



Measuring the New Sustainable Development Goals: Opportunities and Challenges for Human Rights

Nicolas Fasel*, Grace Sanico Steffan

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland,
nfasel@ohchr.org, gsteffan@ohchr.org

Abstract

The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) about to be adopted by the United Nations (UN) provides for an unprecedented set of ambitious goals and targets to achieve sustainable development for all by 2030. While reiterating their commitment to freeing humanity from poverty and hunger and achieving the unfinished work of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), States have agreed on the need to broaden the agenda and include further social, economic, environmental, equality, and governance objectives. States also reaffirmed the need for the post-2015 agenda to operate in full respect of the human rights norms and principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the most translated document in the world, and other international legal instruments. The human rights component of the data revolution is expected to be reflected in the collection, processing, dissemination and analysis of data. Consequently, there are high expectations on the statistical community, both at national and international levels, especially on official statisticians, as they will assume the primary responsibility for measuring the SDGs. In this context, it is particularly timely to explore the main features and implications that a human rights approach to statistics and data collection could have. The paper argues that it would mean broader data disaggregation, measuring human rights standards, facilitating participation, including of the marginalized populations, ensuring human rights safeguard in the entire life-cycle of data, and strengthening accountability.

Keywords: data revolution, data disaggregation, United Nations, accountability

1. Introduction

In the Millennium Declaration, States made a first commitment to uphold and promote civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all. This pledge did not however find its counterpart in the approach to the indicators and accountability framework of the MDGs. Human rights standards and concerns were kept away from the statistical work, and population groups, in particular vulnerable groups, remained largely invisible in statistics and excluded from relevant policy efforts. The new SDGs offer a unique opportunity for addressing this failure. More so now that the human rights commitment reiterated by States is being echoed in the process of elaborating the SDGs measurement framework. Also important is the call for a data revolution that recognizes the need for integrating the protection and advancement of human rights in the development of modern statistical systems.

2. The common cause of statistics and human rights

The contribution of official statistics to the realization of human rights is significant. The human rights community, including the UN human rights mechanisms¹, rely on the use of statistics to measure implementation of civil, economic, political and social rights and to support evidenced-based policy. International human rights law and standards, starting from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have specified the importance of disseminating sound statistical information in fulfilling

¹ UN Charter-based bodies, including the Human Rights Council, and bodies created under the international human rights treaties and made up of independent experts mandated to monitor State parties' compliance with their treaty obligations.

peoples’ right to information and entitlement to participate in public affairs and hold their public officials accountable. The Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities includes specific provisions on the role of statistics and data collection in order for State parties to formulate and implement policies to give effect to the convention.

Likewise, the contribution of human rights in producing trustworthy statistics is significant. Human rights standards and principles; such as rights to privacy, data protection, right to information, right to be registered, principle of self-identification, and participation; are all vital to ensure robustness and independence of official statistical systems. Implementing the rights of statisticians themselves could help provide them a safe space to do their work, without fear of recrimination or even worse reprisal. The common cause of statistics and human rights is to improve peoples’ lives, and collaboration between these two fields will gain importance as the work on measuring and monitoring the SDGs is underway.

This common cause has been recognized by statisticians themselves. The Independent Expert Advisory Group (2014, p.23) in their report ‘A World that Counts – Mobilizing the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development’ clearly stated that *“Any legal or regulatory mechanism, or networks or partnerships, set up to mobilize the data revolution for sustainable development should have the protection of human rights as a core part of their activities, specify who is responsible for upholding those rights, and should support the protection, respect and fulfilment of human rights”*.

In order to achieve this, it is therefore imperative to explore the important elements of a human rights approach to data and their implications to the development of modern statistical systems.

3. Human rights approach to data

Figure 1 – Elements of a Human Rights Approach to Data

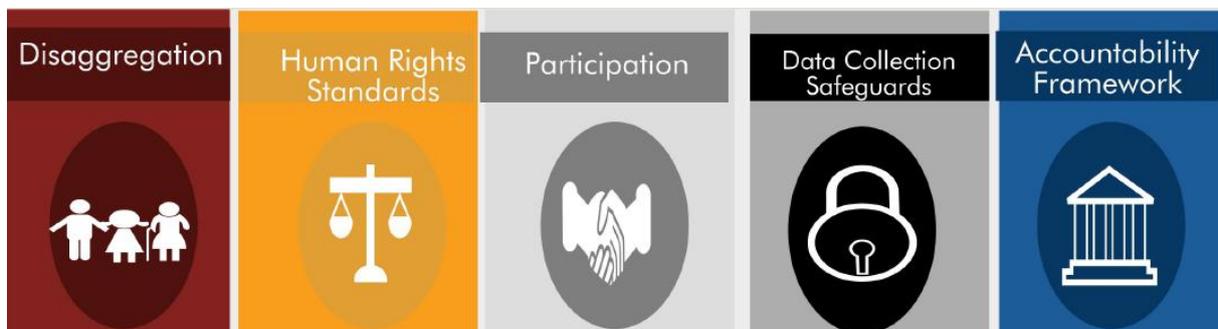


Figure 1 shows the elements that make-up an approach to data that is consistent with human rights standards and principles.

Disaggregation

In the human rights field, national averages are insufficient to help reveal who are the most deprived or vulnerable population groups or to measure the level of inequality and discrimination in a country (United Nations, 2012, p. 68). Similarly, for the SDGs, disaggregated indicators by grounds of discrimination prohibited by international human rights law to the extent feasible are needed to make sure that no one is excluded or left behind. States, under their commitments to human rights treaties, have the obligation to produce disaggregated data by grounds, which could include, among others, ethnicity, sex, age, income, geographic location, disability, religion, migratory or displacement status, civil status, sexual orientation and gender identity. Thus, increasing the capacity of statistical systems



to produce and analyse more disaggregated data is necessary to be able to measure the disparities between social groups and monitor the reduction of inequalities. This is important in order to close the gaps between social groups. Use of innovative technologies and statistical techniques, including geographic mapping, oversampling and small area estimation, are required.

Human Rights Standards

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (United Nations, 2014, p.25) called for an integrated agenda which ‘... mirrors the broader international human rights framework, including elements of economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights, as well as the right to development.’ These elements should include availability, accessibility and quality of rights-related services, for example in health care, education, water and sanitation, conditions of detention, etc. Measures of the use of maximum available resources to deliver the rights and needs of the society, both domestically and internationally, should be included in the agenda. ‘No target should be met unless it has been met for all’ is an important measure to drive in non-discrimination, equality and participation. Measures of civil and political rights, including access to justice and freedom from violence must find their place in the agenda this time. These pose a challenge because for some of these priorities data may not be readily available yet, although they are conceptually clear and with established methodologies. In fact, for many of these topics there are considerable data development and compilation in international organizations, some national statistical systems, and human rights organizations. Thus, a forward-looking approach to measuring the new goals and targets is needed, so that the priorities of the SDGs are not limited by existing data and data sources. In addition, serious investment in the development of new data, such as topics that are currently not part of official statistics; and data sources, such as non-traditional sources which meet relevant statistical and human rights standards, should be promoted. To ensure that these new sources of data comply with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, statistical systems will have to play a more central role in coordinating the validation of data coming from these sources, e.g. civil society, human rights organizations, including big data.

Participation

Participation is a key human rights principle. The slogan “nothing about us without us” embodies the zeitgeist of the human rights movement. Facilitating participation of the population, especially those that are disadvantaged and marginalized in the measurement process does not only make sense to guarantee wider acceptance of the data but also to ensure their usefulness and accuracy. National human rights institutions (NHRIs)² and civil society organizations, due to the nature of their work and how close they work with marginalized and vulnerable population groups, would be strategic partners to facilitate this participation. This in turn would require a more institutionalized partnership between official statistics and the human rights community. By encouraging their participation in the preparation of the national strategies for the development of statistics, in national statistical advisory councils, or signing of memorandum of understanding, national statistical systems could potentially strengthen this type of collaboration. The advantages from these inter-disciplinary exchanges, aside from those noted earlier in this paper, could include preparation of metadata with references to human rights, and cross training on basic human rights for statisticians and basic statistics for human rights practitioners.

Data collection safeguards

² NHRIs are independent administrative body set up by a State to promote and protect human rights. An inter-governmental body of NHRIs oversees a peer-review process of their independence. There are currently 108 NHRIs across the world.



An important element of a human rights approach to data is ensuring that human rights safeguards are respected during the entire life-cycle of data. Human rights principles such as data confidentiality, non-discrimination, self-identification and those already mentioned earlier must be observed during collection, processing and dissemination of data. This must be so if we would like that the surveyed population, data producers and users are able to operate freely and independently from political and other influence. The population must be able to control information regarding them and be protected from abuses of data. In the long run, the purpose of guaranteeing data collection safeguards is to ensure that data are used for their inherent function, to serve the public good. National statistical systems and international organization should work together on developing guidelines to ensure that the full spectrum of data production conform to legal and institutional standards on ethics, statistics and human rights.

Accountability framework

For States to know the extent of efforts needed to reach the SDG targets, they should be measuring not only outcomes, but their means (legal, institutional and policy). Strengthening accountability and policy coherence means that any new global review mechanism for post-2015 development commitments should explicitly refer to international human rights treaty standards, and should ensure rigorous independent review, effective civil society participation and high-level political accountability. For States not to dilute or retract from their legal and policy commitments at the global level there must be a clear and transparent national tailoring process. Accountability also means transparency in the work of statistical systems and more direct communication with the population they serve. To this end, increased data literacy is crucial in allowing the population to better understand and use data.

5. Conclusions

For a truly transformative new Sustainable Development Goals where no group of people and key issues remain invisible, a human rights approach to data is critical. A human rights approach means broader disaggregation, measuring human rights standards, facilitating participation, especially of the marginalized and vulnerable populations, ensuring data collection safeguards and a strong accountability framework. Each of these elements poses opportunities and challenges that statistical systems at the national, regional and international levels must address in order to help achieve the ambition of leaving no one behind in the new agenda.

References

Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development (2014). 'A World That Counts: Mobilising the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development' Report prepared at the request of the United Nations Secretary-General.

Retrieved from: <http://www.undatarevolution.org/report/>

United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2012). 'Human Rights Indicators: A Guide to Measurement and Implementation', New York and Geneva.

United, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and Center for Economic and Social Rights (2013). 'Who will be Accountable? Human Rights and the Post-2015 Development Agenda', New York and Geneva.

United Nations (2014). 'The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming all Lives and Protecting the Planet', *Synthesis Report of the Secretary General on the Post-2015 Agenda*, New York.