

CGD EGM Opening panel: Engaging citizens for data-driven policymaking

This is the opening panel, which is meant to set the scene, so I was given a fairly innocuous topic: Engaging citizens for data-driven policymaking. Everybody agrees with that and the background paper did excellent job covering many of the salient points, so not need to repeat them here. Just maybe adding some additional perspective. And some of these points are hopefully meant to generate a robust discussion.

1- Policy, data, advocacy? What is the correct order?

We often say that data drives policy making. Is that really true? Time and again, research has shown that CSOs are the ones driving major policy shifts. Example in gender abound such as on VAW, unpaid care and domestic work. Child marriage, particularly in Africa is another example. These are topics that CSOs have been advocating about for decades before official statisticians actually started getting interested. A major study for example shows that from 1975 to 2005 the most important and consistent factor driving policy change is feminist activism, more of factor than left-wing parties, numbers of women legislators, or national wealth.

We see that more recently in gender and climate change data and the online gender-based violence. Data collection by NSS on key topics actually lag by several years or decades advocacy by CSOs, and not other way around. Official stats work can in turn help give the ammunition to CSOs to back their advocacy with solid evidence that in effect has the seal of legitimacy of the State. This is the mutual reinforcement part and clear complementarity - not only in terms of scope and coverage but often also in terms of methodologies such as qualitative research methods. However, this process does not happen automatically. Without genuine efforts, respect and mutual recognition of what each party brings to the table, the process can be left wanting. Data and statistics can be super helpful but they can also leave out critical qualitative and contextual information that the citizenry has, sometimes in the form of hard data and sometimes in the form of deep practice-based knowledge. Policies that ignore either of these are bound to fail.

2- When official statistics are unwanted statistics or left wanting?

Engaging citizens for data-driven policymaking is essential and goes to the heart of the democratic project. We often talk about statistical offices validating or providing quality criteria for CGD. And when we talk about CGD, the place where we often deadlock is always quality. But in critical well-established

intergovernmental fora such as human rights mechanisms, shadow reporting by civil society actors is an essential part of the process – partly because these mechanisms don't just want to take the States' word for it. So why is it that when we start talking about civil society and data, the quality criteria is the first thing that pops up and we never move beyond it? but also geographic coverage - and yet CSOs are often the best providers of information on hard to count populations e.g. people living in remote areas or populations operating in the shadows e.g. drug users or trafficking in persons.

Let's now talk about data validation by official statistics. This is great in some cases but also impossible or I'd say even undesirable in others. The reason is that citizens can actually play an important monitoring function. There are lots of things we want to know that Governments don't want to provide, and most people wouldn't trust them anyway if they did. For example, how many people have been victims of human rights abuses such as state sponsored killings. Who would trust the data provided by the Government? Without strong independent civil society groups being involved or even leading, no one would probably believe any figures that Governments provide.

More generally, the official statistical community has a bit of a tendency to de facto assume that official statistics are the best there is. This may be true in most cases (maybe) but certainly not in all. CGD is often faster and more readily available than official data e.g. during the early phases of the COVID19 pandemic official statistics was hardly produced. We have seen many instances where NSOs for example lack independence and may be swayed by political currents. Censuses can be used to undercount certain population groups, with huge consequences, winners and losers, for years. You need the engagement of the citizenry in these instances to try to get to the truth or at least provide a barrier against abuses of data.

For example, Blockchain is an example of technology that was born to serve as a mechanism to serve as digital currency without the need for a central authority to validate it, because nothing says that official sources cannot or won't be manipulated.

Building on the Blockchain model, there could be an instance where State actors are de facto bystanders in the data production process because citizens are best placed to do it and would be more credible doing it. Today crypto currencies are

effectively moving in this direction with a market size of \$37 billion. So why can't the stats community do it with data?

This is all to say that as much as we can talk about the pros and cons of CGD, we also need to be equally introspective about the limits and constraints of official statistics. This can then lead us to a place where we can have an honest conversation about the limits of each and complementarities between them.

3- Who speaks for citizens?

Engaging citizens sounds great in principle but can be hard to do in practice. Who is your interlocutor? CSO groups which tend to represent citizens in discussions on data are not a monolithic group – care needs to be taken so that groups that are perhaps not well as connected and resources are not excluded. In such case fringe groups can easily occupy the mainstream while those with legitimate claims could be excluded.

And sometimes they also emphatically speak for themselves. We have lots of example where citizens are actually the ones making critical policy decisions through data. Referendums or ballot box initiatives are a bunch of zeros and ones – so to speak – directly reflecting the voice of the citizenry, with the potential to fundamentally reshape countries futures.

So as a concluding point, whenever we are collecting data about people, we are involving them in some way shape or form. So, the question in a way is not whether citizens should be engaged but more about how.