

## *Analysis Examines Availability and Use of Data for Development*

In order to plan and develop sound policies, evaluate programs, and lead development activities, government officials need adequate data, particularly demographic data. “Data for development can be likened to money in an economy or blood in the system of a human being,” explained one respondent to a recent Population Council study on demand for access to and use of data. Increasingly, such data are being gathered in the developing world, but are they reaching the people—government officials, policymakers, and others—who need them most? Do those people understand how to use the data to their fullest potential? With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Population Council researchers explored these and other questions in four African countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, and Uganda. Researchers interviewed people who work in government agencies, civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and the media, among others.

### *Determinants of demand*

Global initiatives, such as the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, have intensified the pressure on developing countries to quantify progress. Additionally, international donors have increasingly requested evidence that their investments result in positive outcomes. Countries may lose funding if they are not able to produce the appropriate data. But this external demand for data will not increase evidence-based practice in countries if there is no local ownership of the process. The demand has to come from within, fueled by an understanding

of the power of data to support high-quality programs and policies. To date most data are collected and turned over to international entities. One official commented, “When it comes to our politicians, they need to look at a map

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and see that in one district there are about 20 primary schools constructed by the government and in another district there is only one, so there is justification to allocate funds to the district that has been marginalized.”

Of course, data are not the only factor driving policies. Nevertheless, having current and appropriate information can help guide the development of policies and enable others to assess the implementation of those policies. As one government official noted, “The central government has been publishing amounts of funds released, but this is not enough. For example, if the funds are for roads, the information should indicate which roads—not just a lump sum for roads.” The challenges to making data available are exacerbated by the fact

that in many developing countries, including all four assessed in this study, a move is being made to decentralize strategic planning and budgeting, allowing local-level agencies to take on these functions. This decentralization means that data must be available for planning and budget execution at those local levels. Many data sets (such as the Demographic and Health Surveys) are available at the national and sometimes regional levels, but rarely at the district or lower levels. The census is the one data set that provides crucial data for smaller areas, but access to the census is often challenging. Council researchers found an understandable lack of local capacity for analyzing, understanding, or even accessing such data. Access to information means that the data have to exist, that they have to be easily obtained, and that there be a reasonable expectation that someone is available with appropriate skills to make use of the data.

### *Impediments to demand*

“A number of factors seem to have discouraged researchers from releasing routine reports and distributing micro-data,” says Wendy Baldwin, director of the Council’s Poverty, Gender, and Youth Program. “Some fear that the data will be misused. Others cite a culture of secrecy and a need to maintain confidentiality.” To address these concerns, researchers often limit access to their data.

Moreover, in some instances, data are available, but potential users are unaware of

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their existence or their potential. One respondent explained, “Outsiders get data because they look for it; as a people we are not in the habit of finding and using data.” In other cases, the available data are of uneven quality or

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out-of-date. One government official reported, “Timeliness is a serious problem . . . by the time data are collected, analyzed, and the findings released, the context may have changed and the data become less useful.”

In many cases, the data—particularly local-level data—simply do not exist. Where they are lacking, or where resources are not available to mine them, the fallback position may be to use no data at all in planning. If central governments lack useful local-level data, they may shrink the budgets of lower-level governments without taking into account the real needs at these levels.

One reason for the lack of available data is a corresponding lack of human and technical resources. Respondents repeatedly mentioned insufficient skills among people involved in data collection and management. Furthermore, technical difficulties are widespread. Surveys are often left in paper form and are susceptible to damage. Even in areas with computer access, frequent power outages and inadequate equipment restrict online resources.

Finally, the knowledge and experience gap between those who collect information and those who would use it is wide. Lacking training in analysis, policymakers need to have data translated for them into more comprehensible formats, such as tables or maps. Similarly, journalists prefer lay language to statistical language.

### Conclusions and recommendations

“Is there one ideal way to share data that will lead to increased use and eventually greater demand for data?” asks Baldwin. “The answer, in short, is no.” The researchers involved in these studies conclude that a multifaceted approach is needed, but a good place to start is creatively mining the data that are already available. “This would also likely motivate the groups who would lobby for more and better data and greater access to it,” said Judith A. Diers, a Council researcher. “A virtuous circle has to begin somewhere.” ■

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