Engaging universities in implementing SDGs

Dr. Amara Satharasinghe,
Former Director General of Census and Statistics

(This is an excerpt of the Keynote address delivered by Dr. Amara Satharasinghe, former Director General of the Department of Census and Statistics at the National Research Conference on Applied Social Statistics – 2018 organized by the University of Kelaniya, held on 2018.11.30)

Social statistics use statistical measurement systems to study human behaviour in a social environment. Social statistics research is a crucial resource for effective implementation of the development agenda of a country. In the absence of robust, reliable, and valid social statistics that are derived from credible research, development actors would be blindfolded; vast resources spent on development would be wasted, or even cause negative repercussions. Social statistics guide the way to effective and efficient pathways for bringing development results to people. Thus, social statistics bring substantial benefits to legislators, policy makers, program managers, and to local, regional, national, and international communities. If estimated using a monetary measure, these benefits would be huge.

One example that illustrates the importance of social statistics is the Social Statistics Division of the United Nations Statistics Division. It compiles social indicators covering a wide range of subject-matter fields such as housing, health, education, conditions of work and employment from many national and international sources. It pays particular attention to the study of conditions of special population groups, including children, the elderly, the unemployed, and people with disabilities to ensure that no one is left behind in the development process.

The Annual National Research Conference on Applied Social Statistics organized by the Department of Social Statistics of the University of Kelaniya commenced in the year 2015. The conference theme this year is "Quantitative Research in Social Sciences Perspective." The conference is open to all researchers and covers a wide range of disciplines. The conference publishes an abstract volume every year with the sub-themes of Economics and Economic Development, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development, Demography and Population Studies, Mass Communication and Information Management, Management Studies, Social Statistics, and Social Sciences, Tourism, and Trade.

Scientific and technological research and the resulting innovations can offer solutions to both national and global issues. The key driver to achieve balanced national development is scientific and technological research and innovations, which are aligned with national and global development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Scientific researchers and innovators of a country, therefore, play important roles in national develop-

information that has been collected through some process and having a structure. However, many examples of new types of data have very different and often unstructured formats popularly known as big data. Some examples are millions of tweets or thousands of PDFs of public documents. Vast quantities of data on people, organizations, and social groups are collected each day across the world. In addition to the data collected through conventional methods such as surveys and censuses, we need to make use of such data by using proper tools in order to bridge the data gaps. Without deriving proper definitions and computation methodologies for indicators and start using unconventional data, it would not be possible design programs for achieving SDGs, to monitor progress, and to evaluate performance. Consequently, a heavy responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the research community, including universities, to ensure data availability needed for reaching the SDGs.

ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

The SDGs represent some of the biggest chal-

Dr. Amara Satharasinghe

KNOWLEDGE AND SOLUTIONS

Addressing the challenges of the SDGs will require new knowledge, new ways of doing things. Universities attract and nurture talent and creativity and are central players in innovation systems. These resources can be effectively harnessed to understand the challenges, opportunities, and interactions among the SDGs; develop and implement solutions; develop and assess policy options, transformation pathways, and monitor progress.

SDG IMPLEMENTERS

Universities provide people with professional and personal skills, and capabilities. They have access to significant concentrations of young and curious people who are passionate, creative, and strive for a better world. As achieving the SDGs will need everyone to contribute, universities can align their training to equip the young academics to contribute to different aspects of SDG implementation: theoretical underpinnings of SDGs; designing feasible SDG interventions; monitoring progress; evaluating to learn what works and how; results-based management, results-based budgeting; and

SDG agenda, developing solutions, Identifying and evaluating options and pathways, supporting the operationalization of the SDG framework.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES

It is required to understand the causes and dynamics of the sustainable development challenges represented by the SDGs in order to identify the best policies and solutions to address them. Research is critical to filling the many gaps in our understanding of the physical world, the human systems, and the interactions between them that contribute to these challenges.

LOCALISING THE SDGS

Research also has a crucial role in translating the global SDG agenda to national and local contexts – including helping to identify relevant local challenges, priorities for action, and appropriate indicators for measuring local progress.

DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS

In order to drive the development of social and technological innovations and solutions across the SDG challenges, research is needed. This will include the development, testing, and piloting and upscaling of solutions, as well as understanding the conditions and barriers for them being implemented.

Options and Pathways

SDG implementation is "directed," in the sense that we know where we want to get to. However, finding the best pathway to get there can be challenging due to the radically diverse contexts across each community; and the likelihood that every pathway will include some winners and some losers. Research play a key role in helping policymakers and the public to construct, assess and identify the most positive, efficient and coherent pathways to achieving the SDGs.

SDG FRAMEWORK

There are still many gaps and unknowns about how best to implement SDGs. As such, research has a critical role in, for example, determining how to monitor and evaluate progress, how to address interlinkages between the goals systematically, and how to incorporate the SDG agenda into national and regional policy frameworks.

Finally, the research community also has significant expertise and facilities for the collection, management, and analysis of data, which could provide much-needed support to the enormous task of monitoring progress on the SDGs. Equally important is to evaluate the SDG implementation. Development evaluation is still a new field in Sri Lanka. Evaluation is the source of knowledge on what works, what does not, and why. It is therefore, imperative that evaluative knowledge is used to direct and guide the SDG processes. Universities can provide critical leadership to evaluative processes by introducing program evaluation in their curricular, training evaluators, and engaging in conducting credible, robust evalua-