
FORMATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY NETWORK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Action Plan for Improving Development Statistics* presented at the Second International Roundtable on Managing for Development Results (Marrakech, February 2004), recommended six urgent actions to improve statistics for measuring development outcomes. One of these actions was the formation of an international household survey network (IHSN), to identify, promote and implement coordinated and sustainable solutions to problems of availability, timeliness, cost-effectiveness, reliability, relevance, comparability, and dissemination of household survey data.

A first round of consultative discussions was held on 21 June 2004 with some key survey sponsors, who identified the following as priority activities for the IHSN: (i) advocacy for minimum national household survey programs (as a component of national strategies for the development of statistics); (ii) harmonization of data collection instruments; (iii) development and maintenance of a central survey data repository; and (iv) development of tools and guidelines for survey data archive, dissemination and documentation (including a review of legal issues in dissemination of survey datasets).

The next round of discussions will be held in Geneva on 27 September 2004 with a larger circle of participants. It will aim to formalize the existence of the IHSN and to establish an IHSN work program.

Although no decision has yet been made regarding the organization of the Network, there is a consensus to establish it as a light and flexible mechanism, conducting its work in close cooperation with existing partnerships such as PARIS21 and the Health Metrics Network.

Background

To monitor the achievement of development goals and to provide policy makers with information for designing, monitoring, and targeting development policies, the international community has established various data collection programs, largely based on sample household surveys. But despite decades of technical and financial assistance toward statistics, and some progress in data availability, many countries are not performing adequately. Externally funded initiatives are not being sustained, and many national systems are caught in a vicious spiral of under-performance, domestic under-funding, and conflicting donor agendas.

The First Round Table on Better Measurement, Monitoring, and Managing for Results, held in Washington in 2002, identified the improvement of statistical systems as a priority of the results agenda. Also concerned with the data challenge, the Development Committee asked for a time-bound plan of action for improving statistics for measuring development outcomes.

An *Action Plan for Improving Development Statistics* was presented at the Second International Roundtable on Managing for Development Results held in Marrakech in February 2004.¹ The Action Plan recommends six urgent actions (Box 1) which are a synthesis of ideas and recommendations that have emerged in a variety of forums, including the meetings of the Coordinating Committee on Statistical Activities and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Indicators Expert Group, and from the work of several PARIS21 task teams.

The first three actions are directed at improving national statistical systems, by adopting appropriate policies and statistical methods and by investing in the staff and equipment needed to operate a functioning statistical system. The other three actions are directed at the activities of international agencies, the multilateral development banks, and bilateral donors. They call for greater accountability and coordination of their statistical programs and increased financial support for statistical capacity building at the country level. One of these recommendations is the establishment of an international household survey network (IHSN). Similarly, the Health Metrics Network (a multi-partner initiative aiming at harmonizing data collection practices) recommended that household surveys be better integrated into health information systems.²

Box 1 - Six Actions proposed in the Marrakech Action Plan for Improving Development Statistics

Actions for improving national statistical systems

- **Action 1:** Mainstream strategic planning of statistical systems
- **Action 2:** Prepare for the 2010 census round
- **Action 3:** Increase financing for statistical capacity building

Actions directed at the international agencies

- **Action 4:** Set up an international household survey network
- **Action 5:** Undertake urgent improvements needed for MDG monitoring by 2005
- **Action 6:** Increase accountability for the international statistical system

¹ *The Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics. Better Data for Better Results. An Action Plan for Improving Development Statistics.* Presented at the Second International Roundtable on Managing for Development Results, Marrakech, Morocco, February 4-5, 2004 (see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc04/marrakech.pdf>).

² Household and facility surveys, health information systems and Health Metrics Network development 2003

Rationale

In developing countries, sample household surveys are an effective way of obtaining much of the information needed to support the planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation work that are essential for good management and accountability.

Much progress has been made in the last 20 years in terms of data availability, largely as a result of internationally-sponsored survey programs. National capacities to collect and process data have been strengthened. But many technical and operational problems remain, some of them resulting from a lack of capacity at the national level, others from the lack or from the nature of the assistance provided by external agencies.

Availability

Large scale surveys which yield nationally representative results are carried out infrequently, especially in the poorest countries. Further, not all countries have benefited from sufficient donor support. As a result, in some of them, baseline data may not be available for some crucial indicators. In others, data might be available but with insufficient frequency for proper monitoring and assessment of policies.

Timeliness

National survey programs are often implemented in a relatively ad-hoc way. Surveys are conducted when donor funding is available, which is not necessarily at the time when they are most needed for policy making or monitoring.

Cost-effectiveness

Donor support is not sufficiently coordinated. This not only causes a waste of resources, it also puts a high burden on national statistics offices and on sectoral ministries. Progress has been made in the past few years to identify synergies among different international survey programs. But there is room for more cooperation and possibility for significant cost-savings by implementing joint or harmonized activities.

Reliability and relevance

In many countries, the quality of household survey data in terms of reliability and relevance remains unsatisfactory. The lack of capacity is striking in the areas of survey data analysis and dissemination. There is room for improvement at all stages of survey implementation (design, sampling, field work, data processing, and analysis) to increase the reliability of data. Better interaction between users and producers is also needed to ensure that only relevant data are collected, and that clear priorities are identified to better match the supply and demand of information.

Comparability

Surveys are more valuable when they permit comparisons across data sets. Better timing and standardization of surveys would increase the coverage and comparability of the results obtained. Yet there are many examples of parochial interests outweighing the interests of users in maintaining comparability over time or across countries.

Dissemination and use

National sample surveys are complex and expensive undertakings. National authorities and international sponsors have an interest in maximizing the value of the information collected by ensuring that all data are carefully analyzed, disseminated and used. There are, however, many examples of surveys that have been either overlooked, or not included in a timely manner in national or international assessments. Reasons for the under-use of surveys include the suspicious quality or lack of relevance of the data, the lack of analytical capacity at the national level and among users, and poor quality of presentation and dissemination. Some countries restrict data dissemination, because of concerns for confidentiality or to control the use made of the data. Data are therefore not easily accessible by secondary users (e.g., researchers and non-governmental organizations). Finally, data may be underused due to their poor documentation which makes them difficult to use by secondary users.

Impact of survey program on statistical systems

Survey programs in poorest countries are largely donor driven, and are not always properly integrated in national statistical or sectoral strategies. They may thus have adverse effects on the regular program of activities of national statistics offices or of line ministries. Along with the establishment of the IHSN, the adoption of a national strategy for the development of statistics (NSDS) by all developing countries by 2006 is one of the six actions recommended by the Marrakech *Action Plan for Statistics*. The PARIS21 Consortium is leading efforts to strategize and prioritize statistical activities.

The International Household Survey Network will be established to identify, promote and implement coordinated and sustainable solutions to these problems, in partnership with other existing initiatives. It will provide a formal mechanism to tie various national and international efforts together.

The ultimate goal of the IHSN will be to assist national and international agencies in designing and implementing better informed policies, for better results. The IHSN will pursue this goal by (i) fostering the collection of more and better data, and (ii) fostering better dissemination and use of available data.

Collecting more and better data. The main purposes of the IHSN will be to share information and mobilize international support for more efficient approaches to conducting household surveys in developing countries. An important contribution of the IHSN will be to prepare specifications for a minimum survey program, building on existing instruments and targeting the needs of countries to monitor and report on the MDGs and their own poverty reduction strategies.

Improving dissemination and use of available data. Another important function of the IHSN will be to consolidate and disseminate information about household surveys to potential users. The IHSN will work with experienced data archivists and data users to establish a global information center containing household survey and metadata, and to establish good dissemination practices which promote analysis and research while protecting the confidentiality of survey respondents. One objective will be to improve access to raw data by secondary users, in order to foster analysis and use of the data in a variety of research, operational and programmatic contexts.

Proposed activities

The IHSN will either initiate new activities, or participate in existing ones by providing a platform for making them more globally identifiable and accessible. It is not expected to take over existing activities from their current sponsors. The following proposed list of priority activities emerged from a first round of consultation on the possible IHSN work program. Capacity building will be an overarching objective of all activities.

Advocacy for a minimum household survey program

To ensure regular provision of data and sustainability of capacity building, the IHSN could advocate the adoption of secured “minimum” (and “continuous”) national survey programs with a 10-year horizon. To avoid over-burdening—and weakening— national statistical systems, guidelines for establishing a “maximum” survey program (i.e. for defining an upper limit to the volume of survey data collection that each country can handle) should also be provided. The development of national survey programs should result from a prioritization of data needs, which itself must result from the development of an overall national statistical strategy. In this effort, not only surveys but also administrative data collection systems should be considered. The IHSN would work in close cooperation with PARIS21, who is currently developing guidelines for the development of national strategies for the development of statistics, and with the United Nations Statistics Division.

Development and harmonization of data collection instruments

The IHSN could work as an information exchange platform between users, sponsors, and producers to ensure that new demands are addressed in a coordinated way, and that existing data collection instruments are harmonized. Some useful initiatives have already been initiated, such as the World Health Organization (WHO)-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for harmonizing the collection and dissemination of data on water and sanitation and ongoing efforts by UNICEF and ORC Macro to harmonize the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) questionnaires.³

Development and maintenance of a central survey data depository

An important activity of the IHSN could be to proceed to an exhaustive inventory of existing surveys, and to the centralization of metadata. Building on the World Bank’s household survey databank, the IHSN could share the maintenance of a more exhaustive survey data and metadata repository. This could be linked to other databases such as the Country Logbook⁴ of health information activities maintained by WHO.

Development of tools and guidelines for survey data archive, dissemination and documentation

Much training and reference material has been produced on data collection, processing, and analysis. Less attention has been paid to providing guidelines for proper documentation (metadata), preservation, and dissemination of survey datasets. Appropriate guidelines and tools, compliant with international metadata standards, could be developed by the IHSN and provided to data producers and depositories.

³ Calls for greater coordination of health-related household surveys were made both at the meeting of the High Level Forum on the health-related Millennium Development Goals and at the first meeting of the Health Metrics Network Board. Various international agencies involved in health, including WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank, have agreed that promoting such coordination should be central to their work.

⁴ The Country Logbook stores information on a variety of data collection modes including household and facility surveys, censuses, and service reported (administrative) data.

Review of legal issues in dissemination of survey datasets

Confidentiality is often invoked by national statistical agencies to justify their refusal to provide external users with access to survey datasets. As national survey producers do not always have the capacity, resources, and interest to fully analyze and disseminate their data, this considerably restricts the further analysis and use of the data. The IHSN could build on the work undertaken by the GDN to develop recommendations and guidelines for best practice in survey data dissemination.

Expected benefits

The main benefit of the IHSN activities will be the enhancement of the use of data for evidence-based policy planning, program implementation, monitoring and evaluation, i.e. **better management and monitoring of development policies**.

This will result from the:

- **Reduced cost** of compiling survey data (resulting from reduced duplication and better methods)
- **Improved quality** of future surveys (i.e. improved sampling and data collection methodologies, and increased reliability and relevance of the data)
- **Increased frequency** and **better timing** of surveys
- **Improved comparability** (over-time and across countries)
- **Strengthened national capacity** of providing data for planning, targeting, and monitoring policies and projects
- **Wider access to datasets** (including existing datasets), resulting in more analytical work
- Guaranteed **preservation** of survey data and metadata.

Status as of August 2004

A workshop was held in Washington, DC, on 21 June 2004, hosted by the World Bank. The objective of the workshop was to brainstorm on the possible activities of the IHSN (see the resulting proposed list above). For this first round of consultative discussions, the participation was limited to some key survey sponsors, including those involved in the development of the Health Metrics Network.⁵

The organization and funding of the IHSN have not been discussed yet, and no formal decision or commitment has been made. There is, however, a consensus that the IHSN must be established as a light structure (possibly supported by a small secretariat).

The circle of potential members will be enlarged in the next round of discussions, to be hosted by WHO in Geneva on 27 September 2004. The objectives of this second workshop will be (i) to formalize the existence of IHSN, and (ii) to decide on an IHSN work program.

⁵ Participant included representatives of the Centers for Disease Control, Inter-American Development Bank, ORC Macro International Inc., UNICEF, United Nations Development Programme, United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization.

One of the items for discussion at this meeting will be the involvement of sectoral agencies in the IHSN. While sector-specific statistics are clearly integral to the statistical system as a whole, there are often specific concerns related to technical definitions and methods and to ways of linking outputs of surveys and the broader information system. The planning and implementation of household and other surveys needs to be complementary to other sources of information, such as the administrative data in health or education information systems. This would greatly enhance the utility of surveys for national sectoral programs, while maintaining international standards of quality and comparability. It would also permit more rapid methodological advances to tackle difficult challenges (e.g., the measurement of ill-health, assessment of equity in health care use and health status, and evaluation of complex health interventions). By fostering better data and information sharing, the IHSN could also help promote better understanding of intersectoral linkages.

Although the IHSN does not have a formal existence yet, some joint activities have been initiated, i.e.:

- **Harmonization of questionnaires** (in particular health-related questionnaires, by participants in the Health Metrics Network), and discussions on new survey modules on infrastructure data.
- Development of the **central survey data repository**. The World Bank is working on making its survey database accessible to external partners, in order to initiate cooperation in the maintenance of a common metadata repository (linked to a network of associated data repositories); WHO and UNICEF already agreed to contribute to this initiative. The World Bank is also sharing technical information with WHO to synchronize its survey database with the Country Logbook being developed by WHO.
- Development of a **survey data dissemination toolkit**. Technical terms of references have been developed by the World Bank, and shared with IHSN potential members to initiate their participation in the development of the toolkit.
- An **IHSN website** is being developed⁶.

The next steps will involve the identification of the membership of the IHSN and the establishment of a virtual secretariat. As already noted, it is anticipated that the Network will operate as a light and flexible mechanism, carrying its work forward using existing partnerships such as PARIS21 and Health Metrics Network when appropriate. The initial workplan for the IHSN will identify specific outputs and activities that have potential significant impact, but that could be taken forward relatively easily.

Since the success of the IHSN will depend on the building of effective partnerships, particular attention will be paid to information sharing and regular reporting to all members and interested partners.

⁶ The following URLs have been reserved and point to the same website:

- www.surveynetwork.org
- www.internationalsurveynetwork.org
- www.internationalsurveynetwork.net
- www.internationalsurveynetwork.com