

QUALITY ASSURANCE, ARRANGEMENTS WITH COMMON QUESTIONNAIRES
AND CONFLICTING STATISTICS

Note by the
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Introduction

The *Human Development Report* (HDR) is a policy driven report, focussing on all aspects of human development. Statistics are used in the report to provide information on trends in human development and inputs for the analysis of critical policy issues. Thus, although the HDR is not a statistical publication, it presents data on a wide array of indicators in diverse areas of human development in the annex statistical tables of the Report. The Report also constructs composite indices of human development to provide summarised information of the state of human development in different countries. The indicators in the HDR reflect the rich body of information available internationally. As a secondary user of data, the Report presents statistical information that has been built up through the collective effort of many people and organizations.

Comments on internal quality factors

As a user of statistics the HDR essentially reproduces the statistics created by many international statistical agencies. However, there are many issues of quality over which we have control, including the selection, presentation and correct use of statistical data, attributing data to its original sources, accurately describing the quality of data and correct footnoting. These issues raise important questions of prioritisation, as the limited space of the Report makes it impossible to describe the data and its origins in the same detail as the original sources.

Since its inception in 1990, with the help of many agencies, the HDR has undergone important improvements in these areas. These include improving the selection and presentation of indicators, including original sources where different from the agency that provided the data, and fuller descriptions of quality issues both in the footnotes and note on statistics. The key to these and further improvements are good communication with the international statistical agencies who provide us with the data. We need to continue working more closely with these agencies to ensure that the best data is being used and correctly presented, and that their detailed knowledge of the data is suitably conveyed to our readers.

Issues of accuracy and consistency

While improving the quality of the statistical part of our report by further improving our practices, there are also a number of widely acknowledged issues in the statistical community that directly affect our work.

1 - Inconsistency between national estimates and international agency estimates.

The HDRO is frequently contacted by country statistical offices and other national bodies regarding discrepancies between official national data and data presented in the Report. These queries cover a broad range of indicators from homicide rates to education indicators to PPPs. Some discrepancies also have indirect impacts, for example differences in population estimates often affect other indicators.

These problems often appear to have occurred either because the best and most recent national data is not made available to the relevant international agency at all (or with a significant time lag), or due to delays in the incorporation of this data by the relevant international agency.

On many occasions discrepancies between national and international data are due to the very process of harmonisation undertaken by the international agencies which allow publications such as ours to make valid global comparisons. There are also occasions, most frequently regarding the PPP data, where there is not a conflict with national data, but rather a confusion over how the data was derived. In both such instances the issue is not one of inconsistencies in the data, but one of lack of communication between international and national statistical bodies.

2- Differences in estimates between international agencies.

Due to differences in data sources, timing of updates, definitions and methodologies there are differences between estimates even by international agencies. For example, the population estimates and projections made by the World Bank differ from estimates by the United Nations Population Division for a significant number of countries. As many international agencies rely on the UN estimates for deriving indicators, while others rely on World Bank, these differences are often already reflected in available indicators.

This leaves the HDRO, as well as any other secondary user of data, in the position of having to use sets of data which are not always consistent. For example, we use different population estimates for the same country in the same report, and even the same table. Examples abound, perhaps the most prominent is that the components of the Human Development Index (HDI) are based on different population estimates (i.e. in the HDI, Life expectancy, Adult Literacy, and Gross enrolment use UN estimates, while GDP per capita uses World Bank). While we could adjust data to reflect consistent population estimates, discrepancies between data shown in the HDR and the original published data would create confusion. The problem is not limited to indicators, but also aggregates based on population weights.

The fact that other estimates and projections such as economically active population and urban population often lag behind updates in population estimates, makes it inevitable that these estimates are not consistent with the population estimates shown in the report.

Conclusions

As a user rather than a producer of statistics, we have presented some views on issues of quality and conflicting statistics. Three areas strike us as important for future action:

First, we need to continue improving our practices. The key to doing this is to continue improving our relationships and communication with the international statistical community, particularly the agencies who provide us with data.

Second, already well acknowledged, is improving the co-ordination of international agencies. It would be a tremendous benefit to have statistics that are comparable, and available and used at the same time.

Third, there appears a need for better communication between the international agencies and national statistical offices. We have dealt with inconsistencies and queries from national offices on an ad hoc basis, explaining discrepancies where possible, and directing their concerns to international agencies where necessary. There have even been a number of occasions where we have been contacted by national offices unsure who to give the data they had collected. It points to a need for a more institutionalised form of contact between national and international agencies. It would not only facilitate the best data being made available to the international agencies, but would allow national offices to understand more fully international methodological issues, and thus any inevitable discrepancies that remain.