

Seminar on “Evolution of National Statistical Systems” (Commemorative Event for 60th Anniversary of the United Nations Statistical Commission – United Nations, New York – USA, February 23, 2007)

Panel Discussion: Prospects and Risks for the Future: How to Manage Uncertainties?

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1. Background

Looking towards the future we will discuss some issues concerning the challenges for the National Statistical Offices – NSOs.

In its sixth meeting, held in Madrid on the 25th and 26th of September 2006, the Executive Committee of the Statistical Conference of the Americas of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean agreed on the preliminary final proposal for the strategic plan 2005-2015, incorporating the decisions of the resolution recommended by the Statistical Commission to the United Nations Economic and Social Council entitled “Strengthening Statistical Capacity” (Report on the 37th Session of the United Nations Statistical Commission – March 7 -10, 2006).

Brazil supports the strategy of the Statistical Commission and of the Executive Committee of the Statistical Conference of the Americas and would like to make some considerations upon such resolutions.

2. Prospects and risks

The advance of democracy in the world, the organization of several segments of civil society claiming for their rights, the increase of globalization and international commercial agreements, the impact of technological changes in the economy and the society, and so on have resulted in new demands for information to be provided by the National Statistical Offices .

In this context a challenge faced by the NSOs is to produce a larger, more diversified and consistent set of relevant statistics based on statistical principles

and practices and continuously evaluate the relevance of their statistical production.

In the case of Brazil in 2006, the year of IBGE's 70th anniversary, the institution held the Fifth National Conference of Statistics. The main objective of this event was to discuss the National Statistical System with producers and users of information such as governmental and non-governmental organizations, research institutes, scientific associations, universities, private institutions and so on.

Besides the improvement of traditional topics related to statistical production, such as: vital statistics, population prospects and estimates, agricultural census, national accounts, education, health, price index, etc., there were also discussions on topics of increasing relevance nowadays, such as: time use, citizenship, disability, human rights and violence, culture, tourism, information and communication technology (ICT), food security, etc.

Updated information with geographic and thematic details is one of the main challenges faced in Brazil as well as in many other countries. In this respect, we can highlight the development of studies on alternative approaches to traditional Population Census. Some countries have started to develop and implement new approaches to population census and many other are evaluating their possibilities of implementing such alternative approaches.

IBGE has held three International Seminars aiming to discuss this subject in Latin America and to encourage partnerships among countries. These International Seminars were held in partnership with INEGI (Mexico), in October 2004, in Rio de Janeiro; in July 2005, in Mexico; and at IBGE, from May 29th to 31st, 2006.

The objective of the 3rd Seminar was to evaluate the methodological aspects to monitor the current phase, to discuss the lessons learned from the experiences with the implementation of new methods of censuses in countries such as the United States, France and Colombia. Among other topics, the discussions covered: the methodological aspects, the problems faced in order to update information, the use of results in population estimates for small areas and the register of households and addresses.

A question important to be mentioned is the increasing use of statistical information as a parameter for public policies. If by one side it may help to strengthen the statistical system on the other side in many cases this practice may involve some risks. In Brazil the annual population estimates for municipalities used to define the distribution of public resources among these units is a legal duty of IBGE. The accuracy of these estimates, however, does not attend all the requirements of the official table of coefficients used for this purpose.

This is an example of a situation that demands a proper use of official statistics, as expressed in the resolution about strengthening the statistical capacity recommended by the Statistical Commission of the United Nations.

3. How to manage uncertainties?

The relationship with the users of statistical data is crucial. Although the use of statistics has grown considerably, the focus goes on strongly on short-term statistics. A good example is the larger use of short-term indicators of national accounts while the analytical potentialities of the whole set of accounts of the system is little explored. Indeed some charts of the system are practically unknown by the general public.

How can we strengthen the use of structural data? It would be very useful to encourage key users, especially policy-agencies and the media, to get acquainted with the advantages of the use of integrated short-term and structural data in their analyses.

In relation to the proper use of official statistics and the credibility of the NSOs, it was an important step the discussion held by the United Nations Economic and Social Council on the problem of different population data resulting from data imputed by regional organizations and the one's produced by the NSOs. We believe this discussion will represent an important step towards the consolidation of national statistical systems and their credibility. Efforts made by regional organizations in order to obtain information on national level should be focused on the construction of continuous capacity of the NSOs. Cooperative work among regional agencies and countries including the development of their competencies and the adoption of international recommendations will generate resources for other areas and themes, which are not explored so far.

The permanent effort to maintain and improve the national statistical system in developing countries must not be weakened by the dissemination of different data on the same subjects produced by regional agencies and NSOs. The use by regional agencies of data produced by the NSOs is a positive element in the expansion of their capacity to produce relevant information for the monitoring of international, national and regional commitments on a regular basis.

International capacity programs and projects, such as the International Comparison Program and the Monitoring of the Millennium Goals, are excellent opportunities to consolidate strategies for the straightening of the NSOs and increasing the credibility of their work.

Methodological frameworks developed by international organizations are important tools for the NSOs but its implementation requires a considerable amount of time and resources. In our opinion, there should be more initiatives to evaluate the implementation of the international recommendations by NSOs, including the identification of obstacles in order to increase the actions to overcome them.

Strengthening statistical capacity of the NSOs implies also in effective resources management. It is worth to highlight, when considering official statistics, the high costs of production and the time necessary for the development of information

systems. Restrictions or discontinuities on the budget resources for the NSOs may threaten the efforts to develop and maintain their program and their specialized staff. The relevance of statistics data produced by the NSOs for the policy agencies and for society and the credibility of the statistical agencies are important elements to face this problem. Relationship with key users, especially policy agencies, should have priorities because of their influence on government support to NSOs.

We believe that these initiatives of the Statistical Commission, including the resolution hereby mentioned, are essential for the development of National Statistical Systems, fundamental tool for the social and human development of nations.