

Open letter to the UN Secretary General on the IEAG's Report on the Data Revolution

Ban Ki-moon
Secretary General
United Nations
14 November 2014

Dear Mr Ban Ki-moon,

We welcome your decision to convene the Independent Expert Advisory Group (IEAG) on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development. The efforts made by individual members of the IEAG in producing the report within a limited timeframe and mandate are to be commended. There is much in the detail of the report that we support, and we recognise its importance in guiding the work of all of those involved in data and development. There remain, however, three significant areas of concern:

Lack of consultation

Whilst we acknowledge the limitations of producing this report to such tight deadlines, we regret the consequences in terms of lack of time for adequate consultation. This has led to frustration and criticism from many interested parties. Moving forward with this project, we recommend that the UN allows enough time for consultations to ensure sufficient participation in the process from all relevant stakeholders. As the report itself says, it is subsidiary to the revolution.

Insufficient emphasis on strengthening human capacity

The report emphasises the need to build both technical and institutional capacity, but it underestimates the efforts required to strengthen human capacity – perhaps the most significant challenge that the data revolution faces. The final report includes a welcome acknowledgement of the risk of rising inequality between those who can access and use data and those who cannot. To mitigate that risk, more emphasis should be placed on strengthening human capacity, both to collect data and to use it.

Over-emphasis on global priorities at the expense of national

Progress in human development, including that envisaged in the draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, will be driven by the actions and priorities pursued at national and sub-national level, with global efforts playing a supplementary role. Similarly, the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development must also be driven at this level, providing decision makers at national, municipal and local level and those holding them to account with the data they need to make well informed decisions. While the IEAG report states that “strengthening national capacities will be the essential test of any data revolution” – a sentiment we wholly endorse – some sections of the report continue to emphasise the role of global institutions and processes at the expense of national contexts and priorities. Providing experts with better data to monitor global progress on the SDGs will be a useful by-product of a successful Data Revolution, but should not be its driving motivation.

We understand that the report of the IEAG will contribute to the Synthesis Report on the SDGs that is currently being finalised. We hope that our comments on IEAG report will also inform that process.

Yours sincerely,

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