



# Meeting the SDGs in South Sudan: The data landscape



UNITED NATIONS  
SOUTH SUDAN



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A photograph of a classroom in a rural school. A female teacher in a patterned dress stands at the front, facing a group of young students sitting on wooden benches. The students are wearing light blue school uniforms and carrying blue backpacks. A chalkboard with writing is visible in the background. The room has a corrugated metal roof and white walls.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*This report was prepared by **Development Initiatives (DI)**. The report draws from the detailed South Sudan's SDG data landscape diagnostic study and Strategic Action Plan. The team included **Bernard Sabiti (lead consultant and analyst)**; **Tong Anei (national consultant)**; **Sam Wozniak (lead desk researcher)**; **Bill Anderson (editorial guidance)**; and **Mary Gaichiri (project manager)**. Overall guidance and support during the drafting of this diagnostic report was provided by **RCO, UN M&E WG** and the **NBS**. The exercise was funded by the **UNCT**, with additional funding from **UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women** and **WFP**.*

Front cover: A traditional birth attendant smiles as she holds a new born who is starting to open his eyes in Kajo Keji hospital, Central Equatoria. The attendant was present during the delivery a day earlier and is now caring for the baby, while the mother recovers from a caesarean section.

Photo credit: UN RCO

# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CHW</b>	Community Health Worker
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>DHIS2</b>	District Health Information System
<b>EMIS</b>	Education Management Information System
<b>GoSS</b>	Government of South Sudan
<b>HMIS</b>	Health Management Information System
<b>KII</b>	Key Informant Interview
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and Evaluation
<b>MDA</b>	Ministry, Department or Agency
<b>MICS</b>	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
<b>MoGEI</b>	Ministry of General Education and Instruction
<b>MoH</b>	Ministry of Health
<b>NBS</b>	National Bureau of Statistics
<b>NDS</b>	National Development Strategy
<b>NIN</b>	National Identity Number
<b>NSDS</b>	National Strategy for the Development of Statistics
<b>NWOW</b>	New Way of Working
<b>PFM</b>	Public Financial Management
<b>RCO</b>	Resident Coordinator's Office
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SSCCSE</b>	Southern Sudan Centre for Census Statistics and Evaluation
<b>UNCF</b>	UN Cooperation Framework
<b>UNCT</b>	UN Country Team
<b>UN M&amp;E WG</b>	UN Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group
<b>VNR</b>	Voluntary National Review



# Executive Summary

South Sudan, the world's newest country, gained independence in 2011. Decades of conflict and humanitarian strife mean that it is facing unique challenges; it was ranked 185th out of 189 countries in the 2020 Human Development Index. Basic elements of statecraft and governance are not yet well formed, and mismanagement of resources and a fragile peace make it difficult to build strong institutions. More than two million refugees remain in neighbouring countries and many communities are displaced internally. Public infrastructure remains limited in most parts of the country. Communication systems, while generally improving, need rapid modernization and expansion.

The country though has significant opportunities for an upward developmental trajectory, with its significant oil resources, that could for example provide the basis for funding its development and recovery process.

Decades of humanitarian crises, stretching back before independence, make South Sudan one of the most challenging environments for good data governance and strong evidence systems:

- The country does not have a national monitoring and reporting framework for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- High costs and the risks involved in collecting data, coupled with limited resources for establishing strong data and monitoring ecosystems, make it impossible to establish baseline data for over 70 per cent of the SDG indicators.
- The last time a national census was conducted was in 2008, prior to independence from Sudan.
- The current National Development Strategy (NDS) was predicated on the 2013–2016 armed crisis, which means that it is heavily focused on peace and security.

It can be compellingly argued that the reason why data is not a priority for the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) is because the country faces such huge challenges that peace and recovery must be its first priorities. But this is to miss another important truth: good-quality, reliable and relevant data – and good use of the evidence they provide – are key in any recovery and reconstruction effort and therefore should be one of the top emergency considerations. Thus;

- Good use of evidence can help a country in its economic recovery and efforts to create jobs.
- The use of data is key in the restoration of justice and rule of law as the evidence they provide, when used well, can be a tool for the powerless to hold the powerful to account.
- Good data can be as valuable as money and resources in helping to facilitate the difficult transition from humanitarian interventions and fragility to development programming.
- Good data create community awareness and can be a tool for civil society to engage with the government and other stakeholders in order to make better decisions.



The South Sudan United Nations Country Team (UNCT) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), through the UN Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group (UN M&E WG) and the National SDG Monitoring Taskforce, commissioned Development Initiatives to conduct a data landscape analysis of the country's data ecosystem, with a view to developing an SDG monitoring and reporting framework aligned with the NDS, as well as to develop a national action plan to guide their data investments over a period of 3–5 years.

This document summarizes the findings and recommendations resulting from this analysis. It is accompanied by a longer, more detailed report that consolidates the data landscape diagnostic and a proposed Strategic Action Plan. In summary, the major recommendations are for the GoSS, supported by the UN and donors, to:

- Empower the National Bureau of Statistics to lead and coordinate the national statistical system, including the data required for humanitarian operations, by:
  - Ensuring that NBS staff salaries are secured
  - Investing in NBS' ICT infrastructure
  - Adopting a new National Strategy for the Development of Statistics
  - Establishing a national data portal
- Take first steps in strengthening subnational data infrastructures by:
  - Further investing in the Health Management Information System to establish facility-level digital data collection
  - Using the HMIS experience as a flagship for sharing technical resources and capacity with other sectors

- Take ownership of the national management of the SDGs by:
  - Establishing leadership and coordination structures across the GoSS to both meet and monitor the goals
- Implement short-term improvements to national statistics by:
  - Conducting the planned population estimate
  - Conducting partial Multiple Indicator Cluster and Household Budget Surveys, in those parts of the country that it is both safe and practical to do so
  - Beginning digital capture of birth registrations at health facilities and local government offices

While this study focuses on data, it should be viewed within the wider scope of national governance: improving the state of the data landscape is part and parcel of the need to improve governance in general and to tackle the peace and security challenges facing South Sudan.



# Methodology

The analysis started with a mapping of the country's data landscape through extensive desk research, aided by both online publications and documents shared by the RCO/UN M&E WG. A catalogue of the documents reviewed, with links to a consolidated repository, can be obtained from RCO and NBS. A mapping of all information systems, past and present, was conducted, creating metadata on the scope and quality of these systems and their relevance to the SDG monitoring framework. Using the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) and other data sources, a review of partner investments and activities was also prepared.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) facilitated by a national consultant were conducted with representatives of the NBS, five GoSS ministries and 15 UN agencies. In total, 63 UN and government officials participated in these interviews. Information from the desk review and the KIIs was then analysed to inform the preparation of the data landscape diagnostic report and the Strategic Action Plan.

Through the desk research and interviews, an attempt was made to:

- Develop an understanding of the political economy of data governance and infrastructures in South Sudan
- Develop an understanding of the political culture around the demand for and use of data (or lack thereof)
- Track the history as well as the current status of information systems
- Search for appropriate, robust and sustainable data systems.

The SDGs are part of an inclusive agenda that aims to tackle the root causes of poverty and to unite different stakeholders globally to bring about positive change for both people and the planet. To effectively measure and guide the realization of the SDGs, there is a need for the generation of quality data through different national data sources for routine reporting and reviews on their implementation.

To assess where South Sudan stands at present, the team:

- Examined the level of SDG planning and localization
- Mapped the extent of SDG integration into the national planning framework
- Assessed government-wide SDG coordination frameworks.

Detailed recommendations were suggested based on the findings documented in the diagnostic report. For the action plan, these were distilled into four priority interventions that were deemed to have potential for the greatest impact and to be realistically achievable within the next three years. An attempt was made to provide indicative estimates of what these proposed investments might cost.

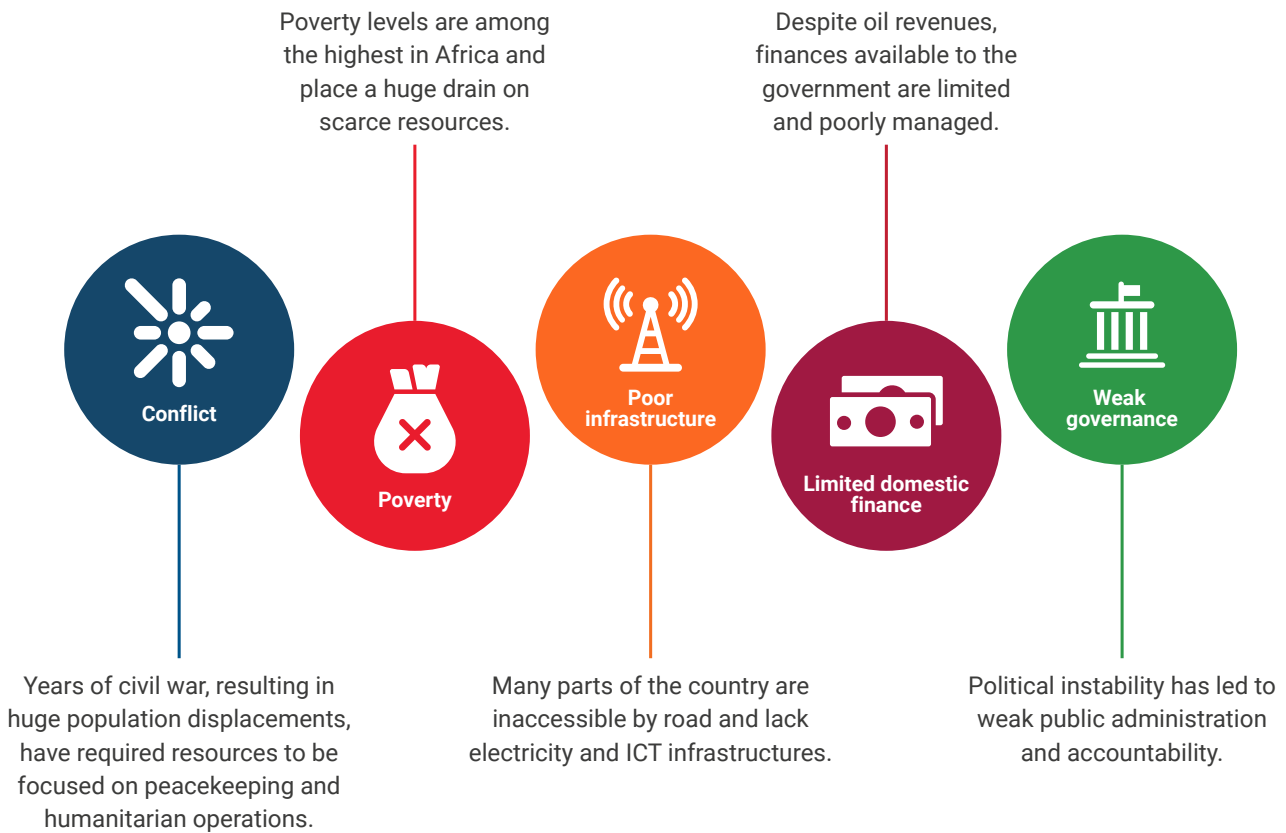


# Context

It is impossible to understand the data ecosystem of South Sudan unless it is viewed within the wider context of the country's recent socio-political history. Data are an integral part of governance and decision-making in any country, and the quality of data systems is inextricably linked both to political and technical decision-making that involves the allocation of resources and to the political will to base development decisions on evidence.

South Sudan has been plagued by conflict and humanitarian emergencies for decades, since long before the region became an autonomous self-governing entity following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in 2005.

## *The greatest challenges to a healthy data ecosystem in South Sudan*



A fragile and costly détente currently holds between various warring factions following the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan in September 2018. This agreement provides for different political alliances to form a transnational government, which means that a significant proportion of domestic resources is channelled into the maintenance of this political class, at the expense of providing social services. The importance of conducting a census and collecting other official statistics has been referenced in all peace agreements to date. The national statistical system, however, remains grossly underfunded.

Humanitarian action and emergency response are the priorities right now for most development partners and for the GoSS. Millions of refugees from South Sudan remain in neighbouring countries and many are internally displaced. The jostling for resources by political actors, coupled with a cash-strapped government that for months has been unable to pay the salaries of civil servants, makes it harder for the GoSS to focus on investing in data.

- The civil war is blamed for the lack of regular production of official data, which creates the necessity for stopgap measures by humanitarian agencies, who need data to do their work.

- The extent of poverty and the number of displaced communities places a huge burden on the State's ability to deliver services to all.
- Physical and technological infrastructure around the country is very weak, which makes data collection, analysis, transmission and use more difficult.
- The country is facing huge governance challenges. Misuse of resources is a major challenge which the government itself has repeatedly acknowledged. The cost of resource leakages sometimes come at the expense of investment in social services.

Data are as much a political issue as a technical one. In addition to the resource challenges created by the collapse in global oil prices, the spending priorities of the GoSS are skewed against social services and important technical areas such as data, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and systems strengthening.

The lack of harmonization between donors is also a longstanding problem which has consequences for data capacity. An OECD evaluation of joint donor programmes in South Sudan found that, with respect to alignment, expectations have not been met and that governance structures have been inadequate.



# The SDGs

For any country, a strong data ecosystem is crucial to succeed in achieving the SDGs. Better management of demand, supply and use of data can result in more informed decisions being made, ultimately leading to better policies and improved results for the population. Monitoring of the SDGs is central to making progress against them. With good SDG data:

- Governments can improve policymaking and service delivery, including the alignment of national plans with the SDGs, and of budgets with need.
- Citizens and civil society groups can make better decisions and hold leaders accountable for their actions.
- Companies can build capacity and drive entrepreneurship and innovation.

For a country emerging from conflict the role of data is even more critical as, when resources are scarce, good data can help determine which SDGs and indicators to focus on. In order to transition from humanitarian interventions to development programming, South Sudan needs good data to guide decision-making. To foster economic growth, improve efficiency and effectiveness and establish transparency, a broad coalition of data sources is required to measure and incentivize progress across the goals.

The 2017 *South Sudan SDG Inaugural Report*, by the UNCT and the Ministry of Finance and Planning (MoFP), notes the lack of recent and high-quality data for most indicators, which poses challenges for evidence-based planning and the monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes.

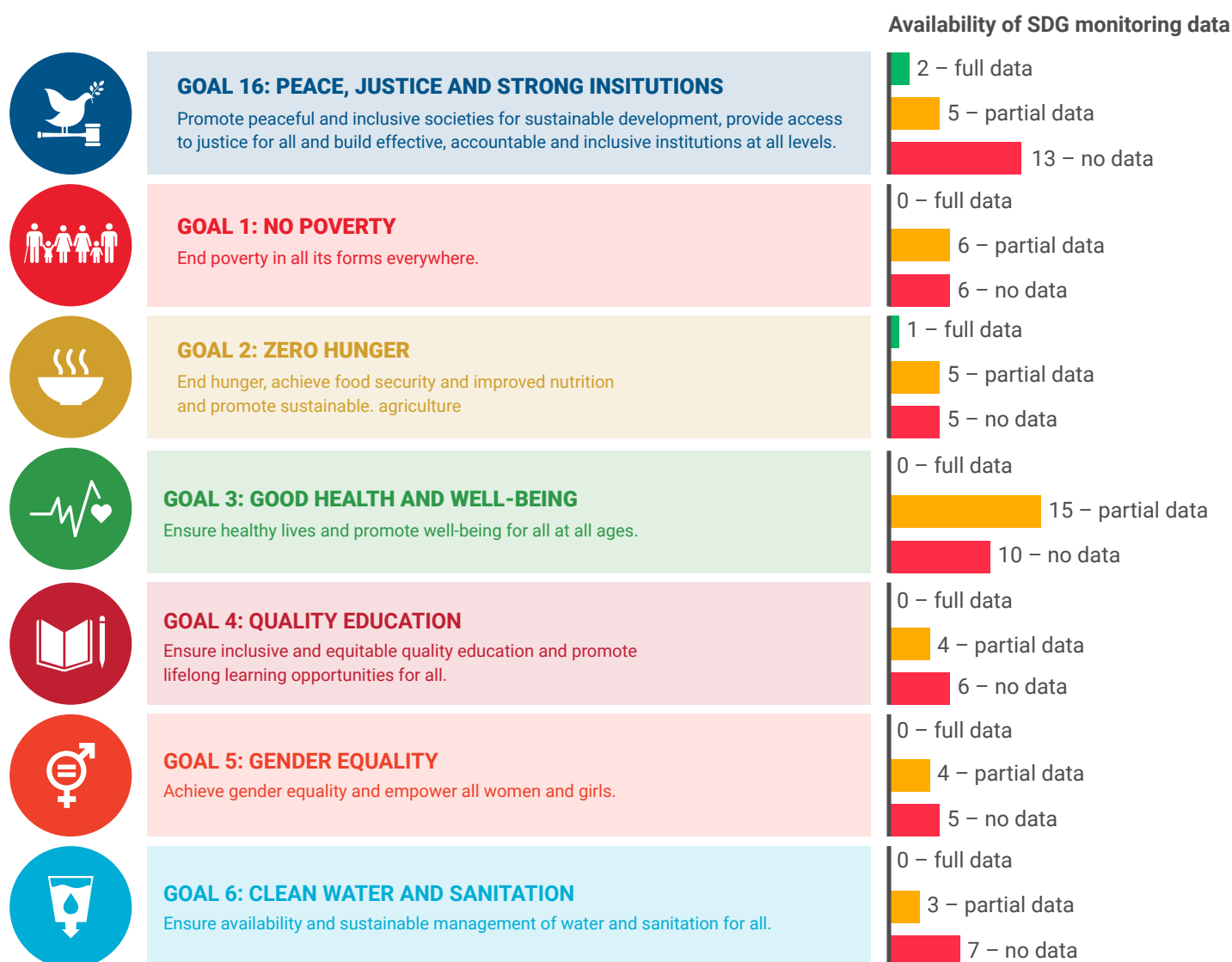
The NBS has drafted a proposed coordination framework for the SDGs monitoring and reporting and plans for an SDG National Taskforce are in place, but these efforts do not appear to have been proactively embraced by the GoSS, and there does not appear to be high-level political support for the SDGs. Most government respondents expressed the view that the SDGs are not considered a priority by the government and they do not have high-profile champions. Consequently, national awareness of the SDGs is also very low, and it is the UN that is the main driver of any discussions of the SDG Goals and efforts to achieve them within the country.



# AVAILABLE DATA

Like most resource-constrained countries, South Sudan does not have the luxury of being able to tackle all the Goals and indicators at once, and it has thus prioritized seven SDGs to focus on.

## The current status of data monitoring for South Sudan's key SDGs



The health sector currently has the most developed information management system and can therefore provide data for some of the SDG 3 indicators. However, no significant survey of any kind has been conducted since 2010, and there are few official statistical sources for most of the indicators. For many years, South Sudan has been unable to report to key international development databases because of a lack of data. Currently, the NBS and most ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) do not produce enough data of

good quality to be able to adequately measure progress on the SDGs on their own.

As a member of the international community, South Sudan needs to be supported to fully engage with Agenda 2030 by adopting and domesticating the SDGs. The UN and the GoSS should work together to strengthen local data ecosystems so that they are robust enough to function as the direct and primary sources of all SDG indicator data for South Sudan.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

In order to provide a focus for its work on the SDGs, it is recommended that the GoSS commit to undertaking a Voluntary National Review (VNR) report on progress on the SDGs within the next three years. This should be led by the GoSS and presented to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development at the United Nations. The emphasis of this review should be on demonstrating steady progress, rather than on ambitions or aspirations that cannot be met in the short term.

To achieve this, there is a need to change the governance framework from being UN-centric to being locally owned, by establishing an SDG Secretariat in the President's office and assigning one of the Vice Presidents to take responsibility.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the GoSS should establish a national SDG Indicator Framework that identifies potential data sources and gaps, and that this framework should be employed to conduct a more comprehensive

audit that makes a realistic assessment of what is possible in both the short and medium terms.

If the GoSS is to succeed in these endeavours, it will require substantial support. It is recommended therefore that a joint programme on data should be created to bring together all key stakeholders at the highest levels of government, together with the UN, development partners and humanitarian communities and others, to plan for and support South Sudan's data ecosystem in a joined-up manner. Under this arrangement, a multidonor subcommittee on statistical financing could be created to support the development of foundational data infrastructure.



# Data governance

The roots of the NBS go back to 1995, when it was known simply as a “Database and Monitoring Unit” for Operation Lifeline Sudan and the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association. The New Sudan Centre for Statistics and Evaluation was created in 2004, headed by an Executive Director working closely with the UN in preparation for the 2005 CPA. It was renamed the Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation (SSCSE) in 2006 under a presidential decree and tasked with conducting the 2008 census.

The 2012 National Statistical Act established the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics as an autonomous body with a mandate to “be an autonomous public office responsible for the development and management of official statistics, the authoritative source and custodian of official statistics in the Republic of South Sudan”. The Act, and a subsequent presidential decree, mandated that a board of directors should be responsible for management of the NBS, with its chairman reporting to the President.

The authority bestowed on the NBS by the Act has, however, been substantially undermined. Currently the NBS is not answerable to the President but reports instead to the Ministry of Public Service. Rather than obtaining funding through a vote on the national budget, as befits an autonomous body, it is the MoFP that determines what funding it receives. Furthermore, it currently has no Board of Directors.

The Bureau’s Strategic Plan for 2016–2020 focused on five thematic areas:

- Improvement of human resources capacity
- Coordination and supervision of the national statistical system
- Development and modernization of physical and ICT infrastructure
- Advocacy for the use of statistics
- Improvement of the quality of statistics and geospatial data.

However, due to limited resources this plan was not implemented as envisioned. It has now expired and there is no money available to develop a new one.

The small budget allocation that the NBS receives from the government is used largely to cover staff salaries. However, as of February 2021, the last wage payment that NBS staff had received was in July 2020. Turnover of staff at the Bureau is very high, as they are highly qualified but poorly paid, and at present only about half of staff positions are filled. The extent of the Bureau’s penury is further illustrated by the fact that it is unable to pay for its own Internet connectivity, which currently is funded by UNFPA. One reason for its funding being so limited is that the role of statistics is not well understood by many politicians and policymakers in the country.



The NBS budget has a very small amount allocated for the production of data, and the technical infrastructure required to maintain a credible national statistics office barely exists. The Bureau thus depends on donors for these functions, and it has no resources for its next strategic plan. The few surveys that the NBS has done are donor-driven, and it is thus donors who set the agenda for statistics in South Sudan.

The poor state of physical infrastructure makes it both difficult and expensive to gather data nationally. Many areas cannot be reached due to insecurity and many are accessible only by air. Surveys thus becomes very expensive to conduct.

By law, all humanitarian agencies and development partners in the country should coordinate their data collection plans and share their data with the NBS; however, this does not happen, and there is very little cooperation. As the NBS manages the national sampling framework and a compendium of definitions, humanitarian agencies make token efforts to involve it, but they do not consult it on the design of their methodologies or other aspects of the studies they conduct.

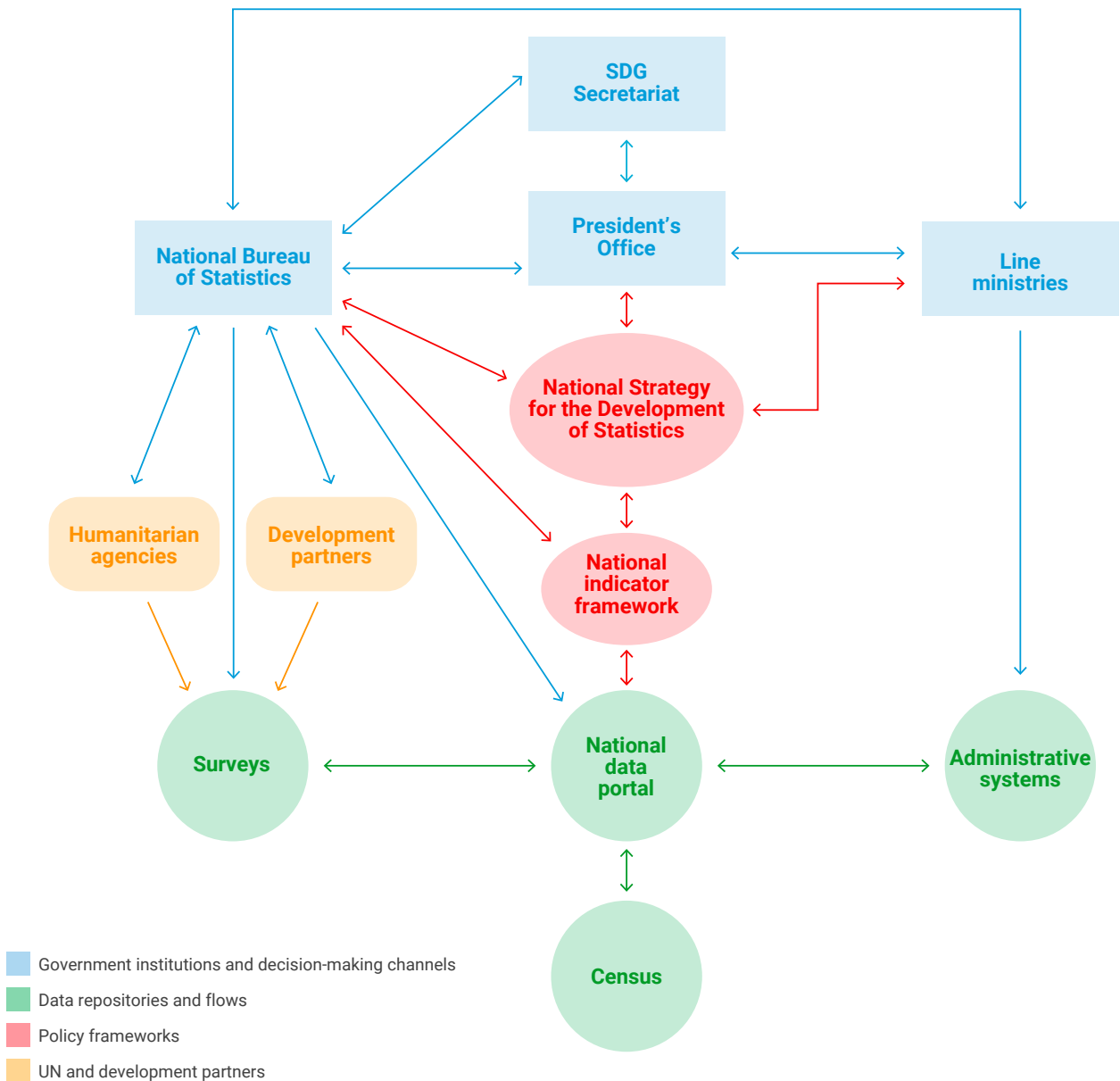
The NBS is expected to train line ministries and agencies on data and statistics, but there is no funding available for this. Every MDA is supposed to establish a statistics unit and to staff it, but few have qualified statisticians. A technical working group does exist as a forum for data specialists across ministries to share available data with one another. However, in practice ministries continue to hide their activities in order to protect their own access to donor money, and some do not share any data with the NBS.

The national statistical system needs a reboot, and this needs to start with empowering the NBS through:

- Improved resourcing
- Improved legal and political authority
- A new National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS)
- A National Indicator Framework
- A national data portal under the control of the NBS.



**What might a good governance system look like?**



## AUTHORITY AND RESOURCING

To lead on the national statistical system, the NBS needs to be fully autonomous and to have a direct vote on the national budget; this would be an important measure of its independence. It needs both the resources and the authority to set the statistical agenda for the country and to

coordinate the statistical system.

Paying salaries on time would be a first step in building up an institution of motivated professionals. Ensuring that the Bureau's central office has the necessary basic ICT infrastructure to function and maintain its operational capacity



is also essential. Once the central office is adequately resourced, a phased approach to establish working infrastructures in state statistical offices should also be adopted.

The GoSS should invest more domestic resources in the NBS, for both recurrent and development expenditures, and it should

begin to fund surveys and censuses. Donors should incentivize the government to make these investments. One approach could be a compact in which capital investments by donors in information systems are conditional on the GoSS taking on the financial responsibility for maintaining these systems.

## THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF STATISTICS

The NBS national strategic plan for 2016–2020 has now expired, and this is an opportune moment to replace it with a more robust and expansive National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS), which will enable the NBS to assert more authority over the statistical landscape, involve more stakeholders and provide clear oversight of the national data ecosystem. The objectives of the previous strategy remain valid: what was missing was not goals or aspirations, but a sober appreciation of how to overcome the practical obstacles that stood in the way of building a functional statistical system in the circumstances the country faces. This process should involve all relevant MDAs, state

governments, the private sector, civil society, development partners, humanitarian agencies and academia.

The new NSDS should focus on strengthening the administrative data functions of MDAs, prioritize better resourcing for the NBS and build outreach to data producers and users in the humanitarian sector. It should also lead to the development of sectoral statistics plans that establish links with the National Development Strategy. This should include the humanitarian sector, led by the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management (MoHADM).

## DATA PORTAL

It is understandable that in the current circumstances the biggest repository of data on South Sudan – containing over 250 datasets – should reside on a server based in the United States, managed by a UN humanitarian agency based in the Netherlands. In the long term, this is neither a desirable nor a sustainable solution.

There is an immediate need for the NBS to play a greater role in the design and management of all data collection, and plans should begin now for the establishment of a national data portal that will have reached maturity by such time as the humanitarian agencies depart or humanitarian operations scale down.



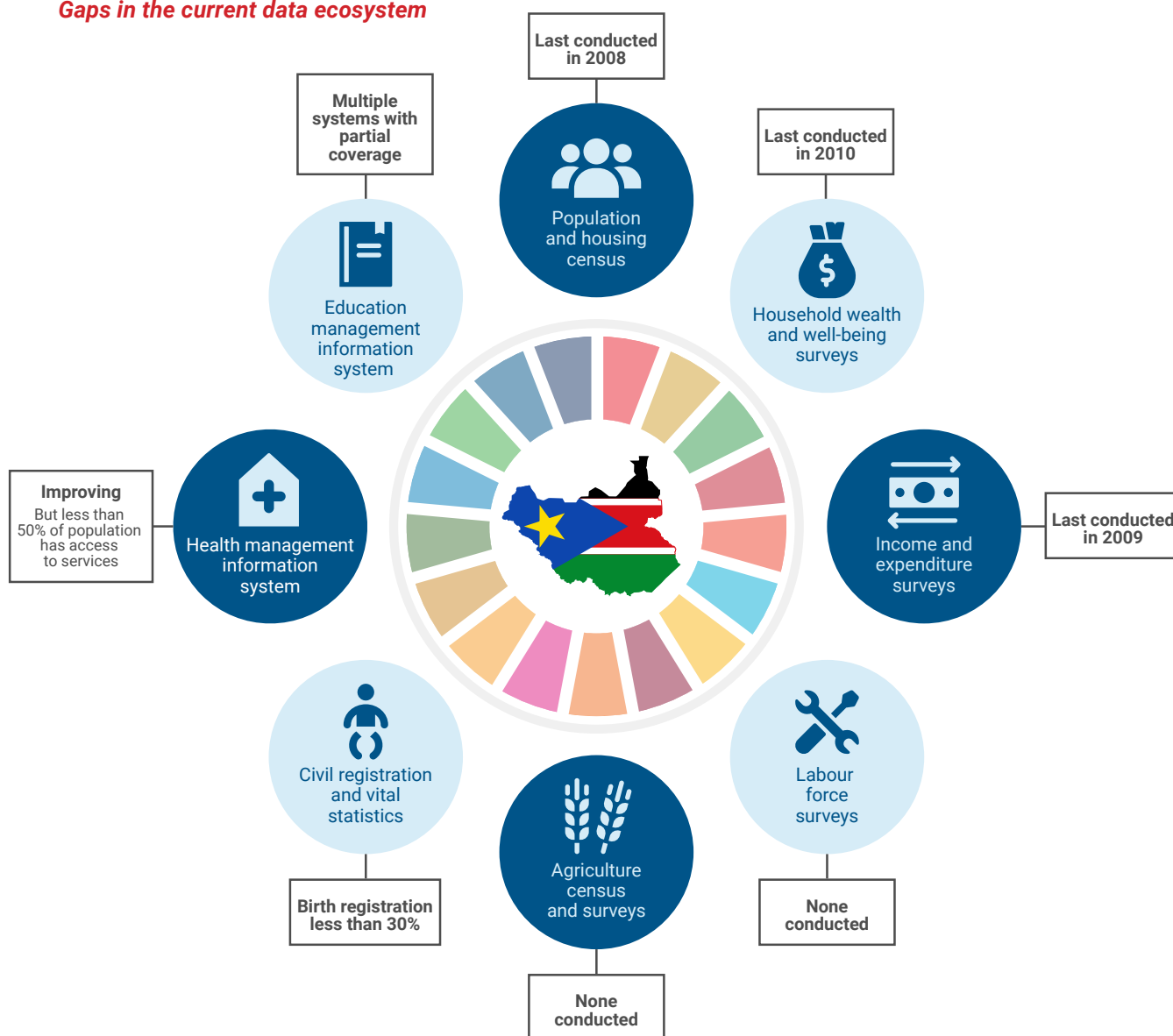
# Demographic data

## CENSUS

The most recent census was completed in 2008, prior to South Sudan's independence. A population census planned for 2014 was disrupted by the 2013 conflict. The conducting of a census was a key element of the 2005

CPA, in order to establish population ratios that would determine how power was to be shared between north and south. Since then the issue of a population census has always been politically sensitive and contentious.

### Gaps in the current data ecosystem



The NBS continues to make population projections based on the 2008 census, but the extent of population movement over the past decade makes these unreliable.

A full National Population and Housing Census remains impractical in today's political and humanitarian climate. The security situation remains unpredictable, the extent of population displacement is enormous and the financial and technical challenges are formidable. However, a population estimation survey, led by UNFPA, is planned for this year. If this is successful, it will

be a critical step along the road to a full census, and it should be supported by all stakeholders. The GRID<sup>3</sup> technology that is being employed in this exercise is the best available, and it is to be hoped that the NBS is involved with this programme as fully as possible.

In the longer term, the sooner a comprehensive census can be conducted the better. Even though it is difficult to predict when this might be, this should not stop the NBS from putting structures and plans in place now, so that it is prepared and equipped to take action when the time is right.

## SURVEYS

Over the past 15 years, very few official surveys have been carried out in South Sudan, primarily due to the conflict, coupled with a lack of funding.

The SSCCSE completed a Household Budget Survey (HBS) in 2009. This identified a national poverty rate of 51% which, in 2021, is still the most recent figure and is the one officially used for planning. Interviewees report that it was intended for an HBS to be carried out every five years; however, subsequent rounds were not conducted, mainly due to the lack of budget. Poverty levels are currently estimated to be over 80%.

Two business surveys have been conducted in the past decade, the first in 2010 and the second – the Integrated Business Establishments Survey – in 2019.

The most recent attempt at conducting a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) was in 2010. Understandably, it is not possible to undertake a comprehensive national household survey at this time, but conducting both a MICS and a HBS with partial coverage in the near future would provide a range of useful indicative data for subnational-/local-level SDG monitoring. Equally importantly, it would provide invaluable experience for the NBS in all aspects of planning and implementation of surveys.



# CIVIL REGISTRATION

According to the 2010 household survey, 35% of births in South Sudan were registered. This was likely to be an overestimate, however, as it is estimated that 88% of mothers give birth outside of hospital settings. There was no legislation in place to record births or issue birth certificates when South Sudan gained its independence in 2011.

The Civil Registry Act of 2018 has since been passed, providing for the establishment of a “data source known as Civil Registry to be headed by a Director” and offices at the national, state and county levels. However, the rules and regulations that are meant to operationalize this law are not yet in place, and the directorate still only exists as a unit under the directorate of Civil Registry, Nationality, Passport and Immigration. Civil registry structures at state and county levels are also yet to be established.

There is still no official birth registration system in place. A UNICEF-backed birth notification pilot is supporting the Ministry of Health (MoH) to register births in health centres and to follow up on some home births and under-5s whose births have never been notified. The scheme has issued over 500,000 children with birth notifications that are being registered in a national database maintained by the MoH.

No system for the registration of deaths exists, however, nor is there any officially sanctioned system for the registration of other civil events such as marriages and divorces.

There are plans for a national ID system and to issue a National Identification Number (NIN) at the time a birth is registered, with state and

county governments being responsible for processing applications. However, as yet no ID system is in place. South Sudanese nationals can apply for a Nationality Certificate, which is an important document as it is required when applying for a passport, opening a bank account or applying for a job. At present, the system for processing nationality certificates is only available in Juba, though mobile units are being planned, with the ministry designating areas where IDPs and refugees can register.

These plans for birth notification and a national ID system, though well laid, have been frustrated by the lack of resources, the poor state of ICT infrastructure and the lack of institutional structures at state and local levels. The government does not even have the capacity to host the database that is needed to manage these systems.

In most countries, achieving universal coverage for the digital registration of births and the issuing of some form of legal identity document is a core priority. Given that most births take place outside of health facilities and that national ID plans are dependent on robust county- and state-level governments, this is a long-term challenge for South Sudan. Rather than investing huge resources now, a steady, gradual approach is recommended, using existing settings such as health facilities, local government offices, immunization campaigns and nutrition points to roll out the issuing of birth registration.



# Using health as a building block

Building sustainable data infrastructures and statistical capacity to serve state and local governments throughout the country is a mammoth undertaking that will take years to achieve. Doing nothing now, waiting for better times, is not a solution as it creates an even bigger problem for the future. Attempting to invest gradually across all sectors is an expensive exercise that will stretch capacity beyond its limits.

The Health Management Information System (HMIS) is relatively stronger than most other sectoral data systems in South Sudan. This is in large part due to strong support from development partners, led by WHO and other UN agencies, delivered through health systems strengthening programmes which include technical support for data systems.

The District Health Information System (DHIS2) was rolled out across the country in February 2019 to support the management of primary health-care services. There is a strong HMIS team at the MoH that has financial and technical resources that enable it to focus on M&E as a means of generating data and information to promote evidence-based decision-making at all levels of the health-care system.

Of late this team has implemented key actions designed to strengthen the health data ecosystem, including:

- Establishing a single framework and implementation manual to guide the collection, processing and use of data by all agencies providing health services.
- Rolling out DHIS2 software at county level across all 10 states of South Sudan.
- Developing a comprehensive national M&E database.
- Training staff and health workers at national and state levels on data collection and management.
- Institutionalizing regular and comprehensive health sector performance reviews, with input from all stakeholders, and hosting forums for dialogue on the health sector.
- Publishing annual reports and monthly bulletins covering the progress of the HMIS.

Over 50% of the population have only limited access to the formal health system, but the MoH has recruited Community Health Workers (CHWs) through the Boma Health Initiative to reach out to these populations. Their work includes reporting on outbreaks of diseases and other health emergencies, and a pilot has been launched in which CHWs are provided with cell phones that can capture health data and relay it into DHIS2.



Despite these successes, many challenges remain:

- The health sector, like most social services, is chronically underfunded by the government. The 2019/20 budget allocated less than 2% of the national budget to the sector, leaving it dependent on international donors.
- Most forms of data capture remain paper-based, which often leads to poor data quality and to problems with the timeliness of data.
- Few of the data captured are actually used at facility, state or county levels due to a lack of data analysis skills.
- There is no link between DHIS2 and the NBS. The NBS has paid little attention to supporting administrative data systems.

## STRENGTHENING THE HMIS

Despite these problems, however, the HMIS represents a useful case study of emerging best practice that can be used to stimulate improvements in other sectors. With harmonized support from several development partners, it would not be unrealistic to see establishment of some form of digital data collection at a substantial number of health facilities, both public and private, across the country. Doing this would not only benefit the health system but would create a nationwide data infrastructure that could be used as a model for other sectors.

To achieve this, further investment in DHIS2 is needed in order to:

- Extend digital data capture to health facilities
- Train clinical staff at health facilities in the use of digital data capture
- Strengthen national infrastructure to allow for both centralized and decentralized use of the data
- Engage with the private health sector to ensure its compliance with the system
- Build appropriate dashboards within DHIS2 for the data to be used at facility, county and state levels, and train staff to appreciate the benefits of using the data available.



# LINKING HEALTH AND EDUCATION

In most countries, MDAs at both national and subnational levels of government tend to be protective of their own resources and to be reticent when it comes to interdepartmental collaboration. In a country where electricity, connectivity and equipment are all in short supply, there is an opportunity for these barriers to be broken down. In an ideal situation, local government offices would be the sites where resources would be rationalized, planned and shared. It is recommended that for South Sudan in the short term a health-education nexus should be the focus. What is envisaged here is not additional layers of investment, but rather the instilling of a culture of resource-sharing, backed up by suitable policy agreements across sectors.

In Uganda, for example, a pilot is under way to build a new Education Management Information System (EMIS) on the back of the success of DHIS2. Relying on an existing, proven platform that allows for the sharing of technology, infrastructure and experience across sectors would appear to be a sensible approach to building systems in difficult circumstances. In its present form, the EMIS is designed only to collect basic information on school facilities.

It is therefore recommended that a feasibility study should be conducted involving DHIS2 education experts, the HMIS team at the MoH and the EMIS team at the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) and their Ugandan counterparts.

# DATA INTEROPERABILITY

All stakeholders in this study acknowledge that data “silos” are a serious problem for South Sudan’s data ecosystem. Efforts by many clusters are already under way to improve collaboration and harmonize their systems; these include:

- Efforts to integrate nutrition data into the HMIS
- The joining up of data on social protection from different systems
- The harmonization of intelligence provided by early warning systems

- The establishment by the NBS of a national data portal.

These efforts need encouragement and support, and the NBS should play the role of neutral arbiter to ensure that all concerns relating to privacy and data security are addressed. Data-sharing agreements and MoUs should be signed where needed to protect the integrity of private data.



# Data use

One of the biggest frustrations facing the NBS is a culture of “data hugging” among humanitarian and development actors in South Sudan. There are few proactive efforts to share data within or across agencies. The reasons for this are not clear, though the desire to protect funding and not have to share resources is one of them.

Most stakeholders in the country’s data ecosystem are frustrated by the lack of demand for and use of data and information in decision-making, especially by government policymakers. One explanation for this is that it is indicative of the wider problems caused by decades of fragility, conflict and political dysfunction. A new and war-torn country that is still in the process of State-building, where key institutions of accountability are still being formed, is unlikely to treat the use of data and evidence as a priority. These are, however, the very conditions that necessitate evidence to inform the better investment of scarce resources.

Intra-organizational demand for data is higher among development partners, foreign researchers and humanitarian actors, who at the same time are among the biggest producers and users of humanitarian data. Inter-organizational demand for data between government and the humanitarian sector is very low. One reason for this is that data and evidence are not big priorities for the government; another is that the government has few data that humanitarians would be interested in.

Most government officials do not have the capacity to demand or interpret data, and evidence derived from data is rarely used in decision-making at any level of government. This makes the data

ecosystem incomplete, as data users must form the nucleus of any strong national data system.

Building a culture of data use is critical for the country’s development. The capacity of state, county and other local government institutions for the production of, demand for and use of data needs to be encouraged and strengthened. Every state ought to have a designated statistician. This is one of many objectives in the previous NBS strategic plan that were not implemented due to a lack of resources.

The NBS could be supported to convene an annual national data forum which would bring together both producers and users of data to discuss mechanisms for improving data production and use and to create more awareness of data and statistics in the country. MDAs should hire statisticians and data analysts to synthesize available data for policy leaders and decision-makers in the MDAs.

The NBS and MDA statisticians and analysts should aim to interest policymakers in data by preparing factsheets that target their constituencies or special interests, in order to demonstrate the power of good data and evidence. Formats in which data are published should be simplified so that users can easily identify with the messages that the data are communicating.

Most importantly, both the GoSS and its development partners need to wholeheartedly embrace the fact that data are not a peacetime luxury but an essential element in the peace-making and State-building human development process.



# Supporting the government

It is understandable, given the humanitarian, security and governance challenges faced by South Sudan, that donors have focused their efforts on these sectors. This has meant, however, that investments in sustainable development have suffered.

When it comes specifically to data, these discrepancies are even more marked. Humanitarians deal with emergencies and hence have little time to build sustainable systems.

Scores of humanitarian organizations are involved in short-term needs-based initiatives to access information with which to work – small-scale surveys, research, M&E and other data collection activities. Unfortunately, some of these stopgap measures have become semi-permanent, to the detriment of the more complicated and important task of supporting the national agencies charged with collecting data, in particular the NBS.

## PARALLEL STRUCTURES

There is a marked difference in the way that government officials perceive the data challenges facing South Sudan and the country's development challenges in general and perceptions of the same issues by donors and humanitarian actors. Many humanitarian actors consider the GoSS to be too weak to undertake most forms of data collection activity. Government officials, on the other hand, while acknowledging their weaknesses, believe that this is often an excuse used by humanitarians to continue bypassing the government on the implementation of key humanitarian and development programmes.

A 2019 study by the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility recommends that "donors and agencies must understand, and where appropriate, work within South Sudanese systems, rather than ignoring or overriding them. The aid community needs to acknowledge that for many South Sudanese these local systems of accountability are legitimate, respected and understood, and that it is the international system that is alien and unintelligible."

Some government officials interviewed for this study were concerned that, in their words, "data colonialism" – defined as the potential for powerful, data-rich countries and corporations in the Global North to undercut capacity



**Spend by sector over the past three years**

**Bilateral**

2018 2019 2020

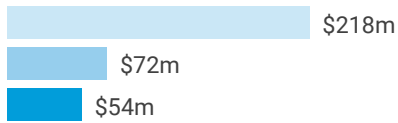
**Humanitarian**



**Governance and security**



**Economic**



**Social**



**Multilateral**

**Humanitarian**



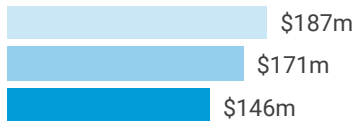
**Governance and security**



**Production and economic**



**Social**



development in the Global South – is at risk of becoming a reality in South Sudan. For example, most humanitarian data relating to the country are neither collected nor used by the government, and most are stored in databases hosted abroad.

The solution to the range of challenges described above should not be to create

a parallel operational universe or an alternate data ecosystem in which major actors conduct their short-term needs-based surveys and assessments with only token involvement by the NBS and other government agencies. This is the wrong way to go about it, even in the complicated context that is South Sudan.

## ROLE OF THE UN

The UN, under the leadership of the RCO, plays a critical role on development issues in the country. The United Nations Cooperation Framework (UNCF) is the UN Country Team’s blueprint for its work in South Sudan and provides a basis for the UN to work with the government and other partners to address key development challenges.

The UNCF acknowledges that efforts to implement programmes to achieve targets set under its priority areas are affected by the “limited availability of quality and disaggregated data, which is needed for effective and targeted interventions” and that these data challenges are in part a result of “insecurity and limited capacity at all levels of government offices, particularly at the National Bureau of Statistics”. The UNCF sets out to “support data systems and evidence-based policy-making” to address these data gaps and commits to “work with the National Bureau of Statistics to enhance national statistical systems and capacities for disaggregated data collection and analysis”.

As part of the UN’s global New Way of Working (NWOW) approach, the UNCT in South Sudan is committed to fostering partnerships, including conducting joint data collection and sharing exercises, joint analysis and assessments, combined planning and programming. For example:

- The UN as a whole is committed to aligning the upcoming UNSDCF and the SDGs with the National Development Strategy.
- UNDP and UNICEF are providing support for public financial management (PFM) systems.
- UNESCO and UNICEF are supporting MoGEI to conduct regular surveys (including the annual EMIS census).
- WHO, UNICEF and other agencies are providing robust support to the HMIS.
- The UNCT, led by UNFPA, is supporting the planned population estimation survey.
- The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is supporting the NBS with the collection of migration-related data.
- The RCO has put in place coordination frameworks to avoid duplication and to ensure that One UN and NWOW principles are followed.



Yet despite these efforts there are still problems with data silos, data duplication and a lack of adequate coordination. The UNSDCF is designed to foster coordination between the UNCT and the GoSS, and the UNCT has made its own efforts to share data and information. However, the establishment of these important frameworks has been hampered by a number of challenges, including limited willingness to build synergies within and across the humanitarian sector, weak government and the existence of multiple data systems.

One solution could be the establishment of a pooled fund for data and statistics within the UNCT, with a focus on improving coordination. Furthermore, targeted support for GoSS sector working groups, aimed at establishing operational budgets and workplans, could transform these structures from existing in name only at present

to being actors that play an important role.

The most significant short-term results could arguably be achieved by development partners and humanitarian agencies redoubling their commitments to consultation, coordination, collaboration and cooperation, so that all stakeholders contribute proactively to a nationally owned and maintained, and inclusive, statistical system. Donors play a huge role in South Sudan and they must play a part in any recommendations aimed at strengthening the NBS, not only by providing resources but also by strengthening its capacity and confidence through conducting joint assessments, sharing data and information and supporting it to establish a centralized data system that all stakeholders contribute to and access whenever they wish to use data.



Photo credit: UN RCO



# An achievable plan of action

It is not possible for the government and its development partners to solve all the challenges they face overnight. The Strategic Action Plan that has been prepared as part of this report offers a relatively modest suite of recommendations that have the potential for at least some partial solutions over the next three years. The recommendations are for implementation by the government with support from the UN and other development partners. The ambitions of the plan are deliberately modest in order to ensure that its outcomes are realistically achievable. It focuses on just four major themes.

- The first set of recommendations aims to empower and resource the NBS to properly lead on the national statistical system. A new and pragmatic national strategy for the development of statistics is required that moves towards managing a central repository of official statistics via an indigenous national data portal.
- The second proposes to support a roadmap towards building administrative data infrastructure based at the level of local facilities by building on the successes of the HMIS and using it as a backbone from which other sectors can learn and grow.
- The third aims to place responsibility for, and ownership and monitoring of, the SDGs firmly with the government through the establishment of a national secretariat answerable to the President, and a National Indicator Framework supported by an audit of data sources and gaps.
- The fourth focuses on the collection of demographic data, recognizing the importance of the upcoming population estimation survey, and proposing to conduct two further more comprehensive household surveys such as multiple indicator cluster survey and to make gradual improvements to the digital registration of births.



**Expected outcomes of the Costed Strategic Action Plan**

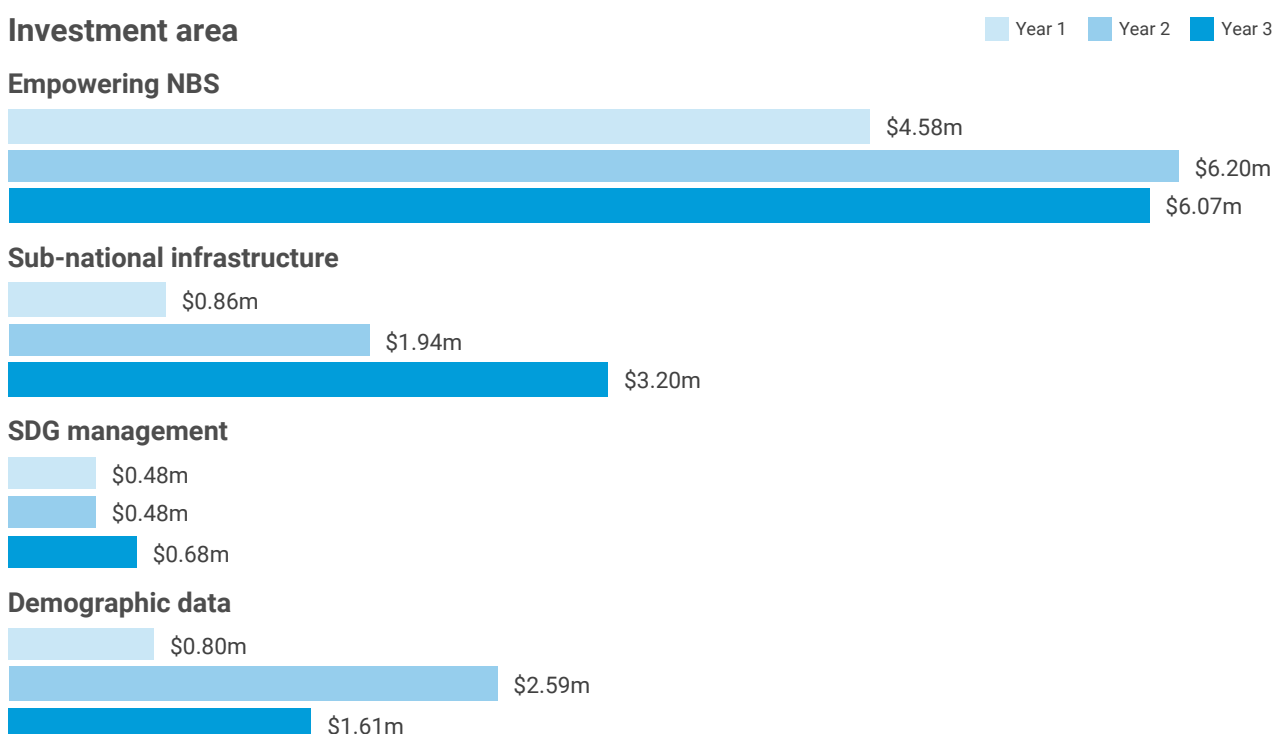
Strategic area	Investment areas	Expected outcomes	Indicative 3-year budget (\$)
<b>Empowering the National Bureau of Statistics</b>	National staff salaries	NBS staff are properly employed and motivated to fulfil their duties.	12,478,000
	National ICT infrastructure	The national offices of the NBS are secure and fully equipped and serviced.	1,300,000
	National Strategy for the Development of Statistics	A new NSDS is adopted with a detailed, pragmatic roadmap for implementation.	1,500,000
	National data portal	The NBS launches the first iteration of a data portal as an authoritative source for official statistics.	800,000
<b>Building subnational data infrastructures</b>	Health management information system	Digital collection of data is carried out by clinical staff at 1,000 primary and secondary health-care facilities.	5,635,000
	Sharing HMIS experience	Health workers collaborate with schools and local governments to share their digital experience.	350,000
<b>National management of the SDGs</b>	Leadership and coordination	Establish an SDG secretariat in the Office of the President, along with cross-departmental coordination.	690,000
	National Indicator Framework	The NBS maintains a central register and audit of all SDG and national development indicators.	600,000
<b>Short-term improvements to demographic data</b>	Population estimate	The planned population estimate is conducted successfully and published in the next two years.	600,000
	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey	A partial MICS is conducted in states where a statistically coherent sample can be safely accessed.	600,000
	Baseline Household Survey	A partial BHS is conducted in states where a statistically coherent sample can be safely accessed.	920,000
	Civil registration and vital statistics	Within three years digital data capture is functional at 500 locations where births are registered.	2,875,000



A very rough attempt has been made to cost these recommendations. These indicative estimates, provided in more detail in the Strategic Action Plan, suggest that much could be achieved with a three-year budget of less than \$30 million. Ideally these investments should be made from domestic resources, but in the current

circumstances this would be a substantial commitment from the GoSS and is unrealistic. However, it represents substantially less than 1 per cent of the current total aid budget. From both a humanitarian and development point of view, this is surely an investment worth making.

**Proposed annual investments by theme**



There may well appear to be a compelling argument that the reason why official statistics are not a priority in South Sudan, for either government or international agencies, is the scale of the challenges facing the country and the fact that peace and recovery have to come first. But this is to miss the important truth that good-quality, reliable and relevant official statistics

– and good use of those statistics – are key in any recovery and reconstruction effort. And if this is true, then the strengthening of sustainable national capacity to own and manage national data infrastructure and official statistics should be at the heart of the security, humanitarian and development agendas in South Sudan.



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