

**Symposium on “Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SAMOA
Pathway in Small Island Developing States - SIDS:
Equipping Public Institutions and Mobilizing Partnerships”**

Think Piece 5¹

Building Statistical Capacities and reviewing progress

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscored that data is key for effective policymaking and decision-making, as well as for reviewing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and for ensuring that no one is left behind². It called for ensuring that data is of high quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated. Earlier in 2014, the SAMOA Pathway addressed data and statistics as an important means of implementation and made several recommendations in that area³.

The 2030 Agenda also established the critical importance of keeping implementation under review. Reviews at national, regional and international levels are seen as an important tool to accelerate the realization of the SDGs. During the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda, SIDS had expressed their concerns about the limitations of their statistical capacities. They also raised the question of whether their statistical systems would be able to produce the data needed for making policies and reviewing progress on the SDGs and the SAMOA Pathway.

Session V of the Symposium will discuss ways to build statistical capacity and mobilize new technologies to support policy making and review progress towards the SDGs in SIDS. It will place a special emphasis on how SIDS can best review progress towards the SDGs at home and at the United Nations.

I. Building national statistical capacities

(A) Importance of data and current divide

Data is critical to make the right decisions, develop adequate policies, ensure their success, continuously review progress, evaluate results and to draw lessons learned. The Secretary-General’s Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development (IEAG) highlighted that “Data are the lifeblood of decision-making and the raw material for accountability. Without high-quality data providing the right information on the right things at the right time; designing, monitoring and evaluating effective policies becomes almost impossible”⁴.

¹ This thinkpiece is prepared by UNDESA to guide Session V on “Reviewing Progress and Building Statistical Capacities” at the Symposium, to be held on 21-23 February 2017, at the Bahamas. More information about the Symposium is available at https://publicadministration.un.org/bahamas_symposium.

Note: This paper may not be exhaustive or exclusive in illustrating concepts or cases related to the topics. For any comment or suggestion, please contact kwok@un.org

² GA 70/1 p 48.

³ Available online, <http://www.sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1537>

⁴ <http://www.undatarevolution.org/report/>

There is a deep divide between the countries and people who have access to data and have the skills to analyze and use it, and those who do not. For example, recent studies show that 29 of the world's poorest countries have no data at all to measure trends in poverty between 2002 and 2011⁵.

Data are also often released too late, are inaccurate, inconsistent or remain at the level of aggregates. It is estimated that the insufficient ability of policymakers to understand how people of different ages, capabilities or income levels fared under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) hampered the design and implementation of strategies to ensure achievement of the goals for all⁶. Since the SDGs pledges to “leave no one behind”, it is critically essential that data is disaggregated. There are also vast amounts of data that currently exist only in paper forms. Converting this information into digital format would be an enormous boost to planning data-informed strategies for the SDGs.

The current divides are deepening as new technologies drive an exponential increase in the volume of available data. Data can be collected in new ways through mobile phones, mapping, sensors and satellite imagery and across the Internet. These changes open up a wealth of possibilities for reinforcing the evidence base for policies and programmes – while also bringing new challenges. Mobilizing such data requires public institutions, business and civil society to work together. There has been a call for a UN-led effort to mobilize this data revolution for sustainable development⁷.

(B) Issues facing SIDS

SIDS are among the countries facing a dearth of data. Some of the challenges they face relate to human resources in the National Statistical Offices; geographic and demographic characteristics that impact data collection activities; the limited contribution of information technology to statistical development; the reliance on regional support for statistics; the fragile state of the statistical systems; and confidentiality issues, among others⁸.

There are also challenges related to resources, low data utilization, and others. Many National Statistics Offices in SIDS are units within Ministries rather than independent self-sufficed organizations. Another common issue is the lack of coordination among official data producers as well as the fragmented production of statistics.

The challenge, as the implementation of the SDGs moves in its second year, is to modernize the data collection systems, build the capacities of national statistical systems and develop data literacy in both traditional statistics and big data analytics. The Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group also called for “liberating data to promote transparency and accountability”. Also critical is the building of national data ecosystems where different data producers, such as academia, civil society and business, play an increasing role in data production.

⁵ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/10/15/world-bank-new-end-poverty-tool-surveys-in-poorest-countries>

⁶ See i) Melamed, C and Samman, E (2013), Equity, inequality and human development in a Post-2015 Framework. UNDP HDR Office: New York. And ii) Watkins, K (2013). Leaving no one behind: an equity agenda for the post-2015 goals. ODI: London

⁷ Data Revolution Report, “A WORLD THAT COUNTS”, Presented to Secretary-General. Please see <http://www.undatarevolution.org/report/> for reference.

⁸ See PARIS21 at Ten Improvements in statistical capacity since 1999, available online at <https://www.paris21.org/sites/default/files/P21-at-10.pdf>

A recent study showed that in general, many countries are determined to dedicate resources to build the capacity of their statistical systems, in line with the requirements of the SDGs⁹. At the same time, a major international effort is needed to support these policies, notably in SIDS, through SIDS-SIDS, international and other cooperation as well as collaboration among all actors.

In the 2030 Agenda, all countries committed to “support developing countries, particularly African countries, LDCs, SIDS and LLDCs, in strengthening the capacity of national statistical offices and data systems to ensure access to high-quality, timely, reliable and disaggregated data”¹⁰. It is important for us to deliver on these promises.

(C) UN World Data Forum

The first UN World Data Forum on Sustainable Development Data was held in Cape Town, South Africa from 15-18 January 2017. The Forum resulted from a UN resolution which decided to establish a platform for intensifying cooperation with various professional groups, such as national statistical offices (NSOs), information technology and geospatial information managers, and data scientists among other representatives of government, intergovernmental organizations and civil society.

The Forum launched the Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data¹¹. The Global Action Plan was prepared by the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for the 2030 Agenda (HLG-PCCB). It recognizes that modernizing National Statistical Offices is essential to achieving the SDGs. The Plan sets out a framework for member countries to assess, build and strengthen National Statistical Offices’ capacity. It is divided into six strategic areas: coordination and strategic leadership on data for sustainable development; innovation and modernization of national statistical systems; strengthening of basic statistical activities and programmes, with particular focus on addressing the monitoring needs of the 2030 Agenda; dissemination and use of sustainable development data; multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development data; and mobilization of resources and coordination of efforts for statistical capacity building.

Some recommendations emanating from the World Data Forum include: (i) rethinking capacity development for better data; (ii) leverage on big data innovations and tap on synergies across different data ecosystems; (iii) enhance the use of administrative data for statistical analysis; (iv) integrating geospatial and statistical information, and among others¹². There are also other macro challenges such as (i) the challenge of invisibility of data, that is, to identify gaps in existing data, and (ii) the challenge of inequality, that is, to identify the gaps between those with and without information and what they need to know make their own decisions¹³.

This Plan is expected to be adopted by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2017. Implementation of the Plan will be evaluated at the second UN World Data Forum, which will convene in

⁹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=400&nr=2017&menu=35>

¹⁰ Para 76 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

¹¹ Global Action Plan, available at http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/global-consultation-hlg-1/GAP_HLG-20161021.pdf

¹² International Institute for Sustainable Development, “UN World Data Forum Bulletin”

¹³ Data Revolution Report, “A WORLD THAT COUNTS”, Presented to Secretary-General.

Dubai, United Arab Emirates, at the end of 2018 or early 2019¹⁴. It is hoped that it will help equip countries, including SIDS, to conduct evidence-based policies and review progress towards the SDGs.

II. Reviewing progress towards the SDGs

(A) Reviewing progress at the national level

The focus of SDG review will be at the national level, even though there are also reviews at regional and global levels. The 2030 Agenda encourages Member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels¹⁵. These reviews are to be conducted by the country in the manner it chooses, through its established or other institutions, as a way to monitor its own progress towards the SDGs and make any policy adjustment.

The 2030 Agenda defines a few principles that all reviews may take into account. In particular, they are to draw on contributions from various stakeholders, including indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and others.

Such reviews may engage national parliaments as recognized by the 2030 Agenda. It is however not clear whether many countries have engaged their parliaments in implementing and reviewing SDG implementation thus far. Parliaments themselves have taken the initiative to convene hearings or debates on the SDGs¹⁶.

Supreme audit institutions (SAIs) may also be engaged in the reviews at country level, as one country pledged to do during the high-level political forum on sustainable development last July. The XXII International Congress of Supreme Audit Institutions (INCOSAI) (Abu Dhabi, 7-12 Dec. 2016), recognized SAIs' support to the follow-up and review of the SDGs as a cross-cutting priority. It identified four approaches through which SAIs can contribute, including assessing national readiness for implementing the SDGs and reporting progress, undertaking performance audits of programs that contribute to the SDGs, and assessing and supporting the implementation of Goal 16.

(B) Monitoring and reviewing process at the global level

Indicators:

At the global level, goals and targets are followed-up and reviewed using a set of global indicators. An Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) has developed a set of over 230 global indicators to be used in following up and reviewing the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda at global level¹⁷. Countries were closely engaged in the elaboration of the SDG indicators. This global SDG indicator framework was agreed by the UN Statistical Commission and the Economic and Social Council. But there remain challenges with respect to data gaps, quality and timeliness of data. Less than half of the indicators have sufficient data coverage, and there is no agreed definition or

¹⁴ International Institute for Sustainable Development, "UN World Data Forum Bulletin", 21 January 2017 Vol.232 No. 1

¹⁵ 2030 Agenda para 79

¹⁶ <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/Final%20-%20Policy%20brief%20on%20institutional%20arrangements%20including%20cover%20note%20rev1.docx.pdf>

¹⁷ More information at <http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/>

methodology for some indicators¹⁸. The indicators are to be disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location, or other characteristics, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.¹⁹ These global indicators are complemented by indicators at the regional and national levels which will be developed by member states.

The high-level political forum on sustainable development and the Voluntary National Reviews:

The United Nations high level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF) is the central platform for SDG follow-up and review at global level. It reviews international progress towards the SDGs and conducts thematic reviews focused on specific goals and issues. In 2017, the theme of the HLPF is “Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world”. The forum will review SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, and 14 – namely the goals on poverty, hunger, health, gender, infrastructure and industry and oceans.

The HLPF also conducts national voluntary reviews of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Agenda encouraged all UN Member States to volunteer for those national reviews. The VNRs are intended as an opportunity to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned. They are aimed at accelerating implementation. There is the expectation that they will lead to the launching of partnerships. They are prepared by countries at national level and can benefit from the support of the UN system.

Twenty-two countries participated in the first round of VNRs, held during the Ministerial Segment of the July 2016 meeting of the HLPF. These countries range from the least developed countries to some with the highest per capita incomes in the world. They also varied greatly in terms of their institutional capacities and challenges. Countries also took different approaches to conducting their VNRs. Some included steps that the country has been taking or planning to take to implement the 2030 Agenda, while some highlighted the roles of different levels and sectors of government that contributed to the overall review. Some shared information on how national evaluation and oversight institutions contributed, and on how civil the society, academia and the business sector were involved.

Samoa was among the 22 countries conducting those first VNRs. The key characteristics of its VNR included a mid-term review of the strategy for the development of Samoa 2012-2016 with an assessment of the strategy’s alignment with the SDGs. Samoa noted that given the breadth and depth of the 17 Goals and 169 targets, the demand for quality statistics will increase significantly and will be a challenge for many of the small island countries, including Samoa. Samoa also noted the difficulty in monitoring progress in respect of the official indicators: as many indicators were not suitable in the Pacific context, in selecting the global SDG indicators relevant to the Pacific context, it is important to ensure an open and inclusive consultation process. It is critical that Pacific leaders continue to oversee the monitoring of the Goals at the regional level.

¹⁸ Note: The expert group classifies the indicators according to three tiers: tier 1 covers indicators with an established methodology and standards available, and with data regularly produced by countries; tier 2 indicators feature established methodologies and standards, but data are not regularly produced by countries; and tier 3 indicators are those without an established methodology and standards, or methodology/standards are being developed/tested.

¹⁹ E/CN.3/2016/2/Rev.1, para. 26.

The discussions on the VNRs at the HLPF allowed countries to learn from one another on how to conduct the reviews and address challenges related to implementing the 2030 Agenda. The VNRs and the discussions at the HLPF showed that many countries are well advanced in supporting implementation of the SDGs. Forty countries have since volunteered for the VNRs in 2017, including Maldives.

Some of the main challenges identified by countries in the preparation of VNRs included: limited availability of data, and particularly disaggregated data, shortcomings in institutional capacity, difficulties in effectively involving and coordinating multiple areas and levels of government and in ensuring adequate multi-stakeholder participation; and in ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the process. Countries also noted time constraints and difficulties in engaging in a review when the implementation strategy was not yet fully adopted, or when the review took place prior to the conclusion of national planning cycle²⁰. Practices that were considered useful included a roadmap for technical analysis and consultations, the constitution of technical working groups to institutionalize the SDG review process at all levels of government, applying a flexible approach to the inclusion of civil society, and the establishment of an SDG coordination council to foster engagement with civil society²¹.

Guiding Questions

1. Can SIDS national statistical offices effectively keep track of progress towards the SDGs? What are the most critical gaps in their capacities and in existing data sets? Are there examples of initiatives that helped bridge those gaps?
2. Have SIDS identified ways and systems to regularly review their situation regarding the SDGs at national level? What is the main role of their existing institutions in this area?
3. Are parliaments and Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) engaged in reviewing progress in implementing the SDGs at national level? How can they contribute in this regard? Is civil society able to provide inputs? What are key challenges?
4. How can SIDS engage in carrying out voluntary national reviews (VNRs) in the high-level political forum on sustainable development? What are the main lessons from the first round of VNRs and what are the next steps?
5. How can global and regional organisations better support countries in the monitoring, reviewing and reporting of the implementation of the SDGs and the SAMOA Pathway?
6. Are there emerging issues that have not been adequately considered or addressed in the global sustainable development policy debate?

²⁰ Expert Group Meeting on Voluntary National Reviews, New York, 15-16 December 2016

²¹ Ibid