
Mohamed Ibrahim

BETTER DATA, BETTER POLICY MAKING

**In Africa, the eradication of poverty is the number-one goal.
Sadly, there's little data to measure the continent's progress.**

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Governing is about delivery. The challenge of government is to improve the quality of life of citizens. “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” has been a recurrent refrain in quadrennial American presidential campaigns and is a question that is just as relevant in the African political context. To meet this challenge, a government has to come up with a clear and coherent set of ideas—a vision—and use available resources and instruments as efficiently as possible to produce the results that citizens expect. The risk taking involved in articulating and defining a progressive vision for the future is what defines great leadership. Achieving that vision as effectively as possible requires effective risk management—in other words, good governance.

In defining a national vision, leaders employ their ideologies and are elected, or not, accordingly. However, the successful implementation of that vision cannot be ideologically driven. It requires sound public policy that is transparent, accountable, and effective.

I would suggest that the best way to improve government is to improve government’s ability to manage risk and produce results. This could be achieved by a shift toward data-based policy making. While this may sound self-evident, the lack of good statistical data in Africa is illustrative.

Five years ago, my foundation began to publish a comprehensive index of governance (the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, or IIAG) to address exactly this deficit. We were able to identify approximately 100 measurable indicators that accurately capture

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governance performance. This may sound impressive, until you consider that we were seeking variables to measure everything from national security to personal safety, from public management to gender equity, from physical infrastructure to democratic participation, and from education and health to welfare at the rural level. Moreover, after scouring all available data for consistency (including from the World Bank), we were unable to include poverty in our index. This is due to the extreme patchiness of the data—we could find no single consistent measurement that covered a minimum of 35 African countries and had been taken at least twice over the past decade.

Since the primary goal of development must be the alleviation and eventual eradication of poverty, this deficit raises serious questions. If the reduction of poverty is not the definition of success (and is not being assessed accordingly), then what are the billions of aid dollars going toward? And if the reduction of poverty is the primary goal, why is no one measuring it adequately to see if all those funds are being used effectively? Similarly, how can African citizens and governments properly assess their progress and make informed electoral decisions and promises? I wonder how Western governments would fare running an election campaign with no access to public-opinion polling?

I have long advocated for increased investment in national statistical offices and other data-gathering institutions. This is a point

that bears repeating. For African governments the paucity of good data is further complicated by the weakness of institutions, particularly the civil service. This is exacerbated by the fact that the poor public perception of civil service ensures that the best and brightest young people are more apt to seek work in the private sector. This means that it is even more important that the civil service have access to the necessary resources to guide its decision making.

Data-driven policy making would also have the additional benefit of allowing for a more rational public debate on sensitive topics. In Africa and beyond, the increased economic migration that comes with the economic integration of countries is a source of inflated rhetoric and conflict. Be it the Tanzanian fear of the country's businesses being subsumed by dynamic Kenyan entrepreneurs or the British working class feeling displaced by Eastern Europeans, the fear is the same and fueled by the failure of politicians to make a data-based case for immigration and to articulate the economic costs and benefits of not embracing further regional integration. African leaders are not articulating clearly enough to their citizens that an entire continent with a collective GDP that is less than that of Brazil has no future other than through integrating its markets.

Even Africa's reserves of natural resources must be understood in context. For example, Africa is by far the largest global producer of cobalt. Yet global cobalt sales in 2011 totaled less than \$380 million. Furthermore, the potential benefit of these resources requires better public management than has been the case to date.

Similarly, the demography of Africa poses a huge opportunity but also a huge challenge. By 2020, 200 million young Africans will enter the job market. The political stability of much of the continent will depend on the ability of the different governments to meet



this supply with appropriate demand. For all Africa's natural-resource potential, it is this human-resource base that will determine its future prosperity.

All of this points to the necessity of robust data. It is as difficult to design policies without data as it is to measure the outcomes of those policies. But data alone is not sufficient. In just five years, the IIAG has increasingly become a tool for policy makers, citizens, and civil-society organizations to assess the impact of policy interventions, guide resource allocation, and learn from the successes and failures of other countries in the region. Yet it is just one small contribution, and for each government that welcomes it as a policy-mak-

ing tool, several others view it with suspicion. Clearly a shift of mind-set is required on the part of some policy makers so that the index is seen not only as a way to critique but also as a tool to strengthen government. In this regard, we still have much work to do.

We need to work to strengthen both the supply and demand sides of governance data. Then we will see the kind of progress in Africa that its citizens have a right to expect—through the formulation and implementation of public policies and discourse that are rooted in an empirical understanding of where the continent is and where it needs to go. That, in my view, is the single best idea for government in Africa. ■

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A HARD REALITY
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