
REAL-TIME DATA FOR THE SDGS: Accelerating progress through timely information

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects a unique global consensus and commitment to address the world's most acute and pressing challenges. But to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and to leave no one behind, everyone in the world should be represented in up-to-date and timely data that can be used to measure progress and make decisions to improve people's lives.

Too much of our data is out-of-date, and too many people are missing from the numbers. There is an urgent need for more accurate, timely, and comprehensive data to make the SDGs an actionable framework for sustainable development that can drive policies and programs in real time for all people.

Accurate and timely information about certain aspects of people's lives are unknown, numerous groups and individuals remain "invisible", and many development challenges are still poorly understood.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2018

Today, new technologies, paired with existing data sources and methods, give us an unprecedented opportunity to solve this problem. However, it has been difficult to make progress at scale, given poor information-sharing on the latest innovations and methods, challenges in creating the right partnerships to share and use data at scale, and skills gaps in many institutions. The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, the United Nations Statistics Division, the World Bank, and the Thematic Research Network on Data and Statistics (TReNDS) at the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, working with governments and partners from across the United Nations System, multilateral organizations, the private sector, academic networks, and civil society are launching an ambitious new collaboration. The program will build a community of data users, leaders, and innovators, partnering in new ways to deliver more robust and timely data that will help us achieve the SDGs.

The Real-time Data for the SDGs initiative aims to increase the use of robust methods and tools that improve the timeliness, coverage, and quality of SDG data through collaboration and partnership, technical and capacity support, and information sharing.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE PROBLEM

Data availability gaps:

- A UN survey in Africa and Asia found that, on average, data for only 20% of SDG indicators is currently available (UN SDGs report, 2018).
- Only 100 countries in the world have nationally representative data on violence against women. The suffering and deaths of millions of women worldwide is invisible to policymakers and therefore can't be tackled effectively (UN Statistics, SDG Metadata).

Inadequate timeliness:

- Poverty data on two-thirds of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa is based on surveys that were done before the SDGs were agreed in 2015 (Povcal net, 2019).
- It is believed that approximately 15 billion trees are cut down each year. However, our latest global figures on deforestation are four years out of date, from 2015 (Crowther et al., 2015).
- Current figures for global ambient air pollution mortality estimates are from 2012 (UNSDSN 2018).

Unmeasured people and geographies:

- There are currently 25.4 million refugees in the world, who go uncounted in national statistics (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2018).
- Coastal zones are one of the most heavily populated and developed land zones in the world. However, there is no reliable global-scale assessment of historical shoreline change trends. One estimate of satellite-derived shoreline data suggests that 24% of the world's sandy beaches are eroding at rates exceeding 0.5 meters per year (Luijendijk et al. 2018).

THE STRATEGY

A huge amount of work is already underway among multilateral organizations, in academia, in national statistical offices, and elsewhere to fill gaps in SDG data availability, including the coverage and timeliness of different sources. However, it has proved challenging to leverage this work at scale, and to make sure that the data being produced is useful for decision-making, owing to poor information-sharing on new methods and approaches to data collection, skills gaps, and challenges in creating the partnerships for data sharing and use at scale.

To build on those efforts, this initiative has three main goals;

- **Improve accessibility of methods:**
Make innovative methods for data production and analysis easily accessible to data producers and data users to support progress towards the SDGs.
- **Build technical coalitions and capacity:**
Develop technical collaborations to build skills and knowledge and increase the standardization and uptake of new methods at scale.
- **Catalyze national data innovation partnerships:**
Catalyze or take to scale new data partnerships in selected countries to increase the availability and use of timely data for decision-making on the SDGs.

The initiative will involve **working closely with National Statistical Offices and all relevant government agencies**, so the use of new data sources, such as citizen-generated data, will complement official statistics from surveys, censuses, and administrative sources by providing information in between survey or census rounds and helping to provide information on uncounted populations or understudied environmental issues. The aim will be to **integrate new methods and sources into existing national statistical systems**, and explicitly not to create a parallel data infrastructure at the country level.

While government systems are at the heart of this initiative, the aim will be to improve opportunities for collaboration and information sharing between data scientists, statisticians, data producers, and data users, at both global and national scales, and catalyze new data partnerships between public, private, and academic entities.

Data and methods included in the Real-time Data for the SDGs initiative may relate to specific SDGs, but may also pertain to other pressing policy and management challenges, identified by partner countries, that are cross-cutting and relevant to more than one SDG, such as data on displaced populations.

With this approach, we aim to improve the coverage and timeliness of SDG-relevant data, reduce duplication, and accelerate learning and innovation.

OUTCOMES

The first phase of this work will focus on setting up outcome-oriented collaborations, primarily at national level, to demonstrate the feasibility and value of the Real-time Data for the SDGs initiative, in the run up to the UN General Assembly in September 2020. Work in this initial phase will concentrate on a small group of partner countries who opt in to the initiative on the basis of the opportunity to leverage ongoing activities on SDG data development.

The priority outcomes of the first phase will be:

- By the Spring of 2020, demonstrated capacity in partner countries to regularly produce timely data (updated annually or with higher frequency, depending on the measure) from sustainable sources (including private sector and civil society), for at least three SDG measures related to demography (population estimates), socioeconomic well-being (including poverty estimates), and environmental protection.
- Ability in the partner countries to make those data sets available in national SDG dashboards for national government planning, as well as to development partners, including the UN, and other stakeholders.
- An initial proposal of a set of global measures relevant for all countries that can be generated by leveraging existing tools and global initiatives and made available as a global public good, and measures that can be generated by integrating innovative data sources into official statistical production. Such measures could, for instance, include data drawn from satellite imagery on forest cover, land degradation, or coastal erosion, or from the integration of citizen-generated data or private sector data with national official data sources.
- A strategy for the sustainable production, curation, and dissemination of data available in global platforms, so they can be widely available to the public and to policymakers for a minimum of 15 years.

ACTIVITIES

The core partners in this initiative will draw on a diverse network of collaborators from public and private entities and civil society to deliver early results that will demonstrate feasibility and be the starting point for a scaled-up effort after 2020. We will seek to build relationships over time with many of the groups developing and testing methods and providing capacity support for timely SDG data, to share knowledge and develop a wider community of practice in this area.

- **Initial scoping and building collaborative.**

In the early months, the focus will be on building support from governments, academic institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations leading to the establishment of a diverse group of collaborating partners drawn from the following groups:

Data users

- Policymaking institutions at the national level.
- The United Nations Resident Coordinators under the guidance of the Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General.
- Civil society groups, to build in public engagement and link with SDG advocacy in the run up to 2020.

*Data
producers
and capacity
building
partners*

- Statistical offices and government agencies that are part of the national statistical system.
- Space agencies and other Earth observation generating bodies.
- Data producers and technology providers from the private sector.
- Academic groups working on methods for producing robust, timely, SDG-relevant data from different sources.
- Civil society groups with established data collection systems from citizens.
- Organizations running major survey programs.
- Other multi-stakeholder platforms that can help process and visualize robust, timely, and SDG-relevant data.

Collaborating organizations will come together regularly to share information and learning, and to identify areas of common interest or shared knowledge that can usefully be pursued together or turned into knowledge products for the wider community.

- **Country-level collaborations to produce and use timely data**

Smaller project teams focused on particular countries or sectors will bring together selected data users and producers from the collaborative, and other local country partners such as local academic institutions, to establish how different data sources and methodologies can provide useable, robust, and timely data on the selected issues identified in each country, and how these can be integrated into national decision-making, to complement and enhance official statistics. In some cases this will build on existing work being conducted by governments and development partners in specific sectors or regions. The aim will be to ensure there is no duplication with existing work, but that this initiative can enhance ongoing projects by bringing in a wider group of stakeholders and increasing visibility and scalability.

Data will be made available in formats that can be integrated into existing and new national data dissemination platforms and SDG monitoring tools.

- **Communications and advocacy**

Communications and advocacy are a key part of building support for the initiative, for unlocking data, and securing broad participation. Partners in the collaborative will have the opportunity to participate in communications activities around major events such as the UN General Assembly, and to showcase their work. Communications activities will help to build broader interest and buy-in, so that by 2023, we have data that can present a robust and timely picture of progress on key sustainable development dimensions, at both global and national level to mark the halfway point to the SDGs' 2030 deadline.

NEXT STEPS

Following this first phase, in September 2020 we will review the outcomes and learnings with the collaborative members, and develop a strategy to increase the scale of the initiative so that, by 2023 and the halfway point to the SDGs, robust methods and sources of timely data are in widespread use and it is possible to assess progress and devise programmes and policies based on timely data to ensure that SDGs are achieved by the deadline of 2030.

Annex: Partnership Options

The project will be anchored by four operating partners: GPSDD, UN Statistics Division, World Bank and SDSN TReNDS. The initiative will also seek and secure the formal engagement of a wide range of partners willing to contribute their time, expertise, data, methodologies, technology, and other resources in support of the project. In addition, we anticipate that a wide number of data producers and users will engage in the Real-time Data for SDGs initiative, contributing with their inputs and ideas through a GPSDD-hosted collaborative. For each type of partner, we will have different partnership agreements stipulating the types of engagement and nature of their contributions.

Governments

Governments are invited to participate in the project in two primary capacities:

1. As country partners, collaborating with others to identify real-time measures in their country and to pilot new approaches for generating this data.
2. As collaborative members, advising on the general project development, country pilots, and global measures and particularly providing user input.

Companies

Companies are invited to participate in the project in two primary capacities:

1. As corporate partners, providing data, technical assistance, technologies, or other assets to support country data needs, and committing to do so sustainably, for the duration of the SDGs, until 2030
2. As collaborative members, advising on the general project development, country pilots, and global measures and particularly providing technical assistance and supply-side input.

Academics / Research Institutes

Academics and research institutes are invited to participate, either through SDSN TReNDS or as individual members in the collaborative, to serve three primary functions:

1. As data suppliers, identifying new methodologies and producing high-quality timely data for select countries, regions, or the world, on select SDG measures, and committing to provide it to countries, sustainably for the duration of the SDGs, until 2030.
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2. As peer reviewers, helping to review methodologies and approaches, to vet them, and to review data sets, in partnership with national governments.
 3. As collaborative members, advising on the general project development, country pilots, and global measures and particularly providing technical assistance and supply-side input.

NGOs

NGOs are invited to participate in the project in two primary capacities:

1. As local data providers, working in countries with the national government, to curate citizen-generated data on key SDG measures and to provide it to countries, sustainably for the duration of the SDGs, until 2030.
2. As collaborative members, advising on the general project development, country pilots and global measures and particularly providing technical assistance and supply-side input.

Funders

We are seeking funding to support this project, and welcome discussions with potential funders for the whole project or for work on particular countries or sectors.
