

## DATA ACCESS AND MANAGEMENT – WHERE DO WE STAND?

Just eleven years are left to achieve Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. But not only are the SDG targets themselves ambitious. As our author explains, the United Nations also faces the huge challenge of establishing an adequate data base to monitor progress towards the SDGs, and she sheds light on the existing technical, financial and legal barriers to data access.

By Karen Bett

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted as our blueprint to address challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. The 17 goals seek to ensure prosperity for all people, and the planet, by 2030 – and were adopted together with a framework of 169 targets and 232 indicators. Without great investments in data, information, and knowledge, we won't be able to track or measure progress, and thus are at risk of not meeting the goals. Around the world, the status quo on data access and management leaves much to be desired – we are not collecting, sharing, or analysing data optimally. Too many people, especially already marginalised groups such as the extreme poor, the disabled, and women and children, are invisible in data and therefore invisible when it comes to policy-making and resource allocation. Too many countries simply do not have the resources for comprehensive birth or death registration systems, mapping fields and houses, tracking the impact of climate change and disasters, or collecting and sharing information about health or access to basic services. Setting policies without this baseline core information means resources are wasted and their impact is limited. Also, lack of timely and comprehensive data means that investors do not have all the information needed to make the most effective, efficient financial investments.

### WHY GATHER DATA?

But with eleven years to go to the SDG deadline, we still have time to strengthen the data ecosystems and capacity required to monitor and achieve the SDGs. There are tremendous opportunities to fast-track progress by collecting and using the foundational data we need, building capacity and political will to invest in data infrastructures, and then innovating to strengthen new, complementary sources of data.

Data is the raw material for decision-making. Data not only helps to conceptualise solutions,

but, as a prerequisite, supports us in understanding the magnitude of the problems.

Data helps donors and policy-makers know what to prioritise, and it assists decision-makers in sequencing solutions. And once we have used data and begun implementing interventions, baseline data can help us track progress and optimise programming as needed.

The SDGs set out a universal agenda requiring progress everywhere, not just in developing countries. Every country will need national and sub-national-level data in order to meet their own unique, context-specific challenges. For this reason, data gathering is a critical first step towards understanding the challenges, and then creating informed, strategic policy solutions.

During data collection, we must consider three key principles:

1. The data must be high quality, timely, and granular, allowing comparison and trend analysis over time, as well as between and within countries. This will make it meaningful for decision-makers.



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2. It requires technical expertise and smart data collection systems that are robust and utilise new technology.
3. Data gathered should be usable, trusted, and openly available. This means data should be open to enable public analysis and use, in usable formats that are both human and machine-readable, and accompanied by relevant meta-data for transparency and accountability.

But data gathering is just the first step. There is a lot of work that must happen afterwards, so the data is put to use.

### MONITORING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

To effectively monitor progress towards the SDGs, we need not only to have the data, but governments must dispose of the human and technological capacity to analyse and use the data, resources to finance those efforts, and political will to then incorporate data when shaping policy.

But in many low-income countries and lower middle-income countries, data sources are not centralised, data collection is not streamlined, data use is not regular, and funding/capacity for all of the above is falling short across the board.

The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, a network made up of governments, businesses, and civil society organisations, brings all of these pieces together to mobilise and coordinate the actions and institutions required to make the data revolution serve sustainable development. Since it was established in 2015, the Global Partnership has elevated data issues at a political level, to make data infrastructures and statistical capacity a priority for governments and donors. And the Global Partnership has facilitated country-led data roadmaps for sustainable development which support governments to convene all relevant stakeholders, assess SDG data availability, identify data gaps, and outline concrete, long-term next steps.

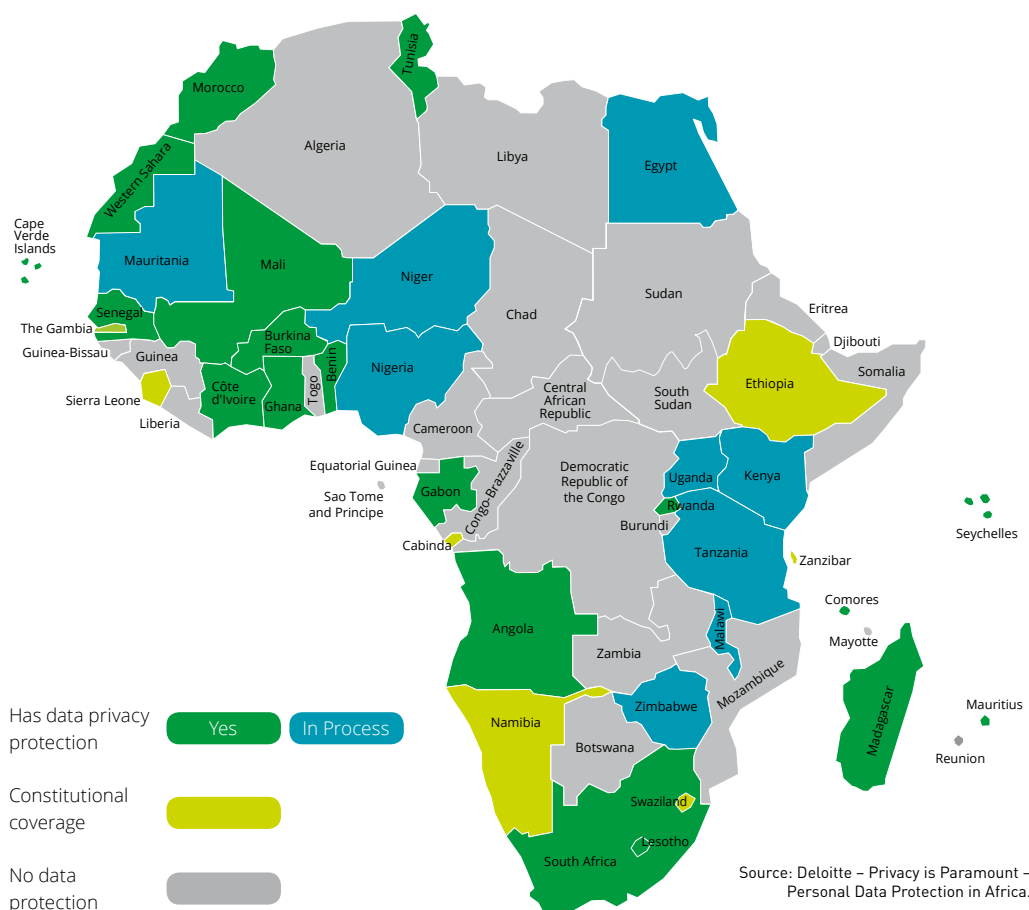
### DATA REVOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The data revolution for sustainable development refers to the transformative actions needed to respond to the demands of a complex development agenda by improving how data is produced and used, closing data gaps to prevent discrimination, building capacity and data literacy in “small data” and big data analytics, modernising systems of data collection, liberating data to promote transparency and accountability, and developing new targets and indicators.

The goal of the partnership is to drive better decisions and better lives for all by facilitating the production, sharing and use of better data. We’ve learnt some important lessons along the way and identified a few trends in terms of the data barriers many countries face.

### DATA ACCESS AND ITS BARRIERS

Data access and use face several challenges around the world, although the issues are more pronounced in the developing world. First, countries don't have enough high-quality data to aid decision-making, and where data exists, it is often collected and shared too late to inform decision-making. Second, the governments and the public often cannot access or use this data due to technical, financial or legal barriers.



### Technical barriers to data access

Improved data access begins with strong, tech-smart data collection. There are various technological solutions for collecting data that is timely, obtained at regular intervals, high-quality, human and machine-readable, and easily shareable, but these solutions are often not available in developing countries. Or, if they are made available during a data collection process, the rest of the data ecosystem – which comprises both state and non-state actors – may not be technologically enabled to support and complement that improved data set. With limited technical capacity and financial resources, most countries do not collect data routinely or in a timely manner, and do not have the resources to make the necessary, fundamental technological improvements for a bottom-up, sustainable data approach. This has considerably limited data availability for many SDG indicators, hindering countries’ ability to monitor SDG progress and further target policies to ensure resources are reaching those most in need.

In many developing countries, basic Internet connectivity remains a major barrier. According to the International Telecommunications Union, four billion people, or two thirds of the population of developing countries, do

not have access to the Internet. This striking gap limits how governments and other stakeholders can share, access and use data. Governments and data producers are often forced to publish PDFs and/or hard-copy versions for data sharing – resulting in data that are not machine readable, not freely accessible, not easily shareable, and not easy to further analyse or compare.

But technology and Internet access are spreading rapidly in developing countries, creating more and more opportunities to promote data access – if these skills and capacities are built into the foundation of teams, infrastructures, and workflows. With improved technology, governments can achieve more high quality, disaggregated and interoperable data, and with an improved Internet, the data can be shared and analysed, leveraged for policy-making, and put to work over and over again towards achieving the SDGs.

### Financial barriers to data access

Unfortunately, while the demand for more and better data for monitoring the SDGs has been on the rise, it has not translated into commensurate growth in funding for data and for national statistical systems. As such, national

statistical offices remain under-resourced and vulnerable to political influence by those who fund them. The latest data from the Partner Report on Support to Statistics – PRESS – shows that in 2016, the share of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for data and statistics was 0.33 per cent (623 million US dollars). This is far below the estimated cost of collecting data to monitor the SDGs – between USD 2.8–3.0 billion per year up to 2030.

National governments should re-align budget allocations so that domestic resources, combined with increased ODA, can together close this financing gap. Conversations are happening at global level to bring together key stakeholders and identify practical, actionable next steps for increasing the amount and quality of financing for data. Indeed this will require a multi-stakeholder effort to mobilise additional resources, but beyond that, it will require building partnerships, supporting individuals who champion data and statistics in their capitals, and sharing knowledge on data's value and return on investment.

The 50x2030 Initiative, launched last September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, is an example of progress in this regard. The initiative commits a coalition of donors and countries to fund and implement an overhaul of agricultural data systems in 50 developing countries by 2030 (see Article on page 7).

### Legal barriers to data access

When SDGs were adopted and the data revolution was increasingly being recognised as a necessary ingredient for success, it became evident that the international community would need to develop legal, technical, geospatial, and statistical standards to guide the exchange of data in an open manner that protects privacy, safety and human rights for everyone.

We cannot advocate for more data to become open, available, and shared widely without also addressing the serious privacy implications that come with data sharing. Sharing data can do more harm than good if there are no data protection laws to guide or regulate data use and re-use, while still allowing innovation and data sharing as a public good. This is particularly the case if the data is high-quality, disaggregated data representing otherwise uncounted marginalised groups – data that is most needed for SDG monitoring and implementation.

The current state of legal frameworks for data protection, while better than before, shows

that there is more work to be done to ensure we have the right laws in place to protect citizens. In 2017, Deloitte carried out an assessment of the regulatory framework on personal data protection in Africa, to guide multinationals and business entities as they venture into investing in the continent. The results show very little privacy protection in place in the form of legal frameworks, which then hinders business operations, and, as a result, the economic development of a country.

Data protection will benefit everyone, but governments must be in the driver's seat when it comes to data protection and privacy policy.

For example, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) adopted in 2018 triggered and influenced a shift in privacy regulations across the world – to strengthen the legal framework around data access and protection.

### THE WAY FORWARD

While the world continues to face these challenges of data access and use, there remains hope that they can be addressed in our time. There are a number of solutions. Among them is the need for solid partnerships with multiple stakeholders. For example, if governments

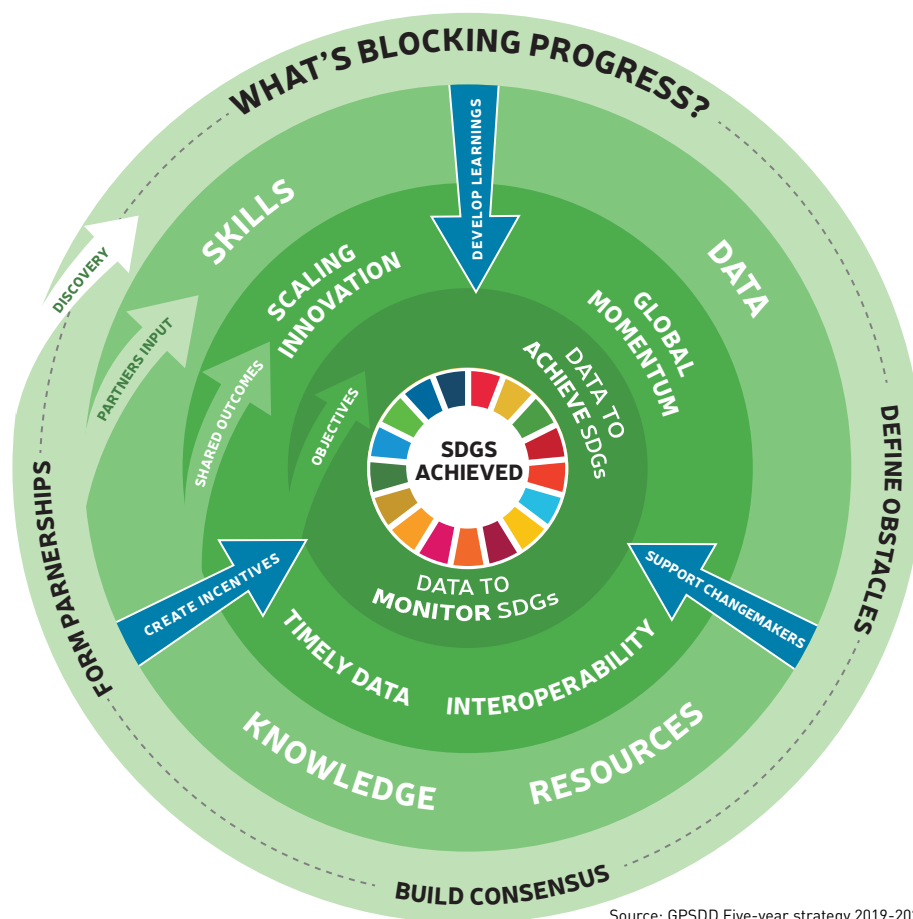
could partner with the private sector, they would be able to gain access to additional data which can inform decision-making and help track the SDGs. In addition, these types of partnership will facilitate the sharing of technical skills, knowledge on best practices and ideas among individuals and across countries.

Without partnerships, it will be difficult to build the much-needed political will to keep the momentum of the data revolution and make investments towards more and better data.

The international community must remain committed to addressing the technical, financial, and legal challenges to data access. With just eleven years to the SDGs' 2030 deadline, without strengthened data ecosystems, more and better data collection, and improved capacity and political will for data use, we risk not meeting our goals.

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For references and further reading, see online version of this article at: [www.rural21.com](http://www.rural21.com)



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