

Transcript of Development Drums Episode 44 – The Data Revolution

Host: Owen Barder. Guests: Claire Melamed and Amanda Glassman

Listen to the podcast: <http://developmentdrums.org/875>



Owen Barder

Thanks for downloading Development Drums. My name is Owen Barder. And our topic today is the data revolution. I'm joined by two people who have thought more about this than anyone else. Claire Melamed, the Director for Growth, Poverty and Inequality at ODI. Who was on a previous I think episode 24 of Development Drums. Claire, welcome back.

Claire Melamed

Nice to be back.

Owen Barder

And Amanda Glassman, the Director for Global Health Policy and a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development. Amanda, welcome to Development Drums.

Amanda Glassman

Thank you, Owen.

Owen Barder

So let's start by figuring out what we mean by a data revolution and Claire you've just hosted a two day conference on it and you've been writing about it. What do we mean by a data revolution? Where did this idea come from?

Claire Melamed

Well the idea came from a small paragraph, a sentence really, in the report issued just over a year-ago by the United Nations high-level panel on the post 2015 development agenda. A group of the great and the good who were assembled to advise the Secretary General on what the next development agenda after the Millennium Development Goals might look like. And they in common with many others over the years have been increasingly frustrated at the fact that we don't really know what's going on in many areas of development because the data is very poor. And so inserted into the panel a plea for a data revolution and I think this idea has just really taken off and everyone has been talking about it since, it shows how much demand there was.

Owen Barder

This has probably been the bit of the panel's report that's had the most interest and the most positive reception around the world. So what do people think it means?

Claire Melamed

Well, part of the beauty of it and the reason why it has become so popular, so quickly is that it means different things for different people and in some ways that's led to a kind of explosion of ideas which is a really positive, if slightly chaotic thing. So for people who are interested in big data and the kind of whole open – new world of data which is opening up before our eyes, it means that. It means bringing that more into the mainstream of measurement and making it more useful to policy for people who are interested in the sort of hard work and building up capacity at the local level within country governments for example, that's what it means, training more statisticians, getting computer systems to work properly and all points between really.

Amanda Glassman

So I was also at that meeting and I think over time people kept talking about a couple of common concepts which is great, because there seemed to be some coalescing towards a single definition. One is more data, better data, disaggregated data, frequent data, so this idea that you'd have kind of an annual tracking of progress at a level that's relevant to decision makers that it's usable data, but that it's also used. So it's an enormously ambitious idea and statement that might be a longer term goal, aspirational for sure.

Owen Barder

So Amanda, you've just produced a report from a working group about data for African development. What was the problem that your working group is trying to solve?

Amanda Glassman

Well, when we started the data revolution as a concept hadn't – didn't yet exist. We were really concerned with the lack of accurate data that was coming from sub-Saharan Africa. Most people are familiar for example with the recent re-basing of GDP estimates in Nigeria and Ghana and the differences were huge. It was like a 90% difference in the GDP estimate for Nigeria. So that has huge implications for domestic policy. It has implications for the research that we do, what we know about relationships between different kinds of macroeconomic aggregates and well-being. So I think people were pretty shocked by that. And that was reinforced by a book that came out from Morten Jerven, it was called Poor Numbers. That got a lot of attention. So I think that that was sort of why we started to work on it, why are we seeing such problems in statistical systems in Africa? And what we found is sort of limited incentives to produce accurate data in systems as they're now, insufficient and unpredictable funding for national statistical systems, sometimes incentives to actually misreport data either from donors or from budget systems within country. A tendency to respond to the money that was available and donor priorities rather than sticking to what would make sense from a government standpoint in terms of priorities and then very low access and usability of data. So someone in our meeting today I think put it really well. NSOs for long time – National Statistical Officers thought of themselves as like table and spreadsheet producers, not as producing data that's supposed to be used by people.

Owen Barder

So that's the problem and the data revolution is some combination of more better data, perhaps using new techniques, but perhaps investing in existing systems. That's the thing that – I mean, so why is that – why would this be a revolution as opposed to just business as usual in terms of building up the capacity of national institutions across the developing world to do the things they should be doing?

Claire Melamed

I think one doesn't want to get too hung up about the precise definition of this word revolution. The phrase, was used in the panel and part of the – it's the drama of the word that has got so much political attention and traction behind it. So in some senses it's already filled its – fulfilled its purpose just by doing that. If the wording had been some improvements in the quality of data x, y and z we probably wouldn't be sitting here today. So I think it's partly a sort of mobilizing device by heightening the kind of drama of the – and the level of ambition. I mean there is a sense that there are two possible revolutions. One around open data and the extent to which data – there is a kind of jump which is possible in the availability of data and the use of data by different groups. And the second is a potential revolution through big data and suddenly the world, the universe of data that we're used to seeing which is the kind of official data statistics looks very, very tiny when put next to all the mobile phone calls in the world, all the credit card transactions, all the sort of world of big data.

Owen Barder

So let's get to why this is important? One way of thinking about this is, this is a competing claim for scarce resources, these are the data people or the statistics people who like the health people and the education people and the water people, want their share of the aid pie or the government resources pie and this is – if this – if any of those groups were putting their case, we'd say well let's see your cost effectiveness numbers, let's understand what the benefit is and understand what the costs are and see if it stacks up compared to alternative uses for the money. So if you had \$1 billion and you could spend it on this or you could spend it on say childhood vaccination, which of those would you do? What's the reason why we need to spend lot of money and effort on data, Amanda?

Amanda Glassman

[7:41] Well, okay. The first I think is an existential point, if a tree falls in the wood and no one is around to hear, it doesn't make a sound. I mean, for many areas the data we have is so inaccurate and so outdated that it's very difficult to even narrow if government spending or donor spending is having an effect on the things that we expect it to have an impact on. So I think that's one good reason. Second, most development projects are already spending some share their resources on monitoring and evaluation. We've seen an explosion in bespoke household surveys as part of impact evaluations, as part of donor tracking, as part of government programs. That's very positive and we at CGD have been pushing that. But at the same time, how can we be funding these bespoke surveys in huge amounts while we neglect basic things like the sampling frame on which those household surveys have to be based or the censuses or the basic vital statistics that tell us how many people are born and what people die of. So it seems to me that maybe it's not that we need a lot more money, but it's that we need to focus on the right ways to get to the measures and accountability that are going to make the whole system function better.

Claire Melamed

Yes, I mean, I agree with that. I would add two things really. One is a political point that we know the least about the people who are sort of the most marginalized and the least important. So I think it maybe that there is a set of unknowns out there. We just don't know for example, there's huge parts of the population of some of the poorest countries we never

know – we don't know when they're born, we don't know when they die, we don't know what they die of, we're just kind of flying blind on a whole range of things which are the things which primarily are going to affect the poorest people. So I think there is a sort of political point there just about kind of fairness.

Owen Barder

So there is an equity argument which is the one you've just made, Claire, which is that if we had more information especially about marginalized people or women for example in some circumstances that we'd do a better job of providing them with services and so on. There is an efficiency argument, which is if you're going to make choices about the allocation of services you better do that on recent information. And there is another efficiency argument to do with government interventions in aid programs, which is you're better able to see whether the things you're trying to make a difference to are changing in the way you expect. Okay, so there are some possible benefits here, but how sure are we that those benefits are big enough and I think a lot of people worry that we'd have more data and no one would pay any attention because the problems are not that we don't know, the problems are political or something else anyway. So the – how does data get through that?

Amanda Glassman

There is a couple of papers that try and draw a connection between the quality of statistics and governance and even private investment. There is a paper by the IMF that seems to show that as the quality of official statistics on economic activity improve, that increases investor trust and might actually increase the appetite of investors to act in those countries. And then there is a paper – these are associations, of course we don't know which came first, was it the growth or was it the quality of statistics, but obviously these things are all good things that go together.

Claire Melamed

But I also think we do have to hold up our hands and admit that there is a lot that we don't know in answering that question, and in a sense one of the conclusions that came out of the meeting today was that, while it's very nice to have a lot of people in a room who care very much about data. If you're going to reach beyond that group, we have to make a much more effective case about the value of investing in data over and above vaccinations or roads or anything else. And also for ourselves in order to be able to do that effectively we have to know where that stops and where we have roughly enough data we should actually start putting it into roads and vaccinations. And I think there is a research project there around what is the cost effectiveness of data, what are the cost benefit ratios of different types of investment in different types of data, what is the human outcome impact in terms of how – can you measure the sort of – can you in somehow – in some way measure the impact on people's lives of trying to run a health system with or without good data for example.

Amanda Glassman

There is this new literature on the value of information which tries to quantify the benefits from – well, the costs associated with collecting new kinds of data and making it into information and then the benefits that you would get in terms of the policy actions that you could take as a result, which is interesting. But it's literally a couple of books or something.

Owen Barder

But we don't yet have a number to put to it. I mean one imagines that this is relatively cheap in the grand scheme of things and you wouldn't need a very big percentage improvement in the efficiency of decision making for it to pay back and some. But it'd be quite good to see those numbers written down somewhere?

Claire Melamed

But not all of it is about new money anyway or some of it is really just about making sure that for example we have a standard form of household survey so that where every donor does their individual survey for the evaluation which they're doing already half of that survey is framed in a way that means that you can add up the surveys that are done by DFID and USAID and Save the Children and Oxfam and turn them into a single dataset and that doesn't cost hardly anything, it's really just about efficiency.

Owen Barder

Let's come in a second to this question of what are the things that donors can do, international institutions can do broadly we in the industrialized world should be doing differently to support the data revolution. But before that, let's look at the broader question of what's happening to national statistical offices and services in developing countries? Because Amanda your report finds that there is insufficient investment and improvement in many countries in the collection of basic statistics. So tell me what you found there and what your set of recommendations is for improving the basic statistical capacity of the developing world?

Amanda Glassman

[13:57] Okay. Well, I should say that this working group we undertook together with the African population health and research center, because as you know CGD has traditionally focused on international agencies and the donors. So it was great to partner with an organization in Africa that has more of a policy maker focus in country which is a little bit outside of our usual domain. But what did we look at, I mean, we looked at the extent to which financial incentives either through donor payments or budget affected the accuracy of statistics and how some high-level indicators were vulnerable to political influence. And this was echoed I think by the meeting that we just had where someone said if the Minister of Finance calls the Head of Statistics and says change the consumer price index, they do. The inflation rate, growth rate, number of people living in poverty, these are all very sensitive statistics and so one of our recommendations was to try and support an evolution towards NSOs that are functionally independent and able to generate unbiased estimates. And also to have a civil society, maybe a window or something that could nurture these – think tanks, intermediary groups locally to be able to do a check on those headline statistics and make a stink if something seems really bad, because as we know – like the IMF, they've pointed out to me that they did footnote when Argentina's inflation rates started to look funny. They footnoted it in their report, but they didn't make a stink about it until the Economist wrote about it and then okay, so it's making that cycle work a little bit faster. The other issue is around the administrative data, because in most developed countries we're evolving away from like household surveys and big population censuses to much better administrative systems that provide the routine daily disaggregated data that we're all dreaming of as part of the data revolution.

Owen Barder

Could you give an example? You mean that instead of sampling whether children are in school by going around asking households you would collect that data from school registers?

Amanda Glassman

Exactly. Exactly or what do I know about utilization of healthcare? I don't ask you – in the household survey they ask you were you sick last week and if you were sick enough did you go? That's what we know from a household survey whereas every single clinic increasingly is going to know what did I come in for? What was I sick from? What prescription medicine did I get? Can you imagine the power of that information to change how you spend on healthcare?

Owen Barder

So one of the things that was interesting in your report was that there was this divergence between survey data and administrative data?

Amanda Glassman

Yes. So I mean many years of neglect of administrative data and these perverse incentives have led us to a situation where the administrative data is not very useful at the moment.

Owen Barder

Just explain about the perverse incentives, because I'm not sure listeners would have understood exactly what the problem there is.

Amanda Glassman

Yes, so this is some research undertaken with Justin Sandefur, who is a colleague of ours at CGD and we looked at – in one paper we're looking at education and health and then he has some other papers that look at agricultural yield and also the consumer price index. And he is comparing administrative data which is sort of the data that's passed on to the international organizations as school enrollment data or vaccination rates or ag productivity. And then he checked them against household surveys and we looked at that and then looked at health. So what you find are these big discrepancies in terms of trends. So in Kenya for example when they started, they switched from a budget that was input based to a budget that rewarded sub national entities based on the number of kids enrolled in school. And what you found is that enrollment went straight up and it looks like they've met the MDT. But if you look at the survey based estimates, it's absolutely flat. That's a huge distortion let's say in our understanding about what's actually going on.

Owen Barder

So it looks like the region – regional bits of government are a reporting rising number of school kids because that way they get more money from the central government.

Amanda Glassman

Exactly.

Owen Barder

But when you ask the households, you don't find that there are more kids in school?

Amanda Glassman

Exactly.

Owen Barder

So you get this divergence between the two, okay.

Amanda Glassman

Yes. So and we see something similar, trying to net out all the other things that might be going on that would affect those estimates. We are still seeing those things and it's the same we're also seeing over reported vaccination rates during the period when the Gabi alliance was paying an additional amount of money per vaccinated child. You see kind of a flat trend – you see misreporting before and after those incentives were in place, but you just see a larger misreport when the incentives come into play.

Owen Barder

So, so far this sounds a bit like a problem statement, which is there is political interference in statistics, there is under-investment in the core statistical functions, administrative data is been distorted and misreported, all those sound like compelling problems. What is it that we or somebody should do about that to make that better?

Amanda Glassman

Yes, so I mean I think under investment is one – under investment and lack of attention to administrative data is one big issue. So the idea is we should really focus on that and we should focus on national statistics offices as a kind of fact checker of the line ministries or at least a mutual support society. In South Africa for example, they're placing statisticians inside the line ministries to try and help them in strengthening the administrative systems. The other thing we could think about as donors is – well, let me also back up, I think that civil society oversight of the administrative data is also a good idea. These kind of report card efforts, citizen feedback, checks on local level data are also useful to improve admin data, use the household surveys as we did to try and check whether these estimates are close to each other. And then in terms of a funding approach, because we've – we found that there is low funding, there is irregular funding and it's very tied to products. So the idea that we suggest and report is a compact for data that would encompass the entire statistical system, not just the National Statistical Office that can involve CSOs, private sector, donors, government in agreeing on sort of mutual goals for better data, with certain attributes of accuracy and openness and timeliness and then maybe paying out a portion of that money against progress in that data.

Owen Barder

But this feels to me like a kind of somewhat rebadged version of a traditional technical co-operation program where you have some donor – I mean, you're basically saying donors should spend more money on statistics offices and they should have some kind of agreement about the outputs that they're going to get from it.

Amanda Glassman

How can you say that, Owen? No, this is cash on delivery.

Owen Barder

That must be good.

Amanda Glassman

It's a public statement, mutual accountability, own funding, flexible funding, but against progress on goals with some watch dogging happening by society and citizens as a whole. It's not just the same old thing.

Owen Barder

Claire, cash on delivery for national statistical offices, is that what is going to take?

Claire Melamed

[21:09] I think that if that was – not that that's necessarily a bad idea, but if that was what it was, then I think a lot of people – if that was all it was – and I'm not saying that's a bad idea in itself. But if that was the entirety of what happened as a result of all of this excitement, I think people would feel a little bit short changed, because that isn't all it is. That's one of the sort of core parts of the system that needs to be fixed, but I think that the aspiration of the data revolution as – the clue is in the name really go quite a long way beyond that. I think the difficulty with this is that really it's a sort of umbrella term into which we're throwing a whole number of different things, some of which as you say are not news. We've been doing and thinking about for a quite a long time, and then at the other extreme some of which we don't really know what they're yet. So some of it we're sort of making it up as we go along, we're exploring, there are various projects on the go to explore the potential of big data for example.

So there have been some fantastically interesting experiments whether it be using mobile phone data in Cote D'Ivoire to track poverty to do almost effective, almost kind of real time poverty monitoring, using mobile phone top ups as a proxy for income, tracking the movements of phone users through the day to track people's movements around cities and use that as an input into developing public transport. There's been fantastically interesting and something – there's been a thing also about tracking international calls and using that to estimate the whereabouts of refugee populations, who you have absolutely no other way of counting, no one is even there.

There are some fascinating experiments going on, but we don't actually kind of know what that universe is going to be yet. We certainly couldn't draw up a plan for what different parts of the international system could do to support the use of big data in development, because we don't even know any – how any part of that is going to work out. But it's clear there is something there and it's going to be very important and very exciting. So I think the data revolution is split between more of the things that are going on anyway and just keeping our eyes open and finding a facility to kind of make sure we're pulling in to the sort of useful parts of the system, all of the experiments that are going on as they happen and it maybe that we don't see any kind of system type results from some of this for 10, 20 years.

Amanda Glassman

One other idea that came out during the meeting this week is this idea that our own personal data should not be treated as an extractive industry. I love that terminology. So this – and this is more of something that would affect – it affects all of us that have a cell phone, but should we – if we involve the Facebook's and Google's of the world, the Vodafone's, is it the case that we'd like them to agree to a standard for data disclosure and use. If it's the case

that the UN is going to engage on these efforts, should we not hold them to some standard of data disclosure and reporting. So it's not just someone else's problem, it's our own problem and it's firm's problems and so I think I agree it's a much larger issue than what we have been talking about.

Owen Barder

So we're going to come to our end of the problem as in the industrialized world's end of the problem, but just on this question of building capacity and how we get more better, more timely, more disaggregated information in the developing world. The story of the revolution part, the shiny new bits which are very attractive and may solve a lot of problems. It seems to me that there are two potential worries about that, if we forget about the basic part. So one is, there is nothing to calibrate them against, right? You don't know if your mobile phone data is telling you about poverty, if you don't have some way to calibrate it against actual poverty data, you don't know what it's telling you. So that seems to be a reason why you would want to be doing both and the other problem we have is that it might detract from doing the more basic investment in national NSO organizations that funders, I could imagine donors and foundations being interested in mobile phone stuff and satellite imagery and the yada yada, but it's quite hard to get people to pay the salaries of statisticians in a national statistical office. So is there a danger – is there actually a tension between these two objectives? How do you connect them and bring them together if they're both part of the data revolution?

Claire Melamed

I think certainly there is a hypothetical danger, those it may turn out as you suggest, and there is a finite amount of money and if it all goes to one place rather than the other, then clearly that's a danger. I have to say in the – nothing has actually happened yet, so it's hard to know, but in the discussions that we've been having I felt very strongly that both ends of that deal are kind of really being quite effective in making their voices heard. If anything, I would say probably it's the official side of the system which has got itself organized first and is kind of lobbying hard, its making its voice heard and if anything we're under-representing the kind of potential of big data in the conversation because they are not people who are usually in these rooms and know how to – necessarily interested or knowledgeable about engaging in these rather sort of stuffy bureaucratic events. So I completely see that's a hypothetical danger and it may go that way, but I'm not seeing it now.

Amanda Glassman

Yes I would agree with that assessment. I'm a little worried about the shiny, but maybe that's because I am more exposed to shiny in my current job, but we do know that so little of aid is going to the official statistics sector so and we know that the characteristics of that money is – are terrible for trying to achieve the goals that we'd like to achieve. So I don't think there is any incompatibility between these things and I think certainly for things like environmental statistics, we want them new and shiny. The satellite imagery of trees that can be used to track deforestation is really important and it's not going to be accomplished by the national statistical system. So I really do think it's about taking a more integral view to the potential for new technologies and big data and all that to work.

Owen Barder

You're listening to Development Drums with me, Owen Barder, and my guests today are my colleague Amanda Glassman, from the Center for Global Development and Claire Melamed from ODI. We're going to turn now to this question that has been rumbling underneath about what it is that donors should be doing differently, what it is that international organizations should be doing differently? And let's start with the extent to which we're part of the problem. Let's get the problem statement out and Amanda you were saying some things about this earlier. What is it that – to what extent are donors and international organizations contributing to this problem?

Amanda Glassman

[28:30] Yes. Well, on the one hand, the money that we are giving directly to statistical activities is quite fragmented and focused on specific products, usually household surveys, because they are an easy way to get the data that donors are increasingly needing and that's connected to the second issue, which is that the results based aid movement is a great success. I think both of us have talked a lot about how great it is to link money to results and measure results better and do fancy impact of valuations, but the problem with that has been at least it seems that there has been more money put towards to those things than to building the basic systems, the administrative data, the basic economic statistics. So I think now the pendulum is swinging, hopefully it doesn't swing too far in the other direction to sort of to correct this behavior. And there is also an issue around – this is the usual aid effectiveness discussion of multiple surveys on the same thing. Food security is one of the main examples. So the LSMS that the World Bank runs includes – the Living Standards and Measurement Surveys – now funded by the Gates Foundation through the World Bank has an ag productivity component. There is a feed the future survey. There is administrative data systems, sometimes there is a set of special surveys and you get the idea. We have like a lot of different surveys, non-standard approaches, that could be fixed, although there has been progress but ...

Owen Barder

But why is it bad to have lots of surveys?

Amanda Glassman

Well, I mean, it's – given the limited capacity of statistical offices and given that they respond very much to the incentives associated with doing fieldwork, because they're quite poorly paid and the per diems associated with fieldwork are higher than salary. So you have a lot of unnecessary fieldwork going on to collect basically the same information sometimes in the same year in a non-comparable way. That is of limited utility and it also confuses people.

Owen Barder

So it would be better if that was core funding for the organizations to collect the information once at – in a sensible way, okay.

Amanda Glassman

Yes exactly.

Owen Barder

So donors are funding lots of fragmented bits of fieldwork and unnecessary duplication and also creating distortions, particularly, in administrative data. That means that data are less

useful. What about international institutions and their – the contribution they are making or not making to providing data that other people can use and so on?

Claire Melamed

I think that one of the reasons why it's good – it's particularly good that we're having this conversation in – as part of the post 2015 new goals conversation is that to some extent the millennium development goals have also provided a bit of a kind of a poor incentive around data. Because clearly they're sort of elevated the status of certain specific indicators over others which perhaps aren't necessarily the ones that governments would have chosen or were useful to particular governments at particular times because of the importance they have for national monitoring. And they've also increased the importance of being seen to have a kind of national average for your indicator rather than necessarily the kind of disaggregated data that would be useful. So in so far as the monitoring system for the MDGs have driven donor support to data and things in order to help governments to produce that, that's also been a kind of missed opportunity for making that also work for national level decision making and that was a conversation that we weren't having in the late '90s as the MDG architecture was being set up that we definitely are having now. So hopefully the impact of that particular global system on creating some of these slightly wonky incentives at least we won't be repeating that mistake again.

Amanda Glassman

Something else that came out in this meeting was someone from IATI was there and saying ...

Owen Barder

That's the International Aid Transparency Initiative?

Amanda Glassman

That's right. And he was saying the OECD and the UN don't define East Africa the same way. And then they publish statistics and then there's no way to compare them or analyze them, so that's why I love the idea of a mutual accountability that all organizations should commit to some kind of coalescing around global standards for the presentation of data, for the cataloguing of data, all that will help with use.

Owen Barder

And actually just moving to open data would make a big difference. The same person who was at your meeting from the International Aid Transparency Initiative tweeted the other day that he couldn't get hold of data that is published by the UN on a particular data series without paying for it. Right and of course we've already paid for this information, we've paid for it to be collected and here is a researcher wanting to use it presumably for some public good and can't because it's only available behind a paywall. So, there is also a question of whether we can unlock the data that international bodies hold and collect.

Claire Melamed

And I mean there is obviously a particular urgency and kind of moral case there to be made about data which is paid for from public funds and as you say you don't want to pay for it twice. I think increasingly there is also an issue, a slightly different issue around data which is created in the private sector and one has examples like the huge volumes of incredibly useful

data that are collected by Gallup for example on well-being, really that's how we know that's the kind of gold standard for rigorous research on global well-being, but a lot of it you can't get hold of because it's paid for, it's a private company, they have to make their money somehow, but there is a big question that there's a huge potentially thing there which would be of enormous public value which we can't get at, increasingly – if big data does prove to be useful, a lot of that data is held in the private sector and I think there is going to be perhaps a sort of a second generation of open data is going to have to be about thinking much more about the kind of economic issues and the public interest issues around how to get access to more of that private sector data as well.

Owen Barder

Can I just pause on this issue about lack of donor interest. It seems to me probable, but tell me if this is right or not that many ministers or people who run philanthropic foundations would much rather spend money on a school or a vaccination than they would on a bunch of statisticians, it's a not a very photogenic investment and it's hard to explain to your stakeholders why you are paying for bureaucrats in a developing country. Is that fair or is that – are they in fact silently doing the work of saints behind the scenes and funding this boring sounding thing?

Claire Melamed

I don't think they're as much as they could be. I mean I suspect maybe they are getting a bit of a bad press here and they maybe doing more than we think they are and it maybe that the governments that have managed to use this system effectively have managed to for example use some of the monitoring and evaluation resources or the kind of some aspects of the results based framework to invest in those core functions. But I also – I mean, following on from now, I also think that part of the case for better data might be to not really talk about data at all, but to talk about something like if you want to build an effective education system and put your schools in the right places and have lots of well educated, happy, motivated children, you kind of need to know where the children live and how old they are in order to be able to do that effectively. So the argument actually for some audiences may actually be much more effectively made to not really talk about data very much, but to talk about outcomes for people.

Amanda Glassman

I mean I think it's important probably to recognize that organizations like the Hewlett Foundation from whom we also receive funding have traditionally been interested in the area of demography and population and the think tank initiative which tries to use data to influence policy. The Gates Foundation is one of the biggest funders now of the Living Standards and Measurement Surveys through the World Bank. So definitely there is interest, but the question is whether we – there's appetite to invest more substantially in country data systems. I should also mention DFID, actually DFID has a very good track record on statistical capacity building, but again, very focused on household surveys. So I guess the next step is really to go beyond the household survey as a way to support statistics in countries.

Owen Barder

And on this – on the sexy end of the spectrum, the big data, the cell phones, and the satellites and so on, are there things that donors or international organizations should be

doing now to make maximum value of that? Is that stuff that will happen through the private sector and through the tech community and the best thing donors can do is keep out of it or is there – are there some global public goods here that donors should be investing in or what should donor's engagement be in that?

Amanda Glassman

[37:58] I think Claire has pointed out how important experimentation is at this point in understanding whether using a mobile phone to collect a sample on some piece of information actually works, can you get a representative sample from cell phones. So I think the donor role could be experimentation and evaluation, so that we can understand if these new techniques actually have promise, whether they're more cost-effective versus the existing one. So do we have to do a census, a huge every 10-year census, or could we have a really souped up civil registration vital statistics system that essentially substitutes for that once every 10 years, \$40 million investment. So I think these are the kinds of things that donors are really well suited to fund.

Claire Melamed

I also think that there is a role in just kind of finding out what's going on out there for a sort of – what again is a fairly cheap thing, but somebody has to do it. And there is a lot of experimentation going on in the private sector and some of it very, very localized, just based around small startups in different countries creating apps and seeing what happens and a lot of that information will take decades to sort of percolate through the system unless somebody goes out and looks for it and brings it back together and assembles it in a way which is useful to other people who are having – sort of tackling the same problems and I think that's quite a useful role that a donor or a foundation could play.

Owen Barder

So let's finish up by drawing together the threads. I know at your meeting you came up with an action plan and in this conversation, Amanda's talked for example about the compact as an important way to invest in basic systems, we've just talked about the need for lesson learning on the shiny new stuff. What are the – what is it that you would like to see happen next and how will that feed in for example to the post 2015 framework? Let's start with Claire.

Claire Melamed

The motivation for having this meeting was very much the sense that there is a political opportunity now, a moment, this idea of the data revolution has galvanized a lot of talk, everyone's very excited, but as we know people have short attention spans and in a year or two, some other phrase will be the thing that everyone is talking about and nobody will care about data anymore.

So I think the urgent job now is to think about one or two sort of quite specific actions, political deliverables, ways to lock some of this into the system so that when everyone's attention inevitably turns to something else, we've set something in motion, which can be the kind of long-term impact of this flurry of excitement and interest and – various ideas were floated at the meeting today some – a lot of which sort of caught a lot of attention and need a bit of sort of thinking through, whether there is a need for a sort of dedicated funding instrument facility of some kind, to galvanize more resources and make sure they're

spent in a certain way which provides the right incentives for the right combination of core investment and innovation and not forgetting about the sort of needs of the users and accountability in open data and so on so there's a sort of funding thing.

I think there is a way again in which one can use the opportunity of having new goals and needing to create a baseline around that to in a sense pick up some of the campaigning energy around creating new goals and really hoping that we can kind of turn that – after the goals have agreed, we can turn that into a similar level of energy and excitement around creating all kinds of information, citizen generated data, information about people's views and opinions as well as the sort of formal household survey and census and administrative data that will form the core of the monitoring framework. So I think there is a big political opportunity now. There's a certain urgency to it, because it won't be around forever and really the focus of the meeting to – that we've had over the last couple of days has been trying to really get people to switch people's attention away from defining the data revolution to making it a revolution through a series of specific actions.

Owen Barder

So we're log framing the data revolution, Amanda?

Amanda Glassman

Oh I knew you were going to say that. You're too harsh. Well, I mean one another idea that came up and this is more evolution than revolution, but it goes with the ideas is that there is a lot of existing data out there that isn't linked together, that isn't usable. So there are some quick wins that we can do to put together some form of a baseline hopefully for a simplified set of SDGs that would come out of the intergovernmental negotiation process that the mapping of service delivery indicators that the World Bank has undertaken lately is a really good example of the ways you can make existing data a lot more relevant. So just taking advantage of that in the short-term is a good idea, because I think we need to show something cool pretty soon. The other idea is that some people are talking about being data radicals. And maybe putting out a manifesto that would call on not just the governments, but the UN, the donors, the foundations, put out your data. If you paid for data, put it in the public domain, put it in a form that people can use.

Claire Melamed

And I think really we're talking at two levels at the moment. There is a huge amount that the kind of broad technical, academic, NGO community can just get on with some of those things they can just happen, they don't need anyone to sort of tell us what to do or put more money in, we can just get on with it. I think at the moment the gap that is waiting to be filled is pushing that up to a much higher level of sort of political engagement. If we are really talking about substantial new resources, for example, we can't create that by kind of working out better harmonization procedures for household surveys. We need to have a number of pretty sort of high-level politicians and people who run foundations rather than just people who give out the money to decide they want it to happen and make it happen.

Owen Barder

Claire Melamed, Amanda Glassman, thanks for coming on Development Drums.

Amanda Glassman

Thank you, Owen.

Claire Melamed

Thank you.

Owen Barder

You've been listening to Development Drums with me, Owen Barder, and my guests today have been Amanda Glassman from the Center for Global Development and Claire Melamed from ODI, and the producer is Theo Talbot. Thanks for listening.