



# Policy Briefing

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## Using knowledge from the margins to meet the SDGs: the real data revolution

As efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) gain momentum there is an increasing need to consider the inclusiveness of the data revolution. In order to 'leave no one behind' in development, knowledge from marginalised people is necessary and must be valued and recognised. Without this knowledge being embedded in data, the complex realities of people living in societies' margins are made invisible, and data may reinforce exclusion and inequalities rather than challenge them. Knowledge generated and amplified through participatory research processes that promote learning and dialogue between citizens and duty-bearers can enhance accountability relationships and help solutions to difficult social issues emerge. This real data revolution can support inclusive strategies for meeting the global goals from the ground-up.

There are large gaps between change that is happening at the local level, where the real possibilities for meeting the SDGs lie, and the processes in place for monitoring progress towards the goals. A real data revolution is needed that is both top down, *and* bottom up. Governments, donor agencies and the private sector need to be more effective in delivering sustainable development. Citizens need to create, access and analyse data in innovative ways, and use this data to hold governments, the private sector and donors to account. Data generated by people from the margins through participatory methodologies can give depth to the vast array of data gathered through surveys and growing digital data repositories. Together, these different forms of data can enable a more comprehensive and grounded understanding of how people are left behind, what they want to change and how that change can happen. To address the underlying issues that perpetuate poverty and

**Above**  
Two participants from the Delft Safety Group discuss hand-mapping, a method the group piloted to research intersectionality.

PHOTOGRAPH: Nava Derakhshani



**Participate**

Knowledge from the margins for the SDGs

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marginalisation, policymakers, alongside citizens, need to use knowledge from the margins to design, implement and evaluate policies and programmes.

### Success of SDGs depends on inclusion

The ultimate success or failure of the SDGs depends, in large part, on inclusion. The data revolution has been hailed as critical for achieving the SDGs, in terms of understanding and reaching those who are being left behind. Big data could help mean more accurate measurements of progress towards the SDGs, but mining large digital data repositories alone will not address fundamental aspects of exclusion if the way that data is produced is itself exclusionary. Big data needs to be complemented by data generated and analysed by the most marginalised. Participatory research from Egypt, Ghana and South Africa finds that knowledge from the margins, generated by people confronting daily exclusion, is a necessary ingredient for sustainable change. This is because it provides information on how change is possible from the perspectives of those who are most affected by poverty and inequality.

### Existing data sets hide the perspectives of the most marginalised

The most difficult and sensitive issues are the hardest to measure through conventional means. Years of participatory research demonstrate that people on the margins are not adequately represented through civil society organisations or formal political processes like voting. Furthermore knowledge from the margins is difficult to capture through surveys. Current research shows how people refuse to answer, or misdirect responses to surveys about sensitive issues. For example, in townships in Cape Town, South Africa, where levels of violence are at epidemic proportions, people refuse to answer questions about who is responsible, or employ racist or xenophobic labels to respond. In Egypt, in a context of extreme stigma, parents of children living with HIV refuse to disclose their status because of the fear of discrimination by schools, clinics and neighbours alike. The reality of these children's lives remains invisible even within locally-generated statistics. Distortions like these are then amplified when data is aggregated by commonly used statistical methods.

### Knowledge from the margins builds holistic data

To address these gaps, policymakers need to view data in a more holistic way. 'Knowledge from the margins' refers to a unique and complex kind of data that comes from people who are living at the intersection of multiple inequalities, and are the bearers of unique insights into what it means to be left behind by policies and programmes. However, often, their experiences are invisible in policy terms: they might be physically out of sight because of where they live (for example, townships and informal settlements distant from the city centre such as Delft in Cape Town); silenced by gendered norms (for example, women in the Ada region in Ghana who are not usually heard by traditional and elected leaders); or afraid to speak because of stigma (for example, HIV positive children and their carers in Egypt).

«A real data revolution is needed that is both top down, and bottom up.»

### Understanding the real impact of natural resource depletion on women in rural Ghana

For centuries, the Ada women have relied on traditional salt-winning from the Songor Lagoon as their main livelihood activity. Through a long-term participatory action research process they have been able to identify the impacts of private sector-led depletion of the salt lagoon. The impacts go beyond the material, including: the loss of social-standing within their communities, the deterioration of relationships with their spouses, and the decreased availability of income to pay for children's education. Work with the community radio station, Radio Ada, has helped make the women's knowledge on the issue visible. It has opened a public debate on an issue previously outside the concerns of the local, regional and national level policymakers. In addition, it has shown the deep connection between salt-winning and the cultural identity of the Ada people, reframing the value of the lagoon beyond economic terms.

## How participatory processes can help

Participatory research processes with people living in the margins were found to contribute to more holistic data. This is important because:

- Participatory processes generate data that most accurately and completely reflects people's experiences of discrimination and exclusion.
- Data generated with people living with exclusion can communicate the complexity of social issues rather than reducing problems to one dimension.
- Generating data with the most marginalised increases the possibilities for people holding their own governments to account with that information.
- Generating and analysing data about the experience of marginalisation contributes directly to finding sustainable solutions to complex issues.

## Using knowledge from the margins to improve accountability

Knowledge from the margins not only pinpoints and describes problems, it can also be used by policymakers to open up and build dialogue about possible solutions. A holistic approach to data can help to develop accountable relationships between citizens and decision-makers, both within government and in UN agencies. When policymakers engage with knowledge from the margins and create spaces for dialogue, it has the power to break discriminatory norms and silences around injustices. This process can be the basis for mobilisation at multiple levels, in order to contribute to accountability and build a basis for sustainable development

Those making decisions about policies and programmes will not necessarily meet the challenge of generating and responding to data which exposes the experiences of marginalisation. At this point, not enough has been done in national contexts in relation to the SDGs, to ensure the links between monitoring and collecting data and increasing accountability are made. Decisions that shape the allocation of resources, programming, and policy directions for the implementation of the SDGs are still largely made in isolation in capital cities, or by head offices of UN agencies. Accountability requires shifts in relationships of power that ensure the answerability of government institutions is enforced.

## Knowledge from the margins also offers solutions

Accessing and merging the knowledge of people living in the margins with mainstream knowledge, and bringing it into spaces where it can be seen and discussed by policymakers, is challenging and often needs the committed and sensitive work of an accompanying organisation. The case study of carers of children living with HIV and AIDS (+CHAD) in Egypt demonstrates this. These organisations facilitate an open dialogue between people living with profound exclusion and decision-makers, often in positions of power. By helping people on the margins connect to laws and policies they facilitate the design of effective ways for citizens to influence government decisions. They also give recognition to the value of knowledge from the margins and support the development of practical and realistic citizen-led solutions. Furthermore, by showcasing the relevance of knowledge from the margins in spaces to policymakers, people who live in marginalisation can create innovative solutions to entrenched problems.

## Highlighting the discrimination and exclusion faced by children living with HIV and AIDS, and their carers, in Egypt

People living with HIV and AIDS in Egypt are not a large proportion of the population; some might not even be part of the lowest income population in the country, hence not statistically significant in big data sets. However, they are one of the most discriminated and excluded groups. Participatory research facilitated by the Centre for Development Services has shown that people who are HIV positive often exclude themselves and their children from the few services available to them, including receiving treatment and attending school. Parents, fearing stigmatisation, cannot bear disclosing their HIV status to their children or other relatives, decreasing the possibilities of building family and community support networks. The participatory methods built the confidence of children and their carers to share their experiences, and to begin to frame their relationship with public services in terms of rights. Through dialogue with government and civil society organisations, the +CHAD carers started to generate knowledge around the ideal design that HIV health service provision must have for patients, including children, to make use of it.

## Recommendations

For policymakers:

- When looking for data to inform policy decisions, it is important to ask: How was this data generated? Who was excluded by using that particular methodology? What gaps does this data have and how can those gaps be filled?
- Open up dialogue with diverse groups as part of the policy process, in particular reaching out to organisations that accompany long-term work on social justice.
- Go beyond broad but shallow forms of data collection reflected in many reports and statistical figures. Personal, in-depth stories are connected to the wider system dynamics and can be considered valid and important.
- Take care not to take stories and examples out of context to support existing policy positions: consider the real implications of experiences of people from the margins.

For accompanying organisations:

- Recognise and value the knowledge of marginalised people and communities with which you work towards social change.
- Provide psychological support for people surfacing the pain and trauma embedded in the embodied/experiential knowledge of exclusion.
- Facilitate the process of bringing individuals into spaces for reflecting and generating collective knowledge, with careful attention to power dynamics.
- Take responsibility to bring this knowledge to the attention of policymakers, in partnership with the group and with their consent, taking care not to use their knowledge in tokenistic ways.
- Step back when needed as the collective power of citizens' groups grows and the role of the accompanying organisation is no longer essential for knowledge generation.

For researchers:

- Invest in the development of methodologies that allow for the perspectives of marginalised groups to be better represented in social science research.
- Recognise that knowledge from the margins is another type of knowledge but with equal value to that generated by researchers in academia and civil society.
- Support the integration of knowledge from the margins into policy processes.
- Develop strong research partnerships between academia and community collectives through taking on the role of an accompanying organisation.
- Help communicate knowledge from the margins into mainstream media, in order to break down social prejudices towards marginalised and excluded groups.

## Further reading

Lopez-Franco, E.; Shahrokh, T. (2015) *Achieving meaningful accountability for people living in poverty and marginalisation*, Brighton: IDS

Burns, D.; Lopez-Franco, E.; Shahrokh, T. and Ikita, P. (2015) *Citizen participation and accountability for sustainable development*, Brighton: IDS.

Burns, D.; Howard, J.; Lopez-Franco, E.; Shahrokh, T. and Wheeler, J. (2013) *Work with us: How people and organisations can catalyse sustainable change*, Brighton: IDS.

## Authorship

This policy briefing was written by **Jo Howard, Erika Lopez-Franco, and Joanna Wheeler**, and edited by **Emilie Wilson**. It is based on findings from participatory research contributing to the *Participate* initiative, which aims to provide high quality evidence on the reality of poverty at ground level, bringing the perspectives of the poorest into the SDG debate. Thanks to **Thea Shahrokh** for her constructive comments.

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