The Call for a Data Revolution

There is growing recognition that the success of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will depend on the ability of governments, businesses and civil society to collect and manage data for decision-making. The SDGs are ambitious and there is an urgent need to mobilise a data revolution in order to monitor progress, hold governments accountable and foster sustainable development, according to Stig Enemark, president of FIG.

(By Stig Enemark)

A key lesson from completing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) over the last 15 years was the need for monitoring progress through publishing an annual status report on the MDGs. This enabled governments and the world community to assess improvements and gaps in achieving the goals at the global as well as regional and local levels.

This need for monitoring and assessment was further recognised in the report of the High level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The report called for a 'data revolution' which reflects the growing demand for better, faster, more accessible and more disaggregated data for reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development. The report also proposed a new international initiative, the Global Partnership on Development Data, which would collaborate with and build capacity of statistical offices around the globe. This is further supported by the UN-GGIM initiatives, and also recognised explicitly in the 2030 Global Agenda by statements on the need for an indicator framework, accountable data and annual reviews: "We need sustainable data to support sustainable development".

This call for a data revolution is also underlined by the phrase, "If we can measure it – we can better it". Experience shows that by monitoring and documenting the ongoing progress, governments can justify activities and costs, and also attract donor funding to help them meet country-specific targets.

Fortunately, advancements in information and communication technology have enabled a platform for such a data revolution, including innovative approaches such as the growing use of crowdsourcing and satellite imagery analysis. This is further expanded on in the UN-initiated report called 'A World that Counts: Mobilising the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development'. Despite this information boom in some parts of the world, however, in other parts of the globe there are still people and assets that we know very little about and for which the fundamental baseline data is missing. These people tend to be the most marginalised, the poorest, the vulnerable and the excluded.

This challenge is faced by the Africa Centre for Global Development in its report on 'Delivering on the Data Revolution in Sub-Sahara Africa' which identifies five 'data building blocks' for innovation: Births and Deaths; Growth and Poverty; Taxes and Trade; Sickness, Schooling and Safety; and Land and the Environment (including cadastral registries and administrative data).

Against this backdrop, and bearing in mind that six out of the 17 SDGs are directly land-related, it becomes essential to build basic and fit-for-purpose land administration systems in developing countries that cover all land and provide security of tenure for all. Such systems can deliver reliable and robust data for devising appropriate policies and interventions for the achievement of the SDGs and for holding governments and the international community accountable through monitoring and assessment. Land professionals have a key role to play in supporting this 'data revolution'.

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