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Social Statistics – Some Issues And Potential Strategies *

by

Simon Ellis **

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** Head of Education Survey and Education for All Observatory, UNESCO Institute for Statistics. The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of the United Nations Secretariat.

SOCIAL STATISTICS – SOME ISSUES AND POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

Simon Ellis

Head of Education Survey and Education for All Observatory,
UNESCO Institute for Statistics

1. UNESCO Institute for Statistics is responsible for all aspects of UNESCO's statistical activities. Within the UN system it has lead responsibility for statistics on education and culture, and joint responsibilities with other agencies in the areas of communications, science and technology.
2. The Institute's four main roles are
 - 1) guardianship of cross-national data. Maintaining the integrity and currency of the major databases within its core responsibilities
 - 2) development of new methodologies and international standards. Responding to the demand for new data and new methodologies that will allow international comparability.
 - 3) statistical capacity building for member states. Recognizing the problems that states have in collecting, compiling, and analysing data. Helping them to address these problems.
 - 4) strengthening of statistical analysis. Encouraging all users to make the most of the data to maintain its relevance for policy development.
3. This note presents some observations on recent trends in social statistics based on UIS experience. It is by no means complete nor does it intend to supplant dialogue within the expert group.

Issues in social statistics

4. Given UIS responsibilities and experience we would highlight the following issues
 - Education statistics are hotly debated at national and international levels. Definitions of indicators are subject to much discussion. Consistency and comparability are major issues.
 - Cultural statistics are very underdeveloped in some regions and in international levels. Until the present there has been a concentration on major institutions (eg museums and galleries) and products (eg books). UIS is working to introduce assessments of access, participation and usage, but much further work is required on conceptual and definitional issues.
 - UIS is also working to identify gaps, and introduce international measures of social aspects for communications. A first result of this work will be the statistical report for the World Information Society conference in late 2003.

- UIS has been reviewing the collection of data on science and technology. It is likely that future indicators will give more emphasis to the availability of science skills and learning in developing countries.
 - Increasing demand for statistics on areas which cut across several accepted domains of social science, including the information society and poverty reduction
5. Turning to the use of social statistics at international level we would note the following:
- The increasing use of global targets for UN Member States. Within the UIS areas of interest these would include the Millennium Development Goals, Education for All, and perhaps at the end of 2003 on the Information Society. These targets are often set with little appreciation of the difficulties encountered by developing countries in monitoring progress.
 - The corresponding growth in the number of global monitoring reports with corresponding indicators – the World Development Indicators, Human Development Index, the State of the World’s Children, Education for All, and the Millennium Development Goals. Sometimes such reports have reified targets so they become ends in themselves rather than reflections of changed policy or progress on the ground. Proliferation of international goals and monitoring systems can lead to duplication of data collection.
 - Consistency and international comparability in the use of global indicators on social issues is hard to achieve.
 - There are tensions between the need for international data, and the needs of member states to have data that responds to their own national interests, while acknowledging that data is owned by states. These are manifested in different targets and different definitions of indicators.
 - Increasing requirement at the international level for data on specific sub-national or cross national groups (eg ethnic groups), but frequent inability of international agencies to reach sub-national data through lack of resources and respect for national sovereignty.
 - Education statistics in particular have become central to international and global initiatives. They have in many ways become the focal point for many of the debates on social issues, and encapsulate many of the methodological and theoretical problems faced by other domains.
6. UIS would also note the following major lacunae in data availability and collection methodologies

- Data on the non-government institutions in developing countries (including private sector education institutions) ;
- Continuing lack of good vital statistics in some countries, including irregular censuses;
- The need to measure cultural differences with culturally sensitive instruments that intrinsically reflect cultural differences and diversity;
- Many social statistics are collected by line ministries rather than by central statistical offices. Where co-ordination between ministries has been lacking national statistics can be inconsistent.

Education data

7. These issues may be further developed with regard to education data, which remains the main focus of UIS activity. (UIS has been reviewing its data collection policies for culture, science and technology, and communications.)
8. UIS conducts annual surveys of education ministries to collect administrative data on national education systems. It also organizes twelve annual regional workshops to consider current issues in education statistics along with statisticians from ministries of education in each country. The data cover every level of education from pre-primary to tertiary.
9. In the preceding section reference was made to the major debates to which education statistics are subjected.
10. There is some discussion about the relative advantages of household survey and administrative data. These debates can sometimes be posed in terms of one form of data being more 'accurate' than another, when both forms of data are complementary. This is not helpful since both data are necessary for national and international policy development. Without administrative data line ministries cannot function effectively, while household surveys are essential to understand the contribution of family background to social development.
11. There is much debate about population based indicators. UIS follows UN guidelines and uses UN population estimates, but these are subject to much disagreement from countries. Population remains the basis, and more specifically the denominator, for many social statistics which are normally expressed as a proportion of the appropriate national population.
12. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) of 1997 created a distinction between primary and secondary education, associated with Grade 6. Many countries have unified national systems of 'basic education' that incorporate both primary and secondary education in the same school. To achieve international comparability countries have to split their 'basic education' into primary and secondary subdivisions at Grade 6. This poses many questions as to whether there

should be an international standard and how often it should be modified to reflect changing practice.

13. UIS has also been working with the World Bank on the Data Quality Assessment Framework for Education. This initiative has grown out of the International Monetary Fund GDDS system. UIS believes the development of such frameworks in social statistics will have benefits in terms of the clarity of educational statistics at the international and national levels as well as in the capacity building of member states. A particular benefit of this framework is to identify data flows between ministries. The education DQAF follows on from those on finance and demographics (IMF), as well as poverty (World Bank). In the longer term this may lead to a broader international understanding of the inter-relationships of social statistics production and use at national level, as well as more effective use and dissemination of statistics.
14. Social Statistics has much to learn from recent developments in statistical methods. UIS compiles annual literacy projections for all countries based on national censuses and the occasional dedicated national survey. The validity of these data is problematic as they originate in self-classification through a limited number of questions. UIS is developing a new measure based on item response theory and hierarchical modeling. This project has been named LAMP, the Literacy Assessment Measurement Programme. It is hoped that it will result in a cheaper, more valid assessment of literacy, which will be easier for countries to undertake.

Cross-sectoral studies

15. UNESCO has identified two areas for cross-sectoral studies on ICT and poverty.
16. UNESCO is considering its role in relation to poverty reduction. This has led the Institute to develop a programme of work on the relationship between poverty and education, looking at the potential indicators on topics as diverse as HIV/AIDS, language, and rural issues.
17. Such a programme demonstrates the way that social statistics can be interrelated. It demonstrates at institutional level that strong partnership and co-ordination are required, and at the technical level how complex associations of variables, and international indicators require careful judgement of causality.

Gender

18. Gender is a central dimension to all social statistics. The Inter Agency Technical Group on the Millennium Development Goals has agreed that gender should be a dimension of all appropriate MDG indicators. In education the UN Girls Education Initiative has been a major influence in highlighting the importance of gender and education within the UN system.
19. It is relatively easy to ensure that any statistic that is collected includes a gender dimension at little extra cost. Furthermore there are very few social statistics that do

not have a gender dimension. Nevertheless there are still some countries and agencies that do not collect gender based statistics.

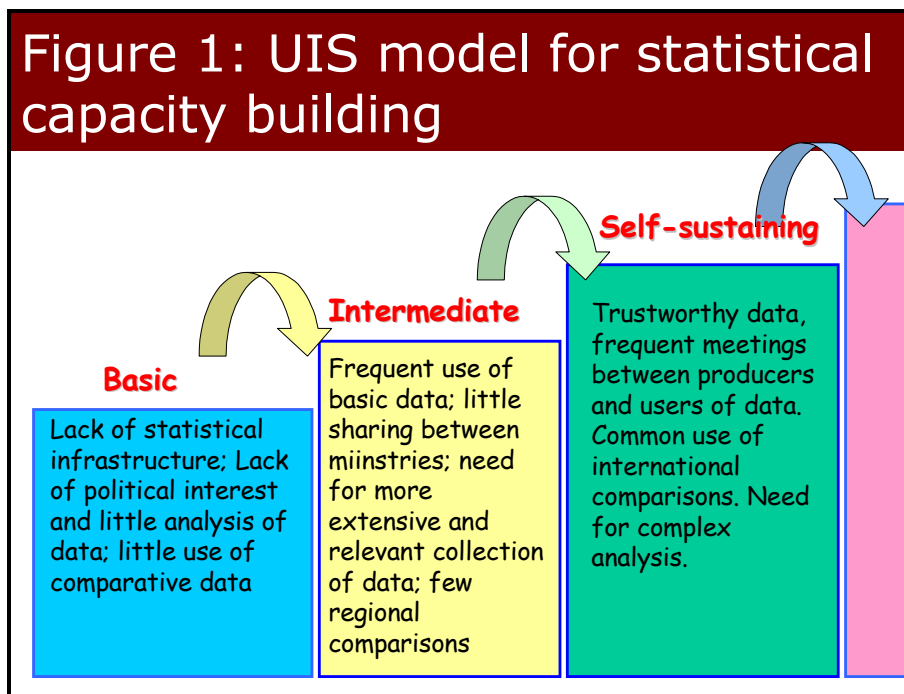
Statistical capacity-building

20. UNESCO Institute for Statistics has conducted annual regional workshops since the year 2000, with statisticians from ministries of education. Sustainable statistical capacity in line ministries is jeopardized by

- Changes in staff, in particular caused by low wages, and competition from the private sector
- Economic, social and political upheaval
- Lack of resources including qualified staff, leading to high workloads. (The need for minimizing the burden of international data collections, which has been the subject of much discussion at the UN Statistical Commission is of major importance here.)

21. During the last twelve months UIS has begun to build up sufficient resources for direct longer term capacity building missions in developing countries. These should be vehicles for more permanent change than our annual workshops, but we are under no illusions that their results will also be limited by the factors outlined above.

22. Any global strategy for social statistics is in turn unlikely to be sustainable unless it addresses these limitations on development.



Some potential strategies

23. It is easy to come to premature conclusions on some of the issues discussed here, but it may be appropriate to suggest some potential strategies which could be discussed in relation to the issues that have been raised.

24. These might include

- Development of more co-ordinated international surveys, based on shared concepts and definitions eg international labour force surveys
- Clarity about responsibilities within the UN system and other international agencies
- Lobbying within countries for more disaggregated statistics covering minorities and sub-national data.
- Development of international standards to promote clarity in discussion and clarity in the use of social statistics.