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# **data for development in Africa**

ensuring commitments made at the High-level  
meeting in Kenya are met

discussion paper

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# Introduction

The [High-level meeting on data for development in Africa](#), held in Nairobi on 29 and 30 June 2017, was by any measure a success.<sup>1</sup> Co-hosted by the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD), the governments of Kenya and Sierra Leone, and Safaricom – in collaboration with the African Development Bank, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and the governments of Ghana, Senegal and Tanzania – the conference aimed to create ‘political momentum and attention to reinforce the need for reliable data for decision-making’. It also sought to demonstrate that ‘the data revolution is delivering at scale in Africa by leveraging significant commitments to strengthen data infrastructure, capacity and use’.<sup>2</sup>

This paper seeks to summarise the key commitments made at the meeting, and also to unpack the key steps that need to be made by governments, donors and other actors to ensure that the vision for development data in Africa becomes a reality.

# Outcomes of the High-level meeting on data for development in Africa

The GPSDD Executive Director Claire Melamed reiterated the importance of the meeting in her opening address when she called for “political will and coordination” in addressing barriers that inhibit data use, cause interoperability challenges and entrench the data divide. Most governments, a number of them represented by multisectoral delegations rarely seen in conferences of this kind, heeded Melamed’s call. The conference was arguably one of the few occasions where political commitments to the cause of the data revolution were as bold as they were unanimous.

And the conference was also successful in other ways. It was highly Afrocentric in participation, with the majority of speakers coming from Africa, or organisations based in Africa. This is noteworthy because some well-intentioned ‘Africa’ initiatives or efforts aimed at effecting change on the continent are sometimes led from outside. The meeting also featured prominent inputs from Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Kenya – a fair reflection on these countries’ long-term efforts on the data revolution in Africa.

## Senegal

Senegal announced plans to prioritise data- and technology-enabled agriculture as a key driver of its ambitious inclusive and sustainable economic-growth agenda. With support from NASA, the country has embarked on mapping farms, collecting and using comprehensive agriculture statistics and incorporating satellite data to improve the productivity of the sector. The country’s minister of finance made a historic remark when, speaking to many long-term advocates of leveraging data for development, he said that “Senegal considers investment in data as important as investment in other infrastructure such as roads.”

## Ghana

Ghana detailed its plans for a comprehensive national identification system as a key aspect of service delivery, announcing that a birth certificate will be a prerequisite for securing a national ID card, which will in turn make access to healthcare, education and employment easier. This will help ensure that all children have these documents. “Often without Data, you will get policies wrong. If the data is poor, you make poor decisions,” said Ghana’s minister of planning.

## Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone, already a leader in the open data movement on the continent, was upfront on the importance the country attaches to easy and unconstrained access to information by citizens. Its Open Data Council and the Right to Information Commission have for a couple of years been raising awareness on the important link between open data and development, as well as encouraging and compelling agencies to make their data freely available to stakeholders in that country's development. Sierra Leone's vice president visited Nairobi to announce a proactive multistakeholder effort by his government to engage in a comprehensive data revolution roadmap that meets increasing demands for data by leveraging new technologies.

## Kenya

Kenya – christened 'Silicon Savannah' for its leadership in harnessing information communication technologies – is a hub for the vast and growing technology ecosystem on the continent. Kenya, being host and co-organiser of the High-level meeting, committed to a number of measures that will bolster its leadership of the data revolution movement on the continent and improve its already impressive communications technology development ecosystem. These are:

- establishing an African intergovernmental network on open data for agriculture and nutrition
- building a sustainable development goals tools platform with the UN
- championing the use of data to accelerate access to health services
- registering births in rural areas.

# Putting these commitments into action

All these commitments point to significant momentum for leveraging the data revolution in Africa. But as with all declarations, the hard part is putting commitments into action. African leaders and governments – as well as their supporters in the non-state and academic sectors and donor communities – will have to take action to ensure these commitments come to fruition. They will need all the support there is to make these commitments a reality. The following are suggestions on how this can be done:

## **1. African governments will have to walk the talk by putting money where their mouth is**

There is still insufficient attention paid to statistics and data when it comes to budget allocations across Africa. Only a tiny fraction of national budgets is allocated, and this has to change. While it is understandable that resource constraints force African governments to focus on emergency areas, it is crucial to understand that quality data is an indispensable element of effective decision making, and therefore funding for quality data should be considered an important part of the development ecosystem. The words of the Senegalese minister – that financing statistics would be considered as important as financing other crucial sectors – represent a very positive step.

## **2. African governments need to build capacity in national statistical offices**

Expecting government agencies and other stakeholders to meet commitments on the data revolution without supporting them with the technical tools and capacity to do so is unfair and unrealistic. Retraining national statistical offices and other agencies charged with these tasks, such as using new tools and technologies, is an important first step. A comprehensive capacity gap analysis needs to be done to inform decisions on what kind of retooling and skills are needed to enable governments to rise to the challenge of meeting their commitments.

## **3. Reinvent the role of civil society and other non-state actors**

A sustained and reinvented civil society role will be more critical than ever if commitments are to be realised. Long-term strategic partnerships between state actors, non-state actors and donors must be established. Engagement that is bold, yet constructive and positive (and not necessarily combative and adversarial) can lead to a more considerate understanding of the sociopolitical and economic context of each country. The political

economy of the data revolution in general is important for constructive and successful engagement.

The changes wrought by the data revolution are in many cases disruptive to the traditional structures of national data ecosystems, and it will take time for these systems to adapt. National statistical offices should be encouraged to embrace change, rather than to see it as upending the traditional order of their statistical systems. Concerns on quality of non-official statistics (statistics produced by organisations sitting outside government) can be satisfied by developing standards and defining mandates at all levels. Standardised research tools between civil society organisations (CSOs), national statistical offices and ministries, agencies and departments of government are crucial in this regard. At the same time, civil society needs to be engaged constantly to remind the governments of their commitment to leveraging the data revolution.

#### **4. Donors need a coherent funding strategy**

Donors must stop funding multiple similar efforts in similar agencies, which stalls progress by creating unnecessary and unhelpful inter-agency rivalries rather than synergy. Donors must have a clear, coordinated funding and support strategy for the data revolution. Understanding the legislative and policy mandates of agencies and stakeholders will help donors direct funds in more context-sensitive ways and foster collaboration rather than competition. This means governments also must have clear definitions on who in their ecosystem is responsible for what, to avoid role ambiguity and confusion, which leads to duplication of effort.

#### **5. Community data collection and engagement is critical**

*All politics is local*, an American politician once said. The same could be said of data. With urbanisation still low in Africa, it would be a mistake to focus data revolution efforts in cities and peri-urban areas where there are resources and robust infrastructure. This would inadvertently widen the digital divide and worsen inequality. The development ecosystem works well when the benefits of development are felt at the local level, particularly in rural areas, which in Africa is where most of the population still lives. This means that engagement with this constituency in the cycle of data collection and use is crucial to ensure that no one is left behind.<sup>3</sup>

There are fantastic examples of community information systems that engage local people, and are both representative and very successful.<sup>4</sup> These need to be supported more. Not only are they cost effective, they are more representative of the pulse of what is going on at community level, and can support larger-scale, but less frequent, data collection efforts such as censuses and surveys. Community data collection and engagement is especially key for fulfilling commitments made on civil registration and vital statistics systems.

## **6. Stakeholders must understand each country's context**

Commitments have to be understood in terms of a country's sociopolitical, economic and cultural context. No two countries are the same – there is a different data revolution in each of Africa's 54 countries; indeed often there are differences within countries. Stakeholders need to understand the context of each country, community and region because designing context-specific approaches to commitments will increase the chances of success.

## **7. A harmonised understanding of key data-revolution concepts such as an inclusive national statistical system is needed**

As we have argued before, if one key to the success of the data revolution for sustainable development is the ability of a diverse set of stakeholders to work together, then they all need to speak the same language.<sup>5</sup> Different perspectives on the meaning of the data revolution, on associated terminologies and on the best approach to moving forward have emerged. Some new terms – such as 'data communities' and 'data ecosystems' – have originated (mostly from new non-official players) and are not understood in the same way by more traditional government entities like national statistics offices and line ministries. Similarly, there is no harmonised understanding of whom, or what, constitutes the national statistical system and, consequently, what the exact scope of official statistics is.

This lack of a common language has the potential to hinder progress, especially if official and non-official actors misunderstand and misinterpret one another. Global consensus on an inclusive definition of such concepts as national statistics systems – one that recognises both the centrality and rigour of official statistics and the diversity and contribution of all stakeholders – would represent a major step toward integrated and united action.

## **8. CSOs need to lead the way in opening up their data**

Some CSOs and charities have large datasets, larger than even certain credentialed national datasets as a result of long-term investments in data concerning their issues of interest, and they need to share this data.

## **9. Collaboration between private companies, governments and other stakeholders will be critical**

Companies such as telecom giants and other tech companies, who are presently the largest holders of big data, should work together (and with governments and other stakeholders) to explore beneficial ways for harnessing the data they collect from citizens, and how they can support the efforts of governments. This will make government ambitions to scale up big data efforts – such as civil registration, or the use of satellite data – easier to achieve.



# Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.data4sdgs.org/high-level-meeting>

<sup>2</sup> Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, 2017. *Unleashing the power of data and partnerships for Africa*. Available at:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55f7418ce4b0c5233375af19/t/5953492fa5790a7122a13d4b/1498630484357/Data+for+Africa+-Agenda+1+-Print-Draft-28-06.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See our work on the P20 Initiative, available at <http://devinit.org/p20i/>.

<sup>4</sup> See more at <http://www.ubos.org/statistical-activities/community-systems/district-profiling/community-statistics/>

<sup>5</sup> Development Initiatives (Bernard Sabiti), 2017. *Common cause, common language: Harmonising key concepts in the data revolution*. Available at: <http://devinit.org/post/common-cause-common-language-harmonising-key-concepts-in-the-data-revolution/#>

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