Expanding the Data Ecosystem: The role of "Non-Official" Data for SDG Monitoring and Review

Summary:
- We strongly support the adoption of the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data by the UN Statistical Commission. We commit to strengthening and nurturing partnerships with National Statistical Offices (NSOs), particularly around Objectives 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 5.1, and urge NSOs, governments and UN bodies to intensify work and expand opportunities for partnership with non-official data sources[1] and providers.
- We are committed to working with NSOs to overcome challenges in working closely with non-official data for the SDGs – most notably around issues of comparability and interoperability, data quality and methodologies, trust-building and subjectivity of data, and open data standards and data privacy.
- We strongly support the call in the 2030 Agenda and the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data to strengthen the capacity of official statistical systems, as well as further support for non-official data providers as well.
- We call upon NSOs to harness non-official data in their countries to help ensure that no one is left behind, and to further use of survey-based perception and experiential data, in an effort to maintain the people-centered nature of SDG implementation.
- We urge countries to utilize non-official data sources to inform national development planning and indicators development. We also strongly call for governments to include non-official data sources in its monitoring and reporting systems, and to put in place inclusive mechanisms for submissions of civil society expert assessments or alternative reports, and dialogues with civil society.

---

[1] Non-official data comes from a range of sources, including, inter alia, the UN, other multilateral institutions, civil society organizations, research institutions, academia, the private sector and citizens themselves.

Background

To meet the ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda, it is essential that national implementation efforts are matched by an equally comprehensive and inclusive monitoring and accountability framework. While National Statistical Offices (NSOs) will be the primary bodies responsible for monitoring SDG progress, data being produced by other actors will also play a crucial role in providing a more complete, robust, timely and accurate picture of progress at all levels.

The 2030 Agenda itself notes that while SDG follow-up and review process should be *"primarily based on national official data sources",* it will also *"promote transparent and accountable scaling-up of appropriate public-private cooperation to exploit the contribution to be made by a wide range of data, including earth observation and geo-spatial information, while ensuring national ownership in supporting and tracking progress."[2]* As such, the 2030 Agenda cements the opportunity for strong partnerships between official and non-official data producers. Additionally, as acknowledged throughout the *Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data[3]*, these "non-official" and quantitative data sources can be instrumental in helping complement data from official statistical sources. These data sources are also critical to implementing the 2030 Agenda's commitment to "leave no one behind," by helping expand the scope of data collection to cover communities and population groups that are often not counted through some "official" channels.

Building upon this momentum from the World Data Forum and the Cape Town Action Plan, *the Transparency, Accountability & Participation (TAP) Network strongly supports the adoption of the Cape Town Action Plan by the UN Statistical Commission, commits to strengthening and nurturing these partnerships, and urges NSOs, governments and UN bodies to intensify work and expand opportunities for partnerships with non-official data sources and providers.*

What is "Non-Official Data"?

Non-official data comes from a range of sources, including, inter alia, the UN, other multilateral institutions, civil society organizations, research institutions, academia, the private sector and citizens themselves. It ranges from global surveys (e.g Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer and the International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey) and indices (e.g. UNDP's Human Development Index) to personal, qualitative data generated by some of the world's most marginalized people at the local level (e.g. citizen-generated data project Map Kibera or perception-based surveys such as the IMAGES survey conducted by Promundo and ICRW). It also includes data translated from publicly available (open) data sets to track a specific phenomenon/issue (e.g. Publish What You Fund's Aid Transparency Index) and information collated through expert assessments (e.g. CIVICUS' annual State of Civil Society Report). All of these, and many more similar data sources will play a critical role in informing policies and delivering on the SDGs and 2030 Agenda, as well as in monitoring and accountability processes at all levels.

The value of "Non-Official Data"

---

[2] Paragraph 76, Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld)

[3] Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data. (http://undataforum.org/WorldDataForum/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Cape-Town-Action-Plan-For-Data-Jan2017.pdf)

There is a compelling case for the creation of a pluralistic data ecosystem of data producers and users, which harnesses both official and non-official data:

Filling data gaps and capacity
Non-official data can complement official sources of data, fill data gaps that exist in a timely, robust way, and supplement official reporting when data quality and availability is insufficient. Particularly given the immense capacity challenges that NSOs are facing in collecting data for all SDGs and indicators, it can therefore help take the burden off NSOs and ensuring broader data coverage on a wider range of issues. We must collectively use the 2030 Agenda as an opportunity to significantly improve, widen and deepen data availability.

Fulfilling commitments to multi-stakeholder partnerships
The shaping of the 2030 Agenda saw unprecedented levels of engagement between governments, civil society, the private sector and the entire UN System. Similarly, an inclusive and multi-stakeholder World Data Forum produced the *Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data*, which further commits to increasing collaboration and cross-fertilization of official and non-official data communities throughout many of its objectives. Fostering mechanisms to facilitate further dialogue to share best practices and data expertise will help spur additional innovation and broader ownership amongst a wider range of stakeholders.

Broad ownership of data and improved accuracy
"Country ownership is about much more than state ownership; Pluralistic data production will also mean data ownership across society."[4] Usage of non-official data will help triangulate data and will help reduce the possibility of limited, erroneous or politically manipulated NSO data being the sole source of information about a context. This will play a key role in ensuring legitimacy of our collective data, and painting a truly accurate picture of progress towards the SDGs.

Accountability
It is not only policymakers that need data to make decisions and set development priorities, but civil society, legislatures, supreme audit institutions, opposition politicians, activists and the media need it to hold them to account. Nationally-relevant non-official data can offer a crucial check and balance that can help ensure that views and perspectives of people's lived realities are monitored and taken into account when policies are being shaped. Especially when it comes to issues like justice, the rule of law or human rights, survey-based perception and experiential data can be useful for measuring effectiveness of policy makers and institutions, and their accountability to citizens themselves. Similarly, use of a balanced range of sources is critical to build public trust and credibility in the SDGs and how they are being monitored.[5]

Challenges and Opportunities to tackle in Data Partnership

Comparability
Additionally, utilizing and aggregating the rich data generated by a diverse range of actors – including data collected at the subnational level – is a big challenge given the significant variance in focus, format and quality. If one of the keys to the success of the data revolution for sustainable development is the

---

[4] Saferworld (2015), 'Who Should Measure the Sustainable Development Goals?' (http://www.saferworld.org.uk/news-and-views/comment/174-who-should-measure-the-sustainable-development-goals)
[5] Saferworld (2015), 'Who Should Measure the Sustainable Development Goals?', (http://www.saferworld.org.uk/news-and-views/comment/174-who-should-measure-the-sustainable-development-goals)

ability of a diverse set of stakeholders to work together, they all need to speak the same language.[6] Therefore, further work to ensure harmonization of formats and methodologies for data collection between official and non-official data sources is needed to maximize comparability and interoperability. These standards can build upon the existing Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.[7] Initiatives like the Joined-Up Data Alliance and Joined-Up Data Standards Initiative can help bridge this data language divide.

Data Quality and Methodology
Capacity restraints are an innate reality: only a relatively small number of large international organizations and initiatives are currently able to effectively aggregate data generated in different local contexts, or use data samples large enough to statistically disaggregate this data. Sharing robust metadata on methodologies can help NSOs mitigate against bad quality data and overcome some of these issues. If non-official data methodologies are as robust as data that comes from NSOs – and are open to similar levels of scrutiny – then there is every reason to view their data as equally valid.

Subjectivity
While research and data collection methodologies from most non-official data providers are publicly available, questions around data "bias" are still pervasive in discussions around non-official data. The Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, most notably in objective 2.3, lays the foundation for trust-building measures which can help mitigate concerns around perceived data biases – whether for official or non-official data sources.

Open Data and Privacy:
Open data standards can have significant impacts on policy-making and accountability for SDG commitments. Increasing recognition for open data, including through Cape Town Action Plan Data Objective 2.1, has led to growing momentum for such initiatives. However, concerns about data privacy, from both official and non-official data sources, is also a concern – particularly in regards to data collected on various marginalized groups within society. Objective 4.1 of the Cape Town Action Plan acknowledges the need to address such privacy and confidentiality issues. NSOs and non-official data providers should be respectful of the privacy and confidentiality of citizens. This is particularly important when collecting data on increasingly sensitive issues such as sexual violence. Data privacy must be upheld to ensure the safety of all those participating in data collection.

Recommendations

With a significant amount of momentum built for catalyzing partnerships between official and non-official data providers at an open, inclusive and multi-stakeholder World Data Forum, we reiterate our call for the UN Statistical Commission, ECOSOC and the UN General Assembly to adopt the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data. In particular, we support Strategic Areas #2 and #5, which call for further partnerships, mechanisms and trust-building between official and non-official data providers at all levels. We also strongly support the Cape Town Action Plan's call for further capacity building and resources to support both official and non-official data, and call on governments and donors to back up their "commitment" to a data revolution with additional resource commitments for official statistics to support NSOs to enhance their work.

---

[6] Common cause, common language: Harmonizing key concepts in the data revolution. (http://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Common-Cause-Common-Language.pdf)

[7] Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. (https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx)

Furthermore, non-official actors may also merit additional capacity support as data producers to foster the development of a diverse data architecture. Additionally, "so called 'info-mediaries', such as libraries, archives, CSOS, community leaders and the media[8], may also need support so that they are able to translate data into meaningful narratives for a broader set of actors,"[9] including the general public. This entails engagement with a broader set of actors beyond traditional data providers and experts – including reaching parliamentarians, activists, the media, and political parties – so that they are able to recognize and harness the potential of this data as a decision-making or accountability tool. "Basic data literacy among these actors, and within the broader public, will likely need to be strengthened."[10]

Partnerships to Leave No One Behind

As recognized in the Cape Town Action Plan, there is a need to strengthen and expand data on all groups to ensure that no one is left behind. Partnerships and dialogue between official and non-official data providers will be critical to ensuring that data coverage is sufficient, and that this data is disaggregated by *income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts[11]*, as called for in the 2030 Agenda. In particular, civil society and citizen-generated data can help provide an accurate snapshot of progress in local contexts, including amplifying the perceptions and voices of those typically marginalized and hard to reach, who are also the least likely to be counted in official statistics, including children, people with disabilities, and those living outside of households or other traditional spaces of data collection. We call upon NSOs to open up dialogues and mechanisms for sharing data between official and non-official data sources to help ensure that data coverage is universal. We must also make sure that this data is open, transparent and easily accessible, as these are prerequisites for us to know where gaps in implementation are, and for accountability.

We also call upon NSOs to expand the use of survey-based perception and experiential data in national reporting on the SDGs. With the "people-centered" nature of the 2030 Agenda, and its strong commitment to "leave no one behind," survey, perception and experiential data are a critical means for ensuring that SDG implementation is not just outcome-oriented, but people-oriented as well. This kind of data is critical to help identify areas for improvement for policy-makers at all levels, as they measure the direct needs, priorities, perceptions and experiences of citizens themselves.

Inclusive and Consultative National Planning Processes

Citizens and civil society can help contextualize SDG issues into local priorities, to make it relevant for people's' own experiences of development. Therefore, the development of national-level indicators to prioritize government priorities on the SDGs needs to be consultative and include a wide range of data sources, instead of only utilizing indicators based on what an NSO currently collects. Nationally-created and nationally-owned indicators, which have been agreed upon in broad-based consultation with civil society and citizens, not only ensures that national development is "people-centred", but it has greater potential for driving accountability and changing the incentives of decision-makers, and ensuring that

---

[8] Paragraph 4, Lyon Declaration. (http://www.lyondeclaration.org/)
[9] Saferworld, the TAP Network & UNDP (2016), 'Making them count: using indicators and data to strengthen accountability for the SDGs',(http://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SDG-16-Making-them-Count-Workshop-Summary.pdf)
[10] Saferworld, the TAP Network & UNDP (2016), 'Making them count: using indicators and data to strengthen accountability for the SDGs', (http://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SDG-16-Making-them-Count-Workshop-Summary.pdf)
[11] Paragraph 74g, Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld)

government priorities for "achieving" the SDGs is not merely a "box-ticking" exercise. When it comes to setting national priorities to contextualize the SDGs in a given country, a genuinely bottom-up approach could start by gathering data on people's concerns, and building up from there.[12]

<u>Non-Official Data and National Reporting:</u>
In addition to having open and consultative national planning processes, governments and NSOs must also ensure that its monitoring and reporting mechanisms are equally inclusive. These reporting mechanisms should not only utilize data coming from governments and NSOs, but non-official data sources – including not just quantitative data sets, but also separately, qualitative civil society assessments or alternative reports on the SDGs. In addition to providing the mechanisms for inputs from civil society and other non-official data into a country's "official" reporting process, governments should facilitate regular dialogues between various ministries, civil society and NSOs.

Endorsing Organizations:
Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication, International Budget Partnership, Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development, Social Economic and Governance Promotion Centre(SEGP), Article 19, JasHim Foundation, ATD Fourth World, Global Peace and Development Organization, Human Rights First Rwanda Association, Women Educators Association Of Nigeria (Wean), Sierra Leone Coalition 2030, ENDA Tiers Monde, Candid Concepts Development Agency (CCDA), Echoes of Women in Africa Initiatives(ECOWA), CIVICUS, United Youth for Growth and Development Nigeria, Soroptomist International, AfroLeadership, Campaign2015+, CAFSO-WRAG for Development, Civil Society Coalition on Sustainable Development, Center for Human Rights and Climate Change Research, Youth Association for Development, Women Dialogue Forum Nepal, Universal Rights Network, Pakistan Parwan Alliance, Plan International, Saferworld, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), West Africa Civil Society Institute, Community Outreach for Development and Welfare Advocacy (CODWA), Namati,

---

[12] Saferworld, TAP Network, UNDP (2016), 'Making them Count: using indicators and data to strengthen accountability for the SDGs', (http://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SDG-16-Making-them-Count-Workshop-Summary.pdf)