Session 37 at the 7th African Population Conference
Johannesburg –1 December 2015 – 11:00-12:30

Advancing the data revolution in Africa: A dialogue between demographers and data practitioners

The UN 2030 Development Agenda and the Data Revolution

In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly agreed upon 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to guide national development efforts and to drive international cooperation through 2030. These goals are in turn subdivided into 169 targets, which will be assessed by between 100-200 measurable indicators. Discussions are currently underway under the aegis of the UN Inter-Agency Expert Group on the final list of the indicators and their monitoring processes; the outcomes of these deliberations will be presented at the 47th UN Statistical Commission in March 2016.

Many of the proposed SDG indicators are demographic in nature, relying on population and demographic metrics entirely (e.g., neonatal, infant, and under-5 mortality rates, TFR, contraceptive prevalence and met need for family planning) or on population statistics in the denominator of the indicator (e.g., the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty and school enrolment rates have the relevant population sizes in their denominators). These indicators aim to provide broad, disaggregated information on subnational population groups in a timely manner, so as to allow for the design of effective policies and interventions, and for monitoring progress towards the SDGs.

The UN 2030 development agenda is highly ambitious and will require a "data revolution" to succeed. Compared to the more limited Millennium Development Goal agenda (with 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators), monitoring progress towards the SDGs will require a massive scaling up of data activities: data collection, expanding the types of data available and linking them together (censuses, surveys, satellite and other remote sensing data, cellphone records, CRVS and other administrative data…), in many cases substantially improving the quality of data, along with the usual activities of data editing, analysis and dissemination. In addition, designing effective policies and interventions requires data on *processes and behaviors* that affect the outcomes measured by the SDG indicators – information that often stretches far beyond the indicators themselves. (An example of this is the monitoring of maternal mortality. While understanding trends in this measure are important, the explanation of why differentials in maternal mortality persist among sub-populations is probably more important in designing and implementing effective interventions to bring out further declines in this metric.)

Importance of sub-Saharan Africa and the evolving African population situation

While the SDGs are designed to be of pertinence to countries at all levels of development, they are especially relevant to sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where extreme poverty is relatively common, and the related health, nutrition, hygiene and urbanisation challenges are acute. In addition, population growth patterns in the region make efforts to improve human welfare and protect the environment both hugely important and particularly difficult.

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to experience very rapid population growth. According to the most recent UN population projections,[1] the population of SSA will grow by 45% over 2015-30, from slightly more than 960,000 to nearly 1.4 billion. During this same period, the population of the rest of the world will grow by just 11%. Roughly 78% of world population growth through the end of the century is projected to occur in SSA. Even assuming fairly rapid fertility declines, by 2100 the SSA population is projected to attain 3.95 billion, an increase of nearly 3 billion over 2015 – growth that is roughly 1.4 times the size of the combined populations living in Europe, North America and South America today.

This growth is caused by continued generally high levels of fertility relative to falling mortality, and to population growth momentum due to the young age structure. Sub-populations with relatively little schooling or living in rural areas, moreover, tend to have higher fertility, and much of future population growth in sub-Saharan Africa will be composed of their offspring. The behaviors and outcomes of these typically disadvantaged groups are relatively difficult measure, and devising ways to improve their wellbeing will be crucially important and an enormous challenge. The success of the UN 2030 development agenda will depend in good part on very significant progress in human welfare and environmental protection in the SSA region, starting with massive improvements in the evidence base for designing and implementing effective policy and interventions. This progress, moreover, must occur prior to major changes in the population age structure – changes in the dependency ratio that are thought to underlie much of the demographic dividend.[2]

National capacity concerns

The capacity for timely and accurate data collection and analysis varies enormously across SSA. It is improbable that even the best endowed countries will be able to provide the full set of data for measuring the SDG indicators in the near future. In the poorer countries, where NSOs tend to be less well funded, less autonomous and constrained by professional staff that are both smaller and less-well

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[1] United Nations Population Division (UNPD, 2015). *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision*, medium variant data acquired via website; see also Leridon, Henri (2015). "Afrique subsaharienne: une transition démographique explosive", *Futuribles* n°407, July-August 2015..

[2] UNPD (2015) shows the total dependency ratio in SSA, defined as the number of dependents <15 and >65 divided by 100 people of prime working ages 15-64, falling from 86 to 74 over the 2015-2030 period, and attaining 55 for the 2075-2100 period. In contrast, this ratio was estimated at 37 in both China and Korea in 2015 – countries that experienced sharp fertility declines over the past 40 years that transformed their age structures.

trained in critical areas including demographic analysis, the task of scaling up data activities will prove to be especially daunting.

The dual challenge of the Data Revolution that simultaneously reasserts the primacy of the National Statistical System in the SDG framework while supporting the idea that data should be more open, transparent, accessible, and capable of holding national and local authorities to account, is particularly apparent in sub-Saharan Africa. Not only are new demands going to be placed on the National Statistical Systems to provide new data and indicators, those systems are also likely to be subjected to demands for greater openness and transparency.

Meeting the challenges of the Data Revolution in Africa: Roundtable discussion at 7APC

With the above analytical framework in mind, the IUSSP has organised a roundtable discussion at the 7th African Population Conference to be held in Johannesburg in early December 2015. This session aims to stimulate discussions between demographers and data practitioners especially in regard to how to best implement the data revolution over upcoming years – action plans that include "quick wins", longer term investments and activities; priorities (in terms of quality vs quantity of data, priority variables, types of data, level of disaggregation that are feasible…); potential bottle-necks and specifically difficult challenges to meet, international collaborations, approaches to better and more rapidly disseminate information to policy makers, local officials and the civil society in ways they can use, data collection and diffusion outside of public sphere (civil society, telephone records…), etc. The goal of this meeting is to generate concrete ideas on how to tackle these issues and to provide guidance for the progressive implementation of the 2030 development agenda within Africa.

Format of the meeting

The event will be structured as a roundtable dialogue organized in a "Davos format". Seven high-level panellists from the UN, academia, research centers and NSOs will participate in a moderated discussion. After a brief overview by the moderator, panellists will briefly respond to the key questions, drawing upon knowledge and expertise from their relevant sectors. The roundtable dialogue will last for about 45 minutes, after which there will be time for comments and questions from the floor.

The session moderator will be Thomas LeGrand of the Université de Montréal. Panelists will include:

- Alex C. Ezeh, *African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)*.
- Patrick Gerland, *United Nations Population Division*.
- Stephane Helleringer, *Johns Hopkins University*.
- Pali Lehohla, *Statistics South Africa*.
- Tom A. Moultrie, *University of Cape Town*.
- Andrew Mukulu, *Uganda Bureau of Statistics*.
- Rachel Snow, UNFPA New York
- Mabingue Ngom, *UNFPA West and Central Africa.*

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