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For better or worse? The global data revolution

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Bonn, 13 January 2017. At a time when most of us are having a quiet start to the year, cleaning up desks and refreshing to-do lists, a group of UN officials, South African statisticians and international partners are frantically working to finalise preparations for the first-ever UN World Data Summit.

The Summit takes place from 15-18 January in Cape Town and looks into what role data and statistics can play in realising the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Cape Town event will not be another momentous occasion to adopt a weighty political outcome document of which each and every word has been negotiated by a committee. It will instead be a more 'down-to-earth' gathering, yet no less ambitious in its aim to convene governments, businesses, civil society and the research community to discuss how data and statistics may serve to measure global progress as well as directly contribute the realisation of the 2030 Agenda. Such a 'data revolution', as it was referred to during the negotiations of the 2030 Agenda, will only be realised when both the functional and political dimensions of the use of data and statistics in all countries of the world are adequately considered and addressed.

It is clear that today's technical possibilities are nearly endless, allowing Estonians to be the first to use their mobile phones to vote in parliamentary elections in 2007, or Kenyans to accelerate business opportunities, or for the US President-Elect to outline the main dimensions of his future foreign affairs strategy on Twitter.

Yet today also brings realisation of the risks that such technologies raise, as they may expose the mobile phone habits of the German chancellor, or the misuse of people's continuous access to information sources by the spread of 'fake news'.

These examples point to a formidable challenge facing all countries in the world: new technologies, solutions and social movements propel the production and use of data and statistics, yet they also contribute to destabilising our societies and creating new inequalities. Governments are challenged to simultaneously deliver 4G connectivity, combat increasing distrust among the electorate as fired up by 'post-truth' online (dis)content, as well as maintain a healthy balance between security and privacy.

Poor numbers, or poor governance?

In the field of international cooperation for sustainable development, some extreme views – and a resulting lack of consensus – can be detected when it comes to the role of data and statistics. There are those who argue that new technologies may allow countries with otherwise unreliable and inadequate official statistical systems to leapfrog their way towards evidence-based policy making, while others defend the long walk and argue that patience, leadership and resources are needed to gradually develop the required capacity.

Morten Jerven's book on "Poor numbers" (2013) was an eye-opener to many academics and policy-makers: inaccurate macroeconomic data is a knowledge and governance issue, not only in African countries but also in wealthier countries. His main message is that data and statistics are not just about functional problems in search of technical fixes. Data and statistics are important components of the political-economy landscape of every country.

Facing up to a funding and learning gap

Patterns of past investments in capacity development for data and statistics, reveal that donors – and as a consequence more aid-dependent countries – have deprioritised this area for decades. Today, the requirements for SDG monitoring – the tip of the iceberg for data and statistic needs in many countries – requires an annual increase in aid of $350 to $400 million to support the production of data on the SDG indicators. Moreover, support has emphasised technical solutions to perceived bottlenecks and often negated or ignored the political dimensions of existing capacity challenges. A recent UN system-wide evaluation observed that "challenges of supporting capacity development for greater and deeper use are complex and are as much about addressing incentives and political constraints as they are about helping to develop individual technical capacities to undertake statistical analysis." Few would object to this statement, and yet the reality is that writing the terms of reference for a new project, with a demanding time-frame and expectations for tangible results, is challenging.

Hence, a data revolution will only be realised once those who support and lead it, covering various public and non-governmental stakeholders that each co-produce and use data and statistics, agree to revolutionalise themselves. The OECD hosted PARIS 21 (Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century) network was created to allow for knowledge sharing among development cooperation experts and officials of developing country statistical offices. While it is important to push the technical dialogue in Cape Town, the funding gap and long-standing data trends point to a need to catapult this debate into the political arena. Because just like when discussing research funding, there are many other things of greater visibility and interest to politicians. Nevertheless, it will in the end be the 'softer' dimensions of capacity, research and information that determine whether or not the 2030 Agenda will be realised, as opposed to another round of silver bullets.