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## Expanding the Dimensions of Social Statistics\*

by

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# Expanding the dimensions of social statistics

## Ahmed Hussein<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

International conferences, summits and declarations of the 1990's, most notably the Millennium Development Goals, have underscored the central role that social statistics and indicators play in the planning, implementation as well as monitoring and assessment of socio-economic goals and targets. The increased interest and demand for social statistics and indicators necessitates an expansion of the dimensions of social statistics so that it captures and addresses emerging social issues in this fast changing world. The creation of a dynamic social statistics system that produces and disseminates accurate, reliable and policy-relevant data on time and on regular intervals requires new technical and operational mechanisms. These include new conceptual frameworks, definitions as well as improved methods of data collection and dissemination. Institutionalizing user-producer dialogue in national systems of social statistics will play an integral role toward achieving this goal.

### **Introduction**

During the last decade, a series of international conferences were held to shed light on emerging development issues.<sup>2</sup> These conferences and subsequent declarations emphasized the role of statistics and indicators in planning, implementing, monitoring and assessing development policies. Indeed, statistics and indicators have become inextricable components in the development process. The increased interest in social statistics and indicators is largely due to the growing belief that a wide range of statistics and indicators are needed as basis for socio-economic policies and programmes, and as tools for monitoring and assessing their outcome. However, rapid shifts on the global, regional and national levels are producing continuous changes in the economic and social base, which in turn impact socio-economic progress and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

The challenge for social statistics in this fast changing world is to develop the framework, tools and mechanisms for addressing emerging social concerns and providing policy-relevant data. In turn, a broad-based system of social indicators is needed to assess the impact of social policies and monitor policy efforts, which would include positive and negative indicators as well as objective and subjective considerations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These conferences include the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and as well as the Millennium Summit (New York, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Dianne Macastill (Statistics, New Zealand). "The Policy Link to the Direction of Social Statistics." Paper presented at the 2000 Meeting of the Siena Group on Social Statistics at Maastricht, Netherlands 22-24 May 2000. p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Viviana Egidi (ISTAT, Italy). "System of Indicators for Social Policy." Paper presented at the 2000 Meeting of the Siena Group on Social Statistics at Maastricht, Netherlands 22-24 May 2000. p. 7.

## **Redefining the scope of social statistics...**

To start with, the conceptual framework of social statistics must be revised, improved and developed to proceed beyond basic and traditional issues, such as demographics and health. To this end, social statistics is taking on the challenge of capturing less tangible correlates of social issues including trust, empowerment, as well as social integration and cohesion. In the Arab Countries, the following emerging areas of critical concern should be integrated with traditional systems of social statistics:

- Unemployment, out-migration and the informal sector
- Child labour
- Poverty
- War and conflict
- Human rights, development and good governance
- Gender equality and women's empowerment

### *Unemployment, out-migration and the informal sector*

Unemployment and out migration: Although the scale and nature of unemployment differ from one country to the other, across the region it is at double-digits levels, and more so in troubled and devastated countries such as Iraq and Palestine. Due to lack of employment opportunities, political instability and other factors, out-migration particularly of young adults is a very common phenomenon in this part of the world. However, chances of emigration and employment are diminishing due to labour-saturated markets in the Gulf countries and stricter rules for entry into North America and Europe that have been enacted since September 11, 2001. This implies that greater pressure will be exerted on local labour markets to create employment opportunities, not only for resident populations but also for expatriates wishing to return and settle in their home state.

In this light, statistics on out-migration, unemployment and employment are necessary to identify and study the causes and correlates of these phenomena. These may include an unfavorable environment for the private sector, educational systems that fail to provide knowledge and skills as per local labor market needs; and the absence of the facilities for training, re-training and life-long educational programmes.

Underemployment: It is also imperative to address under-employment beyond its traditional sense, which considers employed persons working less than a fixed time and/or working for less wages. Social statisticians in the Arab countries must develop tools to measure the less visible facets of underemployment, namely, low productivity, less than full use of the individual's skills and inadequate compensation/remuneration.<sup>5</sup>

Informal sector: Greater effort is needed to capture the full extent of informal sector activity. National accounts, which form the basis of macroeconomic goals and targets, only take into consideration market activities. Accounting for informal sector activity would lead to more accurate estimates of economic productivity and serve as more reliable and accurate basis for macroeconomic policies. Also, given that women's work mostly falls in the informal sector,

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme. Arab Human Development Report 2002. p. 93.

statistics on this sector would reflect women's contribution to national production as well. Thus, informal sector statistics may provide a sound basis for labour market and economic activity analyses.

### *Child labour*

Effort should be exerted to generate reliable, accurate and meaningful statistics on all forms of child labour. Concepts, research techniques and statistical measurements for capturing hidden and illicit forms of child labour are necessary. Almost all Arab countries have ratified conventions banning and calling for immediate action for the elimination of child labour. Social statisticians should devise a machinery to collect reliable information on the extent of the implementation of international agreements and national regulations in order to evaluate efforts made by member states in eliminating child labour. Social statistics on child labour should also reveal the following:<sup>6</sup>

- Magnitude of child labour
- Magnitude of children working under hazardous conditions
- Nature of risks and impact on child health, education and future employability
- Likelihood and extent of exposure to health and safety risks
- Educational opportunities provided by the employer to working children.

### *Poverty*

The growing gap between the rich and poor in Arab countries further underscores the need to establish information systems that can describe the incidence, nature and consequences of poverty. However, the broad spectrum of poverty – as a social and economic phenomenon – requires that statistical work proceed beyond traditional economic considerations, which examine poverty only from an income perspective. Social statistics can contribute tremendously in informing poverty alleviation policies by shedding light on all aspects of poverty – education, health and housing, as well as the gender aspect. To a large extent macro-statistics are insufficiently developed to meet poverty information demands, whereas micro-statistics can help toward this goal. Utilization of population and housing censuses, household surveys as well as labour force surveys can provide insight into these aspects of poverty. The use of administrative registers can provide supplementary data to poverty information systems while cutting public expenditure.<sup>7</sup>

### *War and conflict*

Arab social statistics systems should also address the issue of war and conflict, given that these occurrences have plagued the region for so long, taxing economic and human resources and thus detrimental to development efforts. Statistics on the scale and consequences of war and conflict should depict the links that these issues have with child and adult health, disability, educational achievements, employment and economic performance as well as

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<sup>6</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). "Eliminating Hazardous Child Labour Step by Step." Accessed from ILO website at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipec/index.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Pedro Sáinz (IBGE). "Policies for Poverty Alleviation: Statistical Demands." Paper presented for the Fourth Meeting of the Expert Group on Poverty Statistics, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 15-17 October 2001. p. 22.

women's empowerment. The impact that displacement of people has on social cohesion, most notable in the case of the Palestinian people, should be a focus area of statistical work, including the living conditions of refugees throughout the Arab countries.

### *Human rights, development and good governance*

Human development, that is the expansion of human capabilities, opportunities, freedom and well-being, hinges upon the existence of good governance, which to succeed must guarantee and uphold human rights – social, cultural, political and economic. Despite political liberalization in some countries, “political participation is less advanced in the Arab world than in other developing regions.”<sup>8</sup> Social statistics and indicators are needed to measure and assess levels of participation, transparency and accountability as well as effective and equitable enforcement of the law. Other issues to monitor include women's participation in decision-making and public life, ability of the poor and disabled to affect political discourse, independence of civil institutions, independence of the media and citizens' respect for government institutions.

### *Gender equality and women's empowerment*

According to the UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2002, “Arab women remain marginalized and underutilized in all areas, notably in terms of their economic, intellectual and leadership potential. As women number half or more of any population, neglecting their capabilities is akin to crippling half the potential of a nation.”<sup>9</sup> In this regard, gender statistics and indicators are needed to portray the status, roles, and participation of women compared to men in all spheres of life, public and private, throughout the entire life cycle. Similarly, indicators are needed to track progress toward gender equality and women's empowerment. In this manner gender statistics and indicators contribute to gender mainstreaming activities and to the engendering of national statistical systems.

### **Selecting indicators for social policy...**

A system of social policy indicators is needed for assessing the effectiveness of policies and monitoring policy efforts. Social policy indicators not only serve as assessment and monitoring tools, but also provide information for planning purposes. Below is a list of some useful indicator sets<sup>10</sup> that should be incorporated in Arab national statistical systems. For the indicators to serve their purpose, national statistical offices would need to incorporate these dimensions into their framework and collect the necessary data on a timely and regular basis.

- Friends of the Chair Indicators: Friends of the Chair of the United Nations Statistical Commission have proposed a framework for prioritizing indicators (into three tiers) and frequency of collecting such data for each domain/sub-domain. This

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Programme. *Arab Human Development Report 2002*. p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Development Programme. *Arab Human Development Report 2002*. p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Other indicator sets have been produced by various specialized United Nations agencies, for example, Common Country Assessment Indicators (CCA) developed by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). Indices include the human development index (HDI) and gender-related development index (GDI) developed by the UNDP. The *Arab Human Development Report 2002* discusses various indices for good governance.

framework provides national statistical bodies with a road map for the production of critical indicators.

- Millennium Development Goals Indicators: The General Assembly, which convened at the Millennium Summit in New York in September 2000, adopted eight broad Millennium Development Goals and agreed on 18 targets. Forty-eight indicators have been selected to measure progress toward achieving these targets.
- Decent Work Indicators: The International Labour Organization (ILO) is developing decent work indicators, which are highly welcomed and would contribute enormously to monitoring employment conditions.

### **Establishing the policy link...**

Although information required for policy-making is cross-sectoral, available statistics are often sector-based. Thus, to establish a link between social policies and social statistical work it is necessary to reduce fragmentation in statistical information systems “by developing information on relationships between variables, different domains of life, and between social and economic variables.”<sup>11</sup> A new framework for social statistics that is comprehensive and illustrative of relations between different sectors can be developed by making use of different data sources, such as registers and surveys. The information provided by them can supplement each other to obtain complete and reliable statistics. User-producer dialogue would also contribute significantly toward achieving this goal by bringing to the table the informational needs of various stakeholders.<sup>12</sup>

### **Rethinking concepts and definitions...**

Pushing the frontiers of social statistics inevitably requires rethinking definitions and concepts. In terms of poverty, new concepts and statistical tools must be devised to address the issue of human capability that is associated with poverty. The Arab Human Development Report 2002 states “from this perspective, poverty is almost synonymous with powerlessness. Powerlessness does not manifest itself in income-deficiency and inadequate satisfaction of basic needs, but most critically, it denotes lack of access to, and control over, assets: human, physical, financial and social.”<sup>13</sup> Building human capabilities requires access to adequate education, housing and health care. It also requires access to ongoing training, re-training and life-long education programmes that are based on the requirements of the labour market. Representation at the political decision-making level is another facet of human capability. Thus, social statistics in the Arab countries should collect, analyze and disseminate statistics on these issues, making visible the linkages between them.

### **Revolutionizing data collection and dissemination methods...**

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<sup>11</sup> Paolo Garonna, Director General ISTAT and Gary Jones, Researcher, ISTAT. “The Siena Group After Five Years – Origins and Intentions, Progress and Achievements.” Paper prepared for 1998 Sydney Meeting. <http://www.mirror.cib.unibo.it/www.istat.it/primpag/progsiena.htm>. p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Paolo Garonna, Director General ISTAT and Gary Jones, Researcher, ISTAT. “The Siena Group After Five Years – Origins and Intentions, Progress and Achievements.” Paper prepared for 1998 Sydney Meeting. <http://www.mirror.cib.unibo.it/www.istat.it/primpag/progsiena.htm>. p.3.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme. *Arab Human Development Report 2002*. p.94.

Capable and dynamic social statistics systems should be able to collect and disseminate results periodically and on a timely basis. This is especially crucial in socio-economic spheres that experience continuous fluctuations and change, such as the labour market. For example, in Jordan, labour force statistics are collected four times a year, which is preferable, whereas in Lebanon the last labour force survey was conducted in 1997. The ever-changing landscape of the labour market requires that countries collect data on their population's employment situation on a regular basis for monitoring purposes.

The dissemination of statistics should also occur in a periodic and timely fashion. Capable social statistics systems should capitalize on the advantages and opportunities afforded by modern information technology to ensure that data reaches end-users and is available when needed with relative ease.

### **Creating user-producer dialogue...**

User-producer dialogue is a pre-requisite for producing timely, accurate, reliable, and policy-relevant statistics. Users provide invaluable input by describing data gaps and shedding light on pressing social issues and areas of critical concern. Producers can contribute toward greater statistical literacy, training users on the proper use and interpretation of statistical information. However, the quality of such dialogue and its relevance to the development of capable and dynamic social statistics systems requires the involvement of a wide spectrum of users and producers. In this regard, user-producer dialogue should incorporate all stakeholders, women and men, from various sectors, public and private, including government departments and bodies, national statistical offices, non-governmental organizations, social welfare groups, research centres, academia as well as enterprises and the media.

#### *ESCWA's experience with user-producer dialogue*

ESCWA's experience in the Development of National Gender Statistics Programmes in the Arab Countries is a good example of user-producer dialogue. Since 1997, the project has been underway in twelve Arab countries with the aim of enhancing national statistical capacities in the production, dissemination and use of gender statistics. User-producer dialogue has served as the launching pad for all project activities. By summoning and engaging users and producers of gender statistics in nation-wide and regional workshops, ESCWA staff was able to assist national statistical offices in the establishment and implementation of a framework for enhancing their gender statistics information databases. As a tangible outcome of these workshops, participant countries have produced and disseminated national statistical publications depicting the status of women and men. These publications were produced on the basis of the priority areas, informational needs and selected indicators that were discussed in the dialogue.

#### *Proposing a mechanism for user-producer dialogue*

The challenge of engaging users and producers in an ongoing, flexible and open dialogue lies in establishing the mechanisms for which to carry out and institutionalize it on the system level. Users and producers of social statistics must meet periodically, on both the national and regional level, to communicate informational needs and share good practices in the



development of dynamic social statistics systems. Toward reaching this end, ESCWA is coordinating with Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS 21) to hold a regional forum bringing together users and producers of statistics from all Arab countries to review the state of their statistical systems in their own countries and regionally. The objective of this dialogue is also to propose modalities for the planning and implementation of follow-up activities aimed at strengthening national statistical systems. The Forum is slated to take place in Amman, Jordan in April 2003 with collaboration from the Department of Statistics and Database of the League of Arab States and the Department of Statistics in Jordan.<sup>14</sup>

Given that the scope of social statistics is vast, conducting such dialogues would require both sector-focused dialogues tackling policy concerns in a particular sector, and cross-sectoral dialogues coordinating and linking policy concerns between sectors. The goal is to produce an interactive dialogue between different sectors to create and disseminate comprehensive statistical information. Six main steps for launching nation-wide user-producer dialogue are summarized below:<sup>15</sup>

### *1- Establishing a Supreme Council for Statistics*

A Supreme Council for Statistics should be drawn up from the central statistical office, statisticians from various ministries, private sector, nongovernmental organizations and academic institutions. This multidisciplinary body would be commissioned with planning social statistics strategy, coordinating between various users and producers of social statistics, as well as planning and executing conferences and workshops between various stakeholders. The idea of such a body has reached fruition in Tunisia where a Supreme Council for Statistics has been established and has already convened its first meeting.

### *2- Holding a national conference*

The first step in user-producer dialogue involves identifying the stakeholders and convening them in a national conference to establish an open forum for the expression of informational needs. Assembling a national conference for social statistics will require the participation of a large group of users and producers of social statistics. This would include not only the central bureau of statistics and statisticians from ministries and government bodies, but also banks, import/export enterprises, firms, civil associations and unions, and a wide array of nongovernmental organizations concerned with socio-economic development.

### *3- Linking national social statistics strategy to national development plans*

The development of national social statistics database should be based on the goals, targets and timetable of national socio-economic development policies, which should be presented by the concerned government officials. The purpose of this activity is to achieve an understanding of the direction that national policies and programmes are taking and the kind of data they require as input and for monitoring and assessment purposes.

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<sup>14</sup> For further information visit the PARIS 21 website at <http://www.paris21.org/htm/regional.htm#arab>.

<sup>15</sup> For further information on how to conduct user-producer dialogue refer to Engendering Statistics: A Tool for Change by Birgitta Hedman, Francesca Perucci and Pehr Sundström. Statistics Sweden, 1996.

#### *4- Identifying areas of critical concern*

Users of statistics should enumerate areas of critical concern, problems or questions that are prevalent and critical, but might not already form the target of public policy or statistical work. Given the vast array of concerns and issues that will be brought to the table, it is crucial, as a secondary step, for the stakeholders to prioritize them by voting or ranking them in order of pressing importance. While it is no small feat to arrive at a consensus of priority concerns and issues, it is a fundamental step toward translating user-producer dialogue into focused action with tangible outcomes.

#### *5- Assessing the quality of available data and identifying gaps*

Stakeholders should review the current pool of statistical data to determine what information is available and where data gaps exist. Stakeholders should then assess the quality of available data and identify possible sources for filling in gaps. This process will also require stakeholders to propose new measures, concepts, and classification systems.

#### *6- Collecting new data and beyond*

Upon identifying data needs, new data must be collected, compiled and analyzed. Transparency must prevail throughout the statistical process so that the results of all censuses, surveys and records are presented and disseminated. Transparency is critical to good statistical governance. However, lack of transparency in some countries has resulted with the withholding of records and surveys that indicate undesirable or unfavorable results, such as rising unemployment and poverty. Withholding such data is detrimental to the success of socio-economic policies aimed at creating jobs and eradicating poverty.

### **Launching awareness-raising campaigns...**

However, for stakeholders to willingly participate and contribute to such dialogue they must be aware and convinced of the benefits that are to accrue. Thus, as a preliminary step toward creating ongoing user-producer dialogue, awareness-raising campaigns should be launched to educate users and producers, as well as the general public, on the role and importance of statistics to good governance, public affairs management and the development of effective and efficient markets. Lack of awareness on the vital role of social statistics also reduces the willingness of respondents to cooperate in censuses and surveys.

Statistics advocacy tools are being designed and disseminated to educate policy and decision makers, nongovernmental organizations, private enterprises, funding agencies and the media on the importance of statistics. Brochures, posters, press kits and websites are among the tools for advocating the production and use of social statistics and the need to invest financial and human resources towards developing more capable and dynamic social statistics systems.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ben Kiregyera (Chairman, Board of Directors, Uganda Bureau of Statistics). "Advocacy for Statistics and Statistical Governance." p. 2.

## **Concluding Remarks**

To expand the dimensions of social statistics, several key issues can be underscored. Social statistics in the Arab countries and worldwide should integrate emerging social concerns into traditional information systems. Issues that stand out include unemployment, the informal sector, child labour, poverty, war and conflict, human rights and good governance as well as gender disparities. A system of indicators for social policy should be adopted and continuously updated to monitor and assess progress towards achieving socio-economic development goals. User-producer dialogues should be launched and carried out on a periodic basis (yearly) in order to institutionalize them on the system level. A separate body or supreme council for statistics must be established to plan, coordinate and follow-up on such dialogues.

On the national level, mechanisms must be developed to implement the recommendations and resolutions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the United Nations Statistical Commission. These bodies are continuously revising and improving standards and frameworks for statistical definitions, concepts and classification systems. The adoption of these recommendations and their practice on the national level would allow for comparability of data on the regional and global levels. Last but not the least, accountability and transparency must prevail at all levels and stages in the production of social statistics. It may be emphasized that social statistics are a public good and the need to make sure that they are widely disseminated and accessible should not be underestimated.

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