

# PARTNERSHIPS FOR STRONGER NATIONAL DATA SYSTEMS: NSOS AND UNIVERSITIES

Lessons and Institutional Strategies for  
Sustainable Impact

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# FOREWORD

By Jeffrey D. Sachs

President of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network

Reliable, timely, and policy-relevant data are the foundation of effective decision-making for sustainable development. Yet persistent data gaps continue to constrain progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These gaps are not merely technical. They also include institutional, financial, and regulatory challenges. Addressing the challenges requires new forms of cooperation between academia and the national statistical offices (NSOs).

This report makes a timely contribution to enhancing academic-NSO cooperation. Led by *SDGs Today* under the able leadership of Ms. Maryam Rabiee, and undertaken as part of the *Data for Now* initiative, this study provides a detailed, grounded, and operational examination of how universities and NSOs can work together more effectively to strengthen national data ecosystems. It draws on the extensive experience of academics working across diverse contexts.

Universities are, of course, key contributors of data, statistical methods, policy analytics, and technical skills. Universities train statisticians, economists, data scientists, geographers, and policy analysts; push methodological frontiers; and engage in applied research regarding national development priorities. NSOs, in turn,

are entrusted with producing official statistics that underpin public trust, guide policymaking, and enable accountability. In principle, the case for a strong partnership of academia and NSOs is obvious, yet as the report makes clear, there remain important obstacles.

The report documents the strong appetite for data collaboration and the recurring obstacles, including limitations on data access, bureaucratic frictions, funding limitations, misaligned incentives, and mismatched timelines.

To overcome these obstacles, the report emphasizes the benefits of formalized partnerships, clear data governance frameworks, joint capacity-building, experiential learning, and sustainable financing. The report recommends clear Memoranda of Understanding to address data access, ethics, resourcing, and shared priorities.

I am very proud of the work of *SDGs Today* and deeply appreciative of its leadership in producing this report. I strongly commend the report to national governments, statistical authorities, universities, development partners, and all those committed to strengthening data for sustainable development.

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Finally, sincere appreciation is extended to the many Data For Now partner countries, whose collaboration, engagement, and shared commitment to strengthening data systems were essential to the development of this study.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universities serve as transformative hubs for innovation and knowledge creation. They play a vital role in training future leaders and change-makers who will shape the decisions of tomorrow. In parallel, National Statistical Offices (NSOs) are central to collecting, processing, and publishing official statistics that inform national policies, planning, and development priorities.

As the broader data and statistics communities continue to explore practical solutions and partnerships to address data gaps for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global agendas, closer and more strategic collaboration between academia and NSOs has emerged as a promising pathway. Such partnerships can foster more coordinated efforts toward the production of relevant and trusted data for evidence-based policy and decision-making, a practical path to obtaining better and more trusted data for use and uptake.

This study—conducted as part of SDGs Today’s efforts to engage universities in statistical initiatives through the Data For Now initiative, which supports countries in the Global South to strengthen their data ecosystems—presents insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding these partnerships through an academic lens.

The study identified a lack of literature and documentation from the perspective of universities and academics on sustainable partnership models, their perceived benefits and limitations, and the conditions required for success. To address this gap, researchers conducted interviews and a questionnaire with 52 academics across nine Data For Now countries. Their experiences and reflections help us better understand how academia can engage effectively with NSOs to build long-term partnerships to strengthen data ecosystems.

All participants recognized the value and impact of university-NSO collaboration. They supported aligning research agendas with national development priorities, strengthening capacity building, and improving data quality and access for research and policymaking. However, they also raised concerns about political misalignments, limited funding and institutional capacity, and data governance and sharing challenges.

The majority of respondents emphasized the importance of establishing a clear Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between universities and NSOs, sharing seven key recommendations for a sustainable partnership model.

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This study provides diverse and regionally grounded insights that highlight the need for more aligned and sustainable partnerships between NSOs and universities. Strengthening these collaborations and fostering broader cross-sectoral cooperation can play a key role in advancing robust data ecosystems that support national development and global progress.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Formalize collaborative structures through joint planning and sustained engagement mechanisms.
2. Establish regular communication and knowledge-sharing channels between NSOs and universities.
3. Integrate NSO data and statistics into academic research and teaching to enhance relevance and impact.
4. Facilitate experiential learning and capacity building aligned with national statistical needs.
5. Support resource mobilization and sustainability to ensure sustainable collaboration.
6. Align national statistical priorities with local, regional, and global development goals.
7. Leverage intermediary organizations to facilitate and support NSO-university partnerships.

# 1. INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Launched in 2019 by the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, the Data for Now initiative seeks to strengthen countries' capacities to produce timely, high-quality data. Such data is essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a multi-stakeholder initiative operating across diverse international contexts, Data For Now aims to close data gaps and support the development of more effective and streamlined strategies to strengthen data ecosystems. By promoting robust and innovative data practices at both local and national levels, Data For Now strives to enhance the ability to monitor, facilitate, and evaluate policy programs and interventions.

The initiative is co-led by the United Nations Statistics Division, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data. It supports members of the National Statistical Systems in participating countries to leverage innovative data sources, technologies, and methods for the streamlined production and dissemination of better, timelier, and more disaggregated data for sustainable development. It also promotes effective collaboration among members of the National Statistical System and with local, national, and global partners, including intergovernmental organizations, academia, civil society, and the private sector.

Represented by SDGs Today, SDSN is a core partner of the initiative. Since its establishment in July 2020, SDGs Today has engaged in a wide range of projects that promote the production and application of non-traditional data to advance progress on the SDGs.

In alignment with Data For Now's mission, SDGs Today seeks to foster stronger collaboration between National Statistical Offices (NSOs) and academic institutions. Academics contribute to knowledge frontiers, conceptual clarity, and methodological expertise, including analytical capacities to interpret complex datasets and generate insights that directly inform policy and program design, thereby strengthening data quality and reliability at every stage of the data value chain. Such partnerships offer a promising opportunity to bridge the gap between governmental and academic research, support capacity-building efforts, and improve the generation and application of data to support development solutions and evidence-based policy-making.

As a preliminary step in this effort, this study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of 52 academic stakeholders across nine countries (Table 1) in the Global South.

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While the institutions represented in this publication have demonstrated the capacity to utilize data in research and solutions across various scales and subject areas, direct institutional ties with national statistical offices remain limited. Strengthening these connections presents a vital opportunity for future collaboration and innovation.

Table 1: Data For Now Countries Represented by Participants in the Studies

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Republic of Colombia	Republic of Ghana	Jamaica
		
Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan	Kingdom of Morocco	State of Palestine
		
Republic of Senegal	Republic of Sierra Leone	Republic of Tunisia

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This study presents key findings gathered through interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. By understanding the viewpoints of relevant academics, it aims to inform how Data For Now can facilitate cross-sector partnerships to support long-term strengthening of national data and statistical systems.

## 2. SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES IN NSO-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

Advocates in the data and statistics community have long called for moving beyond siloed approaches and fostering cross-sector partnerships, yet practical experience demonstrates the challenges of establishing sustainable collaborations. Through the Data for Now initiative and other efforts, the SDGs Today team has facilitated collaborations between universities and national statistical offices in research initiatives, methodology development, data collection, and advocacy efforts; however, these partnerships have not always been sustained long-term.

Both communities have consistently noted the absence of a systematic approach to such collaborations. Multi-sector partnerships often face barriers such as unclear governance, limited coordination capacity, and short-termism, which hinder sustainability (Gray & Stites, 2013). Furthermore, effective collaborations between statistical offices, academia, and other partners require alignment with user needs, national priorities, and investment in long-term capacity building (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Leveraging our close connections with universities, our team identified an opportunity to conduct a study capturing the perspectives of academics on these critical partnerships, in order to explore how collaborations between academics and NSOs enhance the generation, use, and impact of data and statistics.

## 3. ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT WITHIN NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEMS

### DATA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF NSOS

The literature on the role of NSOs in relation to SDG data remains limited; however, both academic and policy reports consistently emphasize the pivotal importance of NSOs within development efforts. As the primary providers of official and reliable national statistics, NSOs are widely recognized as essential to evidence-based decision-making across sectors (Paris21, 2023).

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Hansen et al. (2024) further underscore NSOs' contributions to technological and societal progress, noting their role in strengthening data governance frameworks, refining methodologies, and serving as authoritative sources of high-quality analytical outputs.

Despite considerable progress in NSO-led development monitoring since the early 2000s, substantial gaps in data coverage and capacity remain (Paris21, 2024). These shortcomings are particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where the demand for reliable SDG data is highest, yet statistical systems often lack the resources to deliver (Confraria et al., 2024). As of 2023, only 35% of low/lower-middle-income countries had fully implemented national statistical plans, in comparison to 89% of high-income nations (United Nations, 2024).

Persistent gaps in disaggregated data, especially for key social, economic, and environmental indicators, have been highlighted as a key barrier in timely and relevant sustainable policy development across the Global South (United Nations, 2024). Gaps in timeliness, reliability, accessibility, and openness of data contribute directly to low trust and limited uptake (OECD, 2021). Over time, this limits the impact of data-driven initiatives but also undermines confidence in institutions responsible for data stewardship.

## **DATA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA**

Literature on governmental statistical efforts, both within and beyond the Global South, consistently stresses that NSOs cannot function in isolation (Committee on National Statistics, 2021). External partnerships are essential to both the past and future effectiveness of NSO outputs and operations (Paris21, 2024). Among such partnerships, academia plays a particularly significant role (Molina et al., 2023).

Related literature underscores the importance of university research in shaping understandings of SDG progress and agendas (Škokić, Jelić, & Jerković, 2025). Studies show a significant, rapid growth in SDG-related research, documenting trends, challenges, and gaps across academic publications (Mishra et al., 2023). While earlier reviews from 2000-2017 found that approximately 85% of all SDG-focused publications were produced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Bautista-Puid et al., 2021) a more recent (2015-2022) systematic bibliometric review of the global research dynamics of the SDGs highlights 1,274 contributing institutions, with nine of the top ten most productive institutions being universities, underscoring the dominant role of HEI in SDG research.

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SDG-related research also enjoys higher engagement and Altmetric scores across academic research bases, with Springer Nature (2025) documenting a 40-50% higher download rate of SDG-focused literature. This is demonstrative of both an academic and policy-related demand for timely SDG data creation and analysis. While academia is the primary stakeholder for SDG-related research and analysis, it remains isolated from the contexts where the underlying data and knowledge are produced.

### **A RATIONALE FOR COLLABORATION: NSOS, ACADEMIA, AND DATA IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

Several studies portray HEI-NSO partnerships as both mutually advantageous and societally valuable (Dhuli and Sevrani, 2025). Such collaborations are credited with strengthening statistical capacity, for both NSOs and academics, addressing skills gaps through training and knowledge exchange, enhancing the policy relevance of data, fostering peer-learning, and building trusted networks that improve the legitimacy and uptake of outputs from both institutions (Hansen et al., 2024). A Paris21 (2023) report further highlights the expansion of data ecosystems through joint research initiatives as pivotal in enabling governments to respond effectively to both immediate and emerging sustainable development challenges.

However, as Bautista-Puid et al. (2021) emphasize, stark asymmetries remain in SDG-related academic data production across the Global South. Uvere et al. (2025) argue that the lack of sustainable and nationally produced data research represents a critical barrier to both development and statistical analysis in many developing countries. They link this gap to weak collaboration between NSOs and domestic academic institutions, where restricted access to official data and limited channels of engagement undermine developmental progress and constrain the generation of nationally relevant insights.

A persistent epistemic bias favoring research from the Global North continues to shape which questions, methods, and evidence are considered legitimate, therefore, marginalizing locally driven enquiry and knowledge dissemination (Engebretsen and Greenhalgh, 2025). This overlooks the autonomy, potential, and capacity of many underrepresented HEIs in the Global South (United Nations, 2024). Research on SDG strategies shows that local engagement and leadership build capacity, enable context-specific inquiry, and foster diverse, grounded perspectives on sustainable development (Paris, 2023; Hansen et al., 2024; Dhuli and Sevrani, 2025). This rationale supports calls to strengthen outputs from both NSOs and HEIs in developing nations.

## BOX 1. PARTNERSHIPS FOR SDG 14 MONITORING

The Ghana Statistical Services (GSS) has been deploying citizen science to monitor and report on SDG indicator 14.1.1.b, which focuses on the index of coastal eutrophication and floating plastic debris density. To strengthen this effort, the GSS has collaborated closely with non-profit organizations, civil society organizations, universities, and other stakeholder groups to develop robust methodologies to collect and analyze data, and enhance national SDG reporting.

Through GSS's dedicated leadership in establishing cross-sectoral partnerships and sustaining the resources to co-lead activities, they established a partnership with the University of Ghana, through which they developed an initiative to collect data along sandy beaches in African coastal environments. This citizen science project actively engaged local secondary school students and teachers, resulting not only in the collection of valuable data for SDG 14 monitoring but also in improved well-being, increased environmental awareness, behavioral changes that reduce litter, and a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of marine pollution.

Subsequently, in the next phase of the initiative, the GSS contributed to the UK's Oceans Country Partnership Programme, which led to the launch of a graduate program at the University of Cape Coast's Africa Centre of Excellence in Coastal Resilience (ACECoR). This initiative seeks to build West African expertise in marine litter data, analysis, and policy, while strengthening capacity building, training, and the development of a data ecosystem to facilitate knowledge sharing and data production for evidence-based decision-making. This partnership underscores the role of NSOs in supporting academic programs that align research, education, and policy toward achieving the SDGs.



*Multistakeholder workshop on Citizen Science for SDG 14 hosted by SDSN and the GSS in Accra, Ghana, 2023.*

# 4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining interviews, responses from a questionnaire, and expert input to gather insights. The following section outlines the data collection and analysis procedures.

## 4.1 PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT

The SDSN network consists of over 2,000 member institutions, primarily universities, and is coordinated through 57 National and Regional Networks. Drawing on this global network, SDGs Today carried out an internal review to identify member institutions operating in selected Data For Now partner countries. From this, senior academic stakeholders involved in data and SDG-related research were identified as potential contributors.

Academics were contacted virtually using university directories and existing SDSN connections. Each received a brief overview of the project, and those who expressed interest took part in either virtual interviews, completed the questionnaire, or engaged through a combination of these methods. A total of 52 academics took part in the research from the end of 2024 through 2025. These participants represent 31 academic institutions with a wide range of research interests (Table 2). The identities of individual participants are protected and remain anonymous throughout the analysis presented in this publication.

Table 2: Distribution of Academic Participants and Represented Universities

	Colombia	Ghana	Jamaica	Jordan	Morocco	Palestine	Senegal	Sierra Leone	Tunisia
Participants	6	6	5	4	5	9	5	6	6
Universities	4	2	2	4	3	6	2	3	5

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## 4.2. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

This research study employs two primary methods: interviews and a questionnaire. Through a qualitative triangulation of these approaches, the study seeks to address the core questions and objectives, capturing a broad spectrum of academic perspectives and experiences. While questionnaire data provided a streamlined and easily evaluable means of gauging participant views, the more reflexive, semi-structured formats of interviews enriched the findings. These opened avenues for deeper inquiry and broader thematic exploration.

SDGs Today places a strong emphasis on grounded perspectives and contextual nuance in its work. Accordingly, the use of diverse qualitative methods was essential to unpack the complexities of experiences in a way that reflects the richness and diversity of participant input.

### 4.2.1 QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was the most widely used research method in this project. The questionnaire was structured to provide concise and practical insights into key areas of interest. Questions explored participants' perspectives on potential collaboration with NSOs, perceived benefits and challenges, views on the ideal nature of NSO-university engagement, approaches to resource management, and the extent of their institution's prior involvement with NSOs. The questionnaire served as a foundational tool for understanding participants' experiences and perspectives, providing a numerically and empirically rich source of information that allowed for straightforward comparison and analysis.

### 4.2.2 INTERVIEWS

Using semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses, while interviewers guided the conversation toward emerging topics. Interviews typically lasted between 45-60 minutes. Each session began with interviewers introducing themselves and restating the purpose and scope of the research project. Participants were then invited to discuss their academic and professional backgrounds. These initial questions helped establish context and rapport, enabling richer discussions on NSO initiatives, including participants' ideas, concerns, institutional histories, and visions for future collaboration.

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### 4.2.3 EXPERT CONSULTATIONS

While the study's findings are primarily based on input from academics gathered through interviews and a questionnaire, researchers also consulted experts with experience in both academia and national statistical offices, as well as those who have worked at the intersection of these sectors or have advocated for greater cross-sector partnerships between the two communities.

### 4.3 STUDY LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this research, primarily due to the small sample size of 52 participants from nine countries. While the study aims to explore experiences across the Global South, it is not intended to be fully representative. Rather, it offers a focused and nuanced insight from the perspective of academics into data collaborations with NSOs.

## 5. KEY FINDINGS AND EMERGING THEMES

This section presents findings derived from participant input, synthesizing responses to study questions and information shared during interviews into three overarching categories: benefits and opportunities, challenges and concerns, and requirements for partnerships. Within each category, the five most significant themes identified across participants are presented. The thematic analysis reported in this section quantifies the frequency with which themes were raised. The thematic analysis quantified in this section represents the frequency with which key themes were raised by participants. Reported percentages, therefore, indicate the share of participants who referenced a theme at least once. These percentages do not sum to 100% and should not be interpreted as representing mutually exclusive categories.

It is worth noting that the findings presented below reflect varying levels of existing engagement between academics and NSOs. Out of the 52 academics consulted, 11 had prior collaborative experience with an NSO, two had attempted but failed to form a partnership, and 39 indicated that they had not collaborated with an NSO due to a lack of opportunity, rather than a lack of interest, highlighting the limited extent of collaboration and the significant latent interest within the academic community.

## BOX 2. AREAS OF SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION REPORTED BY PARTICIPANTS

Participants with experience collaborating with their respective NSOs shared examples of successful collaborations and identified areas they would recommend to other academics as best practices.

- **Capacity Building:** Universities leading training programs, workshops, and consultations to build NSO capacity, with a focus on thematic priorities aligned between the institutions.
- **Research Support:** Universities leading research efforts to address technical questions and data gaps.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** University support for data collection, data analysis, co-development of reports featuring joint work, and dissemination of findings.
- **Data Access:** NSOs provided disaggregated data that benefited academic research.

### 5.1 BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

While participants were overwhelmingly in favor of exploring partnerships with their respective NSOs, they did highlight some challenges that they believe have been impediments to establishing such partnerships, or that they foresee as potential challenges to initiating discussions with NSOs.

#### RESEARCH QUALITY, CONTINUITY, AND INTEGRITY

A significant number of respondents, approximately 43%, expressed concerns about the challenges in ensuring methodological alignment and research rigor, particularly when collaborating across institutional boundaries. They noted that differences in research priorities, timelines, and expectations can make it difficult to maintain a consistent methodological approach. They stated that the NSO's priorities and approaches are often tied to government and political mandates that may not align with how academics would typically pursue a research question.

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Respondents also suggested that the risk of data being used unfavorably or without the NSO's authorization could pose an obstacle to certain analyses being published, making it difficult to maintain and sustain partnerships. They further emphasized the need for consistent, transparent, and replicable data-sharing practices to address the challenges of establishing partnerships between NSOs and universities.

### **DATA ACCESS, PRIVACY, AND GOVERNANCE**

Academics believe that ensuring data privacy and protecting sensitive data collected by the NSO is important, but it could also be a hindrance. Concerns were raised by 40% percent of participants about NSOs providing limited access to data due to sharing restrictions related to confidentiality, security, or political constraints. They noted that this could pose a challenge when utilizing the necessary data for research projects, as such limitations may hinder data-driven analysis and delay research progress. Participants also mentioned that they might not always be granted access to the granular data they need for the same reasons, making it difficult to design and plan long-term research collaborations or maintain continuity across projects.

Respondents believed these restrictions could also stem from concerns about data privacy, anonymization, and ethical use, issues that would need to be addressed when establishing partnerships between institutions. They acknowledged that NSOs may be concerned about the risks of data misuse and manipulation, emphasizing the importance of establishing clear governance protocols, transparent data use agreements, and proper acknowledgment of data sources. Building trust and clarity around data-sharing practices was seen as essential for fostering research collaborations.

### **RESOURCE AND CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS**

Constraints related to resources and capacity were identified as challenges to sustained partnerships by 34% of the respondents. They highlighted that insufficient funding for faculty, students, and long-term research engagement is not always provided through such partnerships, and universities cannot always sustain resources for collaborative projects. This results in fewer faculty and students who can get involved. They also noted that universities' limited technical infrastructure for handling large or complex datasets, and the high costs associated with it, are challenges academics face and prevent them from fully benefiting from partnerships that provide access to data for research.

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## **MISALIGNMENT OF OBJECTIVES AND TIMELINES**

Differences in priorities, timelines, and methodologies were identified as significant challenges to NSO-university partnerships by 29% of participants. They emphasized that the misalignment between academic research cycles and NSO reporting schedules remains a key concern. This issue is compounded by the difficulties in coordinating goals, deliverables, and communication across institutions. Consistent with concerns highlighted earlier, several respondents also noted that political influence or perceived bias may undermine research independence and affect the progression of research activities over time.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUREAUCRATIC CHALLENGES**

Approximately 24% of participants believed that administrative and bureaucratic challenges can create hesitation toward establishing partnerships between universities and NSOs. They noted that lengthy government approval processes, complex documentation requirements, and bureaucratic delays often act as major hindrances. Participants also mentioned that administrative bottlenecks and limited flexibility in procedures do not always align with the operational systems of universities, making coordination difficult and time-consuming.

These challenges can also lead to potential discontinuity in collaboration due to institutional processes, which can disrupt the progress of research or training programs. Participants highlighted that such obstacles could result in inconsistencies in data-sharing schedules, delays in project implementation, and general disruptions, particularly when there are staff turnovers, structural changes, or shifts in institutional priorities.

## **5.2 BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

All participants agreed that partnerships between NSOs and universities offer many mutually beneficial opportunities and expressed full support for efforts to establish them. This section outlines five of the main themes that emerged from the questionnaire and interviews.

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## **RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGICAL RIGOR**

Collaboration with NSO statisticians was believed to strengthen research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques, improving the overall quality and credibility of academic outputs and national policies. The majority of the respondents, approximately 83%, indicated that forming partnerships with their respective NSOs would sustainably enhance research initiatives and methodological rigor. They emphasized that such partnerships would allow for better alignment of their research agendas and national development priorities, ensuring academic work contributes to policymaking and the formation of programs that meaningfully benefit their communities.

Participants further highlighted that such partnerships with NSOs would improve the accuracy and credibility of their research outputs. Access to quality and timely data was viewed as a major advantage in the development of research frameworks that would, in turn, be valuable to decision-makers, practitioners, and researchers beyond the academic setting.

Additionally, many respondents expressed interest in developing joint research projects with NSOs. They noted that such partnerships could provide increased access to resources and expertise, enabling the utilization of more innovative methodologies and securing sustainable funding to support student engagement and training, while promoting transdisciplinary research approaches.

## **DATA ACCESS AND QUALITY DATA**

The majority of respondents believed that access to high-quality, timely data through the NSO could strengthen the relevance and impact of their research, teaching, and applied projects. Analysis of the data shows that 71% of participants highlighted data access and quality as a key opportunity for partnerships between universities and NSOs. Participants stressed that access to high-quality, timely, and disaggregated data can support research development, data-driven projects, the co-creation of nationally relevant indicators and policy-relevant analytics, enhance validation efforts, and develop accessible information systems. This emphasis reflects the growing need for reliable data for evidence-based decision-making and innovation within academia and government.

Respondents noted that improved access to official datasets would enable universities to conduct more relevant and impactful research, while NSOs could benefit from academic expertise in data analysis, methodological innovation, and the integration of new technologies such as machine learning or geospatial analysis.

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Ensuring data quality and interoperability was also viewed as essential for maximizing the value of existing data. Participants suggested that partnerships focused on aligning data efforts could create more robust and transparent data ecosystems that support national policy and development agendas.

### **INSTITUTIONAL VISIBILITY AND COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES**

Academics want their universities to have greater visibility among NSOs and national decision-makers so they can participate in the process. A total of 45% of the respondents believed that partnerships with the NSO could significantly enhance the visibility and relevance of universities in areas such as research, data innovations, and policy impact, ultimately leading to more meaningful collaborations across different sectors. They emphasized that being included in national sustainability strategies would highlight the universities' contributions and also strengthen their role in collaborative efforts focused on research, data processing, and policy development.

Respondents also conveyed that such collaborative approaches can stimulate greater innovation by creating an environment that values diverse inputs, ideas, and perspectives. Furthermore, they believed that building partnerships with NSOs could open new opportunities for universities to form more sustainable collaborations that extend beyond academic networks and connect them with a wider range of stakeholders.

### **POLICY AND SOCIETAL IMPACT**

The opportunity to make a tangible contribution to policy development and create societal impacts was a strong theme among the respondents. Approximately 43 % considered this to be the main priority of such partnerships. Many participants expressed that being able to see their research influence real-world decision-making was an important aspect of collaborating with an NSO.

The integration of academic research into the policymaking process was widely regarded as a vital pathway for translating knowledge into action. Respondents noted that research-based evidence can support development priorities, particularly those articulated through frameworks such as the SDGs. In this way, partnerships between researchers and NSOs are seen as an effective mechanism for ensuring that data and analysis directly inform strategies for sustainable planning by leveraging links to government bodies.

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Several participants also emphasized the importance of this collaboration for advancing climate resilience and environmental protection. Through the use of academic research, governments are better equipped to design policies that address both broader long-term resilience goals but also to the specific needs and priorities of local communities.

### **CAPACITY BUILDING AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE**

Only 28% of the respondents identified capacity building and knowledge exchange as a central priority in partnerships between universities and NSOs. They viewed joint training programs as mutually beneficial for university faculty and students, while also strengthening the technical capabilities of the NSOs. Some participants explained that their expertise and skills can support the integration of new tools and methodologies into systems that support the national development agenda.

Participants also underscored the value of knowledge exchange in fostering links between academics and public policy. When academics are granted access to NSO data and statistics that inform their research, they can generate evidence to support policy development. This exchange between the two sectors improves policy relevance and enhances the social impact of academic research.

Furthermore, participants suggested that joint capacity-building initiatives could provide valuable opportunities for students and early-career researchers to engage directly with national data collection activities, such as censuses and surveys.

Such involvement helps students develop practical skills while supporting NSOs with gaps in data and analytical capacity. In addition, faculty and technical staff could contribute their expertise to improve data quality, develop innovative methodologies, and assist in designing training materials or workshops.

## **5.3 ENABLING CONDITIONS**

Participants in this study were asked to identify the key requirements for establishing partnerships between NSOs and universities, to facilitate concrete planning and informed discussions on how to develop such collaborations. This section presents their input and reveals areas of consensus and points of less frequent mention of several key elements that should be included.

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## **CORE PARTNERSHIP REQUIREMENT**

Almost all participants identified the establishment of a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between NSOs and universities as the main requirement for a successful partnership. According to the participants, the MoU serves as a framework that clearly outlines the roles of each party, presents objectives that are aligned with institutional priorities, and enables long-term institutional commitments rather than one-off projects. MoUs are essential for aligning efforts across data sharing, training programs, and research agendas.

## **SUPPORTING PARTNERSHIP COMPONENTS**

Funding was viewed as one of the most important elements of a sustainable collaboration. The limited availability of resources for research projects, data acquisition, and training programs at universities constrains the feasibility of joint efforts. However, exploring joint funding opportunities that contribute to the objectives of both parties and support collaborative activities can foster sustained partnerships and create additional opportunities to raise resources that benefit all partners. There was a broad consensus that dedicated funding is critical for collaborations.

Data access guidelines and governance frameworks were also emphasized by most participants, particularly given the increasing role of artificial intelligence (AI) and non-traditional data in research. They highlighted the need for clear protocols to ensure the secure handling, storage, and use of sensitive data, as well as to prevent breaches of privacy.

This reflects participants' concerns about the ethical use of data, privacy, and clarity around data ownership, as well as the critical role of these frameworks when establishing partnerships with NSOs.

Respondents also viewed training and capacity building as a critical component of such partnerships. They highlighted that both parties have complementary technical skills that can contribute to joint efforts and support mutual learning. NSOs can help universities strengthen applied statistical skills, while universities can enhance NSOs' analytical capacity and help inform research agendas that address data and research gaps. Building on complementary capacities across institutions and creating opportunities to jointly develop skills in emerging areas AI, GIS, among others, were also considered strong enablers of NSO-university partnerships.

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## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Participants also highlighted the need for dedicated staff from both institutions to coordinate partnership activities. Assigning dedicated coordinators to oversee the development of the partnership, deliverables, management, and monitoring of progress enables greater commitment, streamlines communication channels to move activities forward and reduce delays, and enhances overall coordination. This suggests a recognition of the importance of operational mechanisms in addition to the technical elements of collaborations.

While infrastructure support and institutional buy-in from universities received fewer mentions, they remain important for ensuring long-term sustainability and alignment with broader organizational goals. Participants shared that these supports enable large-scale data processing and analytics, more secure data sharing, storage, and computing capacity, as well as enhanced access to data for other stakeholders.

Not all NSOs and universities are prepared to establish these partnerships and may lack a clear model to guide their development. The readiness of both institutions should be assessed to support the creation of sustainable, long-term partnerships. This can be achieved through low-risk pilot projects that evaluate the area of collaboration (e.g., data sharing, teaching, capacity building), communication, and workflow processes. Moreover, organizing joint workshops for training or knowledge exchange can facilitate the assessment of data management practices and institutional expertise. Smaller-scale exercises involving data sharing and the testing of privacy compliance and security measures can also serve as indicators of readiness for collaboration.



Figure 1. Comparison of reported benefits and opportunities (left) and barriers and challenges (right) in NSO-university partnerships, expressed as percentages of respondents.

# 6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING AND SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Obtaining insights from academics regarding recommendations for these critical partnerships constituted a key component of this study. This section presents the principal recommendations provided by participants, alongside expert guidance, to inform and support collaborations between national statistical offices and universities through the Data for Now initiative and beyond.

## 6.1 STAKEHOLDER INSIGHTS AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen collaboration between NSOs and universities, participants in the study emphasized the importance of creating formal partnerships that combine the expertise of both institutions. The recommendations focus on fostering ongoing dialogue, sharing data and knowledge, integrating NSO data and statistics into research and teaching, supporting experiential learning, coordinating resources, and aligning national priorities with broader regional and global development goals.

### **1** FORMALIZE COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURES

Collaborative structures should be formalized to facilitate sustained collaboration between NSOs and universities. This includes details pertaining to identifying data gaps, co-defining research questions that mutually align with both parties' priorities, developing joint work plans or research agendas, creating continuous dialogue and networking platforms, and organizing seminars, conferences, or forums to engage both academic and statistical communities.

### **2** PROMOTE COMMUNICATION AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Regular communication channels should be established to align goals and expectations, share information, and coordinate efforts on SDG-related and other statistical data initiatives. Knowledge exchange can be further enhanced through guest lectures, workshops, joint reports, and collaborative research, allowing NSO experts and academic researchers to learn from each other's approaches, methodologies, and tools.

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### **3 INTEGRATE NSO DATA AND STATISTICS INTO ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND TEACHING**

Universities should be encouraged to incorporate real national datasets into research projects and teaching activities. This approach enhances data reliability, ensures that students are trained on real-world challenges, and provides research opportunities that directly contribute to national statistical priorities. Promoting open-access dissemination of anonymized datasets can further broaden participation and impact.

### **4 FACILITATE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND CAPACITY BUILDING**

Partnerships should include programs such as internships, fellowships, and collaborative projects to provide students with hands-on experience in statistical work. This ensures that academic research is closely aligned with national statistical needs while equipping future professionals with practical skills relevant to national development goals.

### **5 SUPPORT RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Joint fundraising initiatives and resource-sharing arrangements should be pursued to ensure that collaborative efforts are financially sustainable. This reduces the burden on any single institution and strengthens the long-term viability of partnership activities.

### **6 ALIGN LOCAL, NATIONAL, AND GLOBAL PRIORITIES**

Partnerships should connect national statistical priorities to broader local, regional, national, and global development goals, including the SDGs. Strategies should include developing roadmaps for scaling up initiatives, engaging private-sector actors, and promoting regional cooperation to share methodologies, tools, and best practices.

### **7 LEVERAGE INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATIONS**

Intermediary bodies such as SDSN can play a critical role in initiating and supporting collaborations between NSOs and universities. These organizations can act as neutral facilitators, convening stakeholders, providing technical or logistical support, and enabling knowledge exchange and sharing of best practices to ensure that partnerships are effectively launched and maintained.

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## 6. 2 EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

This section presents recommendations from experts at the intersection of academic and statistical communities, solicited to complement the input from study participants. These expert insights provide additional perspectives to strengthen and broaden the study's findings.

**Encourage Collaboration Through Grants:** Donors providing grants to academic institutions or NSOs should stipulate that recipients actively collaborate, which in turn incentivizes and encourages partnerships through more formal structures. This approach fosters the development of clear roles, expectations, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks, where lessons learned can support future partnerships.

**Develop an MoU Template:** An MoU template should be developed to streamline discussions between NSOs and universities, ensuring that the key issues identified by respondents in this study are addressed. This will provide both parties with a framework of topics and details to include, which can be adjusted to the institution's requirements and the activities outlined in the document.

**Focus Areas for Collaboration:** A catalogue of areas of collaboration based on national data needs should be developed to inspire diverse partnerships. Moreover, collaborations should encourage more community engagement, which can include leveraging citizen data, among other approaches.

**Contribute to Statistical Principles:** Academics should actively contribute to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS), particularly in preventing the misuse of statistics. This can include training on ethical statistical practices, contributing to methodological standards, and conducting research that highlights potential misinterpretations of data.

**Develop Context-Specific Standards:** Establishing context-specific standards for statistical operations is essential. Partnerships between academics and NSOs can combine technical expertise and local knowledge to create standards that improve data quality, ensure consistency, and make official statistics more relevant and usable.

**Build Integrated Curriculum:** NSOs and universities can collaborate to develop a curriculum focused on essential skills, retooling data- and statistics-related teaching approaches, and remain flexible to accommodate context-specific use cases and thematic priorities. The curriculum should also be designed to stay up to date with the latest data developments and technologies.

## 7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study opens several potential avenues for future research, including:

- Conducting further and more extensive studies that build upon and deepen the report's core research questions, and showcase success stories and best practices.
- Exploring how the report's findings can support the formation or expansion of NSO-academic research partnerships, including the development of tailored MOUs and collaboration plans for member countries.
- Examining NSO-academic relationships in the Global South from the NSO perspective, to enhance understanding of each institution's mandate, priorities, and capabilities, thereby overcoming barriers to collaboration.
- Expanding the research focus to better understand partnership models among NSOs, universities, and the private sector.
- Investigating sustainable financing models that can support collaborations between institutions that often face resource and funding constraints, despite their vital roles in national data and statistical systems.
- Developing frameworks to measure and evaluate the impact of data and statistics generated through these partnerships.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study reveals a common aspiration to create meaningful, sustained collaboration between academia and statistical offices that can transform how data supports national development. Yet, without formal agreements, dedicated resources, and mutual understanding, these partnerships risk remaining ad hoc and short-lived. The study calls for a shift from informal cooperation to institutionalized partnerships built on trust, shared priorities, and aligned timelines. By investing in these relationships, countries can accelerate progress toward stronger, more inclusive data ecosystems that empower evidence-driven policies and sustainable development.

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