# The real data revolution: The participation of the poorest people

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Everyone seems to agree that one of the problematic issues with the MDGs is the poor data available and the shortcomings of measuring progress largely through national averages. The UN Secretary-General's post-2015 High Level Panel's call for a data revolution has therefore been widely welcomed by both civil society and influential governments. The demand for disaggregated data according to different social groups, reinforcing the powerful idea that in a post-2015 framework goals cannot be considered met unless achieved for everyone, are certainly important steps towards 'leaving no one behind'.

But how is this going to work in practice? I've recently heard a lot about how the 'data revolution' should focus on getting full databases, more comprehensive surveys, and better communication and information technologies to gather and manage data efficiently. In other words, it is an extractive process of data collection about the poor – a process that some vulnerable groups (e.g. Indigenous Peoples) may even consider as an attempt to extend the state's control over them. While I agree that data is important, I wonder if there is another way to gather it and ensure that the understanding and evaluation of development progress reflect the realities of people living in poverty.

The problems with current development interventions identified by some of the poorest communities in the 29 countries covered by the Participate research initiative would have not been captured by better disaggregated data.

Research undertaken in rural Uganda for COMPASS 2015, one of the 18 projects that make up the Participate initiative, reveals that, while children with disabilities may go to school, they face several challenges. For example, poorly designed school buildings and toilets expose those with mobility problems to hazards and the lack of trained teachers for those with special needs undermine their learning. 'People with disabilities suffer more in rest rooms; the latrines constructed are not favourable to them and further expose these children to poor personal hygiene. These are problems that the Government needs to put into consideration when it's building schools, even in the villages' (Rose, 53, farmer, Alwa, Uganda). Enrolment of these students may contribute to MDG targets but the inadequate education they receive further reinforces their marginalisation. In this case, disaggregated data will simply show that children with disability attend school like any other child.

Similarly, disaggregated data would not capture the poor quality of education which was raised as a top priority by people living in poverty across various countries. In rural areas, people living in poverty make considerable efforts to send their children to school and expect this investment to be worthwhile. They argued that without enough trained teachers, packing students into an ill-equipped classroom wastes their time, particularly when they could be contributing to the livelihood of the family through farm work. In remote communities of the Philippines inhabited by minorities, COMPASS 2015 research participants explained that appointed teachers subcontract their jobs to unqualified local youth and go back to the cities. It is only through the direct involvement of students, parents and teachers in the process of monitoring progress that issues such as the poor quality of education can be identified and solutions sought.

There are also many other examples of important issues that cannot be captured by the current focus of the data revolution. For example, in Mexico, indigenous pregnant women are forced to visit a doctor under the blackmail that they would lose other economic support if they do not. However, this involves long and risky travels to the clinic where they are discriminated against and treated without dignity. Disaggregated data may indicate that Indigenous Peoples have access to health services but their experiences of discrimination would not be recognised.

To address these issues, we need to work with those living in poverty to set goals and targets, ensure they are equal participants in implementation, and at the centre of participatory monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

While data presented in accessible and usable ways can be a tremendous tool to hold governments accountable, a more important strategy is through the direct involvement of those living in poverty in the monitoring and evaluation of policy interventions. Their participation can reveal the mechanisms of exclusion and help prevent poorly designed and badly targeted projects. Leaving no one behind means including the poorest people in the planning of development interventions. I hope the post-2015 negotiations over next two years will further expand on the spaces for participation provided by the UN in the past year. The real data revolution will happen through the participation of those living in poverty ∎

## MORE INFO

The Participate report 'Work with us: How people and organisations can catalyse sustainable change' can be found here: bit.ly/180njy1

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