

An open letter to the UN Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development

Submitted by *Partners for a people-centered Data Revolution*

Without a step change in the production, investment and use of data, global agreements to accelerate sustainable development will be undermined as people – who should be at the centre of any development framework - will be excluded, disempowered and left uncoun­ted.

Partners for a people-centred Data Revolution is a group of experts and officials from governments, think tanks, NGOs, donors and multilateral organisations and businesses calling on the UN Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development to set out an ambitious agenda for **a people centred data revolution which leaves no one behind, ensures that no one is left uncoun­ted and provides a voice for all peoples.**

The data revolution we envisage would go beyond measurement to put information in the hands of people and equip them to better hold governments, businesses, unions and other social actors to account, while providing the information they need to make better decisions and manage resources effectively to improve people's lives.

We believe that the new emerging data ecosystem and the power of technology must be harnessed for good, and must be accompanied by investments in the basic building blocks of national statistics that are lacking in many developing countries – from economic statistics to birth and death registration. The IEAG should set out an ambitious vision supported by specific milestones, investments and initiatives which support the effective management of resources for sustainable development.

The MDGs increased attention to the need for strengthened statistical capacity and improved the quality and scope of the statistics produced. But progress was incomplete: data quality, frequency of collection and disclosure remained weak which led to discrepancies between datasets, publication delays and an unequal level of reporting between countries.¹

To credibly manage and track development progress requires investments in new metrics, increases in the quality and regularity of data collection, stopping the collection of non-essential data, better coordination at the national and international level, and sensibly addressing the competing needs for accuracy, timeliness, and maximizing data disclosure. It also requires enhancing people's ability to access and use data to impact decisions with direct bearing on their lives. Technology affords new opportunities to do this on a scale never realised before.

To realise this vision, we present a six point plan which we call on the IEAG to consider.

Recommendation 1: Ensure data is turned into information for policy making & action

Many of the incentives created by donors and official statistical agencies have been focused on data collection, while less has been done for improving domestic capacity for analysis and use. To redress this balance we call for a **new and existing mechanisms and partnerships to devote more support to the use of data in policy making processes**. This could include a training programme for investigative journalists, policy makers and civil society organisations, funding for data visualisation sites, and the dissemination of examples showing how data can be used to affect change by shaping policy priorities at local and national levels.

Recommendation 2: Address gaps in capacity to produce, use and interpret data

Statistical systems must prioritise the data which will be of greatest benefit to people. To improve a country's core data collection, we call for **'quick wins' to "build" a baseline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** that are to be adopted by member states in September 2015. This could include documenting data sets; improving the co-ordination of various global household survey instruments, mapping data at relevant political levels through geo-referencing; analyzing and visualizing existing data more creatively; creating inter-operable existing data sources; enhancing the usability, accessibility and affordability of existing data; prioritising gender disaggregated data and using techniques like small area estimation to produce estimates of marginalized or uncounted groups. A central focus of this assessment will be to determine how gaps in statistical capacity can be closed to ensure that every country will soon be able to provide high-quality annual data on the SDGs.

One quick win for the first year could be a specific initiative to support 'Rebasing GDP' taken forward by the IMF, World Bank, and UN Statistics Division.ⁱⁱ In the longer term, more holistic measures of progress and wellbeing should be piloted and implemented.

We call for **additional financing to support national statistical systems channelled through existing financing mechanisms** with larger disbursements beginning in January 2016. A competitive application process could create quality, multi-stakeholder proposals and incentivize the commitments of domestic resources, as well as the disclosure of information in open data formats, enabling people to use it.

This funding would have three driving principles at its core:

- (a) fund more and fund differently following a financing model that crowds in and commits domestic financing as the foundation,
- (b) build institutions that can produce accurate, robust data,
- (c) prioritize the accuracy, timeliness and annual availability of core data building blocks where there remains a chronic shortage of funds.ⁱⁱⁱ

Recommendation 3: Make the case for the instrumental value of data

There is an urgent need to improve the case for why official statistics and data are investments worth prioritizing over other interventions. We call for a new “**research for advocacy**” consortium, on the returns on investment to various kinds of data collection and disclosure investments, and how these are balanced with ethical issues of privacy of personal data, ownership and use. This research programme is urgent and should begin in February 2015. Further work is needed to establish what governments spend on their statistical systems, as this is often dispersed across multiple entities.

Recommendation 4: Close the gap in harmonization between data collection methods and standards and strengthen statistical methods

Data collection is too focused on particular sectors or regions, not giving policy makers the full range of information on which to act. To address this gap we call for **high level review of data methods and standards**. This group, comprised of heads of UN agencies, OECD etc., would assess the current mechanisms in place that foster harmonized approaches of survey data collection and suggest improvements in the current arrangements through which standards are endorsed.

Recommendation 5: Implement a Global Partnership for Development Data

Building on previous calls for a Global Partnership for Development Data, we call for a **People centred Global Data Forum** which would begin meeting in June 2015. This forum would bring together academics, business leaders, governments and NGOs and would act as a policy dialogue, knowledge and innovation hub for data and capacity development. This forum would directly engage civil society of developing countries to find out what they want to know, and how they would use data. Once established, the partnership would come together at relevant high-level summits to facilitate sustained political support, address the most pressing policy issues, and maximize consultation with stakeholders with a particular focus on supporting the implementation of the SDGs.

Complementing this innovation partnership would be a new **dedicated, and separate funding source to be announced in July 2015**. This is essential as, at present, it remains unclear how non-conventional data sources can be incorporated to low-capacity processes for producing and using data. An innovation fund could support a “safe place” or testing ground to research, experiment, and pilot approaches before large-scale roll out.

Recommendation 6: Build political leadership to invest in and use data

More stable funding and better partnerships are needed to create a climate that is conducive to the development of improved use of data – but at a country level and internationally, high-level political leadership is essential. For example, **a series of country level development data commitments could be launched in June 2015**. Initially, this initiative could encourage country leadership including commitments to consult with citizens on which data should be available and how it should be used, provide sustained and additional financing aimed at improving data for advocacy,

describing progress and performance, facilitating data exchange and access, and improving accountability.

Each of these recommendations should focus on identifying champions to share and discuss best practices at the country level. Recommendations 1 – 4 should be implemented by September 2015, as these are critical building blocks for the SDGs. Recommendations 5 and 6 are ongoing processes which will require sustained engagement from the development community, businesses, citizens and governments.

We welcome the opportunity to share our thoughts with the UN Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development and look forward to a specific action-oriented plan from the group.

Signed:

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ⁱLessons Learned from MDG Monitoring From A Statistical Perspective: Report of the Task Team on Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring of the IAE G MDG
[http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broaderprogress/pdf/Lesson%20Learned%20from%20MDG%20Monitoring_2013-03-22%20\(IAEG\).pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broaderprogress/pdf/Lesson%20Learned%20from%20MDG%20Monitoring_2013-03-22%20(IAEG).pdf)

ⁱⁱ Unpublished note by Amanda Glassman for Partners for a Data Revolution

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.cgdev.org/publication/political-economy-bad-data-evidence-african-survey-administrative-statistics-working?callout=3-3>