Statistical Data Capacity Building in 2018 and Beyond

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a shared framework for sustainable development that can help us collectively take on some of the world's toughest development challenges.[1] The 2030 Agenda includes a set of 17 integrated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated targets. To measure progress against these goals and targets, the UN adopted 230 indicators that require reliable, timely, accessible, and easy to use data to inform decision-making. Tracking progress on the SDGs requires an unprecedented amount of data and statistics at subnational, national, regional and global levels, particularly those derived from high functioning official statistical systems.

Although data availability and quality from new and innovative data sources have steadily improved over the years, worldwide statistical capacity still needs strengthening. This building of capacity to produce objective, high quality data requires coordinated efforts on the part of data producers and users, including governments and international development partners.

The scope of modern statistical capacity-building includes collaboration and synergies across increasingly complex data systems and public-private partnerships. National statistical offices, supported by international organizations, must continue to improve the availability and quality of data for sustainable development. Making the national statistical offices central to measuring progress on the SDGs is critical to assure that high quality data are being used to inform decisions on development investments, program outcomes, and ongoing progress.

However, many national statistical systems face serious challenges in this regard. As a result, accurate and timely information about certain aspects of people's lives are unknown, numerous groups and

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[1] "The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017", Foreword, United Nations, New York, 2017

individuals remain "invisible", and many development challenges are still poorly understood. In resolution 70/1, Member States recognized the crucial role of strengthened data collection and capacity-building and committed to addressing the data gap.[2]

The results of a recent survey designed by the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), in consultation with the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HLG-PCCB) and with support of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), showed that only 17 countries, mostly in Europe and Northern America, have fully funded national statistical plans. Eleven of them are located in Europe and Northern America. Such plans lay out the strategy by which a country can develop statistical capacity throughout its entire national statistical system. More than half of the countries or areas for which information was available (81 out of 154) were implementing some sort of national statistical plans in 2016. But only 37 out of 83 countries or areas with relevant information had national statistical legislation in place that complied with all 10 Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.[3] Twenty-five countries failed to conduct a population and housing census during the 2007-2016 period. Among these countries or areas, nine were in subSaharan Africa and seven were in Northern Africa and Western Asia. These censuses are a primary source of data needed to formulate, implement and monitor development policies and programs.

Yet, sometimes simple, yet systematic improvements can make a big difference. For example, Rwanda moved up the publishing date of the Consumer Price Index by five days each month to assist policy makers and businesses. In addition, data from the Demographic and Health Survey and Living

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[3] Joint survey on New approaches to Capacity Development and Future priorities, http://paris21.org/capacity-development-40/cd40-survey

Conditions Survey were released earlier than in the past so that they could be used in measuring Rwanda's first poverty reduction strategy. To assist users and increase data literacy, the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda and PARIS21 partnered to provide training to journalists from local radio, television, print and online media along with the Executive Secretary of the Media High Council of Rwanda.

When underlying data are reliable, creating public platforms for open data can also put that data to use across a wide range of sectors and regions. For example, the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition Program (GODAN) is using open data to improve agriculture and food security internationally. The Ebola Humanitarian Data Exchange was key to sharing Ebola-related information on healthcare facilities and the most affected areas between governments and civil society organizations. There are many other such examples.

There are a number of processes in place to increase and improve domestic and external funding for data. Underlying them is the call to action laid out in the Cape Town Global Action Plan for sustainable development data. The Cape Town Global Action Plan highlights the need for innovative financing mechanisms to 'create opportunities for participation of non-state actors in funding statistical activities through innovative financing mechanisms'.

Different organizations have stepped up to respond to this call. PARIS21, with the support of the Swiss government, are working on an assessment and plan for a scaling up of assistance to national statistical offices. The recent independent evaluation of the World Bank's support to data for development, suggested that the Bank 'initiate high-level discussions on establishing a global umbrella mechanism for long-term financing of data'. Both these processes, working closely with the Statistical Commission's High Level Group, will take some years to come to fruition, but are central for the long term evolution of statistical systems in many countries.

The time has come to build capacity in national statistical offices while building the broader framework for more and better data.