Integrating Geospatial Information into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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Summary

Many global dialogues and processes have been convened, and reports published, on sustainable development over the past 30 years. These reach a critical juncture in 2015 when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the overarching development framework for the world for the past 15 years, come to an end, and a new and ambitious post-2015 development agenda begins. This will culminate in September 2015 when the United Nations General Assembly endorses and transmits "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", a new and universal development agenda for all countries and stakeholders to use as a blueprint of action for people, planet and prosperity. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will guide the way we collectively manage and sustain our Earth through to at least 2030, and will be anchored by 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 169 targets, and a global indicator framework, in order to measure and monitor progress. It will also capture specific and separate global United Nations (UN) system outcomes on disaster risk reduction, climate change, and financing for development.

Strengthening data production and the use of better data in policymaking and monitoring are becoming increasingly recognized as fundamental means for development. The 15 year experience of the MDGs offered numerous lessons and taught us that data are an indispensable element of the development agenda. Despite significant and recognised global achievements, the MDGs failed to recognize the need for data and geography, and were limited in their ability to track and monitor progress consistently. In essence, there was no sustainable data to measure and monitor sustainable development. Poor data quality, lack of timely data, and unavailability of disaggregated data on important dimensions were among the major challenges. As a result, many national and local governments continued to rely on outdated data or data of insufficient quality to make decisions, planning and policy.

Therefore, data, as the basis for evidence-based decision-making and accountability, will be a crucial pillar of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs seek to build on the MDGs and complete what they did not achieve, and with approaches that acknowledge the need for the SDGs to: be integrated and indivisible; balance the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental); and to include critical data for effective measuring, monitoring and for development policymaking. The 2030 Agenda specifically demands new data acquisition and integration approaches to improve the availability, quality, timeliness and disaggregation of data to support the implementation of the new development agenda at all levels – including to exploit the contribution to be made by a wide range of data, including earth observation and geospatial information, while ensuring national ownership in supporting and tracking progress.

However, despite the recognised need for geospatial information in sustainable development processes in recent years, the means for the global geospatial community to implement and integrate this valuable capability into national, regional, or global approaches has been lacking. Arguably, adequately identifying the need for, and articulating the role of, geospatial information has proven elusive in both concept and practice. At its fourth session in August 2014, the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) observed that the level of understanding and rate of uptake of geospatial information, particularly at the policy and decision-making level, remains less than optimal…many do not understand its value and importance within the context of the sustainable development agenda. The production and use of geospatial information within national, regional and global policy frameworks needs to be mainstreamed in order to enhance the capability for governments, international organizations and researchers to analyse,

model, monitor and report on sustainable development, disasters, climate change, and other global concerns[1].

Like sustainable development itself the integration and implementation of geospatial information remains a challenge, but there is evidence of progress. The final 2015 MDG Report noted that geospatial data can support monitoring in many aspects of development, from health care to natural resource management. Knowing where people and things are and their relationship to each other is essential for informed decision-making. Comprehensive location-based information is helping Governments to develop strategic priorities, make decisions, and measure and monitor outcomes. Once the geospatial data are created, they can be used many times to support a multiplicity of applications.[2] Goal 17 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, under the theme 'Data, monitoring and accountability', calls for Member States to by 2020, 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[3].

This paper will demonstrate that, for the first time, the global geospatial information community, particularly through national geospatial information agencies, has a unique opportunity to integrate geospatial information into the global development agenda in a more holistic and sustainable manner, specifically in measuring and monitoring the targets and indicators of the SDGs within a common framework. However, in order to achieve this outcome, national geospatial information agencies will need to: collaborate more closely with national statistical and earth observation professional communities; be more unified, with similar national to global objectives and aspirations; be delivering the same data, as much as practical and depending on national circumstances; demonstrate the functionality and usefulness of the national geospatial data and how it can be integrated into the wider sustainable development policy process; and have the same policy voice at the global level through UN-GGIM.

[1] E/C.20/2014/13/Add.1, 2014, para 37. http://ggim.un.org/docs/meetings/GGIM4/E-C20-2014-13%20Activities%20Related%20to%20Sustainable%20Development%20Report.pdf
[2] The Millennium Development Report 2015, http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/
[3] Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 17.18, p.23. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/7891Transforming%20Our%20World.pdf