People Count: The Importance of Development Data

Preliminary Draft Submission of the Development Data Community to the African Data Consensus (African Data Consensus, Addis Ababa, 27-29 March 2015)

- **To make people count we need to count people**

    - Developing and strengthening civil registration systems must be placed at the top of the agenda.

    - The improvement of administrative data – with particular emphasis on health, education, land and agricultural management information systems – is critical.

    - The National Statistics Development Strategy (NSDS) should encompass all activities relating to the collection of data and compilation of statistics.

- **Development data must drive evidence-based development decision making**

    - Development data must drive development, not just the monitoring of development.

    - Decision makers need usable information based on data that is disaggregated down to the local level and is both timely and accurate.

    - Decision makers and those that hold them to account need this information (and the data upon which it is based) to be openly accessible.

Introduction

This paper has been prepared by the Development Data Community, one of twelve working groups tasked with contributing to the *African Data Consensus*, the outcome document for the High Level Conference [Setting the scene for a sustainable development agenda powered by Data Revolution in Africa](#), which will take place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 27–29 March 2015. Each of the twelve communities has been asked to narrow their focus on a particular aspect of the envisaged outcome. This paper attempts to abide by this instruction, but it draws context from three ground-breaking reports – *[Delivering on the Data Revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa](#)*, *[A World That Counts](#)* and the draft *[Road Map for a Country-led Data Revolution](#)* – as well as practical experiences of development data practitioners working in Africa.

The Africa context

The geographic extent and socio-economic, political and cultural diversity of the continent presents unique challenges. Poverty, risk, vulnerability to conflict, and susceptibility to changing climate patterns driving hunger, all plague the continent year in, year out. Poor data and statistics on all these issues make predictability and mitigation more difficult. Decisions on resource allocation are often highly politicised and made in the context of weak governance and weak political institutions.

An Africa-sensitive data revolution needs to embrace contextual challenges and opportunities – socio-economic, cultural and political – in order to design or define interventions that are relevant to this context. It must be consciously aware of existing inequalities, digital divides, poverty dynamics and their drivers, and priorities for both government and citizens. It needs to build the capacity of multiple stakeholders to change mindsets on the importance of data and information on decision making and resource allocation to create and sustain demand for data and information.

There are specific national priorities and elements of good practice that need to be recognised, addressed and built on. Leveraging the Data Revolution for better development outcomes will [require 54 data revolutions in 54 African countries](#). The development and implementation of relevant and dynamic National Statistics Development Strategies should therefore be at the centre of efforts to improve data collection and use for better development outcomes.

Counting people to make people count

The executive summary of the report on the Data Revolution by the UN Secretary General's Independent Experts Advisory Group ends with the words

> *"Never again should it be possible to say "we didn't know". No one should be invisible. This is the world we want – a world that counts."*

To achieve development and to eradicate poverty individual people matter. To ensure that no-one is left behind and that no-one is invisible when critical decisions are made, we need to count people. Civil registration and administrative data is a crucial part of this.

- The most effective way to know, year by year, the size of a country's population is through a registry of births and deaths. The most effective way to properly plan for the eradication of unnecessary death from disease is for causes of death to be recorded.
- The most effective way to improve education is for every school to report regularly into an education management information system.
- The most effective way to improve health services is for every clinic to report regularly on their activities into a health management information system.
- The most effective way to deliver support to small farmers is to have localised data fed into an agricultural management information system.

Data, statistics and the NSDS
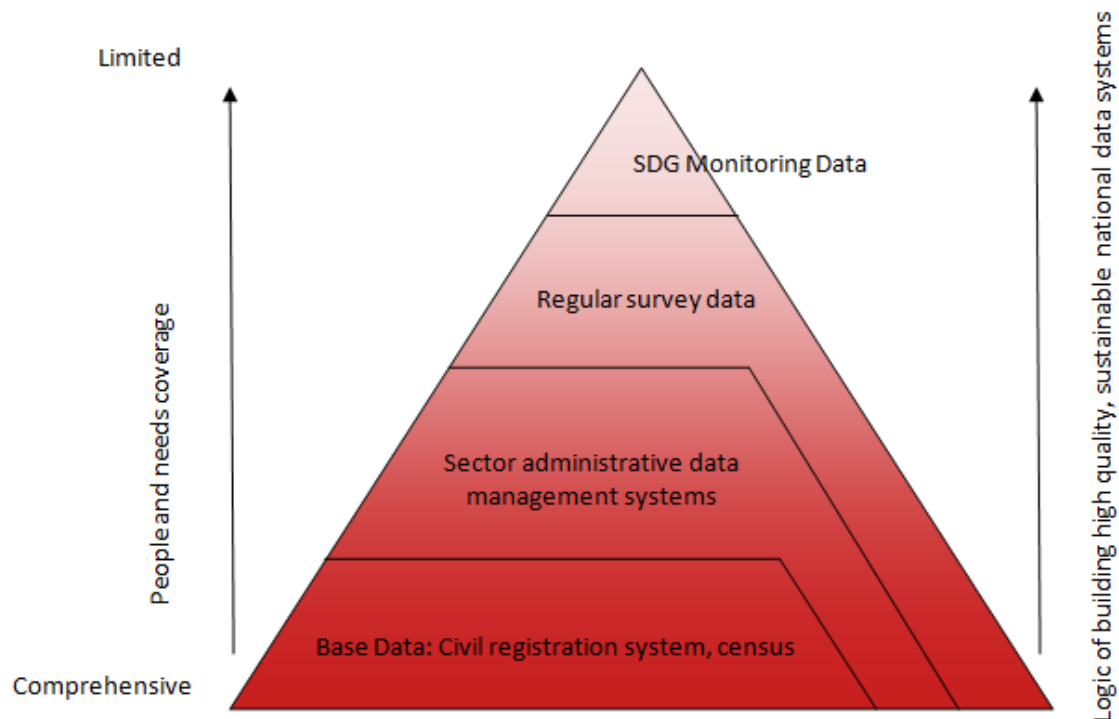
Many African statistics (more than in other parts of the world) are derived from household surveys. These surveys have played a critical role in providing governments and international agencies with calculated snapshots in the absence of more credible registry and administrative data. They are, however, often based on small and unrepresentative samples and the results are often inaccessible and subject to substantial time lags.

Surveys are therefore not a sustainable data solution in their own right, and the investment of limited resources in surveys at the expense of building registry and administrative data capacity will undermine long-term sustainability of national data systems. It is critical that the development of data-collection capacity and the transition, where appropriate, from surveys to registry and administrative data is properly managed. This will be best achieved by ensuring that the National Statistics Development Strategy encompasses all issues pertaining to both statistics AND data.

Evidence-based development decision making

Improving the collection of data and turning it into information of use to decision makers is crucial to the success of *all* strategies to eradicate poverty and promote sustainable development. This includes national development priorities as well as the emerging Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) framework.

For example, reducing maternal mortality is an important SDG. Better development data will lead to improvements in the effectiveness of health services in general and a reduction in all unnecessary deaths; data needs to help create the solution, not merely monitor the problem.

Improved development data will inevitably assist in the *monitoring* of the SDGs. This should be an important by-product of the Data Revolution, but it cannot be regarded as its prime motivation. It is vital that investments in compatible monitoring of the SDGs at the global level – much of which is currently done through surveys – should not come at the expense of developing national capacities to collect and use data for national needs.

The priority data for development-related decisions should be robust national and sub-national statistics that are relevant to the decision at hand. It can only be relevant if it is both timely and accurate. Moreover it can only be relevant if it describes the specific area and people being targeted.

The only way to know anything at all about all the people who live in every locality is to prioritise **disaggregated** data in which all people are counted and all people count. The collection of these numbers – registry and administrative data – has to be at the heart of the data revolution in Africa.

Decision makers do not operate in isolation from the communities in which they work and whom they seek to assist. An inclusive approach to problem solving and public accountability for decisions taken requires openly accessible data and information. For data and information to be useful and usable it needs to be accessible. To be accessible it needs to be open. This is the rationale for governments to commit to open data strategies to deliver effective development.