

Data for development: a double-edged sword

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Abstract: Globally there is a growing recognition of the important role of data with respect to development. According to Jim Yong Kim, the World Bank Group President, “Collecting good data is one of the most powerful tools to end extreme poverty.” Data, monitoring and accountability are explicitly listed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with particular reference to building statistical capacity in developing countries to record and analyze “high-quality, timely and reliable data” (SDG 17.18 and 17.19). Public policy and planning should be evidence-based, that is, informed by reliable data, in order to promote political accountability, both domestically and internationally. Development-related interventions should be managed according to results, that is, be monitored and evaluated for its efficacy and impact. Information and communication technology (ICT), in particular the use of mobile telephony for data collection, presents unprecedented means to improve timeliness, quality and include previously excluded populations. But, in spite of the promise of data for development (D4D), its use also presents several problems: over-standardization of development indicators that disregard local realities, over-emphasis of quantitative measurement, continued exclusion of marginalized data subjects, inability of data subjects to give informed consent, capacity to collect reliable and valid data, erosion of privacy through, for example, the integration of multiple sources of increasingly open data sources, inaccurate or missing metadata, the potential for surveillance and threats to personal security, the exercise of soft power through numerical indicators and ranking, the various vested interests for misrepresentation and the costs involved to collect, analyze and disseminate D4D. Using the research process as framework, this paper analyzes these potential problems and recommends potential solutions that may be of value to researchers, development practitioners, and policy-makers amongst others.