SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Better data is needed for better results but it will cost a huge chunk of aid

While the world has generally seen success with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) — halve the proportion of hunger and poverty, get all children into school and drastically reduce child mortality — drawn up nearly 15 years ago, not all promises will be achieved.

What is somewhat surprising, however, is that we have fairly little information about what exactly we achieved. According to World Bank data, in 1990 there were 850 maternal deaths out of 100,000 live births in sub-Saharan Africa and this number went down to 500 in 2010. However, the World Health Organisation has warned that measuring the maternal mortality ratio remains a challenge as less than 40 per cent of countries have a complete civil registration system that appropriately attributes the cause of death.

Actually, most of the available numbers are rather projections and estimates, not data. In total, there are more gaps than real observations and the observations themselves are often dubious. This matters, because the world is now discussing a new set of targets for the next decade and a half. To do the most good, the Copenhagen Consensus, has asked 63 teams of the world's top economists to look at the economic, social and environmental costs and benefits of all the top targets. Of course most of the attention is on the high-profile issues like health, education, food, water and environment.

But to be able to measure how well we handle all these issues has real costs. How much this will cost and how much the international community can justify spending in this way is the important topic covered by Prof

Government officials during Kenya's recent biometric registration of civil servants. Countries where data collection has not yet started will spend even more on the exercise. Picture: File

COMMENTARY
DR BJØRN LOMBORG

"Most of the available numbers are projections and estimates, not data. In total, there are more gaps than real observations and the observations themselves are often dubious."

Morten Jerven in his new paper for the Copenhagen Consensus.

Take the original MDGs. There were just 18 simple targets. Data collection for these targets had many gaps, and much of the information collected was of dubious quality. However, Prof Jerven collates the information we have about survey costs across the world and estimates that the proper monitoring of all 18 targets and 48 indicators would have cost the world $27 billion.

That is a significant number, but given that the world will spend about $1.9 trillion over the same period, 1.4 per cent is perhaps not unreasonable to spend on getting information.

The problem is, that the next set of targets is growing ever larger. A high-level panel with UK Prime Minister David Cameron, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono from Indonesia and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf along with leaders from civil society and the private sector suggested 59 targets and advocated building "better data-collection systems, especially in developing countries." And some months ago, 70 UN ambassadors in the Open Working Group proposed a bewildering 169 targets. One of these argued that by 2020 the world should "increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts."

Doing even a minimum data collection for all these 169 targets will cost at least $254 billion, or almost twice the entire global annual development budget, Prof Jerven estimates.

And this is a very low esti-

mate, since it does not take account of basic administrative data gathering by national governments, or costs for all the household surveys, which are recommended. And countries where data has not yet been collected, will likely prove even costlier. Remember, six of 49 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have never had a household survey and only 28 have had one in the past seven years.

Moreover, there is a serious question of capacity. Worldwide, only about 60 countries have the basic registration systems needed to monitor trends in social indicators. Many poor countries do not have the capacity to collect useful data on a national basis. In the $254 billion estimate there is no allowance for maintaining the statistical office, training and retaining personnel, analysing along with disseminating the data. There is ample evidence that the MDG agenda has already stretched statistical capacity and strained statistical offices in poor countries and that 169 new targets will only make it much worse.

Most participants discussing the Sustainable Development Goals recognise that we need much, much fewer targets. Taking into account the formidable costs of data collection for each target, it is reasonable to reconsider the best number of targets. For comparison: both the Norwegian and British governments have official statistical services, which cost about 0.2 per cent of their GDP. Using this figure as a measure of willingness to pay would suggest that we should aim more at four SDG targets, which could be properly monitored, rather than a massive 169.

Dr Bjørn Lomborg, an adjunct professor at the Copenhagen Business School, directs the Copenhagen Consensus Centre, ranking the smartest solutions to the world's biggest problems by cost-benefit. He is the author of The Skeptical Environmentalist and Cool It. His new book is How To Spend $75 Billion to Make the World a Better Place.

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Elderly and want to retire in EA? Go to Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania

By CHRISTABEL LIGAMI
Special Correspondent

RWANDA, UGANDA and Tanzania are the best countries in East Africa for the elderly to retire in, according to a new Global AgeWatch Index.

The three East African countries are among the 11 African countries ranked out of 96 globally.

Mauritius is ranked top at position 38 globally followed by South Africa at 80, Ghana 81, Morocco 83, Nigeria 85, Rwanda 86, Zambia 88, Uganda 89, Tanzania 92, Malawi 93 and Mozambique 95.

HelpAge International's Global Index ranks countries according

to the social and economic wellbeing of its citizens over the age of 60 years in four key areas: Income, security, health, personal capacity and enabling environment.

Norway is the top at the first position globally followed by Sweden that is closely followed by Switzerland, Canada and Germany.

Over the past decade, Tanzania has taken steps towards the introduction of a universal pension, but the scheme — which could lift 1.5 million people out of poverty —has yet to be implemented.

The report says that although Africa's population is predominantly young, the number and proportion of older people are growing rapidly.

"The low rankings of African countries in the Index may reflect the low priority given to ageing issues on domestic policy agendas," it says.

Five countries—Bangladesh, Iraq, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia—have been added to the Index this year, bringing the total to 96, representing 790 million people

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The position globally of the top country in Africa, in the ranking, Mauritius

aged 60 and over – 91 per cent of the global older population.

The inclusion of new countries, together with new and improved data, has led to new rankings.

The Index shows that average life expectancy at age 60 is at least 16 more years. On average, a woman aged 60 today can expect to live until she is 82, whereas in 1990, she could expect to live until she was 80.

In countries like Rwanda, life expectancy at 60 has risen on a par with high-income countries. People aged 60 can expect to live three years longer in Rwanda even though it ranks in the lower half of the Index, showing that gains

in longevity are not being accompanied by policies to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of their older citizens.

The 2014 Index reveals some encouraging developments, but also highlights areas where more action is needed. For instance, while in many countries people are living longer, there is considerable variation in life expectancy at age 60 and healthy life expectancy at 60.

Social policies to support healthy ageing are lagging in many countries, and a dearth of robust sex- and age-disaggregated data continues to hinder a full assessment and comparison of older women and men's wellbeing.