KEY POINTS

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls on countries to report on an extensive set of indicators, aimed at ensuring that no one is 'left behind', yet today, nearly halfway towards the end, most countries are struggling to produce the required data.
- The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, conflict and instability are setting back SDG progress while also making it more difficult for national statistical offices to produce data.
- Last year funding to data & statistics fell by 16%, the greatest decline during the SDG era.
- By better matching supply and demand of data, including through new tools and platforms, donors can make every development dollar go further.
- Countries have an opportunity to leverage new data sources and citizen- generated data, but need support to build this capacity.
- More work needs to be done to map and use existing data – system-wide coherence can deliver substantial benefits.

PEGNet Policy Brief

Without a radical rethinking of the role of data, the SDGs will fail to "leave no one behind"

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As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavor to reach the furthest behind first (UNGA Resolution 70/1, 2015).

1 Sustainable development for all

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the global landmark agreement signed by all 193 United Nations member countries in 2015, is an ambitious and historic pledge to end poverty and work towards a more sustainable future for all.

The cornerstone of Agenda 2030 is its pledge to "leave no one behind" (LNOB). It was borne out of a realisation that the previous global agreement, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), failed to account for the unique needs of the most disadvantaged populations in society and that efforts to advance development by focusing on national averages or, to an extent, policies informed by supply-side economics failed to improve the wellbeing of those most in need.

Development of the successor 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was markedly different. The SDGs were created through a number of wide-reaching consultations, including 83 national discussions. The online My World Survey (complemented by a door-to-door survey in some countries) gave nearly ten million a voice in priority setting as well.

In order to avoid some of the ambiguity that plagued the MDGs, the SDGs are an order of magnitude more comprehensive in terms of target setting, with 169 targets and 248 indicators developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDGs) and adopted in 2017 through UNGA Resolution A/RES/71/313. Countries are invited to undertake Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The extensive set of indicators is designed to support the measurement of progress towards an LNOB-driven Agenda 2030 by informing the extent to which different groups face disadvantages, deprivations and discriminations. They are intended to spur collective efforts towards actions that support the farthest left behind first.

Operationalising the SDGs requires development actors to "systematically compile all available disaggregated and other relevant quantitative and qualitative data", drawing on both official statistics and new data sources. This imposes a heavy reporting burden on countries, many of whom have limited statistical capacity to report on national development goals, let alone a far-reaching set of new global indicators.

Yet today, nearly halfway towards the end of Agenda 2030, most countries are struggling to produce the required data. As others have noted, despite progress in some areas there remain persistent and significant data gaps with regards to the geographic coverage, extent of disaggregation and timeliness of data with, for example, only 4 in 10 countries being able to report on gender equality.

2 The state of development data today

Current global crises have upended life for hundreds of millions of people and wrought economic and social damage that will be felt for generations to come. Indeed, a recent analysis by the UN shows a "staggering" backsliding across the health of women, children and adolescents wrought by climate change, COVID-19 and conflict.

The pandemic also exacerbated inequalities between national statistical offices. Many countries, seeking to comply with lockdowns and other mitigation policies, suspended field data collection and implemented remote work measures. National statistical offices have also seen budgets shrink significantly as money is redirected to other areas.

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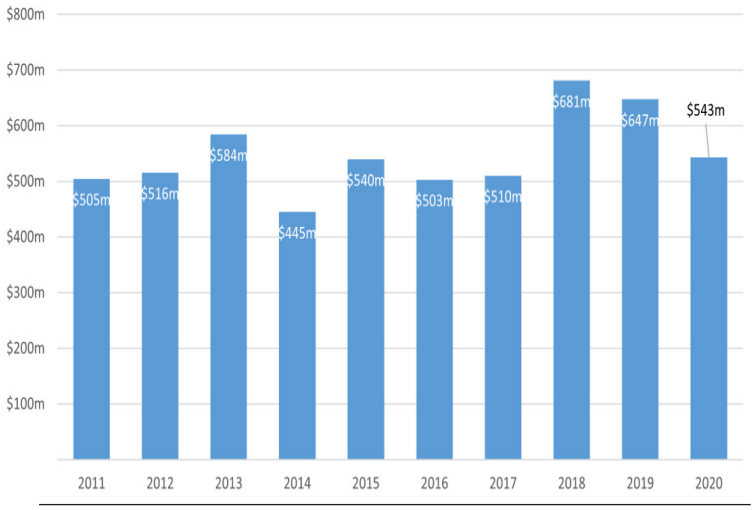
In 2021, PARIS21, The World Bank and UNSD published a survey on the implementation of the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, in which nearly 70 percent of IDA countries professed a need to address funding shortages over the next three years.

Yet last year, we saw the greatest decline during the SDG era to data and statistics funding. Funding to data and statistics fell by nearly 16% in 2020, a record-breaking decline in the SDG era. Prior to this, funding had been stagnant for around a decade. This decrease in funding cannot be fully accounted for by pandemic-induced funding and policy shifts. Rather, it could reflect the decades-old challenges to mainstream data activity as well as the limited pool of donors and the low strategic priority of statistics.

Even prior to the pandemic, funding to data and statistics could only fill half of the funding gap required to produce sufficient data to meet the SDGs. At the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, fewer than half of countries are able to produce data on even 80 of the 231 SDG indicators. The further decline of data funding in 2020 will make it even harder for countries to catch up, with negative consequences for evidence-based policy making at the country level.

Figure 1.1. Funding to data and statistics dropped more than at any time in the Sustainable Development Goal era



Information about the Clearinghouse for Financing Development Data, the source of these data, is presented in Box 1.2. Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Clearinghouse for Financing Development Data (2022[1]), Smarter financing for development data (database), https://smartdatafinance.org/download-data (accessed on 15 August 2022). Data available at https://stat.link/ewr4xu

Funding for gender data dropped by nearly a third. This is inconsistent with global ambitions to support gender equality. During the same period, funding for environmental statistics and educational statistics only dropped by 11% and 14%, respectively. These are in line with other decreases but substantially below the decline in gender data.

In fact, progress towards gender equality, a goal that cuts across all SDGs, is not only stalling but backsliding in some cases. Without a gendered approach to data production and use, we will lack the insights we need to understand how various policies affect women and girls and then take appropriate steps to achieve gender equality.

In March 2022, UNSDG published "Operationalizing Leave No One Behind", a guide for UN country teams supporting member states to operationalize the pledge. It recognises the need to "systematically compile all available disaggregated and other relevant quantitative and qualitative data" from official and new data sources.

Yet in many cases, the data simply are not there to support these efforts. The European Parliament confirmed this in a January 2022 study on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda's LNOB principle in the EU's development policy, where it pointed out that the "lack of disaggregated data constitute… obstacles" to the implementation of the LNOB agenda.

3 Where do we go from here?

To put data and statistics at the heart of efforts to ensure that the SDGs leave no one behind, we make three recommendations:

The first is financing. We need a step change in both international and domestic sources of finance. PARIS21 and other partners estimate that to meet the SDGs, financing needs to double from its current level of around US$543 million to more than one billion per year.

Domestic resources are the first-best option for funding statistical capacity both in terms of sustainability and predictability as well as alignment to country resources and priorities. The challenge, however, is that countries with the weakest statistical systems cannot fund their statistical activities through public finances alone. For example, ODA in Madagascar (with a poverty rate of 71 percent) accounts for 35 percent of the national budget and 62 percent of public investments. Within this context, the government has struggled to prioritise funding for statistics. When allocating budgets, politicians choose to invest in health, education, and food security facilities rather than spend US$1 million on a survey or to strengthen the national statistical system.

ODA therefore remains an important source of financing for national statistical development. Yet amidst a global economic climate that is threatening recession and a swath of global crises (food, climate, security), it will be difficult to convince donors, themselves facing shrinking budgets, to scale up financing for data and statistics – an often - low priority area for donors compared to issues like emergency relief or healthcare.

Another option is to make development data financing smarter. To this end, platforms like the recently-launched Clearinghouse for Financing Development Data aim to ensure that every dollar spent towards development data goes farther by better matching financing supply to demand, and by providing a space to build partnerships and bring projects to scale.

The Clearinghouse also enables donors to benchmark their country's data funding and highlight opportunities for joint projects with other donors. Recipient countries can use it to understand how much aid they are receiving for statistics across the board and plan investments accordingly, assess their funding gaps to lobby for more resources from government and donors, and access best practices to improve efficiency and effectiveness of investments in data and statistics. The Clearinghouse also fits the needs of other user groups such as researchers and civil society organisations, who can use it to analyse overall trends in financing for data and identify who the top donors/recipients are.

Our second recommendation to put data on track to LNOB is a much wider incorporation of new data sources into SDG and national statistical efforts.

Countries need data at an unprecedented level of granularity to ensure that no one is left behind on the path to achieving the SDGs. Citizen-generated data (CGD) have the potential to fill some of those data gaps, and its use by NSOs can facilitate engagement with data users and enhance trust in data.

To do so, national statistical actors will have to undertake a number of key measures. First, a common working definition of CGD should be agreed upon and used as the basis for interactions when bringing in CGD producers. This will help support transparency and manage expectations. Second, efforts to source in CGD should be constrained to specific, clearly-defined areas at the outset rather than seeking a broad incorporation of CGD into the NSS. Third, quality standards must be implemented for CGD so that NSOs can evaluate whether CGD are fit for purpose. Fourth, institutional capacity will have to be built. NSOs can leverage existing user-producer dialogue mechanisms to support this. Finally, data repositories to facilitate data sharing will help to foster buy-in and create value for the producers.

A 2022 report by PARIS21, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and Partners for Review encapsulates the experience of operationalising the use of citizen-generated data to fill gaps in official reporting. The experience of Kenya shows that incorporating new data sources, including citizen-generated data, often requires fundamental changes to the way that national statistical offices operate.

In the case of Kenya, with the support of PARIS21, KNBS developed a national methodology to validate the quality of CGD as fit for purpose. In addition, a participatory model of policy-setting was applied: the KNBS held workshops and consultations with a number of civil society actors in Kenya to discuss the validation criteria and build an inventory of potential CGD producers.

Partnerships like these are essential. KNBS is a national statistical office with fairly advanced capacity, but even NSOs in high-income economies often struggle to make sense of the myriad flows of new data – from civil society sources to satellite imagery – much less impose the required governance, data protection and quality measures.

Support from the international development actors is thus critical and should be prioritised during the second half of the SDG era. Critically, international actors should focus on building the capacity of national statistical systems to engage with new data sources rather than on seeking to incorporate new data sources into their own work. Otherwise, they risk robbing their partner countries of both the data that they need and the ability to modernise in line with national priorities, while also introducing new, competing sources of data of uncertain quality or, sometimes, provenance.

This leads to our third recommendation: that development partners redouble efforts to improve coordination among statistical system actors. Co-ordination within a national statistical system ensures sharing of data and information without duplication of effort, functional processes, and high-quality public service delivery. An efficient pipeline that gathers data producers and users can catalyse the development of policies to achieve the SDGs.

It is often said that we are in the midst of a data revolution. Since the SDGs were first agreed in 2015, the sheer volume and diversity of data producing actors has exploded – from social media companies and satellite imagery start-ups to advocacy groups. While we have no doubt that better data can lead to better lives, it is also getting more difficult for policymakers to discern between competing sources of data or to understand the nuances around how data are produced.

A lack of standardization and transparency also make it difficult for policymakers to aggregate data from disparate sources in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of an issue.

The climate change data landscape is a case in point. Over the past few decades, the international community has developed comprehensive frameworks for climate monitoring and reporting, including those developed under the Paris Agreement. In some respects, progress has been remarkable, marked by global co-operation and transparency on an unprecedented scale. Yet the data landscape is becoming exponentially larger and more complex, and many frameworks have struggled to keep pace. They seldom have the capacity to provide the system-wide coordination that is needed to provide greater access to data, identify and address data gaps or deliver data synthesis and assessment.

Data ecosystem approaches, which seek to systematically map, catalogue, and align the multitude of data on a given topic, can help development actors break down data silos and unleash the potential of multi-faceted topical data for more effective, inclusive and timely action on a range of issues.

In the case of climate change, applying the data ecosystem approach would help countries identify, source, and use all the relevant data produced in their country and elsewhere, while increasing their capacity for resilience to the impacts of climate change.

4 Beyond 2030

We are nearly halfway to the end of the SDG area. We do know that progress in some areas has been remarkable, yet looming data gaps mean that we cannot definitively measure progress across the board. Paradoxically, it is among those countries and those communities that are at the greatest risk of being left behind that we have the biggest challenges with respect to data.

The good news is that the amount of financing needed, and the actions required, to fundamentally alter the trajectory of LNOB are well within the grasp of the development community. In most cases, the tools, frameworks and partnerships already exist. All that is needed is a recognition of the central role that timely, high quality data and statistics play in sustainable development and the political will to see the necessary measures through.

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