UN Statistical Commission 2020
From Measurement to Management: highlights of 51st session might be the pre-session seminars

By Barbara Adams and Karen Judd

How to capture and manage big data? This is a question that will confront the 51st session of the UN Statistical Commission in March 2020 as they review the official reports. The four-year process of finalizing the global indicator framework to measure the 169 targets of the SDGs is drawing to a conclusion with the acceptance by the IAEG-SDGs of 8 additional indicators, 14 replacement indicators, 8 revised indicators and 6 deleted indicators. The framework has gone to the Commission for approval in March and the focus of different players in the data and statistics community is shifting to the management and use of data to influence and shape development policy agendas.

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the statistics community has sought steadily to shift from compiling data and statistics to influencing policy-making. This has intensified with the explosion of sources and initiatives on Big Data and the need to reconcile official and unofficial sources of data and statistics. Data partnerships of all sorts have sprung up, both inside and outside the UN. These include the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics set up by the UN Statistical Commission, the Development Solutions Network, outside the UN but aligned with the Secretary-General, as well as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, which includes UN agencies, a number of Member States and corporate data producers. The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data is in many ways a UN competitor, for funds if nothing else. As the private generators of Big Data jumped onto the 2030 Agenda band wagon, data has been variously anointed the new oil (by the UN Statistics Division) and the new gold (by the business press. See GPW briefing #19, Data Is the New Gold).

Whither National Statistics Offices (NSOs): from data producer to data steward?
This marketplace of data, money and influence has spurred efforts to encourage national statistics offices to manage the production of official and unofficial statistics, both nationally and globally. A recent paper by Steve MacFeely, head of statistics at UNCTAD and Bojan Nastav, University College Cork, Ireland, emphasized that in terms of resources for data collection (official and unofficial) and statistical capacity-building, the UN was vastly outspent by multi-stakeholder initiatives, and that NSOs would not be able to reconcile official and unofficial data without a change of strategy. In order to address these challenges the authors argued that NSOs need to reconceptualize the relationship between official and unofficial data sources. They suggest that an internationally recognized body could be mandated to validate not only new sources of data but also new statistics, provided they meet international standards and are widely available, which could then be certified by individual countries. They see this as a way for

global and national statistical bodies to take some control over the currently unequal landscape, which favours private sector sources.

The authors acknowledge that by allowing some unofficial sources to be designated official, they risk outsourcing or privatizing the compilation of official statistics from NSOs. However, they underline the fact that "a (cold) data war is already underway. There is a growing asymmetry in the resources available for the compilation of public/official and private/unofficial statistics and indicators."

A similar proposal is now being advanced by the UN Statistics Division. At the Monday seminar (2 March 2020) that precedes the three-day meeting of the UN Statistical Commission, the division is hosting a High-Level Forum on Official Statistics, asking, "*Data stewardship, a solution for official statistics predicament?*" The concept note for the forum acknowledges that new data sources have the potential of filling gaps in statistics of official statistical sources and "provide real time data on individual behavior and the environment that can drive targeted policy making for achieving the SDGs".

Echoing MacFeely and Nastav, the forum concept note highlights the gaps in statistics from official statistical sources, and the potential of new sources to fill these gaps. Pointing to an urgent need to "update the vision, strategy and role of statistical offices", it says that "leaders of national statistical offices are rethinking the overall role of official statistics in the new data ecosystem". Digital strategies are being developed for NSOs, "envisioning the role of the statistics office as curator of official statistics, as a repository and custodian of government data and as able to utilize and integrate the new private data sources." It concludes that 'the government data steward would be tasked with setting standards and guidelines for the collection, management and use of government data and with ensuring that government agencies adopt common capabilities" in order to facilitate a "comprehensive and integrated government data system".

In organizing this forum, the UN Statistics Division, catching up with private sector enthusiasm for mining new data veins, adds that the role of NSOs is related to "overall efforts of governments to utilize data as the new 'oil' in an information and technology-based economy and society." Ultimately governments are rethinking data governance with the view to "better utilize government and private data for policy-making, policy execution and the delivery of government services".

Indeed, policy influence is a long-sought goal of the Division. The UN Statistics Division, which acts as secretariat to the IAEG-SDGs, has sought and to some extent achieved a greater role and profile in policy recommendations, both at the national level and globally at the HLPF (see GPW Briefing #22, The Ups and Downs of Tiers; #29, Who Influences Whom in the Policy Arena).

When it comes to policy-making the question will be to what extent these statistical measures can highlight trade-offs and external constraints, all central to policy-making. These issues, missing in the Secretary-General's report of the SDGs in 2019 were placed squarely on the UN

and 2030 Agenda by the Global Sustainable Development Report 2019, during the HLPF Summit (premier policy-setting arena) in September 2019.

From producers to consumers of data
The challenges confronting the UN system and its different entities in terms of data and statistical analysis are echoing throughout the system as it seeks to support countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda, in particular how they engage with non-state actors in the for-profit sector.

A recent initiative, Data4Now, launched in September 2019 by the UN Deputy Secretary-General and reported on in a submission to the Statistical Commission, is designed to bring some of these diverse initiatives under the same umbrella (E/CN.3/2020/3. Jointly convened by the UN, the Global Partnership on Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD), the World Bank and the Solutions for Sustainable Development Network, Data4Now has asked NSOs to "identify their priority areas where they most urgently need to address measurement issues, data availability and timeliness and the core team facilitates the matching with partnerships that can offer innovative data solutions to address those priorities". On the face of it, the ability of NSOs to access 'innovative data solutions' tailored to their priorities appears positive, but it is not clear how this would address their capacity- building needs, and risks their becoming dependent on private data suppliers for critical data and analysis, thereby turning them into consumers of data rather than either producers or managers. Does this direction seem like an end run around national ownership?

In this connection the UN Statistics Division, together with the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys is organizing a Friday Seminar before the official session of the Statistical Commission on Household Surveys in a Changing Data Landscape". In this case the organizers recognize that the growing demand for data has resulted in household surveys being "too-often framed as obsolete when compared and contrasted with other data sources such as 'Big Data' and administrative data", adding that soon, "Big Data may eliminate the need for surveys altogether".

Coming at a time when the targets and indicators for the SDGs require data from the perspective of people rather than administrators, the organizers ask "How do we improve the effectiveness of household surveys and their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." The seminar will provide a platform for NSOs, international organizations and the research community "to debate and discuss strategies to realize the full potential of household survey in this new environment" Such engagements reveal the need for a more robust framework and accountability structure for adherence to the UN mandate to protect and promote the public good.