

TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEXICAN STATISTICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

The transformation of the Mexican Statistical and Geographical System has gone through a Constitutional Reform whose core elements are: the entitlement of the Congress to legislate on statistical and geographical information matters and to establish a National System of Statistical and Geographical Information coordinated by INEGI.

The Reform has to be understood within a context of political evolution and change towards democracy during the 20th century, when a very powerful presidential regime drove Mexico, leading to a general social perception that the Government manipulated key statistical information for its own convenience. It was a felt need in the society to overcome this credibility crisis and to promote a more comprehensive and transparent National Information System, with the coordination of an autonomous institution.

The System is organized in 3 subsystems: Economic and financial statistics; Social and Demographic statistics; and Environmental and Geographical Information, to produce and disseminate information of national importance.

The main challenge ahead after the constitutional amendment, deals with the functioning of the System and the efficient coordinating role of INEGI, in accordance with the principles of accessibility, transparency, objectivity and independence.

I. The Process and its background

The first Mexican official statistical office was created in 1882. Since then, it has been dependent of the executive branch and located in various ministries according to the different reorganizations of the Federal Administration. The last law for Statistical and Geographical Information has been issued in 1980, and gave origin to the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI). The Institute has been a public entity attached to the Ministry of Finance. The President of INEGI reports directly to the Minister of Finance who, it should be said, has been respectful of its technical and managerial independence.

Following the evolution of times, a legislative trend towards INEGI autonomy came into the political arena by the end of last century. This story begins in 1996 when some Mexican legislators took into consideration a felt need by the society. Since then, 6 legislative initiatives were submitted in Congress to modify the Constitution in order to make of the National Institute for Statistics

and Geography, INEGI, an autonomous institution. At the end, all the political parties seemed to agree on this delicate matter.

In December 2003, a new initiative was issued and rapidly approved by the Senate. All political parties backed it up. Nevertheless, the initiative had some important drawbacks with the potential of being negative for the strength and operation of the National Statistical and Geographical Information System. The House of Representatives, with technical advice of INEGI, modified the Senate original initiative which was approved two years later. It was not an easy endeavor. Taking into account that in Mexico, Constitutional amendments have to be approved by 2/3 of each House and more than 50% of the local congresses, the process continued after the House approval. Fortunately, this last part took only 4 months to be completed. Finally, the Constitutional Reform was published in the official journal of the federation (*Diario Oficial de la Federación*) on 7 April, 2006.

Due to the fact that the constitutional amendment needs a statutory law to become effective, the Senate submitted in advance, 30 March, 2006 a proposal of such a law which is now under legislative discussion and analysis.

II. The driving forces of the process

From the above discussion, it is clear that the autonomy of INEGI has to be understood within a context of political evolution and change. Within this framework it is fair to say that the main driving force towards an autonomous institute in charge of official statistics, was political.

During the 20th century, a very powerful presidential regime drove Mexico for several decades. Its force and control were felt in all the segments of the society. Within this context, the perception of an important part of Mexican society by the end of the century was that the Government manipulated elections and key statistical information to its own convenience. Generally speaking, Government credibility was rather low. In a better communicated and interdependent world and in a country with a better democratic perspective, it became necessary to find a solution to such a credibility crisis.

These ideas of change and democracy were transformed in proposals to take away from the Federal Government some strategic functions with the objective of being performed by autonomous agencies. These were the cases of:

- Central Bank (Banco de México)
- Federal Elections Institute (IFE)
- Human Rights Commission
- Federal Institute for the Access to Information
- Federal Chief Auditor; and finally of the
- National Institute of Statistical and Geographical Information (INEGI)

It is important to point out that some of these proposals came from inside of the federal administration.

Besides the main political driving force, there was the need to improve the coordination of the National Statistical System and to overcome its several deficiencies, like the restrictions to fully use administrative data. Thus, INEGI took advantage of the political momentum to promote a more comprehensive and solid National Statistical System.

III. The Constitutional Amendment

The various initiatives to amend the Constitution to give autonomy to INEGI, proposed modifications to different articles. However, there was almost a consensus according to which article 26, which deals with national planning process had to include the main part of the amendment. It was also decided to modify article 73 which deals with the division of functions among the different constituents of the Federation to entitle the Federal Congress to legislate in matters related to official statistics of national importance.

The two articles of the Constitution were reformed, as follows:

Art. 73: It entitles Federal Congress to legislate on Statistical and Geographical Information of national importance.

Article 26:

A. The State will organize a system of democratic planning for national development...

B. The State will have a National System of Statistical and Geographical Information. Its data will be official for the Federation, States, Federal District and Municipalities; the data contained in the System will be of compulsory use under the terms established by law.

The responsibility to rule and to coordinate the System belongs to an Institution with technical and managerial autonomy, legal personality and patrimony on its own, with the necessary empowerment to rule the capturing, processing and disseminating of national importance information.

The Institution will have a Governing Board integrated by five members; one of them will act as President for both the Governing Board and the Institution. They will be designated by the President of the Republic with the approval of the Senate or during its recesses by the Permanent Commission of the Congress.

The law will establish the rules of the organization and operation of the National System of Statistical and Geographical Information in accordance

with the principles of accessibility, transparency, objectivity and independence; the law also will determine the requirements to be fulfilled by the members of the Governing Board, their duration and sequence of their mandate.

IV. The National System of Statistical and Geographical Information and its coordinating agency.

If INEGI autonomy was politically driven, the concept of National System was designed, negotiated, protected and put in place by INEGI.

After careful thinking and analysis in 2001 and 2002, it was decided that the Mexican System could not be a centralized one, although some international specialists had a different opinion.

The main reason for adopting a decentralized architecture for the System is the fact that the Mexican legislation empowers the ministries to put in place information systems on different issues. For example, the Ministry of Health is responsible to build up a National System of Health Information which is mainly based on statistics and according to the Law of Ecological Equilibrium, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources is in charge of the corresponding National Information System. So, the only possibility to have an integrated National System of Statistical and Geographical Information was to emphasize coordination among the many information producers.

Thus INEGI put the emphasis of the constitutional reform in the concept of National System of Information and tried to place it in a more solid conceptual framework. In the law of 1980, the Statistical System was conceived as a huge database. Now it is considered on systemic grounds as the ensemble of organized units in 3 subsystems, coordinated by INEGI, and articulated by the National Network of Information to produce and disseminate information of national importance.

The constitutional amendment also deals with the strengthening of INEGI role as coordinator of the National Statistical System since its coordinating power was extended from the Federal realm to States and Municipalities.

Besides the constitutional reform, INEGI has overtaken its coordinating role, as stipulated in the current law, since 2001. At present, 54 technical committees at regional and sectorial levels are working in the development and implementation of joint projects, establishing standards, sharing budgets and so on.

As it was said before, the new law, under legislative discussion, considers 3 subsystems:

Economic and financial statistics
Social and Demographic statistics, and

Environmental and Geographical Information.

Every one of these subsystems would be managed by an executive committee where the indicators and the methodologies will be discussed and submitted to the Board for approval and publication. The procedure for the adoption of standards is conceived as bottom-up approach that has to take into consideration international and national standards and guidelines or best practices. The main producers of Information will have periodical reviews of their methodologies by international experts.

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In Mexico we have come a long way to have a new legal framework for statistical and geographical information according to the evolution of our times. We have tried to comply with the new perspectives of our society and with the requirements of a more communicated and linked world. It has not been an easy process but we are approaching its final steps.

Nevertheless, the main challenge is ahead of us. It deals with the good functioning of the National Information System through the efficient role of INEGI as its coordinator according to the forthcoming statutory law.