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# Right Data, Right Policy? Innovations in Data Collection and Dissemination in Nigeria

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## Introduction

On 21 July 2015 the Africa Programme at Chatham House hosted Dr Yemi Kale, Statistician General at Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics. Dr Kale focused on Nigeria's recent efforts at gathering and disseminating improved data. He also discussed the important role that data can play in policy-making by supplying the government with the right data and thus promoting the right policies.

This meeting was held on the record. This document is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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## Dr Yemi Kale

Dr Kale began by discussing the significance of data in the global information age, and the consequential importance of statistics and statistical methods. Remarking that the flow of data is constantly evolving, Dr Kale argued the importance of data is centred on three main points: 1) the provision of clear, objective and numerical evidence; 2) assistance with informed decision-making and policy implementation; and 3) the possibility that data provide in enabling more accurate responses to the real needs of communities.

Dr Kale stated that the Nigerian statistical system has a long evolutionary history. Briefly detailing this history, he recognized that, in the past, Nigeria's statistical system was suboptimal. This largely reflected the absence of coordination, with individuals designing their own data and ignoring official data in the process. Data are demand-driven, and are primarily influenced by the interests of funders. Dr Kale discussed funding in the context of statistical independence, recalling that when he assumed office, 90 per cent of data produced were funded externally, thus limiting the agency of the statistical institution.

The independence of African statistical institutions is also sometimes challenged by international commitments that require the tracking of certain indicators that are less relevant to African economies than they are to non-African economies. Dr Kale stated that the issue lies in the fact that some of the key indicators used by more advanced economies cannot be easily transferred to the African context. He suggested a change in ideology and approach towards the generation of methodology, the selection of indicators and the prescription of policy based not on international commitment but on results from rigorous observation of how society works.

Interest in Nigeria's statistics has been rising since the financial crisis in 2008, reflecting both exogenous and endogenous factors. The former are external sector developments, and the interest of global investors in seeking new and higher return-granting markets for their investments. Endogenous factors are related to the Nigerian government's need for evidence-based policy-making, which has been rising since the drafting of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Dr Kale noted the rise in interest in terms of the surge in the volume of data requests. Since the rebasing of Nigeria's GDP in 2014, the National Bureau of Statistics has recorded an average of three downloads per minute for its main reports.

While there has been statistical reform and strong demand for Nigerian data, the Bureau's operations are still heavily reliant on external funding. This influences the type of data on which it can focus. The budgetary allocation to the Bureau is improving but remains considerably low, irregular and unpredictable. This means that the Bureau is not as independent as it ought to be. Dr Kale recalled that one of his first actions as Statistician General was to assert the independence of the statistical office,

particularly on its choice of indicators and methodology. While this has left sources of funding in doubt, the move has, in the long run, enabled the office to regain its autonomy.

The increasing demand for Nigerian data and the Bureau's quest for independence have spurred innovation within the Bureau. However, it has come under criticism in connection with what is described as Africa's 'statistical tragedy'.<sup>1</sup> Dr Kale emphasized that Nigeria is still a developing country, with emerging systems and institutions, and is still recovering from its recent military-ruled past. The country has not paid adequate attention to data-oriented policy-making, and has instead nurtured a frail statistical system which the Bureau is trying to rebuild. Western critics ignore not only the time it takes to repair systems, but also the socio-economic contexts that keep such systems weak in the first place. Overall, the criticisms do not come as a surprise, but the speaker expressed some optimism about the future of statistics in Nigeria.

On the Nigerian policy-making environment, Dr Kale focused on Nigeria's economic 'story', which is one of high economic growth rates but an almost insignificant decline in poverty, and thus also one of widening economic inequality. He noted clear regional disparities in the distribution of growth and poverty, identifying agriculture and the wholesale and retail trade as being among the sectors that contribute significantly to growth. However, these sectors are unable to absorb the millions of people who enter the labour force each year, fuelling unemployment. This could be mitigated if and when data begin to drive policy-making in Nigeria. The Statistician General also spoke about the political neutrality of the Bureau, noting that the political environment within which the Bureau operates often attempts to encroach on its neutrality. In response, the Bureau has over the years had to toughen its stance on data independence. On the one hand, a 'toughened' Bureau has given the Statistician General the reputation of being 'difficult'. On the other, the Bureau has managed to build credibility.

In the last three years, the Bureau has participated actively in the country's major economic policy-making organs. While this is not a remarkable feat *per se*, it highlights the increasing recognition that policy-makers are giving to data as policy-guiding tools. This increasing level of data recognition, together with projects such as the revision of the methodology used in determining unemployment levels, has had the somewhat unintended consequence of suggesting to the public that the Bureau has lost its independence from government. Dr Kale explained that while the Bureau has in recent years begun to work more closely with the Nigerian government, the focus is to supply the government with the right data and thus promote the right policies.

Dr Kale emphasized two important pillars that the Bureau relies on in overcoming constraints to the production and dissemination of reliable data. The first is collaboration. Through collaboration with a host of stakeholders, including the government, academia and the private sector, the Bureau has been able to undertake more rigorous projects and produce higher-quality data. Financial constraints make collaboration the reasonable route to take. The second pillar is technology. Improvements in information and communications technology have enabled the Bureau to improve its data production process. This has meant increased speed, accuracy and reliability of data collection, cost-saving and reduced duplication issues in data processing, and wider and better-targeted data dissemination.

Dr Kale concluded by expressing more realism than optimism. The Bureau remains very ambitious in its goals, maintaining these with full awareness of the challenges in data collection and dissemination in

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<sup>1</sup> A useful review of the current debates on the quality of African statistics can be found here: <http://africanarguments.org/2013/09/26/why-we-need-to-invest-in-african-development-statistics-from-a-diagnosis-of-africas-statistical-tragedy-towards-a-statistical-renaissance-by-morten-jerven/>.

Nigeria. Not only is there need for financial innovation as regards the funding of projects, there is also need for improved coordination and cross-sectoral collaboration.

### Summary of Questions and Answers

#### Questions

A question was asked about the structure of Nigeria's data economy. The participant claimed that published data from the Bureau tends to be aggregated and not specific enough, and enquired as to the possible disaggregation of data. A further question was asked about the current state of health statistics. This participant remarked that available medical statistics, and particularly data on post-partum maternal health, are outdated, and wondered if the health sector is among the Bureau's areas of interest. There was also a question on Nigeria's recently rebased GDP, which shows a smaller share made by oil contributions. The participant was interested in an early estimate of the potential impacts of a falling oil price on the valuation of Nigeria's GDP.

#### Dr Yemi Kale

Responding to the first question, Dr Kale stated that not all of the data collected by the Bureau are published. He estimated that only about 30 per cent of collected data are published. Aggregated data, i.e. the published data, are built off disaggregated data, which are not usually published but can none the less be requested because they are available.

On health statistics, Dr Kale identified surveys and administrative systems as two methods of collecting data. The latter require existing health firms to supply the Bureau with data, which the Bureau then collates. However, such systems do not exist in Nigeria. Data are outdated because of administrative constraints, as well as a lack of funding and shortage of appropriate human capital.

Concerning the impact of the lower oil price on GDP, Dr Kale noted that there was a drop in GDP growth from 6 to 3 per cent in the first quarter of 2015. In its unpublished forecast, at the start of the year the Bureau had assumed that GDP would grow at a rate of five percent. At present the rate is less than four per cent and Dr Kale suggested that a rate of around three percent in the near future does not seem too improbable.

#### Questions

A question was asked regarding the integrity of data. Participants were unsure about the degree of statistical harmonization in Nigeria, and were curious about the Bureau's experience with disharmonious data. Another question was asked about the potential assistance that regional and global communities could give the Bureau to allow for the generation of more reliable data. Participants also inquired about how the Bureau measures and takes into account the informal economy.

#### Dr Yemi Kale

Dr Kale noted that the absence of standardized data was the reason why the Bureau was established. The Bureau's independent status means that it has no interest in misrepresenting data and that it therefore acts as an officiating body, granting official status to data it deems credible. The statistical office is, therefore, what lends data integrity in Nigeria.

The international community can assist with advocacy. Data are not prioritized in Nigeria, and do not sufficiently drive policy there. The international community should put pressure on the government. Dr Kale recommended that the promotion of data could be attached to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition to advocacy, he suggested 'protection', and stated that international communities should lobby for the independence of the statistical offices.

On capturing the informal economy, Dr Kale remarked that both the size and the rapidly changing nature of the informal economy make this difficult to capture data-wise. The informal economy is currently tracked through household surveys; the data generated are usually quite detailed but are often undermined by the fluid nature of the informal economy.

### Questions

A question was asked regarding the state of the relationship between the statistical agencies in Nigeria, monitoring and evaluation bodies and the National Planning Commission. Participants were interested in the current space occupied by data the political sphere and the potential impacts that the recent change in government could have on that space.

A question was asked about citizen engagement; the participant questioned how the Bureau attempts to ensure that citizens can understand the significance of data, recognizing the pervasiveness of data literacy issues and language issues.

Participants were curious about the degree of consultation afforded to Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics during the drafting of the SDGs.

Participants asked about the extent to which microdata were within the Bureau's purview.

### Dr Yemi Kale

Responding to the first question, Dr Kale suggested that performance seems better in those states that have aligned their monitoring and evaluation functions with their planning functions. The attitude towards data is determined by the attitude of the chief executive. There has been a heightened interest in data from the new administration and this suggests that there will be further increases in the use of data and the development of evidence-based policy.

On getting the public engaged in data, Dr Kale explained that the Bureau is using social media, in particular, not only to interact with the public but also to gain an idea of the kind of data the public need.

The Bureau received almost no consultation on the SDGs, according to Dr Kale. The SDGs were drawn up and the countries were handed the indicators to work with. This is an Africa-wide issue, not just one that concerns Nigeria. It was only later, after the indicators had been distributed, that there was some consultation, by which time the UN had expressed strict caveats about any potential changes.

Microdata will be uploaded to the Bureau's website soon. The process is very slow, as much of these data are old and in need of validation. The validation process is what is taking the most time, but Dr Kale stated that in the interim people can contact the Bureau direct for required microdata.