WBG Trust Fund for Innovations in Development Data (TFIDD), July 2015

Data from new technologies can be a powerful force for the post-2015 development agenda

Thanks to new technologies, the volume, level of detail, and speed of data available on societies, the economy and the environment is without precedent. Extraordinary volumes of data are being produced – through social media, mobile mapping, geo-sensing and administrative records – very cheaply, and often automatically. For development, these new data sources hold great potential as the world embarks on the ambitious agenda underpinned by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs breadth and depth require a significant increase in data and information for planning, monitoring, and accountability. Thus, the value of data for the SDGs is to help governments actually achieve the goals, not just monitor that achievement.

However, people, economies, governments, and societies are straining to adjust to faster, more networked, and more comprehensive data. This strain is driven by an emerging process where traditional information, collected periodically, is being supplemented by constantly updated data that often flows through private entities rather than the public sector. And many low-income country producers of data are already contending with low budgets, poor infrastructure, and too often rely on a small number of people trained to do the technical work.

Thus, more attention must also be given to how this technology revolution can spur sustained improvements to country data systems. There are opportunities of complementing traditional sources with the use of new and emerging data sources in statistical production processes for monitoring and analysis, improving systems for global data sharing, identifying and filling research gaps and creating incentives for various actors - including civil society and private sector - to meet these challenges. Innovation will be needed in all phases of data production and use including data quality improvements, open data as well as best use of new sources of data.

The need for financing innovation in development data: a new World Bank Trust Fund

Paradoxically, the low starting point in most developing countries may be a cause for optimism. If done right, countries can focus their efforts on developing architectures that acknowledge the centrality of new data sources working in concert with conventional surveys and government records.

Although the implementation phase of the SDGs begins shortly, good examples of “doing things right” in developing countries are not wide-spread. Now is the time to think of innovation as a bedrock investment to improve development data production, dissemination, and use across a range of policy needs. We need to create a culture of finding and replicating the creative innovative solutions that exist on the ground. And we need to do a better job of connecting technical experts together to share their experiences whether they be successes or failures. To be most effective, these innovations should be integrated within countries’ national plans and not turn into a parallel structure.

To fund this work, the World Bank Group is establishing a Trust Fund for Innovations in Development Data (TFIDD) as part of its contribution to better data for post-2015 development. A common source for funding “innovations in data production and use” has the potential advantages of efficiency, coordination, and visibility.

The TFIDD will also fill a gaping hole in the existing financial architecture. A recent survey of financing for development data identified over 30 separate financing mechanisms disbursing $264m annually. These

funds support data improvements for a variety of themes, but catalyzing innovative approaches was assessed to be an "under-funded" area.

Characteristics of a Trust Fund for Innovations in Development Data (TFIDD)

The TFIDD is dedicated to support the implementation of innovative approaches to data production, dissemination, literacy and use - primarily in low-income countries. The idea is to support data processes that are not one-offs. Rather, funding would be targeted to improve processes where needs are continuous or recurrent, and where innovations can be readily adapted to other regions and sectors.

The trust fund would support both innovations in technology and innovations in approach. Examples of the former include: mobile-phone based voice enumeration surveys, local visualization tools for enhanced public understanding of key issues, and developing APIs that draw from re-usable reference data. Examples in innovations in approach include: community mapping, developing and publishing anonymized microdata, or staffing data science fellows in low capacity environments.

The trust fund plans to raise $100m over five years. The primary recipient of funding would be low-income country governments, think tanks, and civil society for scaling up or replicating innovations that work. Funding would aim to improve a wide spectrum of data activities. It could help local advocacy groups use detailed level data to understand local problems better. It could help policy makers and statisticians combine new data that is often incomplete or biased with surveys to address policy issues in new ways and make better use of the data being collected. It could help replicate projects facilitating data exchange to connect citizens with service users to create better performing markets or improve citizen engagement.

The trust fund would also provide assistance to two other areas. First, to conduct pilots or research in areas that have potential for replication, but lack bona fide approaches that can be drawn from. Second, to catalyze knowledge exchanges by getting technical experts together.

We must acknowledge in innovations will lead to both successes and failures during implementation. Thus, "results" of this trust fund may be more difficult to measure relative to investment in "tried and true" data production, dissemination, and use methods. But the longer-term benefits are more likely to be significant.

The TFIDD's focus on innovation complements the 30+ existing funding sources and acknowledges that these sources must also scale up their impact to meet the needs of the post-2015 development agenda. The Trust Fund will be a multi-donor instrument (MDTF), and the WBG is reaching out to donors to join this MDTF.

Conclusion

The World Bank plans to have the Trust Fund up and running by the end of 2015 to ensure innovative approaches to data improvements lie at the heart of the means of implementation of the SDGs. **The TFIDD aims to systematize and de-fragment scaling up on innovations in development data to maximize spread of new approaches.** It recognizes that getting it right on-the-ground will entail the creation of innovative partnerships along with replicating technological advances. It will strive to incentivize changes beyond the projects it funds.

The best data in the world – timely, relevant and easy to understand – will not by themselves lead to change. Governments and citizens need to act upon the knowledge imparted by the data to make a difference to the lives of people. However, if we under-invest in innovative approaches to improve development data, key data gaps will remain unfilled, and the SDGs will risk falling short of their ambitions.

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