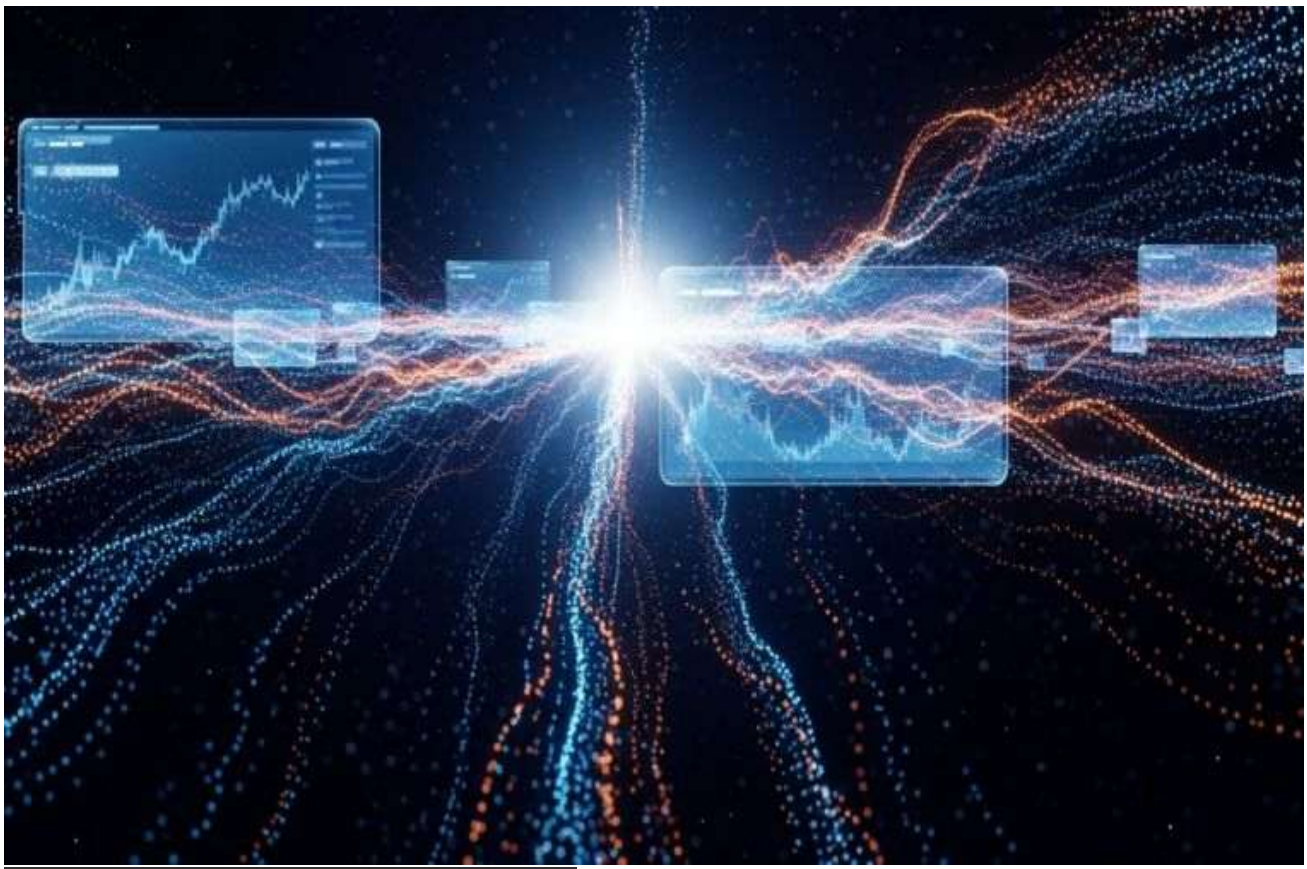
Timely, quality data is the cornerstone of evidence-based policymaking in India

India's statistical challenges call for the urgent need for timely, credible data to ensure policies are based on fact, not perception

By Ashish Kumar and Chavi Asrani Updated: January 02, 2026



Representative imagery | ManoramaAI

The establishment of the United Nations Statistical Commission in 1946 marked a significant step in recognising the vital role of data in fostering peace, reducing poverty, and supporting global cooperation.

Eight decades later, in a world shaped by shifting geopolitics and rapid digital transformation, the relevance of robust, internationally comparable data has only increased.

The OECD's Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21) discussion paper underscores how insights extracted from data can be pivotal in shaping policies—sometimes compelling governments to act, at other times serving as symbolic support, or even influencing the conceptual foundations of policymaking.

Data in policymaking

The PARIS21 framework categorises data use in policy into three forms:

> **Instrumental use**: Data directly reveals facts that necessitate government action, driving evidence-based policies.
> **Symbolic use**: Data is used to support or legitimise existing policies, often serving as a façade rather than a genuine driver of decisions.
> **Conceptual use**: Data influences attitudes and perspectives, which can shape the broader policy environment over time.

While official statistics are widely regarded as more reliable than alternative sources—thanks to their broad geographic coverage, methodological rigour, and the authority of government institutions—policymakers must remain aware of the limitations inherent in quantitative data.

It is essential to look beyond the numbers and consider the social, cultural, and economic contexts that give meaning to data, helping to answer the critical questions of "why," "how," and "so what" in the policy process. Data should be viewed as one factor among many, with policy rationales informed by a broader understanding of context.

Achievements and limitations

Several examples from India highlight both the achievements and limitations of relying solely on quantitative metrics in policy. The Jan Dhan Yojana, a major financial inclusion initiative, achieved a Guinness World Record for the number of bank accounts opened in a single week. However, subsequent reports revealed that many account holders lacked awareness of their accounts and access to their passbooks, rendering them unable to benefit from direct transfers. This disconnect demonstrates the danger of focusing exclusively on single numerical targets while overlooking the actual impact on people's lives. The right measure to track the progress should be the number of active Jan Dhan Accounts, defined as those accounts where transactions are carried out at least once a year.

Similarly, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, launched to distribute food grains during the COVID-19 pandemic, succeeded in delivering large quantities of rations to the poor. Yet, the Global Hunger Report in 2025 ranked India 102nd—down from 55th in 2014—indicating that distribution metrics alone do not capture the full picture of nutritional security. There is also a need to develop indicators for regular monitoring of the nutritional intake of the population and measuring the outcome in terms of physical fitness.

Focusing solely on kilograms of food distributed may obscure persistent barriers such as limited access and insufficient nutrition among the poor.

The crisis of credibility in India's statistical systems

In recent years, the reliability of India's statistical infrastructure has come under scrutiny. Delays in releasing National Sample Survey (NSS) data and the delay in the conduct of the population census due to COVID-19 have contributed to a lack of timely data.

The base year for important indices like the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) and Consumer Price Index (CPI) needs immediate revision so that the basket of goods includes items currently being purchased by consumers and does not include obsolete items.

Additionally, the final Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures are released with a significant lag, and while advance estimates are available sooner, they often contain both meaningful information and noise. In the absence of up-to-date, representative and relevant data, this results in a lack of quality of GDP and other macro-economic indicators, as has been pointed out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in their latest review of India.

IMF has primarily assessed the quality of GDP numbers as less reliable due to an old base, the lack of adoption of double deflation, the lack of convergence in production side and expenditure side GDP, inadequate capture of the unorganised sector and lack of seasonal adjustment in quarterly data and lack of granularity of data. In the absence of scientifically correct data, policy decisions may be based on perceptions rather than facts, resulting in ineffective solutions that fail to address real challenges. High-quality, trustworthy data is critical for effective policy and accountability, and the future of democracy depends on placing reliable statistics at the centre of governance.

Building a robust data ecosystem

The PARIS21 discussion paper emphasises that the use of data in policymaking depends on both technical and non-technical factors. Technical aspects involve the skills, tools, and resources required to produce and use data, while non-technical considerations relate to the broader political economy and the interests of various stakeholders. Engaging policymakers and data users early in the data production process—by providing platforms to express data needs and raising awareness of policy changes—can ensure the creation of relevant data and increase its use in decision-making.

To support effective, targeted government interventions, data must be timely, disaggregated, granular, accurate and reliable. Accessibility is key—not just for policymakers, but also for the public, to ensure accountability. The processes of data collection, interpretation, and use should be independent and neutral, with systems designed to serve citizens.

Institutions should involve civil society in designing data infrastructure, ensuring transparency and inclusivity. Data practices must be viewed as social and cultural processes, not just technical tasks, benefiting from the input of citizens, social scientists, and activists.

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