

Bridging the Global – Local Divide: The Challenge facing the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development.

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Bill Anderson – 7 November 2014

Within the space of a little over two months the UN Secretary General's [Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development](#) has been born, run two consultations and launched a report that has pulled together the experience, concerns and interests of a broad and disparate group of passionate stakeholders. This is an impressive achievement for any venture, let alone one having to cater for such a varied constituency.

While "[A World That Counts: Mobilising the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development](#)" has, technically speaking, narrow objectives relating to the preparation of recommendations to inform the Secretary-General's Synthesis Report on Post-2015, it is, as its title suggests, a flagship product that will guide all those involved with data and development. As such it follows in the footsteps of the ground-breaking report published by the Data for African Development Working Group in July this year: "[Delivering on the Data Revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa](#)"

The short period of consultation on the draft report has generated more than its fair share of frustration and criticism which the UN should listen to very carefully: If it wants to take the lead on such an important issue as this the UN needs to treat its stakeholders with respect. As the report itself says, it is subsidiary to the revolution. The eye-watering deadlines that the drafting team have had to meet has also resulted in the messages conveyed by the report as a whole, the executive summary and the press release being substantially different in their emphasis: The strongest element is the executive summary which suggests that drafting was going on until the very last minute.

That all being said this is an important document and needs to be judged as it stands, and as a Guidestar for all of those involved in the data revolution.

The term '*data revolution*' has been subject to a myriad of interpretations since its coining in May 2013. The report provides a very clear distinction between the general data revolution

"An explosion in the volume of data, the speed with which data are produced"

and the specifics of sustainable development.

"The integration of these new data with traditional data to produce high-quality information that is more detailed, timely and relevant for many purposes and users, especially to foster and monitor sustainable development."

There is less clarity in the distinction between "*sustainable development*" and the *Sustainable Development Goals*.

Achieving the SDGs demands embracing the data revolution. We urge the UN Member States and system organisations to dramatically speed up their work in this field to support the global aspiration for sustainable development.

Whether the confusion is caused merely by the de facto terms, sloppy editing or a disingenuous campaign to subsume the data revolution with the SDGs (more on this below), it would be helpful for this to be resolved.

From where Development Initiatives stands the data revolution is first and foremost about national contexts, priorities and efforts that collect better data leading to better access to and use of information by decision-makers and those that hold them accountable at national and sub-national level. The comments that follow have taken this perspective, rather than the document's outline, as its framework.

The report lays out an array of persuasive arguments for the primary site of this revolution to be liberated from the narrow confines of National Statistics Offices for inclusive National Statistical Systems where

All public, private and civil society data producers share data and the methods used to process them, according to globally, regionally, or nationally brokered agreements and norms. They publish data, geospatial information and statistics in open formats and with open terms of use, following global common principles and technical standards, to maintain quality and openness and protect privacy.

It argues that

Strengthening national capacities in all areas from data production to use will be the essential test of any data revolution, in particular in developing countries where the basic infrastructure is often lacking.

And that

National statistical offices, the traditional guardians of public data for the public good, will remain central to the whole of government efforts to harness the data revolution for sustainable development. To fill this role, however, they will need to change, and more quickly than in the past, and continue to adapt, abandoning expensive and cumbersome production processes, incorporating new data sources, including administrative data from other government departments, and focusing on providing data that is human and machine-readable, compatible with geospatial information systems and available quickly enough to ensure that the data cycle matches the decision cycle. In many cases, technical and financial investments will be needed to enable those changes to happen, and strong collaboration between public institutions and the private sector can help official agencies to jump straight to new technologies and ways of doing things.

It repeatedly calls for financial and technical investment to strengthen institutions and technologies, though it fails to make any specific mention of strengthening human capacity – perhaps the biggest single challenge facing this revolution.

The paper now has, in a welcome change in emphasis from the draft report, a well-balanced approach to the role of technology. It recognises the need to

harness the benefits of new technology

and warns of the dangers of technological inequality – the revolution being hijacked by the tech literate.

Nine key principles underpinning the collection and use of data, including a call for all public data to be open by default, will find resonance with the open data and open government movements, and reinforce the building blocks required to establish an inclusive ecosystem of stakeholders.

The paper is also particularly strong on the importance of moving beyond open data.

Without high-quality data providing the right information on the right things at the right time; designing, monitoring and evaluating effective policies becomes almost impossible

It is however less persuasive on who should be the recipients of this information. While decision-makers and intermediaries are referenced the paper defaults to the broader rhetoric of citizens holding government to account. Despite its lofty intentions this argument is unrealistic: it is not citizens but local government and organised civil society that work at the coal face of this revolution in developing countries.

All the critical points discussed above are relatively minor in the context of where they sit within the overall argument. There is one issue, however that is more serious: where does leadership and ownership lie?

The paper is not dismissive of national governments:

It is up to governments to put in place the rules and systems to realise this vision, working with domestic stakeholders and in the multilateral system, at regional and global levels. Governments, through the legal systems they enforce, are the ultimate guarantors of the public good. If the new world of data is to be based on public trust and public consent, there has to be a confidence that governments can and will play this role

But this position is washed out in the face of unrelenting arguments for the central role of the Sustainable Development Goals, which are

...an unprecedented joint effort on the part of governments at every level, civil society and the private sector, and millions of individual choices and actions

so that

By 2020, we hope to be witnessing the emergence of a vibrant “global data ecosystem” to support the monitoring and implementation of the SDGs

Whether intended or not, the only fair interpretation of the overall gist of the paper is that this revolution will be led and monitored by global institutions and processes at the expense of national contexts and priorities.

There is no doubt that the SDGs are a crucial element within the post-2015 agenda. But the emphasis given to them in this paper can have substantial consequences if not corrected. This is a good flagship document. But it could do with an opening and closing framing from its very own [terms of reference](#):

The data revolution of necessity implies a considerable, concerted and sustained investment in national statistical capacity, both technical and institutional, to increase the coverage, quality, and frequency of data. National Statistical Systems must be in the driver's seat for national, regional and global monitoring.