

UN World Data Forum Started



The inaugural United Nations World Data Forum has kicked off on 15 January in Cape Town, South Africa, with an ambitious agenda aiming to build broad consensus on how to harness the power of data for sustainable development, and boost the collaboration and resources needed to carry the work forward. It will also serve as a launching pad where diverse data producers and users can get behind a new Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data.

Over 1,500 data experts from more than 100 countries are gathering at the Forum from 15-18 January, including from national statistical offices, the private sector and academia, international organisations, and civil society groups, as well as political leaders and sustainable development advocates.

The Forum, which is being held at the Cape Town International Convention Centre, is a unique opportunity for major producers and users of data and statistics to come together to launch new initiatives and innovative solutions that will deliver better data on health, education, income, environmental indicators and other aspects of sustainable development. With close to 100 sessions and parallel events, from data labs and interactive knowledge-sharing spaces, to more traditional keynote speeches and panel discussions, the Forum is expected to address a wide range of data issues and initiatives.

Crucial time

The first UN World Data Forum comes at a crucial time, said Mr Wu Hongbo, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. As the world mobilises to carry out the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is essential to have accurate, reliable, timely and disaggregated data, tracking the unprecedented range of economic, social and environmental goals.

This will require that everyone in the statistics and data community find ways to work across different domains and create synergies. It also poses enormous challenges for the global statistical community, to modernise and improve our capacity. Wu Hongbo expects this Forum to offer a space where new partnerships can be forged, commitments announced, and support boosted for the Global Action Plan.

Global Action Plan to be launched

The Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data has been prepared over the past year by a high-level group of experts responsible for statistics and data policy in their countries, and will be officially approved by the UN Statistical Commission when it meets in March 2017. The Plan calls for the commitment of governments, policy leaders and the international community to undertake key actions under six strategic areas, including innovation and modernisation of national statistical systems, dissemination of data on sustainable development, building partnerships and mobilising resources.

Boosting capacity and commitments

Key policy issues to be examined at the Forum include rethinking how to strengthen official statistical capacity in those countries where it is needed, which is a major concern of the Global Action Plan. A number of new commitments and partnerships are expected to be announced.

The enormous challenges we face require capacity and resources to improve current methods and to find ways to incorporate new data sources, said Pali Lehohla, Statistician-General and Head of Statistics South Africa, co-host of the Forum. The Forum is a major opportunity. Because of the framework created by the Millennium Development Goals, it is possible to make a lot of progress on statistics at the national level around the world, and now, with the 2030 Agenda, making even more progress in ways we can't even imagine seems to be feasible, Lehohla added.

Other issues to be examined at the Forum include the need for open data and how to facilitate data sharing and integration of new data sources into official statistics. Several initiatives are focusing on how to better count minorities and vulnerable groups and improve gender data so that no one will be left behind and ensure the protection of human rights; and on helping people understand the world through data, using data visualisation, literacy and journalism.

Innovative solutions

The Forum will feature data labs and presentations that will launch or advance a number of innovative, practical solutions, many using new large-scale data sources such as mobile phone and bank records, social media and geospatial data. Projects to be showcased include the use of high-res satellite images to map poverty and measure soil fertility and crop yields, and the use of call records and other sources to gather better data on migration and refugees. Also to be featured are a public-private partnership utilising open data, remote sensing and drones to improve the productivity of African agriculture, and initiatives by civil society groups using citizen-generated data to talk to

governments about people's experiences and priorities, and to spur policy change and greater accountability.

About the Forum

The Forum was agreed by the UN Statistical Commission based on a recommendation by the UN Secretary-General's Independent Expert and Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development. Improved use of data and statistics will be crucial to achieving the transformational vision of a better future for people and the planet, set out in the 2030 Agenda agreed by world leaders at the UN in September 2015. Rapid expansion in new sources of data is creating large-scale opportunities for innovative solutions, which need to be integrated with strengthened official data mechanisms and structures.

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