Leveraging new tech tools and agility for data uptake

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In these times of growing uncertainty and shifting trends, the value of data – raw information typically depicted in words or figures – continues to grow. As Artificial Intelligence (AI) dominates the information landscape, prompt, comprehensive and correct data becomes even more essential. Access to data is also a site where inequalities play out, as not all who need data have access to it when needed and, in the necessary form for the most beneficial application.

The global non-profit organisation, ONE Campaign – through its One Data initiative – has just issued an analysis which zeroes in on some of the key limitations around data accessibility and use, offering some recommendations to address them, key of which is shifting from "static" reports to "living" forms of evidence that are more amenable to usage by ordinary people, policymakers and media.

The first issue is data fragmentation. Despite the generation of vast amounts of data – for example by the development world – usage is not optimal because data is often difficult to find and presented in unusable formats for many would-be users.

As a result, partial, and outdated information or anecdotes drive inferences instead of comprehensive evidence.

Secondly, the pace of public interest data production is too slow for the sort of agile decision-making demanded by fast-paced policy decision-making cycles.

For example, crucial national demographic data is generated infrequently. Because demographic and health surveys – covering health, nutrition and fertility – only happen every five years (in some cases longer), while population census take place every 10 years.

In their words, "this is too infrequent to allow for continuous learning and course correction" and is a significant constraint to evidence-based policy practice.

Encouragingly, countries may already be mindful of this critique and making efforts to address the gap.

Ever since it started conducting these surveys in 1989, Kenya launched a mini (smaller in scope) demographic and health survey late last year to provide "updated and fresh" data to the country's last comprehensive survey of 2022.

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Tanzania and Uganda did their last comprehensive surveys in 2022, while Rwanda did one last year.

The third structural constraint is the emphasis on national averages when presenting data. Most official statistics historically present as national averages yet broad averages mask granular disparities.

Averages do not lend themselves well for taking decisions like targeted interventions to tackle poverty and inequalities to broaden inclusion. The picture of poverty in many low- and middle-income countries is often a story of stark contrast between the poorest and their better endowed counterparts.

That differential between the poorest and least poor regions is often more than 30 percentage points. To illustrate, in Kenya, the spatial dimension of poverty starkly manifests in arid parts regions experiencing as much as over twice as high levels of poverty than the rest of the country.

Historical underinvestment in those parts also accounts for the disparity. As Per the 2022 Kenya Poverty Report based on the 2022 Kenya Continuous Household Survey among the seven counties with the highest overall poverty rates are Turkana (82.5 percent), Mandera (72.9 percent) and Samburu (71.9 percent). Contrast this with the places with the lowest poverty rates like Nairobi (16.5 percent), Kiambu (19.9 percent) and Kirinyaga (23.1 percent). If examination of the poverty data in Kenya stopped at the cited average overall rate of 39.8 percent, we would miss the reality of far worse conditions in the three counties, confirming how national averages conceal sub-national inequalities.

In this example, granular data can support policy decisions aimed at responding to this scenario.

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The analysis of this advisory on data cautions about the tendency to ignore that which is statistically invisible, whilst prioritising what is measured. Often, the needs of entire communities and groups of people are ignored when they are "statistically invisible".

In the modern online information ecosystem, in which search engines – those non-human machine learning systems – are integral, "data voids" are a minefield for misinformation and disinformation, underscoring further the value of availing credible data.

As the information landscape changes, the form in which data is presented – which also links to delivery channels and mechanisms – matters. This analysis also echoes research findings which back up trends towards higher uptake across audiences, of more visual, short format information.

Providing information outputs in short form need not sacrifice the quality and rigour often associated with text-oriented long form versions.

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