

First-time UN gathering aims to delve into using data

January 11 2017, by Jennifer Peltz

More than 100 countries don't keep accurate counts of births and deaths. More than 70 don't have robust data on poverty. There's a dearth of accurate, comparable figures on the number of disabled children in almost every nation, U.N. statisticians say.

The world body hopes to help change that by convening its first-ever conference on [global data](#) starting this weekend in Cape Town, South Africa.

More than 1,000 government statisticians, private-sector data scientists, politicians and others are expected at the U.N. World Data Forum , which aims to spark new ideas about using the world's ever-expanding stream of digital information. Tech giants including Google, Facebook and Amazon have signed up to send representatives the four-day event that starts Sunday, U.N. organizers said. The companies didn't immediately respond to inquiries about their plans.

Planned discussions include gleaning information on refugees' migration from phone records, using data to illustrate people's concerns, and mapping poverty and measuring crop yields by scouring satellite images.

"Data are not only for policymakers—data are also for citizens, who need to have access to data to understand what is happening in their various communities ... and to be able to hold the various layers of government accountable," Stefan Schweinfest, director of the U.N.'s Statistics Division, said at a news conference Tuesday. "This is

something really that we are well placed, at the U.N., to invest in."

The U.N. already collects and puts out information on subjects ranging from trade to temperatures to how people spend their time.

But data can be patchy. For example, the world body estimates nearly one-fourth of the world's children under 5 have no record of their births. Without birth certificates, they may not be able to go to school or get health care, among other problems.

The U.N. has flagged the problem for over a decade. A 2002 report by UNICEF, the U.N.'s children's agency, called for free birth registration and new laws to facilitate registration, among other measures. The U.N. is continuing work with many countries on systems for recording births and vital statistics, Schweinfest said.

The world body also is increasingly looking for ways to measure such issues as security and public safety, particularly as new Secretary-General Antonio Guterres prioritizes efforts to prevent conflicts. That could entail developing ways to pick up early on data that signal a spiral toward trouble.

The U.N. has made strides in boosting nations' interest in the idea, but acting on it can be a challenge for countries, said Jennifer Ellis, who works on public health issues at Bloomberg Philanthropies, former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's foundation. It's putting \$100 million into improving [health data](#) in poor and middle-income countries and is sending a technical expert to be on a panel at the U.N. forum.

"Our hope would be that this meeting makes some of that interest more concrete and informs action," Ellis said.

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