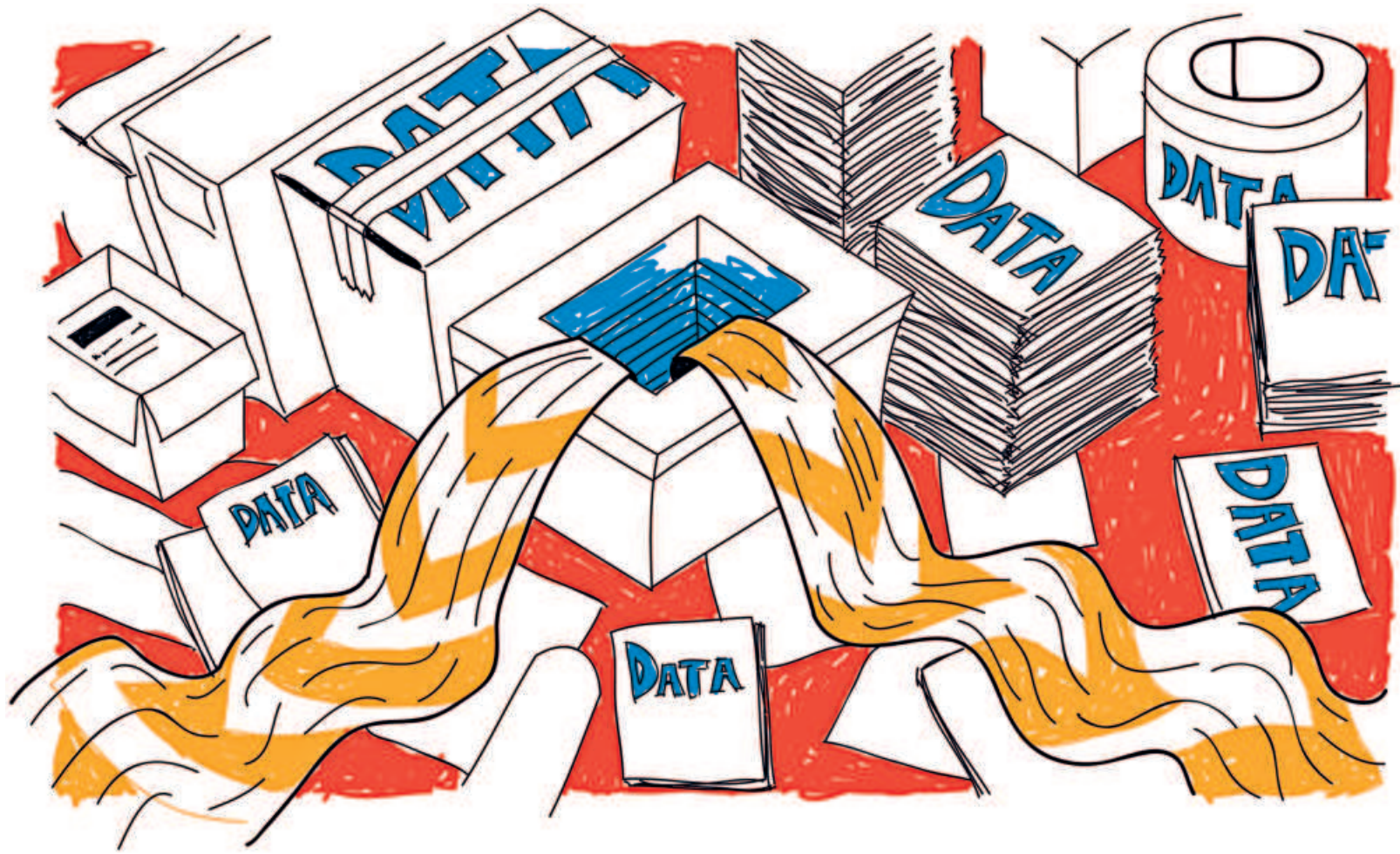# WE DON'T NEED MORE DATA
We need to understand it

> In many instances, monitoring became a bureaucratic exercise. Data was gathered because it was required, not because it mattered.

SABBIR RAHMAN KHAN AND MD MARJAD MIR KAMELI

Back in the 1950s and 60s, aid agencies were largely driven by faith and anecdote. Progress was measured in tons of food or miles of road. In the 1960s, economists at the World Bank redefined how aid was understood. "Without measurement," they stated, "we cannot tell whether progress exists." Those few words marked the beginning of the practice of counting, tracking, and comparing human progress. This triggered the development sector to rely on data to tell its story. Moving forward, the newly formed World Bank and the newly formed UN agencies began measuring economic growth in developing nations. Gross Domestic Product, school enrolment rates, and birth statistics opened new avenues to measure human development.

It was the time of clipboards and paper surveys, of census drives and handwritten ledgers. Back then, the data collection process was lengthy, expensive, and often incomplete. But the underlying objective was strong: what gets measured gets managed. By the late 1980s and 1990s, this practice had evolved into something bigger. The rise of results-based management (RBM) and the logical framework approach turned data from background evidence into the centrepiece of decision-making. Aid agencies and development partners wanted metrics, impact indicators, baselines, targets, and evaluations.

Then came the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. For the first time, the world agreed on eight goals that would define success for an entire generation—poverty reduction, universal education, gender equality—all expressed through numbers. It was an ambitious vision but also posed bottlenecks. Countries that could not count were left out of the count. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) expanded this ambition but also exposed the limits of the global data system. With 232 indicators to track, even the most advanced national statistical systems struggled to keep up.

UNCTAD reported that more than half of developing countries still lack reliable data for half of the SDG indicators. Experts call this phenomenon the "data paradox," meaning we have more numbers than ever, but less usable knowledge than we need. The key reason is that development data exists in silos. It is scattered across ministries, development partners, NGOs, and statistical agencies. Projects build parallel systems, each with its own dashboards, definitions, and what not. And when the project ends, so does the data stream.

Data was supposed to make development transparent, but it also made it transactional. What was once only about people gradually became about numbers. Development actors began to design projects that looked "measurable". Governments designed programmes that would only fit the indicators, not moving beyond counting outputs towards understanding outcomes. To address this shortcoming, different frameworks were introduced.

The DCED Standard, MERL, MEL, and related models were designed to push the sector past mere output-counting and towards genuine outcome-level understanding. RBM (Results-Based Management) introduced a logic chain linking inputs to impact; DCED offered a verifiable method to prove market systems change; and MERL tried to integrate data, evidence, and learning into a single cycle. Later came frameworks such as PDIA (Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation) and adaptive management, both advocating learning by doing rather than predicting.

Each model was an improvement on the last. However, one underlying challenge persisted: the sector became better at measuring activity than understanding change. Indicators multiplied faster than real insight. Reporting systems expanded while the practice of reflection lagged behind. Everyone wanted evidence of impact, yet the mechanisms built to generate it often produced compliance, not

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comprehension. In many instances, monitoring became a bureaucratic exercise. Data was gathered because it was required, not because it mattered.
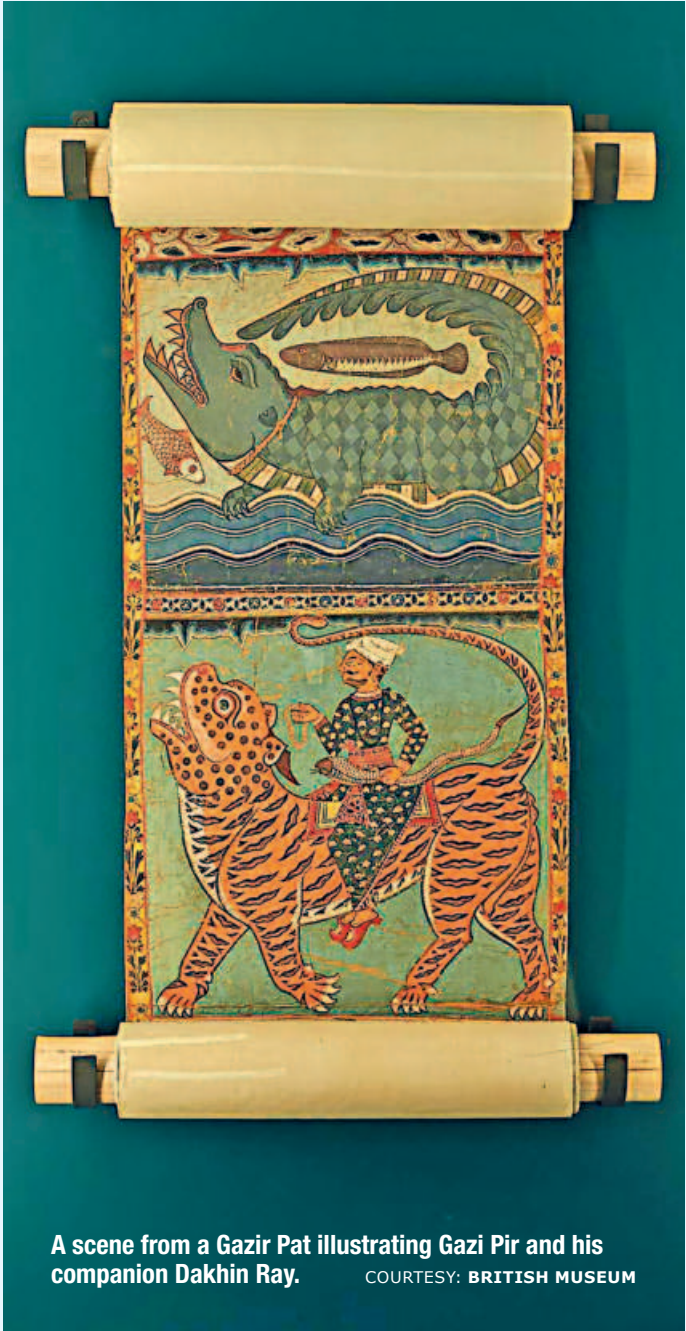
Meanwhile, technology transformed the world of data itself. Satellites, digital surveys, and real-time dashboards were introduced to connect data with decision-making processes more efficiently. "Big data for development" became the new frontier, opening possibilities to predict migration, map poverty, or track deforestation from space. But the reality appeared different: data quality, interoperability, and ethical use lagged far behind innovation. Much of what is collected remains unverified, unshared, or unused—particularly in the Global South, where institutional capacity and coordination remain uneven.

South Asia offers a textbook example of this paradox. The region generates an immense amount of data through multiple development projects over the decades. Unfortunately, data integration remains limited. Most development programmes still maintain project-specific systems that fail to speak to one another. Learning captured in one project seldom informs another. Ministries maintain separate systems; NGOs track their own indicators; national statistical offices operate under their own mandates. The result is a fragmented data ecosystem, where progress is measured in spreadsheets rather than outcomes.

Globally, the development sector is entering what some call the "post-project era", where the impact of interventions depends less on discrete outputs and more on how knowledge and data circulate across systems. As development projects do not stay forever due to fixed timelines, what matters is how data outlives the projects that generated it.

The lesson from seven decades of data-driven development is not that we need more numbers, but that we need better conversations around them. Counting is easy. Connecting is hard. What matters now is not how much we collect, but whether our systems—global, regional, and local—can make sense of what we already have. The question is no longer about data scarcity, but about data governance: who holds it, who uses it, and to what end.

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Faith, art, and livelihood in patachitra
The quiet loss of an audio-visual storytelling tradition

A scene from a Gazir Pat illustrating Gazi Pir and his companion Dakhin Ray. COURTESY: **BRITISH MUSEUM**

MD RAIHAN RAJU

The Bengali word pat literally means cloth, rooted in the Sanskrit patta, and chitra means paintings. Therefore, the etymological meaning of patachitra corresponds to a form of paintings on cloth. In practice, the term patachitra refers to a distinctive form of Bengali folklore—an indigenous audio-visual storytelling tradition that emerged within the sacred Bengali landscape. This particular Bengali form of storytelling is often translated as scroll painting due to the distinctive rectangular size and shape of the pats. People who are engaged in making patachitra are called patuas, comprising both Hindus and Muslims. Patuas serve as an intersecting node between visual representation and oral narrative, performing an audio-visual storytelling tradition known as pater gan. While performing, the patuas slowly unroll the pats (scrolls) and unfold the corresponding stories, in which the two wings of audio and visual are merged into one body of art—better described as one discursive tradition of knowledge.

Patachitra is considered one of the oldest Bengali forms of audio-visual storytelling; however, there is no historical clarity regarding when it specifically emerged in Bengal. Amid ongoing scholarly debates about its origins, some researchers suggest that patachitra first emerged under Buddhist influence and later absorbed a wide range of narrative traditions—mythological stories, Hindu gods and goddesses, local motifs, characters from the mangal kavya, and elements of Sufi and fakir practices deeply embedded in the Bengali sacred landscape.

Indigenous methods of fabric preparation, natural colour making, drawing patterns, tone, and rhythm have made this tradition distinctive.

From a Pir Pat: Satya Pir appears in a shapeshifting form, frightening the king.

It remained apart from European forms of painting—at least during its inception—as it emerged not merely as an institutional practice of aesthetics but as an indigenous way of crafting and curating social life. Historical evidence shows that, alongside Bangladesh, this form of storytelling is also traceable in the northeastern parts of India, West Bengal, Odisha, and some other regions of South Asia.

In 2010, a group of Hindu and Muslim patuas, also known as chitrakars, gathered in the village of Pingla in the Midnapore district of West Bengal and collectively established a Patua art hub to connect their scroll paintings with both local and global markets.

Bahadur Chitrakor, a patua from Pingla, shared that nowadays the Patua profession no longer exists as it was practised in earlier times. Traditionally, patuas travelled from village to village, performing audio-

visual stories spanning mythological and religious worlds, entertaining both Hindu and Muslim audiences, as patachitra encompassed both cosmological imaginations. Generations of patuas have engaged in this hereditary profession, which relies on oral and visual knowledge. In return for their performances, they made no specific demands; audiences offered rice, vegetables, food, and other exchangeable items. Hence, patuas were once also called beggars, as they did not demand but received gifts.

His reflections make it clear that in earlier times, patachitra functioned not only as a traditional art form but also as a vital source of livelihood. In this way, three dimensions were woven together: the transmission of knowledge, the practice of audio-visual storytelling as a communal art, and the everyday means through which patuas sustained their lives.

In Bangladesh today, patachitra is

described the wide range of pats once in circulation—Gazir Pat, Kazi-Kalu, Bonbibi, Pir-Fakir, Manasha Mangal, Sree Krishna, Muharram, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and depictions of many gods and goddesses from the Mangal Kavya tradition—all of which were regarded as sacred objects. For the patuas, any pat that had outlived its use was not stored away but respectfully immersed in a river, in keeping with longstanding customs surrounding sacred materials. Yet, despite these traditions, some historic pats survive today only because they were preserved in European archives, a reminder of the colonial practice of collecting and classifying indigenous storytelling forms.

This storytelling emerged as an intermingling of religious and mythological knowledge, mediating Hindu and Muslim audiences to the religious cosmologies flourishing in the Bengali sacred landscape, marked

> Patachitra is considered one of the oldest Bengali forms of audio-visual storytelling, blending religious and mythological knowledge and mediating between diverse audiences and religious cosmologies.

seldom practised or performed, save for a few isolated exceptions. A couple of years ago in the Sundarbans—particularly in the Munshiganj Union—a Bonbibi pat was still used to recount her story. A patua from the area reflected on the long generational history of patachitra in the Bengal delta. He explained that he had learned the craft from his father in childhood, yet in his old age he no longer finds any social interest or audience for it.

He recalled how, as a boy, he would often perform alongside his father and grandfather. He also

by shared devotional knowledge practices. It serves as a medium for transmitting knowledge to new generations. Above all, it seamlessly encompassed art, social life, knowledge, and livelihood—none of which could be mechanically produced or treated as by-products of one another; instead, they thrived as living social practices in a co-ordinated, organically interdependent system.

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