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Data sharing to fight COVID-19

As the pandemic shows, governments cannot effectively tackle big problems without good data. But it also shows that we must vastly improve how we gather, share and act on data



◀ Members of the Pataxo HaHaHãe ethnic group, living on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. They are part of a group of indigenous people displaced by the Vale dam disaster in 2019. Brazil is among the countries due to hold a census in 2020 who have postponed due to the pandemic

information is built on data systems that create a comprehensive picture of whole societies, and that are based on trust between people and governments.

But when it comes to timely and accurate data to fight COVID-19, and the social upheavals it brings in its wake, every country has been found wanting. For example, snapshots indicate that lockdowns have led to a surge in domestic violence worldwide, as women and children are trapped with their abusers. But there is almost no data to show the prevalence of domestic violence during lockdowns. In any case, few countries regularly track and share domestic violence figures, so trends will be hard to analyse.

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misinformation, spreading lies that harm people, families and communities. Getting the numbers right, and getting them out there, has never been more important.

Reliable, timely data can help overcome COVID-19

For too long, data has been the poor relation of public policy infrastructure, with vital investments in people, technology and skills lagging behind what is needed. But now people all over the world are learning that data, and the policy decisions based on it, can save your life and that of your loved ones, and that there can be no effective response to COVID-19 without good data.

The deficiencies laid bare by COVID-19 have pointed the way to better systems. There are four priorities we must achieve if we are to have the data we all need.

1. Every birth and death recorded quickly and electronically

Knowing about deaths is the most basic data needed for a global pandemic. Given the huge resources that have been poured into health programmes around the world over

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A public hungry for information

It is not just governments that need information. 'What Worries the World', a monthly Ipsos survey of 27 countries, found that COVID-19 has been the primary preoccupation for individuals, societies and governments throughout 2020. COVID concerns have remained higher than concerns about unemployment, despite International Labour Organization predictions of a 14 per cent reduction in employment worldwide.

People are hungry for reliable facts they can use to make personal decisions. Yet the pandemic has also created an epidemic of

many years, it should be a matter of global shame that the causes of more than half of all deaths in the world still go unrecorded each year. A good place to start would be investing in low-income countries, none of which have good-quality death registration systems, according to the World Health Organization.

In Africa, only eight countries register more than 75 per cent of deaths. Some nations, including Rwanda, Senegal and Ethiopia, are now setting up programmes to monitor graveyards and interview community leaders to try to detect spikes in burials.

By **Claire Melamed**, CEO, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data

Governments have worryingly few tools in their toolkit to fight COVID-19. With a vaccine still months if not years away, the best defence is good information to make effective policy and sound individual choices. Good

Donors could make a start by putting a percentage of their health spend into supporting the national systems that consistently and reliably produce the data that underpins all policy and programming for global health, both in normal times and to tackle a pandemic.

2. No more lip service on data protection and privacy

Contact tracing is a critical tool for governments trying to curb the spread of disease, but it relies on people being prepared to share their most personal information. The failures of contact tracing have revealed how lack of trust can prevent vital data being shared.

In the US, awash with technology companies and with 98 per cent of people having access to phones in cities, one might expect contact tracing to be fairly straightforward. Yet efforts have been hampered by mistrust between federal and state government, while US citizens' trust in government is at an all-time low. MIT Technology Review rated every country with a contact-tracing app and found that some smaller countries like Ireland, Czech Republic and North Macedonia performed better than their larger counterparts on measures like transparency and not overstepping on data collection.

The broad discussion about contact-tracing apps and systems, how they are built, and the implications for personal privacy, suddenly makes data privacy everyone's business. This will not be the last pandemic most of us see in our lifetimes, and so data campaigners need to apply pressure on governments and multilateral organisations to rise to the challenge and accelerate progress towards new rules to protect us all.

3. More inclusive data on vulnerable groups

One of the most frustrating things for the data community is that careful plans for a huge round of censuses in 2020 were obliterated by the pandemic. The census is a source of essential information for public policymaking, especially when it comes to improving outcomes for indigenous and

ethnic groups, those with disabilities and other groups that are often overlooked. Our Inclusive Data Charter champions advocate for closing these data gaps, bringing real change in how data is collected.

In Colombia, DANE (the National Administrative Department of Statistics) now takes into account gender, life cycle, ethnicity and disability when producing statistics to create a more complete understanding of people's needs. This data puts countries in a much better position to understand which groups are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and address the systemic pressure driving those trends.

4. Systems not silos

In a world where data is being used to decide which borders to open, which countries people can visit without being quarantined,

developed or strengthened partnerships in 21 countries.

One example is Sierra Leone, which needed more detailed and timely data on at-risk populations across the country. The Government of Sierra Leone's National COVID-19 Emergency Operations Centre is collaborating with a coalition of international partners including GRID3, Esri, Maxar Technologies, Fraym, the Global Partnership and UNECA. Together, they are working to produce crucial geospatial datasets, analyses and tools under an open, non-commercial licence to support Sierra Leone's COVID-19 response.

The partnership is producing the most granular geospatial data in Sierra Leone's history, with rapid population estimates that predict how many people, as well as their age and sex, live within any given hectare area across the country. This data can help

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and (we hope) where vaccines should be targeted, the global response is only as good as the worst data.

Countries need to build systems – not silos with walls between institutions or sectors. In the UK, failure to share data between national and local government slowed down the response when cases started to spike, making policy less effective. When coordination has to be global as well as national, the same applies at an international scale.

My organisation, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, is working with the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), building partnerships to strengthen data systems. We are currently engaging in 40 countries across Africa, have built a roster of 30 partners who will work with those countries, bringing different assets to bear, and have already

identify those most at risk, determine the most efficient support and anti-COVID-19 strategies, including partial or total lockdowns, and resulting community needs. To ensure everyone can benefit from this groundbreaking geospatial data, the new findings are openly accessible in a national digital dashboard and COVID-19 hub, which enable easy access for experts and the general public alike.

Stronger data systems, protocols and standards for sharing data across borders are a critical ingredient in the effective global response to COVID-19. We all depend on each other's data to keep us safe.

Good data and information are the foundation for good decisions. The last few months have shown all too clearly that we have a problem with our data. It's up to governments to rise to the challenge, for all our sakes. ●