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Evidence based policy or policy based evidence? Supply and demand for data in a donor dominant world

SUBMITTED BY HUMANITY JOURNAL ON TUE, 12/26/2017

Print 0

This post, by Morten Jerven, is a contribution to an online symposium on the changing nature of knowledge production in fragile states. Be sure to read other entries by Duncan Duncan and Rebecca Tapscott, Lisa Denney and Pilar Domingo, and Michael Woolcock.

In 2010 I was doing research for *Poor Numbers: How we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it.* I was in Lusaka, Zambia on a Wednesday afternoon, and was having a few pints with some colleagues with a specialist interest for the UN's Department for International Development (DfID) office there as part of the research for the book. One of the themes we kept returning to was the lack of data and how this was hindering the production of necessary relevant for African policy makers. We were also discussing how results-oriented MDG reporting had created *real* outside pressure to distort statistics, with donors having the final say on what gets measured, rewarded and how. Indeed, whenever I asked anyone in Zambia—and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa—"what do we know about economic growth?" a recurrent response was "the donors don't want to know about economic statistics to MDG-relevant statistics.

Two days later I was visiting the Central Statistical Office in Lusaka, talking to the then only remaining member of the economic statistics division. In 2007, this division was manned by three statisticians, but when I visited in 2010, there was only one person there. The statisticians had been pulled from economic statistics to social and demographic statistics where there was more donor money for pen-and-paper surveys. The lone man in the office was busy with a survey of the Lusaka Central Business District, not with economic statistics, but the office's mandate (but reports) indicate that the agency's standing comes through donors. Yemi Kale at the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics told me in an interview in 2015 that donors provide about 70 percent of his budget. And the prominence of this money is not always clear and transparent. Most development agencies cannot cover recurring expenditure or regular salaries. The funds thus go to covers ad hoc projects, new or pet donor priorities and associated costs, and the development of a lower-density set of statistics, occasionally new capital investments in cars and computers. This creates an awkward set of principal-agent dynamics for NSOs. It offers NSOs are often opportunities for donor-funded travel, training, and access to donor-funded sources rather than more—or less—independent actors in, and providers of tools for, the domestic political system.

While NSOs need external support to survive, this has to be balanced with the constraints it puts on the agency's ability to serve its core mandate. The MDG reporting framework has created a kind of development agency-in-a-box that is short monitoring and some of the regular reporting of industrial statistics to the domestic central bank. Again, according to Yemi Kale, the statistics on downloads from the NBS web download show that there is a higher demand for the industrial and the MDG-formatted reports than collect than for datasets requested by donors. At the same time, if a donor asks for a survey that feeds into their global monitoring needs, NBS would have to be in a position to decline. And even though NSOs may want more funds, NSOs have to make the case that they are in need of more funds. But they must not make this request in a way that undermines the credibility of the statistics they produce. Unfortunately, this is a similar logic would pertain to the health ministry. The ministry may want to make the point that it is short capacity they are unable to achieve universal vaccinations and seek resources for this purpose. However, if they make that point too well, the donor or development agency may ask why they would put their funds through a dysfunctional institution.

In 2013, there was some introduction to Poor Numbers that seemed to indicate that such logic was indeed at play. The Director of Statistics in Zambia eventually came across my book. In a conference presentation in May 2013 he responded to my observations. "It is clear from the asymmetrical information that he had collected that Mr. Jerven had some hidden agenda which leaves us to conclude that he was proposing that a poor country should not allow National Accounts and other economic estimate work and room for more European based technical assistance missions."

I will not offer any evidence here to prove that I am not a hired gun, nor will I document that no-one paid me to create room for more technical assistance missions. You will just have to take my word for it. The response was part of a more general bullied-out of dismay about having the official statistics and statistics questioned in my book, and particularly perhaps responding to some headlines generated by media reports. The Zambian Statistics Office was not the only one to react to the perceived threat to its technical role as the sole credible fact provider in these countries. I think in this light it is possible to make the same sense of a new Statistical Act proposed this year in Tanzania, which contained clauses that suggested that only the National Bureau of Statistics can publish statistics on matters regarding the country.

Seeing like a donor, seeing like a state...

Thus as we move into the so-called era of the data revolution in development, it appears that some statistical offices are worried about their own role in this emerging data revolution. It may of course just lead to more resources for statistical office. However, it may also increase the use of "helicopter research" and "parachute" data collection. The latter is when a donor-funded survey firm comes in, organise the enumerators and then fly out again. The former is when donors provide funds to a local firm. This parallels widely criticized practices of institutional bypassing in other areas of development. A donor might consider a health system to be broken and thus build temporary parallel systems, rather than fixing or worsening a broken health system. I think that it is widely recognized that such an intervention in a ministry of health would be unwelcome, yet I do not think that there is yet a strong consensus that the same dynamics prevail when it comes to supplying statistics.

The biggest problem of the data revolution—mentioned in the "evidence-based policy" paradigm, or even worse the notion of "paying for results" in development—is that it is not accompanied by an idea of where "evidence" would come from. Sandefur and Glassman show a classic example from education data in Kenya. A donor supported intervention abolished school fees and rewarded Kenyan authorities financially for pushing students through primary school. According to administrative data there was a rapid increase in enrollment following the abolishment of fees. The evidence showed the policies worked. So far so good.

But donor-funded surveys showed a different picture of school enrollments. The Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) showed enrollment rates that were flat over time. Why? Schools got more funding if they reported more students, and the incentive to report more students was created by the intervention. The actual enrollment rates after the DHS manifested itself after the intervention had not recently results. In such the policy intervention had only one effect that could be clearly established as a result of the policy the Kenyan government had no reliable evidence on how many kids actually go to school. The policy implication going forward, in the context of the "data revolution in development" would have to be that interventions should actually collect information, evidence or data gathering itself. Interventions that use information instrumentally to evaluate success or failure are likely to backfire in a system where the knowledge production system is part of its own complex political economy.

A more constructive example comes from data on fiscal spending in Uganda. Reinikka and Svensson report that surveys of central government expenditures on primary schools in Uganda from 1991 to 1995 showed only 13 percent of the funds allocated actually reached the schools. In response, a campaign was launched to publish the amount of funds that had been allocated to the schools in the newspapers. Administrators and stakeholders in local schools could compare allocations with actual funds received. It was estimated that this intervention reduced graft considerably, and by 1999, 90 percent of the funds were reaching their destination.

Hand in hand with the demand for a data revolution comes the idea that the development community should not only enforce evidence-based policy, but also move towards paying for results. This would be a great idea if poor countries were closely observed labs where you could make objective observations, and the Hawthorne effects—which are a kind of observation effect for facts—were not at play. Unfortunately be a terrible idea if this is not the case. What you get instead is policy-driven evidence, the opposite of what we need. When we falsely assume that a child has vaccinated, has escaped the poverty line, goes to school and has enough food, it is not just a statistical error but a real tragedy.

Local people have the needs to come into focus. A statistical office is only sustainable if it serves local needs for information. The development community needs to remember that demanding evidence for policy is a political exercise that requires local ownership and legitimacy. Paying for results is a political exercise that rather one of building institutions. Statistical offices are first and foremost institutions that provide information to promote a discourse between citizens and states. We should spend more resources to find out which data matters to the citizens of these countries.

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Tags: Africa Development | Data Revolution | #dataeve | DfID | Africa MDGs | public policy | donors | Demographic | africa statistics | Africa | Uganda | Zambia | Kenya

Comments

This write-up presented the

SUBMITTED BY AHMED MOHAMED AHMED ON WED, 12/30/2017 - 08:09

This write-up presented the predicament of most African States where donor driven funds end up confusing their data management system rather than helping to strengthen them. The state apparatus should also be held accountable for allowing this anomalies as they unfolded the section. The reasons usually adduced to this lackluster attitude of policy makers is statistics are that they do not want to be accountable and transparent (which statistics mirror).

It behooves on the civil society to raise up to the challenges in ensuring they play a midwife role where they support governments to realise the importance of statistics in nations development.

reply

I couldn't resist commenting.

SUBMITTED BY TANKILE ESAU ON FRI, 02/17/2017 - 19:46

I couldn't resist commenting. Perfectly written!

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