

**Expert Group Meeting on
Setting the Scope of Social Statistics**

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Current Status of Social Statistics: An Overview of Issues and Concerns^{*}

by

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I. Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on problems that are common in the area of social statistics. It is envisaged that by stating some of the problems the expert group meeting may come up with an action plan that would be a road map for mitigating and resolving some of the problems which are discussed in various sections below. Social statistics have been taken to include all areas of statistics relating to people and their living conditions¹. This broad definition would include some aspects of demography; health, education and training; labour; income, consumption and wealth; social protection and cohesion; housing; mobility; leisure; crime and justice just to mention a few. Social statistics are, therefore, diverse.
2. An important goal for the development of social statistics is to establish statistically meaningful and viable relationships along different dimensions, so that complementarities across different and varied sources of data and across areas of social concern are identified. In order to monitor the Millennium Goals², for instance, there is an increasing demand for comprehensive and interlinked social, economic, environmental and demographic statistics. Such knowledge helps us to understand better the conspiring factors, which contribute, for example, to certain catastrophes such as hunger, poverty etc.
3. It is against this background that the Statistical Commission at its thirty-third session (2002) stressed the need for a more systematic development of social statistics and requested the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) to convene an expert group meeting on setting the scope for social statistics to review current practices and come up with an agreed programme of action for their improvement. At its thirty-fourth session (2003), the Commission “underscored the need for the expert group meeting to be focused, deliver clear outcomes and develop a time frame for achieving the set goals.”
4. Policy formulation is a complex process, which takes into account a nexus of factors of which statistics is one (UNECA, 1993). There is an increasing demand for policy-relevant statistics on an ever-growing number of social issues. In addition, social change brought on by development increases the need for statistics about many aspects of people’s lives, not just what resources they have, but what those resources do for them (Becker et al., 1997). Ryten (2000) advocates for an integrated approach to social statistics that recognizes the links among various areas of social concern. Despite such demands made at national and international fora, progress in social statistics has been lagging behind. Social Statistics are often produced in an ad hoc manner, without a clear strategy or programme of work. Coordination among producers and users of social statistics at both the national and international level is still insufficient, resulting in

¹ Statistics Netherlands, Division for Social and Spatial Statistics, Siena Group Secretariat, Strategy and Goals for short and medium term, 28 January 2002.

inconsistent statistics and under-utilisation of data. Furthermore the needs of stakeholders are not always adequately met in terms of timeliness and relevance.

5. This paper highlights a number of problem areas that need attention in social statistics, namely: strategies to involve of stakeholders, utilization of various data sources, comparability of data, coordination and statistical capacity. The paper concludes by asking for an action plan to be developed by the expert group meeting.

II. Involvement of stakeholders

6. The linkage between the social statisticians, policy makers and planners, for many countries, has not been close. This is partly because social statistics are mainly produced independently by line-ministries as by products of administration. Data collected by the national statistical offices are in most cases not comparable with data from by products of administration, because of lack of uniformity of concepts and definitions. In order to generate comprehensive social statistics data producers and users need to work closely together in all stages of data production. In some countries the communication between statistical offices and policy makers is relatively poor and sensitising of policy makers to the importance of social data is low (Hutcheon, 2002). This, among other things, explains the paucity of resources allocated to the development of social statistics.

7. As emerging concerns continually arise, data gaps occur in a statistical system. It is the responsibility of stakeholders (i.e. both users and producers) to identify and address these data gaps (Virola, 1998). Data users can play an important role in the improvement of social statistics by helping to identify data gaps, data inconsistencies and emerging issues. Thus apart from helping to validate social statistics, data users can play a critical role in identifying their data requirements. The role of stakeholders in the development of social statistics cannot be overemphasized. For example the impetus in producing gender statistics was created by the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women³ and the Fourth World Conference on Women⁴ which, among other things, created due attention to time use statistics. Poverty statistics were given prominence after the global war on poverty⁵ was declared and the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals as earlier stated has ushered in a flurry of activities in the area of social indicators.

8. Interaction among the different members of producer and user groups would provide the necessary multi disciplinary perspectives in social statistics that can enhance evidence-based planning and decision-making processes. In addition, consultations between data producers and users can help elicit public cooperation in the generation of social statistics. This collaboration can minimise some misconception of both producers and users. The former usually have perceptions that they are in the best position to

³ The Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly (see <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw>).

⁴ Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995.

⁵ Report of the World Summit on Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995.

determine what users need, while data users at times behave as if producers have limitless resources and demand that they be provided all the data they need.

9. In general, financial, political and institutional support for social statistics may be forthcoming when the statistics are used extensively and are seen to make a difference to the quality of policy decisions (Lievesly, 2001). In this regard users can be important allies in the fight for continued collection of social statistics.

10. As earlier stated in many developing countries the relationship between producers and users of social statistics is weak. Developing and strengthening the link can help to improve the quality and usefulness of social statistics in these countries. For many countries there are often inadequate mechanisms for drawing social statistics to the attention of policy makers and sensitization of their potential uses. Causes of frustration to users of social statistics in some countries include untimely release of processed data and the fact that most data collected through censuses and surveys are not fully analysed and disseminated.

11. The fact that stakeholders of social statistics cover a broad spectrum that includes, administrators, policy makers, opinion leaders, planners, researchers, the media, international agencies and civil society compounds the problem. It therefore becomes difficult to adequately satisfy each group's needs. Each group uses statistics in accordance with its particular familiarity with statistical analysis and its own consideration of social concerns (FAO, 1999).

12. In conclusion, the following questions may be pertinent for the meeting to consider: Who are the stakeholders of social statistics? How can their different interests be accommodated? How can producers of social statistics broaden their audiences and reach as many potential users as possible? How can users maximize the correct interpretation and use of social statistics? Are there ways in which producers of statistics can discern which data users and analyses may be wanted, even when data users may have difficulty expressing their needs? In general, how can social statisticians effectively engage stakeholders in meaningful and symbiotic dialogues that would result in the production of demand driven quality social statistics?

III. Utilisation of different data sources

13. Social statistics form a basis for sound measurement and monitoring of social concerns, policies and programmes. For many countries there are disparate social statistics. Such statistics are generated mainly as by products of administration and service driven. While appreciable work has been done, even in developing countries, on improvement of economic and demographic statistics, social statistics have been left underdeveloped and mostly under the auspices of their administrative agencies, or line ministries. Because most social statistics have been developed independently by each line ministry or social agency they have mostly served the purposes of administration. They are mainly meant to record the execution and performance of their undertakings primarily to meet administrative needs (United Nations, 1979). The above does not preclude the

fact that there are other sources of social statistics such as censuses and sample surveys. For many countries these sources are disjointed. For example, in many countries, there still exists lack of coordination and rationalization of different sources of social statistics.

14. More often than not, these statistics tend to be incomparable across sources and suffer from severe limitations for social planning and policy. Different agencies tend to use varying concepts, definitions and units for data collection and analysis for similar constructs. As a result, each programme of social statistics goes on underdeveloped with no linkage to others, in a self-perpetuating manner without, benefiting from the statistical improvements in other areas.

15. Apart from social statistics resulting from censuses of population and housing and large-scale sample surveys, many developing countries derive social statistics from administrative records. However such statistics may be restricted to some small segments of the population. For instance, data on civil registration in many developing countries are only available for urban areas. This implies that the measurement of social phenomena is biased by not measuring the total national situation.

16. Countries would therefore benefit if in view of many institutions concerned with social statistics and interdependence of data, appropriate coordination mechanisms were in place for data collection and perhaps analysis. In addition common concepts, definitions and classifications would also be essential (United Nations, 1979). It is however, important to note that these sources are intrinsically different and such differences should be taken note of when using them as complementary sources. For example censuses which are taken infrequently, once in ten years for most countries, are not a source of very detailed social statistics and in most cases are subject to high non-sampling errors. While household surveys are the most flexible of the three data sources their success depends on strict execution of well-designed samples. Another constraint is that inferences cannot be made for small domains because of limitations of sample sizes.

17. The reliability of social statistics from the administrative records depends on the completeness of the system. In many developing countries, for example, administrative records for many social programmes are not well developed, resulting in the unreliability of the data produced. While the administrative processes are continuing for purposes of record keeping and administration, their use as sources of statistics are secondary. It is common for a hierarchy of administrators of reporting offices to receive unclear guidelines on statistical requirement of their work. In this regard, concepts, definition and classifications of items are ambiguously defined or spelled out. As a consequence the data are usually neither complete nor consistent. The common issues to grapple with in the context of administrative records, in many countries, are that often they are limited in content and their use weigh more towards use in administration. They do not have the adaptability of household surveys in concepts or subject detail. Such sources as earlier stated, are often incomplete, inconsistent and limited in subject matter coverage. Moreover, an administrative record mainly focuses on an individual; it does not usually provide detailed information on household or family (Suharto, 2000).

18. Increasingly censuses, sample surveys and administrative records will be used as complementary sources of social statistics. A good statistical programme generally makes use of a careful mix of administrative records, censuses and surveys. Careful balance in the use of these sources may enhance the impact and usefulness of social statistics.

19. At the international level efforts have, to some extent, been made to develop common classifications, concepts and definitions which are included in United Nations handbooks and manuals such as *Towards a System of Social and Demographic Statistics* (1975) and *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses Rev.1* (1998). The real challenge is to enhance the complementary use of census, sample survey and administrative data, as cumulative addition to knowledge, rather than treating them as alternatives. In view of the limitations of each of the data sources, how can social statisticians maximize the complementary use of these sources?

IV. Coordination

20. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (UN, 1998) states that “coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.” Many countries there lack formal mechanisms for coordination among producers of social statistics including involvement of users, such as planners, policy makers, researchers and the civil society in developing social statistics programmes. There is a lack of coordination for the harmonization of concepts, classification and definitions among different sources. This at times happens within the same statistical office where there may be failure to coordinate activities and two competing statistical field activities could be programmed by different sections of the same national statistical office (UNECA, 1993).

21. Countries need to effectively coordinate producers of social statistics and involve data users in the development and implementation of social statistics programmes. Mechanisms for coordinating activities will have to be established within national statistical offices themselves. As earlier stated such coordination does not always exist in some offices. Coordination among all data producers is essential if social statistical operations are to be efficient and cost-effective. In this regard it is essential that the work of various agencies is not dissipated but contributes to a systematic approach to the development and improvement of social statistics.

22. Inter-institutional collaboration both at the national and international levels can, in part, enhance coordination. In this way duplication, dissemination of contradictory and incomparable information can be minimised and the use of scarce resources maximized (ECLAC, 2002). It has often been argued that competing, inconsistent results on the same issue introduce skepticism and doubts in users minds and the quality of such data is viewed with suspicion. This results in diminished belief in statistics (Everaers, 2002). Do producer/user statistical committees, in countries, help in coordinating social statistics activities in countries? If they do work what are the ingredients of success?

23. At the international level, what strategies should be in place to improve comparability, validity and reliability of measures of social statistics and the exchange of information in this area? How can international agencies effectively share experiences regarding joint data collection exercises and use of common data sets? Are there practical ways to improve inter-institutional coordination in order to avoid duplication and the issuing of contradictory information?

24. In order for international organizations to receive quality social statistical data, especially from developing countries, there may be need to develop closer partnerships among international agencies and national statistics offices. Mechanisms should be in place to harmonise requests for metadata. And it may be necessary to reconsider ways of facilitating the flow of data at lower costs for both countries and international organizations.

25. Coordination of social statistics could facilitate, among other things, the interlinking of data from different sources for those countries where this aspect is still a problem.

V. Comparability of social statistics

26. One of the major challenges to social statistics is ensuring comparability of data over a period of time within a country and at international level. Comparability of data is a problem especially when different sources are combined (see section III of this paper).

27. In general, statistics have greater usefulness when they can be amenable to comparison over space and time (Depoutot, 1998); this is certainly true for most social statistics. However, this is far from reality. To monitor change across geographic, sectoral, and temporal dimensions the comparability of social statistics will require the use of common concepts, definitions and to some extent methodologies for data collection and analysis.

28. According to Lievesley (2001), international statistical activities involve among others:

- i. The collection and dissemination of cross-nationally comparable data, guardianship of these databases and support of and consultations with users;
- ii. Analysis and interpretation of cross-national data;
- iii. Initiating and working on special methodological and technical projects including the development of concepts;
- iv. The development and maintenance of international classifications and standardized procedures to promote comparability;
- v. Technical capacity building and support of users and producers of data within countries;
- vi. Establishing and sharing good practices in statistics, supporting activities, which improve the quality of data.

These efforts if well coordinated can facilitate the production of comparable data both within countries and at the international level.

29. The collection of internationally comparable data is essential, among other reasons, because:

- i. It enables countries to compare their performance with other countries with respect to particular social concerns;
- ii. At times, it allows for aggregation of data across countries to provide a global picture.

While the collection of comparable social statistics is difficult, their importance is increasing because of needs for information about the consequences of globalization.

30. Problems associated with assembling cross-national comparable data include the need for the lowest common denominator, the burden created on responding countries while the cross-national data may not be specific to national needs. There is a lack of metadata supporting most cross-national data making the interpretation and comparison of such data a guessing game.

31. What role can national statistical systems play in administrative data development in order to facilitate comparability of data from one sector to another or within one sector?

VI. Statistical capacity

32. Statistical capacity encompasses a number of elements such as: organizational structure of the national statistical system; human and financial resources; statistical training and data collection, processing, analysis and dissemination capabilities.

33. For many developing countries the statistical capacity is weak. Collecting a myriad of social statistics requires a mixture of sound data sources such as civil registration records, population registers, samples surveys, censuses and other administrative records. To accomplish the above tasks there is need for viable national statistical systems. For some countries national statistical offices do not have the capacity to produce high quality social statistics because of the following reasons: lack of trained manpower, staff turnover, inadequate resources (such as transport, necessary for conducting national surveys, data processing and dissemination equipment), general lack of political will to support statistical development and lack of broad based support for statistics.

VII. Conclusion

34. The paper has highlighted some of the problems that are pervasive in the field of social statistics. The list is by no means exhaustive. Some of these problems have been known to social statisticians since time immemorial, however it is necessary to revisit

them, at the risk of repetition, because for many countries solutions are still elusive. It is our hope that this expert group meeting will come up with practical suggestions to solve some of the problems and develop a road map for implementing such solutions.

35. The following are some of the issues which the meeting may wish to consider when developing a plan of action:

- Are there cores of issues, current and emerging, which may serve as a minimum for countries to collect data on, analyse and disseminate?
- What practical steps, can be taken to promote and enhance coordination at national and international levels?
- Can we devise common, useful, functional and effective strategies for involvement of various stakeholders in social statistical programmes at national and international levels?
- Censuses, household surveys and administrative records are common sources of social statistics. How can countries, which have not yet used these sources as complementary, be guided to do so?
- What mechanisms can be put in place to track methodological developments in social statistics to the benefit of most countries?
- How do we make social statistics policy and gender relevant?
- What efforts can be made for the international community to invest in the development of social statistics to the mutual benefit of countries at different levels of statistical development in this interdependent world?
- What mechanisms can be put in place for countries to develop and share good practices in social statistics?

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