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Demographic data for development II—From research to intervention: Improving data access and use among the media

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Demographic data for development II

From research to intervention: Improving data access and use among the media

Demographic, health, and other public-sector data provide an essential evidence base for the planning and evaluation of development policies. In this sense, data function as a public good, benefiting citizens, government, and the private sector. In many countries, however, access to data is often limited. When data are available, the formats are rarely “user-friendly” for non-professionals, thus restricting their potential applications.

In recent years, the Population Council has examined data access and sharing through case studies in Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, and Uganda. In the first phase of the *Demographic Data for Development* (3D) project, researchers conducted interviews with more than 100 data producers, policymakers, and other consumers of information (e.g., civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and the media). These interviews explored factors that limit data collection, use, and sharing. Researchers inquired specifically about censuses, national surveys, budgeting, and service-use statistics to determine how policymakers obtain the data they need to develop and evaluate policies.

Phase 1 Key Findings

- International donors, rather than national constituencies, drive the demand for data.
- Although governments continue to decentralize, reliable sub-national data (e.g., districts, villages) are not common.
- End users of data are frequently unaware of available resources, despite dissemination efforts by producers.
- Delays between data collection and release lower end-user expectations about the potential use of the data.
- Producers are reluctant to release information when they lack confidence in the data.
- There is a lack of trust between data producers and consumers.
- When made available, data are often presented in formats that are hard for non-specialists to interpret and use, and misinterpretations are common.

Results from each country suggest that data play only a modest role in policymaking. The demand for data is low and is often driven by external actors such as international donors. According to interview participants, more widespread and consistent use is limited by characteristics of the data, a lack of technical systems and procedures for sharing resources, and a lack of expertise among many end users.

Based on this work, Council researchers hypothesized that data access, use, and demand operate in a virtuous circle—the more that data are used, the greater the demand will be for more data. As demand grows, so will the extent of data access and use.

In the second phase of the 3D project, known as 3D2, the Council will seek to promote internal demand for data by working with key intermediaries—the media—in Ghana, Namibia, and Senegal.

3D2: Focusing on the media

The national and local media—journalists in particular—represent a natural constituency for development data. Daily deadlines and regular assignments on development issues give the media frequent opportunities to incorporate data into their reporting. Yet journalists interviewed for the 3D study reported barriers to more widespread use of data, including a perceived lack of access to data and of skills for analysis and interpretation. If these obstacles are addressed, data use in development reporting is likely to become more common. Over time this could help to spur new mechanisms for public accountability, promote the use of data in development planning and evaluation, and drive the demand for increased data sharing and access.

From research to intervention

3D2 will focus on improving data access and use among the media in Ghana, Namibia, and Senegal. The upcoming censuses in these countries offer an opportunity to promote data sharing and use. Intervention activities will conclude in July 2011.

► Improving access to data

Barriers to access exist at the individual, institutional, and national levels. The challenges are technical, bureaucratic, and human in nature. The following activities are designed to improve data access.

Producer–consumer dialogues

Journalists and data producers often speak “different languages.” Data producers write for technical audiences, whereas journalists write for the general public. At times, neither group seems to understand the particular challenges of the other’s roles and responsibilities. The Council will work with partners to organize networking events and workshops with data producers and consumers to bridge these gaps.

Data sharing and visualization contests

Innovation is key to advancing data sharing and usability. The Council will organize and sponsor contests to challenge in-country developers to create new open-access web applications for visualizing and sharing data.

Web catalog of data resources

Access to data requires that users know where to find existing resources. To help journalists find information when they need it, the Council will work with its partners to develop an online catalog of resources, including data, reports, and experts.

SMS data connect service

Journalists have a demanding publication cycle. When Internet access is not available or time is short, journalists would benefit from a rapid method of finding basic statistics, experts, and answers to questions. Recognizing the growing importance of mobile platforms, the Council will pilot a short message service (SMS) intended to connect journalists to information and resources.

► Improving data use

One hypothesis of 3D2 is that increased access to data will lead to increased frequency of use. Quantity, however, is only one indicator of success. Improving the quality of data use among journalists is a priority for journalists and data producers alike.

Data curriculum for journalists

Training programs for journalists are well established in the Council’s target countries. Students and professionals can enroll in diploma, degree, post-graduate, and continuing education programs offered by public and private institutions. Although some programs contain modules or short courses on the use of data and statistics,

many administrators report that this type of training is inadequate to meet the challenges associated with accessing, interpreting, and using data in reporting. For instance, training materials are often old and do not address new media and emerging trends in information management. The Council, therefore, sees an opportunity to work with administrators and teachers to improve training in data use by assisting with curriculum reviews and resource development.

Field correspondent data guide

Journalists often rely on a network of correspondents outside of the capital cities to report on news and events. These key informants may be teachers, government administrators, and small-business owners—laypeople with no specific training in journalism. Discussions with journalists about the importance of these networks led the Council to include plans to create a layperson’s field guide for information gathering, with an emphasis on basic data collection and analysis.

On-line article builder

Printed statistical manuals and sector-specific data guides are useful resources for any professional, but web applications offer the ability to link a journalist’s research to the writing process. The Council will develop a web application to enable journalists to “build” an article by entering information gathered throughout the research process. The application will help journalists make connections between their research and other research and reporting on the topic.

Editor’s data review toolkit

Another activity to improve the quality of data use will be the creation of easy-to-use tools for editors. The Council will work with interested partners to develop resources that editors can use to assess the quality of a journalist’s data use prior to publication.

Translating print to radio waves

In these three African countries, radio is often the dominant mode of information dissemination, especially in rural areas where literacy rates are low and access to newspapers is more limited. News articles are frequently read and discussed on radio programs. As information is passed through successive filters—from producers to journalists to radio announcers—the accuracy of the original message can decrease. The Council seeks to work with radio partners to identify the types of resources that radio operators can use when translating articles to listening audiences.

Donor

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

For more information about the *Demographic Data for Development* project, visit www.datauncovered.com. To learn more about the Population Council or to obtain copies of other briefs, contact publications@popcouncil.org or visit <http://www.popcouncil.org/what/pgy.asp>.

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