

ACC SUB-COMMITTEE ON STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES

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NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY CAPABILITY PROGRAMME (NHSCP)

Report prepared by the Division of Statistics and Projections,
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean - ECLAC

Progress report

1. For more than two decades now, one of the main concerns of ECLAC has been the analysis of social problems which hinder development processes. One such problem in particular, income distribution, has been the primary point of reference for the consideration of what are referred to as structural obstacles to development.

2. The empirical analysis of this dimension of development has gained momentum in recent years as a greater supply of information has become available, mainly thanks to the estimates provided by household surveys. Although these surveys have significant shortcomings as tools for measuring income, they have nevertheless opened up the possibility of obtaining a large amount of information on individuals and households that can serve as a basis for multivariate studies having great analytical potential. With this in mind, ECLAC has closely monitored the household surveys conducted in the region; moreover, it has promoted their methodological refinement and, whenever possible, has played a direct role in this effort as an associated executing agency. Within this context two specific experiences are described below which demonstrate that even with relatively few resources, it is possible to make significant strides in this field.

3. In 1986 the Government of Honduras signed a non-reimbursable technical co-operation agreement (ATN/SF-2429-HO) with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) covering the period from May 1986 to May 1989. This agreement

provided for a household survey programme, which, at the request of the contracting parties, was carried out by ECLAC in its capacity as an associated executing agency. The overall objectives of the programme were as follows: a) to obtain a steady flow of integrated, timely and reliable statistics for use in the formulation of plans, the implementation of projects and the definition of economic, social and demographic development policies; and b) to strengthen the capability of the Bureau of Statistics and Censuses (DGEC) to conduct household surveys, and to compile the corresponding statistics on a periodic basis.

4. Since Honduras had virtually no experience in carrying out this type of survey, it was necessary to plan all the steps involved in such an effort, including everything from the selection of materials and the design of the surveys, the selection and training of interviewers and the selection of fields of inquiry in accordance with the objectives of the agreement, to the execution and processing of the surveys. Concurrently, training courses on specific techniques of statistical analysis were given to approximately 70 staff members with a view to organizing a stable work team capable of carrying out this type of research in a systematic and highly independent manner.

5. During the three years covered by the agreement, six surveys were carried out at approximately six-month intervals. These surveys were the following: a) an ongoing survey of the labor force (10/86), which was urban in coverage and required, in particular, a great deal of map updating; b) a second ongoing survey of the labor force (3/87), which was also urban in coverage; c) an ongoing survey of the labor force in rural areas (10/87), which was the first such survey to be conducted in the history of the country; d) an ongoing survey of the labor force (6/88) which provided national coverage; e) the first regular multi-purpose household survey (10/88), which marked the commencement of the Regular Household Surveys Programme as such; and f) a second multi-purpose survey (3/89).

6. The subjects covered by the above surveys may be categorized in terms of the following fields of inquiry: a) housing characteristics (the work done in this connection was primarily aimed at investigating the variables relating to the housing component of well-being); b) the sociodemographic characteristics of the individuals habitually residing in the households in question (in addition to the customary demographic variables, two instrumental variables of great significance in this country were also investigated: rural-urban migration and educational level); and c) economic characteristics. The questions relating to economic matters were the core component of all the surveys. Accordingly, information was gathered on a very wide range of topics relating to work status, as well as on income by source, including in-kind income received in the form of housing, food, clothing, transport, etc.

7. This survey series was complemented by technical training courses. Two such courses were conducted. The first, which was a basic training course in statistics, covered statistical research methods and descriptive statistics, and included an introduction to statistical probabilities. The second, which was an advanced statistics and statistical analysis course, dealt with the sampling of finite populations; employment, underemployment and income statistics; and the statistical analysis and applications of survey results.

8. Finally, a series of detailed reports on the activities that were carried out, particularly the strategic stages of the work, was systematized with a view to providing a solid foundation for future research by national technicians.

9. Costa Rica represented a quite different type of case, inasmuch as it is a country which has a great deal of experience in statistics. Indeed, in the early 1960s Costa Rica conducted a survey on income and expenditure; then, between July 1966 and June 1967 it carried out the first sample household survey based on a methodology for household surveys at the Latin American level, in whose preparation both international and local

offices and institutes participated on a joint basis. Subsequently, a survey on family income and expenditure in urban zones was carried out (1974), and in 1975 work was begun on the formulation and execution of the National Household Survey Programme, whose objective was to collect data on employment and income (1976-1985).

10. In 1986 Costa Rica signed an agreement with IDB covering the period from August 1986 to January 1989 which was similar to the Honduran agreement described earlier. Although the provisions of the agreement were basically the same as those included in the Honduran agreement, the greater statistical capabilities of the technicians in this country made it possible to investigate these subject areas on a more comprehensive basis and in greater depth; furthermore, in many cases this effort involved the refinement of existing procedures rather than their initial creation.

11. The results of this initiative included the National Multi-purpose Household Survey --employment module (July 1987 and July 1988). This survey had the following objectives: a) the measurement of the labor force in accordance with the latest international recommendations; and b) the investigation of phenomena relating to employment, unemployment, underemployment and income. The publication setting forth the results of the 1987 survey is regarded as one of the most complete documents in the region concerning this type of research.

12. Secondly, a national household income and expenditure survey (November 1987 to November 1988) was conducted. Among other purposes, this survey will be used in making up a new "family shopping basket" which will pave the way for the calculation of a new consumer price index. Thirdly, an ongoing household survey (June 1988 to June 1989) has been undertaken. This survey, which was designed as part of the programme to improve employment statistics, constitutes a monthly data-collection system, and serves as an alternative method for carrying out other studies; it also lays the groundwork for the

formulation of short-term employment, economic and social indicators. Fourthly, a housing sampling frame was compiled; this sampling frame, which constitutes a highly valuable tool for the design of probability samples, will, inter alia, be used in carrying out the next Population and Housing Census in 1992. In addition, since this frame is organized in the form of a computer file and includes over 20 social stratification variables it permits samples having a variety of different characteristics to be selected easily and very quickly.

13. Finally, three different levels of statistical training courses were given which focused on practical aspects and priority subjects identified by the Bureau of Statistics and Censuses. The level I, II and III courses provided 126, 171 and 188 hours of instruction, respectively, to a total of approximately 60 staff members. These training activities, as well as those carried out under the agreement, were set forth in a systematized format in various documents which, in combination with the high technical level of the national experts, provide a solid foundation for the continuation of this research on an independent basis; this is true even in such complex areas as sampling, in which, with the collaboration of the School of Applied Statistics and Computer Techniques (ESAYTEC), the CP-CARP software for estimating sampling errors has been put into use.