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Re-Engineering and Strengthening the Production
and Uses of Social Statistics— A Note *

by

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RE-ENGINEERING AND STRENGTHENING THE PRODUCTION AND USES OF SOCIAL STATISTICS— A NOTE

O. O. Ajayi

1. Introduction

For more than the last decade, the United Nations (UN) together with its specialized agencies have been concerned with development in all the areas of social sector. These concerns have led to the holding of summits and conferences during this period to examine the dimensions of the social problems. Such summits and conferences have covered as wide an area as child protection and development, reproductive health and population, the environment, housing, education, health, employment, food security and poverty reduction.

Indeed, in Copenhagen in 1995, the UN had the big summit on social development wherein nations made affirmation to improve the social status of their people. This affirmation was to be turned into actions whose progress must be measured. However, without monitoring mechanisms and appropriate benchmarking of social development based on good quality and comparable statistics, the commitment to social development by governments and international organizations cannot be credible. Therefore, in order to move from affirmation to action, data, facts and figures are required.

Availability of a wide range of quantitative information in the social development field would certainly make for better understanding and this would consequently lead to quantum improvements in social policy and programme design. Given the low level of development of social statistics in most countries, the rate of marginal return is likely to be very high indeed. Perhaps a small component of programme costs invested in the development of policy-relevant social statistics will yield a huge improvement in the collective understandings and insights of the social status of the society.

However, if statistics are to be produced and used for designing social policies and programmes, for use in monitoring progress and eventually for evaluation, the creation of a national capability is an important pre-requisite. Paradoxically, it is precisely the countries that experience the need for proper policy formulation and closest monitoring that are least capable of self-sufficiency in the development, dissemination and sensible use of statistical information. Herein lies the challenge for UN commitment towards statistical capacity building world-wide but more particularly in the developing and transition countries.

Although the various summits and conferences had helped to clearly identify the crucial role of statistics thereby underlining the importance of these international summits for statistical development; it must be very clear to all by now that statistics is at the centre of all developments, be it social, economic or political. If this then is the position of statistics and the statistical capability is very low in most developing and transition

countries, is it not necessary to think of an international summit on statistical development to obtain the commitment of governments so as to raise the level of statistical infrastructure and capacity in their various countries?

No doubt, there had been previous effort in the development of social statistics; but this has not kept pace with the several dimensions of social development. A new beginning is therefore urgently needed!

2. Current situation of social statistics

The current state of social statistics must be looked at from the fundamental issues with respect to its production strategies, institutional and coordination mechanisms before mentioning pointedly some of the problems of this current state.

Statistical delivery including the supply of social indicators has been hampered in most developing and transition countries by some fundamental factors, namely, lack of statistical capacity and very inadequate funding in these countries. This state of affairs had affected the production systems very adversely. To properly represent the status of production through the various sources, viz., census, surveys and System of Administrative Statistics (SAS), it is necessary to examine these sources individually:

(a) *Census*: Although censuses would generate very detailed social indicators particularly at the lowest level of administration, the cost of census exercise and the limited scope of census are critical constraints to this source supplying the needed social statistics. Indeed, a significant number of countries are not in the position to undertake population and housing censuses at regular 10-year intervals. A good vital registration system (vrs) could generate good sets of social indicators with wide coverage and even for this system, the situation is very bad for the group of developing and transition countries.

(b) (i) *Household Surveys*: Household Surveys are best suited to generate social indicators consistently and continuously. If therefore there is a world-wide programme of social development, defined in whatever way, and there is a huge demand for relevant statistical information to help diagnose, monitor and eventually evaluate the result of the policies and programmes adopted, an autonomous, self-sustaining nationally based capacity to conduct relevant surveys must be created first and foremost.

This view probably was one reason why the UN in 1979 initiated the UN National Household Survey Capability Programme (NHSCP) and which was implemented and supported in several developing countries for over a decade before it was wound up in the early 90's. The problem of this programme was lack of ownership and capacity at the country level (this approach was structurally deficient) and the timing of its introduction was unlucky. The result, in many countries today, is that the programme is dead and countries have settled for ad-

hoc, non-consistent, non-continuous surveys and building time series data has become impossible.

(ii) Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS): This was a set of generically formulated surveys largely conducted by the World Bank with no permanent consequences on the countries' ability to conduct statistical surveys in the future. These series of surveys were therefore not a viable replacement of the earlier UN initiative. For the two initiatives, the NHSCP and the LSMS, to succeed, there ought to have been some measure of investment in infrastructure and ability of the countries to perform operations on their own.

(c) System of Administrative Statistics (SAS): Largely, there had been considerable difficulty in the use of administrative file in the following respects:

- Record keeping in the Ministries needs substantial improvement so as to ensure completeness, consistency and quality response.
- There is insufficient or indeed non-existent coordination with administrative sources of information.
- Inappropriate formats for the data collection.
- Inaccessibility of the collected information to be adapted for statistical purposes because of lack of necessary legal provision and bureaucratic hurdles.
- Low statistical capacity of the units in the ministries including lack of central coordination, low funding and low initiative.

2.1 Other problems of the current situation: Apart from the problems linked up with the sources for generating social data, there are other general problems needing attention:

- (i) Lack of guidelines for technical and operational aspects of production i.e. questionnaire and forms design, training, submission of data, etc.

Usage

- (ii) There is low demand for statistical data in developing countries
- (iii) Greater effort in training is necessary to teach policy-makers on how to use data
- (iv) Need for simple statistical products which will be user-friendly and easily accessible.

Framework

- (v) Need for harmonization of definitions, concepts and classifications and measurement methods e.g. difficulty of measurement of "happiness",
- (vi) Difficulty in the development of indicators
- (vii) Advancement of such frameworks as System of Social and Demographic Statistics (SSDS), Social Accounting Matrix (SAM).

National Statistical System (NSS)

- (viii) Weak NSS cannot sustain the pressure exerted at the international level for the production of statistics particularly when there is low investments for statistical capacity building.
- (ix) Low ability for better integration of data from various sources and across sectors at National Statistical Offices (NSOs) level.
- (x) Lack of experience with monitoring in some administrations (sectors), especially with the role that statistics might play in the process
- (xi) In NSOs, other priorities over-shadow priority for social statistics.
- (xii) Insufficient skilled staff in NSOs to undertake statistical analysis and be able to link data to policies and programmes.
- (xiii) Insufficient attention in some NSOs to data segregation by gender, to data disaggregation plus inadequacy of data dissemination to potential users.
- (xiv) Absence of a stable system for production of statistics at NSOs and peripheral institutions of the NSS.

Coordination

- (xv) Lack of a system for integrating data and indicators emanating from departments with those of the national statistical offices.
- (xvi) Insufficient consultation of statisticians even as regards technical problems in statistics of planning, programming and monitoring.
- (xvii) Lack of institutionalization of collaboration between policy makers and statisticians.

3. Strategy and approaches for restructuring and improvement of social statistics

In treating this issue, a number of strategies and approaches will be listed for consideration:

- (a) There must be a move from isolated surveys and ad-hoc approaches to a more systematic approach. This means a sustained development of production systems which will remain robust for all time:

Household Surveys: development should include the following:

- Selecting and maintaining the master sample
- Establishing a geographic frame
- Designing a medium-term survey programme
- Developing capabilities in survey methodology, data processing, data analysis, data dissemination and usage.

This more or less implies the re-introduction of NHSCP-type strategy sufficiently funded, be country-owned and be internationally supervised and monitored.

System of Administrative Statistics (SAS): should cover such activities as:

- Creation of a discussion forum with a medium term agenda for the forum to discuss and ensuring that the forum or committee does not die out as a result of inertia, apathy or simple lack of an agenda to discuss.
- Analysis of the possibilities and shortcomings of existing administrative records.
- Design of proposals and the corresponding cost to have such components as modifications and additions of technical programmes. It should include realistic time-table of operations.
- Mobilization of support to include those of the ministries, UN agencies, policy people, etc.

Under system development, the factors most important to consider concerning household surveys are:

- Adequate and continuous funding and top political support
- Adequacy of sampling frames
- Technical capacity to manage household surveys
- Motivation of information suppliers
- Re-orientation of data users

and concerning administrative records:

- Access to administrative records
- Quality of administrative records (assessment based on use and not on intuition)
- Influence on the design of future administrative records
- Political acceptability of administrative record matching
- Institutions to prevent abuse in use of administrative records.

(b) Use of integrated data sources needed for social development.

(c) The international statistical community should play key roles in:

- Development of definitions, concepts, classifications and nomenclatures enabling the social status of the society to be measured;
- Establishment of a list of statistical indicators that are simple, solid and suitable for a comprehensive and transparent representation of social conditions in various countries, taking into account the specificities of countries;
- Compilation of a manual/handbook on best practices and legal frameworks in the field of methods to measure and ensure the quality of information, publication standards and professional ethics obligation;
- Undertaking studies on problems;
- Promotion of exchange of know-how and a transfer of knowledge between countries with advanced statistical systems and those developing their systems;
- Training of statisticians as well as users of statistics;
- Strengthening the statistical systems of developing countries

— Mobilization for resources

- (d) Advocacy programme must be part of new strategy

4. Framework development

All frameworks developed hitherto should be thoroughly reviewed and be modified to allow for practicality of implementation.

A proposed example:

- (a) Each country to supply the ranking by importance of these indicators to their countries and their corresponding weights ahead of the production of the indicators.
- (b) The indicators can now be combined into an overall index based on the pre-submission of the weights by the countries.
- (c) The overall index can then compare the performance and progress of the countries.
- (d) In Tabular Format:

Social Indicators and Rel-Weights and Overall Performance Index

Country	Indicator 1	Wt	Indicator 2	Wt.	Indicator n	Wt.	Overall Index
A								
B								
C								
.								
.								
.								

It is trivially simple but requires transparency and honesty on the part of the countries.

5. Coordination issues

- (a) Several national and international initiatives in the field of social statistics were launched as an outcome of the Copenhagen Summit as a means to foster statistical capacity building. The need to rely on the national statistical systems to implement the initiatives should be endorsed by all. International statistical initiatives that are not coordinated and undertaken through the NSOs run the risk of undermining the NSOs. This must be avoided. International agencies should not violate the coordination mechanism of any country but rather should enhance such mechanism.
- (b) NSOs should be at the apex of the NSS and must have a status, access, influence and persuasive powers equal to the task of convincing its

colleagues in charge of various ministries to reform their records system. NSOs should equally coordinate all the institutions within the NSS for all data production process.

- (c) NSO is to oversee an orderly application of consistent concepts and classifications by different data production agencies.
- (d) NSO should collaborate with all classes of data users for effectiveness of usage.

6. Programme of work

For a re-engineered strategy for social statistics production and usage, there should be a work programme that must be drawn up, sold to all countries, and supervised and monitored by the UN Statistical Division. Some elements of the programme are as follows:

- (a) Filling the serious statistical gaps which still remain with respect to social development data and quality of data.
- (b) Processing of backlog data and ensuring the analysis of all existing data before embarking on new collections
- (c) Developing indicators and measures to quantify conventional, less conventional and new concepts of development e.g. “quality of life”
- (d) Developing the SAS by improving the administrative sources of data.
- (e) Rebirth of the NHSCP including the development of a manual or guide with enough detail to provide support for those statistical agencies that have little experience on how to take successful household surveys.
- (f) Reviewing summit recommendations and identifying data requirements
- (g) Standardization of definitions, concepts and classifications
- (h) Further work on establishing frameworks for social statistics
- (i) Determination of NSO requirements for strong statistical capacity
- (j) Availability of training facilities and enhancement of training in the areas of:
 - Indicator development
 - Survey management
 - Analytical capability
- (k) Launch “social benchmark programme” which will cover:
 - Review of available social data
 - Identification of gaps
 - Data collection and analysis
- (l) Establishing mechanisms to share experience between developed and developing countries on the best practices in monitoring and benchmarking.
- (m) Database development and dissemination methods
- (n) Advocacy programme to promote the importance of social statistics for measurement of progress of social status of societies.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The re-engineering of an integrated social statistics system which involves the development of policy relevant conceptual frameworks and corresponding measurement systems is intellectually most challenging. A real collective partnership is therefore required among official statisticians, policy makers, public administrators working at various levels of government and external academic and research institutions. The various national governments need to provide NSOs the resources required to achieve the goals.

Recommendations

- (a) Problems in the generation of social indicators are similar in developed countries as in developing countries. Exchange of experiences should therefore involve both the developed and developing countries. This is probably an area where it is not sufficient to transfer know-how and disseminate best practices. Innovation should be encouraged by promoting a dialogue among peers and putting peer pressure to work.
- (b) Partnership should be built among:
 - Users and producers of statistics
 - Policy makers and statisticians
 - Research people and NSOs
 - Media (advocacy)/Producers
 - Countries
 - UN agencies and international organizations
- (c) Taking every opportunity to strengthen the NSS by national governments and international agencies.
- (d) National Governments and UN agencies/international organizations should rely as much as possible on the NSOs, thus raising their profile.
- (e) Implementing standards which favour the long-term investments in statistical systems and statistical activities by consolidating existing infrastructures and/or creating new infrastructures in such a way that all countries would benefit from international aid.
- (f) Improved collaboration between line ministries (which design the policies) and NSOs would be beneficial. Staff training especially if it is provided jointly to planners and statisticians, would be a means to that end. Policy makers would learn about statistical techniques – their possibilities and constraints. Statisticians would benefit by seeing how the data they provide are put to the test of practical application.
- (g) Regional bodies could arrange for training within countries or regionally. They should assist with the integration of social data and more broadly with technical issues such as definitions, appropriate indicators and methods of data collection.
- (h) A statistical component project funding should be provided for monitoring and evaluation for all programmes. This way funding for statistical development will become available in a systemic way.

- (i) The UNSD should develop a comprehensive programme for social statistics jointly with the countries and encourage them to implement the programme. Also UNSD should supervise and monitor implementation.

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