

## Editorial: With great data comes great responsibility

by

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**I**f USD 142.6 billion falls in the forest of development and no one hears it, does it matter?

That depends on who you are. While mothers in Afghanistan or South Sudan can tell you how their families' lives have been transformed by effective development programmes every single day, strong data are needed to communicate how these billions of dollars improve the human condition and create more stable societies for all.

In 2016 official development assistance (ODA) to support development goals represented 0.32% of gross national income, an all-time high. However, aid to those who need it most, including least developed countries (LDCs), is declining. The June 2017 report card on the 2030 Development Agenda – the world's roadmap to end poverty, inequality and injustice for all by 2030 through a set of 17 goals and 232 indicators – tells us progress is slow and data are incomplete.

Now, more than ever, we need to tell the 360-degree story of how development investment touches lives and supports a more secure, stable and prosperous world. Data on development have the ability to amplify human stories beyond the borders of fragile and least developed states. The future of development co-operation depends on hard evidence about the impact that ODA has – and can have – with increased and well-targeted investments. We can't afford not to get a clear picture and turn up the volume.

Fortunately, we have better tools than ever to get the data on development results right. Big data are now being used to tell us how to respond to an e-mail and what news we should read. We know that big data are being used by corporations to predict customers' behaviour, suppliers' performance, equipment failures and planning preventive maintenance. But big data also offer significant impact on energy, environment and healthcare. The combination of big data with genomics has the potential to uncover diseases that prevail in localised geographical areas. The data revolution has tremendous potential to inform innovative development policies and open new doors for individuals in developing countries. However, a dangerous data gap is leaving some of the most vulnerable groups of people invisible while others are propelled forward.

Let us take a look at the data on the development data gap. Just over half of all countries fully register when babies are born and when people die. Only 37 countries have statistical laws that meet UN standards. Not surprising, then, that no data whatsoever exist for two-thirds of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators.

The development co-operation community has a responsibility to translate the ever-accelerating developments in data to on-the-ground development results by supporting sophisticated country-led systems, especially in LDCs. Strong systems require human brainpower and heart if they are to collect quality, timely and disaggregated data, especially for those most at risk of being left behind. The 2017 *Development Co-operation Report* highlights six immediate recommendations for existing and future investments in development.

What will these actions take? Simply increasing the quantity of aid will not guarantee success. The quality of financing for statistics needs to improve to reduce duplication and better target and co-ordinate investments where the impact is greatest. It requires political will to make data a strategic cross-cutting priority in development co-operation policies. If current levels of ODA spent on statistics increased by USD 200 million annually it would fill the funding gap for producing data for the SDGs in developing countries. Talk about bang-for-buck: less than 1% of total assistance to maintain the credibility of the other 99% and its delivery to those who need it most. That's the development win-win: investing in data for development gives voice to those who feel its impact, helps target aid to where it is needed most, while presenting a higher definition picture of results to taxpayers in countries that provide development co-operation.



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