



A Post-2015 'Data Revolution' for Whom – and by Whom?

Bernd Steimann, November 2013

Much has been written in recent years about the lack of data quality for measuring MDG achievements. Numerous experts have criticised the MDGs' naive look at national averages in terms of poverty, school enrolment, or maternal health, and have asked for more detailed, disaggregated data in order to get the real picture (1). Meanwhile, the call has been heard: In its May 2013 report, the High-Level Panel (HLP) calls for "a new data revolution" (2) that should help to better identify the poorest and most marginalised, to make well-informed decisions, to improve track progress, and to strengthen accountability at all levels. It thus looks like the monitoring systems beyond 2015 will be more differentiated than what we have had so far. The question remains, however, what exactly should be measured to get the real picture and improve our understanding of multidimensional poverty. In a recent blog article on the issue (3), Judith Randel from Development Initiatives stresses the need for "better data – on all resources, not just aid". She illustrates her demand with an impressive comparison of international resource flows to developing countries between 1990 and today. The message is clear: the relative impact of ODA is so low that all the talk about aid, poverty reduction and human development can no longer ignore all the other, much more powerful economic and political dynamics – and that better evidence is needed to lead the discussion.

Now the argument is not really new: If we can't fix the problem it means we don't know enough about it – so let's collect more evidence so that we can better understand the problem and find out what's really going on. Actually, most relevant figures are somewhere out there, and many decision makers know about these interlinkages in principle. So the real challenge is to strive for more development coherence, i.e. to merge different debates and policy fields to make global dynamics work for development and against poverty.

In principle, this is exactly what the whole post-2015 buzz is about. It is encouraging to see the many intriguing discussions on the often neglected interlinkages between poverty and environmental protection, trade and hunger, or equity and taxation. It is encouraging because these discussions have never been led with such intensity, and with such public and political interest at such a high level for such a long time.

The real challenge, however, will be to enable and sustain such debates at lower levels, and keep them going beyond 2015. While figures and facts are becoming more and more accurate and accessible at the global level, availability of and access to relevant information too often remain restricted where they would be most needed – at the local level. This is why Randel calls for 'access to information' as a post-2015 goal in its own right. In order to hold governments and administrations at all levels accountable and to make sure they fulfil the promises made (be it in the context of post-2015, national development plans, or provincial or communal budgets), people need to have full transparency regarding their government's income and spending. Not only in terms of poverty eradication, but also regarding taxation, foreign direct investments, large infrastructure development, and much more.

India has set an important precedent in this regard, when it introduced the Right to Information Act (RTI) in 2005, compelling all state bodies and political parties (and even NGOs which are substantially financed by public funds) to disclose any information upon request, as well as some basic information in a pro-active manner (4). However, the state alone will not be able to make the 'data revolution' happen. Other actors are equally asked to fully disclose what they spend to whom and for what. On the one hand, this concerns the private sector which still too often gets associated with intransparency and fiddling – and which is unfortunately also not within the RTI's ambit (5). The High-Level Panel's demand that "by 2030, all large businesses should be reporting on their environmental and social impact" can only be seen as a timid first step into the right direction. Here, the US as well as the EU have advanced much more already with the introduction of strict reporting requirements for investments activities abroad (6). However, the 'data revolution' also requires action by donor and civil society organisations, whose own practices too often differ from what they preach to local governments about budget transparency and accountability (7). So far, only 195 organisations have decided to publish all of their project- related

information in accordance to the internationally agreed IATI standard (International Aid Transparency Initiative) (8). Obviously, there is ample room for improvement for those who have not done so yet.

So good examples for making the new 'data revolution' really revolutionary abound. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent the international community and its various actors dare to touch upon their own habits.

References

- (1) See for instance: David Hulme (2010). Lessons from the Making of the MDGs: Human Development Meets Results-based Management in an Unfair World. *IDS Bulletin* 41(1):15-25.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2010.00099.x/abstract>; or Andrew M. Fischer (2010). Towards Genuine Universalism within Contemporary Development Policy. *IDS Bulletin* 41(1):36-44.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2010.00101.x/abstract>
- (2) United Nations (2013). A new global partnership: Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development. The report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 development agenda. New York, May 2013. http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf
- (3) Judith Randel (2013). Every budget needs a plan – and every plan needs a budget. Guest blog from Judith Randel. http://www.developmenthorizons.com/2013/10/every-vision-needs-plan-and-every-plan_25.html
- (4) Right to Information. A Citizen Gateway. <http://rti.gov.in>
- (5) See for instance: Publish What You Pay. <http://www.publishwhatyoupay.org>
- (6) See for instance: U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission. Dodd-Frank Act. <http://www.cftc.gov/lawregulation/doddfrankact/index.htm>
- (7) See for instance: International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). <http://www.aidtransparency.net>; Publish What You Fund. <http://www.publishwhatyoufund.org>
- (8) International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Data Registry. <http://www.iatiregistry.org>