First World Data Forum part of Agenda 2030 implementation

The first-ever United Nations World Data Forum kicked off in Cape Town, South Africa, on 15 January 2017, with the aim of increasing political and resource support for statistical capacity building worldwide.

Image by 123RF

"Talking about data, statistics - these are very important subjects for the Member States, right from the beginning - day one - of the discussions about the Sustainable Development Agenda," said Wu Hongbo, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, in an interview with *UN News*, ahead of the Forum.

According the UN statistics, more than 100 countries do not accurately count births and deaths, while the births of nearly one in four children under the age of five worldwide have never been recorded. Only 13% of countries have a dedicated gender statistics budget. Seventy-seven out of 155 countries monitored do not have adequate poverty data, although there have been clear improvements in the last decade.

In the following interview (which has been edited for clarity), Wu explains the significance of the Forum in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), its expected outcomes, and what is in it for developed and developing countries:

Q: What's the significance of this UN Data Forum; why should people care about it?

A: The Global Data Forum, the first of its kind, is organised by the UN in cooperation with the South African government. Talking about data, statistics - these are very important subjects for the Member States, right from the beginning - day one - of the discussions about the Sustainable Development Agenda.

The Member States always place statistics or data on their priority plates. They want to have sufficient, accurate information that will serve as a basis for what they're going to do. That's important. Secondly, I think this global data forum will provide the first ever worldwide platform not only for government representatives, but also entrepreneurs, private sectors, and all other stakeholders. According to the registration, we are expecting as many as 1,500 participants. So you could see the strong interest and enthusiasm among the participants in data.

Q: You mention the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs). Why is data

important for SDGs; what is the connection?

A: Let me give you a concrete example, to illustrate the point why data or statistics are so important for the international community, for national governments, and for people. Take the registration of birth and death, for example. According to our information, in this world, about 100 countries do not keep accurate and complete records of people who die and new babies.

Just imagine, if you are planning for, say, employment, for city expansion, for education, [and] you do not know how many people you have in the country [and] the city. That would be disastrous. That shows how important data and accurate information is and will be for the implementation of Agenda 2030.

Q: You mention the deficiency and capability of those poor countries, and that the gathering of data varies, etc. How can countries with poor practices improve their use of data for sustainable development?

A: This is one of the challenges identified by the international community. It will be a very important subject to be discussed in the forthcoming global Data Forum. As far as all the countries are concerned, they all need improvement in data collection, and for developed countries, they need disaggregated information so as to find focused solutions to each area. But in the developing countries, as you mentioned, the situation is not that desirable. In some countries you simply do not find statistical information.

They have no methodologies. What they need is really a challenge, not only for themselves, but also for the international community. So first, the awareness of the international community for the challenges that we see in the developing countries, in particular, the least developed countries - they need information, they need statistics, and they need data.

Secondly, I think that we need financial input to establish, and to improve statistics systems. The need for financial support is very important for developed countries as well. Thirdly, I think there's urgent need for partnership; the partnership between governments in developing countries and from developed countries

Also, [there is need for] partnerships between governments and the private sector. This is the issue [for which] we have not got [a] complete answer yet. We hope, after this conference, we [will] have some ideas for the way forward.

Q: Accuracy in gathering information and data is obviously very important. Can you give us an assessment in this regard, and some examples of good practices?

A: Worldwide, I think we have made a lot of progress. Starting from the implementation of MDGs, the international community began to realize they need indicators to measure their progress. So we have eight goals altogether for MDG, and we do have indicators for them. But when it comes to SDGs, [we have] 17 goals, so the indicators are not good enough. We have to develop more.

And we could see a lot of countries start their own experience, [developing] their own national indicators. And some countries [could] start to combine the official statistics with other information freely available. We see also some countries starting to set up partnership with companies and enterprises - the private sector. So all these are good practices, and they are success stories, [which] I think will be shared at the forthcoming global conference. However, I would like to say [that] the gap between what we have and what we want is still very large.

Q: There are many countries that are, unfortunately, affected by conflict around the world, and where security is a priority concern. For these countries, is data still or equally important?

A: The information which is accurate and timely will remain very, very important, even in countries [affected by] conflict. Just take, for example, countries in conflict - you have a large number of camps for refugees. If you do not know how many refugees are in the camps, how could you provide food and all the necessities that they need? We would like to come back to the idea of the relationship between peace and development.

Without peace, development cannot take place. Without development, peace and security would not be sustainable; they are interrelated. What we would like to suggest, as the information and statistics are so important for countries post-internal/external conflict, the peace building process should include capacity building and statistics. We hope that the countries or international community is involved in helping these countries or these communities, keeping in mind that data and information are also important for their future development.

Q: What could be some of the outcomes of this forum?

A: Well, we have high expectations. And the participants would like to see that there will be some concrete deliverables. We cannot predict at this stage, but I would like to share with you some ideas that we plan to achieve. First, the global data forum would be the launching pad for the global action plan; that is a plan for capacity building, for accurate information collection, and for a better use of data.

That will actually be officially adopted in March by the commission of statistics, but to launch it in South Africa is to demonstrate to the international community what we have in mind for the future work, and the cooperation would be very important. And secondly, we hope there will be more partnerships established. There are some new commitments that have already been made. We hope there will be more. This is very important.

Thirdly, I think there will be some good practices emerging from the discussions and the meetings, and debates. For example, how to use new technology to collect the information we need, for instance, satellite images that can be used for mapping poverty and land erosion.

Another example would be how to use drones - they're very popular - and open data to help to raise productivity, say on the African continent, where food scarcity is obvious. So we would like to see this as only the beginning of worldwide discussions on data and information. It's the first step to push in the right direction. And this is not a once-for-all event. More global data forums will follow in the future.