Meeting the moment: Unleashing the transformative power of data for Sustainable Development by 2030
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Unleashing the transformative potential of data by 2030

“Data – when used responsibly – is the bedrock of a sustainable future. Let’s find new ways to harness and apply this vital resource and shape a better tomorrow for all people.”
– UN Secretary-General, July 2023

As we move into the second half of the 2030 Agenda implementation period, the world is off-track to meet the Global Goals. The need for transformational change to address the world’s most pressing development challenges is greater now than it has ever been. Here at the SDG Summit in 2023, we are at an inflection point. With the world coming up against multiple crises and concerning trendlines on poverty and inequality, armed conflict, human migration, global warming, and habitat loss, none of us can afford to shy away from the challenges we face.

Fortunately, all around the globe, governments, multilateral organizations, academic institutes, companies, civil society groups, and advocates across all sectors remain committed to improving the state of the world. Within this constellation of actors, the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development community has emerged and evolved into a global, diverse, and dynamic ecosystem focused on leveraging the transformative potential of data as an enabler of sustainable development – for both people and planet. We, members of this community, have prepared this statement to articulate our vision of where targeted action can maximise the value of data as a catalyst and enabler of sustainable development to 2030 and beyond.

Our vision is simple: we need to meet the moment by accelerating and scaling-up proven approaches to data systems building and their responsible use. Leveraging data’s transformative potential at a global scale will require targeting resources and interventions efficiently at local levels to maximise impact. It will require investment in statistical modernization initiatives, and the scaling-up of responsible and effective multistakeholder data partnerships for people and planet. Digital and automated technologies will help us to meet the moment, but it is their lifeblood –data– that ultimately drives the decisions we take as human beings, and it is data that holds the key to true transformative potential. Our vision is evidence-based and lays the foundation of a roadmap to leverage the transformative potential of data around the world by 2030.
This vision builds on the groundwork laid by the Cape Town Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data and the calls to action set out across its strategic areas (see Box 1). The vision is founded in the understanding that governments and multilateral organizations cannot achieve the 2030 Agenda alone. They cannot produce, analyse, disseminate, and use the data needed to meet and monitor the SDGs alone. Inclusive, rights-based multi-stakeholder partnerships and governance of the systems that produce data on sustainable development are crucial to leveraging the transformative potential of data.

Moreover, digital and data policy, as mutually reinforcing enablers of innovation and catalytic change need to be more closely aligned and targeted. To this end, we support the announcement of the UN’s High Impact Initiatives (HIIs) launched by the UN at this Summit to accelerate SDG progress, particularly the HIIs on unlocking the data dividend and inclusive and responsible digital public infrastructure. As we head into the second half of the SDG implementation period, we need to ensure that political leadership, investment in data systems, and partnerships are focused on leveraging the transformative power of data as a catalyst of transformative change. Examples of the transformative potential that data enables abound (see Box 2).

**Box 2: Data’s transformative potential**

Data makes climate change mitigation and adaptation possible.

Prior to 2008, what would now be regarded as basic climate data was largely inaccessible. In 2008, the US Government decided to open, free of charge, all Landsat data to the public, globally. These data were images of the Earth taken at moderate resolution (each pixel representing an area of about 30 meters by 30 meters) by Earth-orbiting satellites. The effect has been revolutionary. In 2001, just 25,000 Landsat images were downloaded. By 2023, 160 million downloads had taken place. A 2017 study found that the total annual benefit of Landsat data to the world economy stood at USD 3.45 billion.
Since their release these data have been used countless times to support climate change mitigation and adaptation. In Thailand, maps of temperature change in urban areas, developed using Landsat 8, were used to design urban policies relating to integrative ecosystem landscaping and design. In Yemen, in 2000, climate-induced temperature changes were found to be causing outbreaks of Rift Valley Fever (RVF) disease in humans and livestock across the in the El Zuhra district, located on the western coastal plain. As reported by NASA, Landsat 7 data was used in combination with aerial surveys to expose areas along the coastal plains that were conducive and vulnerable to RVF, considering the temperature fluctuations. Identifying these hotspots enabled surveillance teams to target disease control measures more effectively than would have been possible with ground surveillance, given the complex topography of the area.

The decision to release Landsat data also prompted the European Union to release their own Copernicus satellite data. Collectively, these datasets are now routine sources for scientists, governments and advocates working on climate change mitigation and adaptation measures. Their work would not be possible without these data.

Data exposes the socioeconomic cost of discrimination against women.

In 2013, the statistical standard used to measure ‘work’ was updated. Statisticians from around the world agreed that categorizations of work should be expanded from just ‘employed’, ‘unemployed’ or ‘inactive’ to also include forms of unpaid work such as childcare and care for the elderly. The fact that people can engage in more than one form of work at any given time –paid or unpaid– was also recognized.

These technical tweaks to statistical definitions and methods have been hugely significant for women’s rights activists. For the first time, they provide a globally recognized standard and official route to measuring the value of women’s unpaid labor to the economy. Data from the International Labor Organization indicate that unpaid care work accounts for 9% of the global economy.

The evolution of the statistical definition of work is testament to the decades of advocacy undertaken by women’s and girls’ rights groups. It also generates new evidence that can fuel the arguments of activists moving forward. Organizations at the forefront of efforts to improve the collection, accessibility, and use of gender data such as PARIS21, Open Data Watch, Data2X and countless other regional, national, and local governments and advocacy collectives now have a new and powerful tool in their advocacy arsenal. In Colombia for instance, a Ministry of Equality and Equity was established in 2022 and the city of Bogota has taken active steps to address the unequal burden of unpaid care work.
Data-driven advocacy can also highlight global structural barriers to sustained progress on gender equality. In the past three years, progress on gender equality has not only stalled but in some cases even reversed.\textsuperscript{19} While overall funding for gender equality increased in 2020, funding for gender data dropped by more than 50 percent from 2019. The Solutions in Scarcity series, a collaborative effort involving Open Data Watch, PARIS21, Data2X and UN Women, has convened stakeholders to pinpoint crucial solutions ripe for scaling.\textsuperscript{20} This includes development agencies like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and USAID, who are aligning gender equality endeavors with strategic investments in gender data. Without a gendered approach to data production and use, a lack of insights impedes our ability to evaluate how various policies affect women and girls and then take appropriate steps to correct course and achieve gender equality.

**Data lays bare stark inequality, but also informs pro-poor policies.**

Data on global inequality make for shocking reading: \textbf{in 2019, the richest 26 individuals in the world owned as much wealth as the poorest 50 percent of the world’s population.}\textsuperscript{21} Since the COVID-19 pandemic, decades of steady progress made in reducing global poverty have gone into reverse. \textbf{The international community recognizes that reversing this trend is of paramount significance.}\textsuperscript{22} Data will play a key role in doing this.

Fortunately, since 2011 there have been huge strides made in the compilation of world inequality data. In 2011 the World Top Incomes database\textsuperscript{23} was released and thanks to the contribution of over a hundred researchers worldwide it was quickly expanded to include series on income inequality from more than 30 countries over the 20th and 21st century. Between 2016 and 2019, Distributional National Accounts for the full distribution of income and wealth were added for more than 100 countries and regions. Today, the World Inequality Database includes series for the distribution of income, wealth, labor income by gender for all countries in the world.

With this data it is possible to compare income shares captured by the top income groups over long periods of time and across countries, and thus to refocus discussions on how to tackle inequality. It enables a more nuanced look not only at wages and earned incomes but at income from capital and the role of inherited wealth. Whilst this has declined for much of the 20th century, new data show that in several countries it is again acquiring bigger significance and is contributing to the rapid expansion in top global wealth holders.\textsuperscript{24} In the UK, advances in such data have enabled more nuanced understanding of how the top 1\% acquire their wealth.\textsuperscript{25}
A Vision for Data to 2030: We need to prioritize high impact and scalable interventions

The first half of the SDG implementation period has taught us that improving the availability and use of data at national level is possible through the focused and strategic prioritization of interventions. As we move into the second half of the SDG implementation period, we need to meet the moment by accelerating and scaling-up proven approaches to data systems building.

Harnessing the potential of data will demand the efficient allocation of resources and strategic interventions at both local and hyperlocal levels. It necessitates funding directed towards initiatives that modernize statistical approaches and systems, along with the expansion of responsible and efficient data partnerships. While digital and automated technologies support our efforts, it is the essence of these technologies – data – that fundamentally guides the choices we make as individuals. Ultimately, it is data that unlocks the door to genuine transformation.

To this end, we call upon SDG Summit delegates to:

1. Prioritize data for climate change, gender equality and poverty reduction.

The Political Declaration adopted at this SDG Summit explicitly recognizes the primacy of the challenges represented by climate change, gender inequality, and global poverty and instability. The most recent evidence from the 2023 SDG Report supports this:

“As we mark the halfway point on the SDGs, only one in five countries has data to report on the climate goal and fewer than half can measure progress on gender equality. We cannot achieve what we cannot measure.”

Prioritizing these data needs will have catalytic effects on progress towards all the goals. But it requires political leadership and true multi-stakeholder cooperation. Initiatives like the HIIs are helping to focus international attention on the power and potential of data investments. At the national level, governments must echo this by establishing data as a fundamental, strategic investment area and by explicitly prioritizing crucial data gaps such as climate change and gender equality. They must commit to bolstering the capacity and resources of their national statistical offices and support systems, and encourage national data partnerships: with the private, scientific, and non-governmental communities. As numerous studies show, when governments work with third parties to bring in capacity and expertise, they can drive extraordinary progress, not only with data production but with data and evidence uptake, helping to establish a culture of evidence-informed policymaking. This is not just about working with large technology firms, but...
Worldwide, data systems are chronically underfunded and understaffed—this inhibits modernization. Despite the growing need for data to combat ongoing global challenges, funding levels—internationally and nationally—remain far below what is needed. At the midpoint of the SDGs, we must prioritize smart data financing to drive data system modernization. As it stands, the work programs of only one in nine national statistics offices (NSOs) globally are fully funded, with a larger gap in low- and middle-income countries. Many countries face moderate or severe shortfalls in financial resources, not just for data production, but also for staffing: more than half of NSOs in low- and middle-income countries could not offer a competitive salary for statisticians. And yet, analysis by Dalberg has shown “an average return of US$32 for every dollar invested in data systems, spread across all sectors.”

The Cape Town Action Plan establishes a roadmap for the modernization of national statistical systems. While statistics remain the bedrock of national data ecosystems, national policymaking, and international monitoring of the SDGs, governments and local authorities must go beyond the Cape Town Plan, doubling down on modernization of data systems at the national and sub-national levels. Effective sub-national, decision-making is often where the greatest impact happens, and it is where the SDGs are implemented. City-level administrations for instance are perfectly primed to deliver transformative change but to do so require open, integrated, and adaptable digital infrastructure and data systems that are capable of ingesting multiple sources of data, automating analysis and forecasting functions to deliver complex and bespoke insights. In Los Angeles for example, investments in city-level data capacity (and the establishment of a dedicated Mayoral Data Team) have enabled marked improvements in the city’s crime records and analysis. In 2022 the Mayors Data Team merged and geocoded existing crime data sets to enable better spatial mapping of crime incidents and equity analysis. The team found, for example, a marked spike in homicides in 2020 and 2021, with a male to female ratio of about 6:1. They also observed Hispanic and African-American populations were victims of more than 80% of homicides, compared to less than 30% of all crimes, and observed noticeable spatial trends in the locations of crimes. The analysis is helping the city focus their police and crime prevention efforts upon vulnerable communities and areas.
3 Align policies on digital transformation and data system strengthening.

The Political Declaration from this SDG Summit pledges that Member States will “continue to take action to bridge digital divides and spread the benefits of digitalization” as well as “strengthen international, national and local data systems’ efforts to collect high quality, timely, relevant, disaggregated and reliable data.” In welcoming both these calls, we note that digital divides and data gaps are mutually reinforcing barriers. **Digital infrastructure is the architecture upon which modern data systems are built; there is no purpose to one without the other.** The Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Technology recognizes the need for a common framework to drive “the multi-stakeholder action required to overcome digital, data and innovation divides and to achieve the governance required for a sustainable digital future.”

Achieving this vision and developing a common framework will require political leadership and the coordination, capacities and resourcing of digital transformation and data system strengthening efforts to be aligned. National level mechanisms that bring together stakeholders engaged in digital transformation efforts with constituents of the National Statistical System (NSS) to bolster alignment around priorities and activities are crucial. Budget and action plans across both digital and data policy areas need to also be aligned to ensure that common priorities are met, and efficiencies identified. To this end, the HIIs on digital transformation and data launched by the UN development system at this Summit offer a viable route towards closer digital data policy alignment. We stand ready to support alignment between the HIIs, contribute to building coherence between these agendas, and aligning them with national data partnerships.

Such alignment can be transformative. In India for example, the government has invested in the development of digital public infrastructure that integrates digital identity, data management and financial transactions into multiple, easily accessible government services. As The Economist has noted:

“For the affluent, such innovations are convenient. For millions of others, they are transformative. Vendors of everything from coconuts to jewelry can now accept digital payments. This has made their lives easier, more profitable, and secure. The hundreds of millions in India’s welfare system receive “direct benefit transfers” straight to their Aadhaar-linked bank accounts, which has slashed corruption. The government estimates it thereby saved 2.2tn rupees ($34bn), or 1.1% of GDP, between 2013 and March 2021. The system also helps disburse emergency funds, such as during the pandemic.”
4 Support national strategies for data system strengthening.

Statistical system modernization is integral to the SDG agenda. NSSs, and the NSOs that coordinate them, are the national custodians of official, foundational datasets that drive development. In too many parts of the world, statistical capacity strengthening efforts remain constrained to project-specific initiatives, often missing the opportunity for investment in whole-of-system strengthening through, among others, National Strategies on Development of Statistics. NSOs must be empowered to lead coordination of the NSS and statistical modernization efforts in line with the recommendations of the Cape Town Action Plan.39

We know that when NSOs are given the space to set their own priorities and drive the modernization agenda in their own countries the results can be transformative. In the Philippines for instance, in 2013 the government enacted legislation that merged four existing data-producing agencies into the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). Within five years, the PSA achieved notable improvements across its areas of operation, operational transparency and proactive open data publication, and innovation in the execution of key tasks such as the decennial census. The PSA has also reported improved coordination within the NSS, reduced bureaucracy, and greater financial efficiency.40 Multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Data for Now41 initiative also offer avenues through which proven models can be scaled-up.

The development sectors most in need of better data, including those identified as priority sectors in this paper: climate change, gender, and poverty; need effective foundational systems including administrative registers and censuses, in addition to coordination amongst all the data-producing entities in the NSS. This proposed action on statistical modernization can deliver these and bring additional benefits for these priority sectors.

5 Catalyze change through multistakeholder partnerships.

At the heart of the HII on Unlocking the Data Dividend is a set of innovative multi-stakeholder partnerships that will catalyze data improvements and bring in new capacities and resourcing. Historically, such partnerships have been poorly coordinated, inequitable, and/or have not supported government leadership of data modernization. For instance, research led by Cepei and LIRNEasia in 2022-2023 mapped close to 400 public-private data initiatives across 94 countries in the global south.42 It found that while there is real-world value being produced by such initiatives, there remain a huge number of unrecognized and uncoordinated partnerships and that it is extremely difficult to measure their contributions and impact to sustainable development goals.43
The international community has a major role to play in supporting balanced partnerships that recognize national and local ownership of the data agenda. This is particularly true when it comes to ensuring that the supply and demand of digital and data infrastructure, knowledge and skills align around the globe. We need to make sure that there are equitable and fair flows of knowledge, skills, and technology—including through South-South cooperation—to sub-Saharan Africa where gaps remain most profound. To this end, the role of partnership facilitators such as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, Pulse Lab Jakarta, The Trust for the Americas needs to be recognized as instrumental in garnering political support for data, pushing for effective data financing, and scaling data partnerships at the national and sub-national level.

The next stage: Becoming more than the sum of our parts

While each of our organizations individually represents a cog in the wheel of the data revolution for sustainable development, together, we are greater than the sum of our parts. As we come together to issue this statement, we recognize our responsibility to follow through with our vision set out in this statement. To this end, we reaffirm our commitment to the Cape Town Action Plan and commit to supporting the UN’s HII on Unleashing the Data Dividend.

This statement represents the first step in a process of earnest research, advocacy, and action to develop an action plan setting out the steps needed to achieve our five actions. We invite all interested parties to engage with us in a process of collaborative co-design that will commence following the conclusion of this SDG Summit.

This statement is endorsed by:

We would like to thank Mr. Tom Orrell and Dr. Jessica Espey for their support in producing this statement.
Vision Statement

Endnotes


6. UN. 2023. UN SDG Summit 2023: Announcement on initiatives to accelerate the SDGs. Online at: https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/UN%20SDG%20Summit%202023%20High%20Impact%20Initiatives.pdf?_gl=1*jnj7t8m*_ga*NTY5MTQ0MjY0LjE2MzYwNTAxNTc-.ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTY4ODc2MDYyOC43OC4xLjE2ODg3NjI2NjAuMC4wLjA, accessed 31 August 2023.

7. Ibid.


9. Ibid.


26. Supra at xxii.

27. Supra at ii.


29. For example Cairney, P., & Studlar, D. 2014. Public health policy in the United Kingdom: After the war on tobacco, is a war on alcohol brewing? World Medical & Health Policy, 6(3), 308-323.


31. 2023 CTGAP survey, [forthcoming].

32. Supra at xxviii.


34. Supra at xxii, Para 38(e).

35. Supra at xxii, Para 38(r).


37. Supra at v.
Vision Statement


39. See Strategic Area 2 of the CTAP – Supra at iv.


43. Ibid.