with the backbone of national statistics. The Cape Town Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data endorsed by the UN provides a global framework for strengthening national statistical systems to support the SDGs.

Trust was a key theme in the discussion, given recent public debates around privacy and personal data and the trend toward 'post-truth' politics. Official statistics and robust national statistical systems are needed now more than ever to ground-truth new data sources and to counter this trend. When experimenting with big data and new technology, we need to recognize that different parts of government beyond the National Statistical Office will have mission-critical needs for data and information.

The remainder of the discussion was focused on barriers to advancing the SDG data agenda and possible steps to address these barriers.

Barriers
The discussion touched on conceptual, institutional and financial barriers.

Conceptual – A common challenge is conceptual confusion around data and its purpose. We need to unpack and separate how we talk about data for monitoring, policy, programming, and related needs for digital access.

Institutional – Chief among the institutional barriers is the need to improve coordination and communication across parts of government that produce and use data. This prevents government from developing a coherent approach to data, and building the enabling environment to use new data and technology, including the necessary legislation, regulation and financing mechanisms.

Financing gaps – Several low and lower middle-income countries face significant resource constraints preventing them from transforming their data systems to support SDG implementation. Domestic resources are the most sustainable funding source, and some of these countries are working toward increasing the amount of domestic resources they allocate to data and statistics, but external financing is still required for some. External financing can do more to support country priorities, enable governments to harness new methods and data sources, and strengthen traditional systems. Multilateral development banks have a unique role to play in this by mobilizing finance, and setting standards that incentivize investments to strengthen data and statistical systems.

Financing is not fit for purpose – Even in countries where financing gaps are not typically a barrier, some find that their traditional instruments are not fit for purpose when they want to rapidly take advantage of new types or uses of data. More work is required to determine what adjustments can be made to traditional instruments that will create incentives to take advantage of new opportunities, or at least ensure that these instruments do not prevent action. One participant noted that if we manage to get money organized in the right way with well-aligned incentives then everything else will come along, including the legal framework.

Addressing the barriers
- Build political commitment to data internationally and domestically.
- Leverage the new opportunities offered by the data revolution to strengthen the 'backbone' traditional statistical systems.
- Show how data investments, and use of new technology or data sources result in efficiency gains.
- Frame the arguments around outcomes. Show concrete examples of how using big data improves people's lives and how not strengthening data systems is preventing progress.
- Currently [0.3% of ODA is spent on data and statistics](). Push to increase that percentage, particularly if we see it as a positive externality across all policy areas.
- Adjust our instruments or create new mechanisms to allow for innovation, flexibility, and agility so that domestic and external resources can be channeled toward new approaches.

Next steps
The GPSDD and the WBG will take these ideas forward with the UN Statistical Division, Paris21 and many other partners at the UN, G20 and beyond. We will continue exploring how to foster collective action to address the many barriers identified through this discussion. In the coming months, GPSDD plans to strengthen the evidence based on the value of investing in data and work with partners to mobilize a call to action for more and better support for data. We will also continue our work at the sub-national, national, and regional level to broker collaborative and innovation data solutions in response to country needs by bringing stakeholders together across sectors and combining different data sources. We look forward to engaging many of the roundtable participants in this effort.

Participants
- Mahmoud Mohieldin, Senior Vice President, 2030 Development Agenda, UN Relations and Partnerships, World Bank Group
- Haishan Fu, Director, Development Data Group, World Bank Group
- Claire Melamed, CEO, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data
- Louis Marc Ducharme, Director, Statistics Department, International Monetary Fund
- Susanna Gable, Chief Economist, Swedish International Development Agency
- James George, Advisor, Office of the UN Deputy-Secretary General
- Chris Hurst, Director of the Projects Directorate, European Investment Bank
- Alhassan Iddrisu, Director of Economic Research and Forecasting, Ministry of Finance, Ghana
- Luis Fernando Mejia, Minister of Planning, Colombia
- Alexander Meyer, Vice President, Global Business Development, SAP
- Stefan Schweinfest, Director, Statistics Division, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (by audio)
- Paulina Terrazas, Chief of Special Projects and the National SDGs Coordinator, Office of the President, Mexico
- Ruth Turner, Advisor. International Financial Institutions Department, UK Department for International Development