

Some Challenges in the Production, Analysis and Dissemination of Social Statistics in the ‘Developing World’

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Abstract

This paper presents selected results of a sociological study of data collection, analysis and dissemination processes in the field of social statistics for development (education, health, poverty, and crime) in the so-called “developing world.” We are currently engaged in a multi-country study of these processes as they are experienced by social statisticians working for governments, international organizations, and academia. Our study reveals the complex interactions resulting from data production’s increased freedom from political interference, the increase in global scientific and ethical debates, and aspirations of scientific and methodological freedom. Our study also revealed misgivings regarding the objectives and methodology of cross-national comparisons.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, International development, National statistical offices, Social and economic development, Social studies of science.

1. Introduction

The introduction of evidence-based policies and development monitoring more than ten years ago has created a substantial need for statistics in the so-called “developing world”¹ (Sanchez et al, 2010; Ward, 2004). This need for statistical data is particularly pronounced in the fields of access to education and health services, poverty alleviation, and crime reduction, as in the case of the monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals since 2000. However, it must be recognized that all these requirements have created serious strains on the “developing world”. Heavy demands are being placed on limited capacities. The production of data and the continuous progress monitoring required for major resource allocation projects and financial transfers in the form of loans or development assistance necessitate political, institutional and financial support. They also require trained staff, equipment, computer software, and a thorough knowledge of management processes. The task of providing such elements is exacting, and constitutes but one of the many challenges surrounding social statistics in the “developing world.”

In this paper, we present selected results of an ongoing sociological study of data collection processes, analysis and dissemination in the field of social statistics for development. Our research consists of a multi-country exploratory study of these processes as they are experienced and interpreted by social statisticians working for government agencies, national statistics offices, international organizations, and academia. In particular, our study focuses on the challenges, success and setbacks of data collection, analysis and dissemination for the so-called “developing world” in the

¹ Throughout this paper, we refer to the so-called “developing world”, not as a normative statement on an ensemble of regions, countries and populations viewed as economically, socially, politically or culturally inferior to the “developed world”, but rather as a shortcut for regions and countries in which the international system suggests that statistical capacity is deficient. Perceptions of any social, political or cultural inferiority of these regions, countries or populations must be criticized.

context of growing demand for data to support decision-making processes and evidence-based policies.

Beyond these specific objectives, our study of these processes aims to examine how the policies and practices behind resource allocation are being shaped through the experience of statisticians, demographers and economists. This study recognizes that the process of producing social statistics is in fact always polemical and inherently political, because it identifies the roots of the exercise of power, but does not create consensus on the best conditions for social fabric (della Faille, 2011a).

2. Methodology

This research uses qualitative methodology. Begun in 2011, it is based on over fifty hours of semi-structured interviews.² We met with over thirty statisticians, demographers and economists working mainly in North and West Africa and in Southeast Asia for government bodies, multilateral agencies, and in academia. In order to protect our interviewees, their names, organizations, countries of origin, and countries of work or statistical study will remain confidential. Prior to starting this research, we had no in-depth knowledge of social statistics production. We therefore wanted to remain open to any discovery by working with inductive reasoning and letting social representations emerge. During the semi-structured interviews, we focused on the production, analysis and dissemination of social statistics in the hope of better understanding the contemporary issues the interviewees are called upon to face.

Once transcribed, the interviews were analyzed with the qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo. This software helped us to conduct a transversal thematic analysis, emphasizing the comparison of world views and social representations. Our hope was that such an analysis would allow us to examine representations of social determinants and assess the role of the production of meaning in understanding problems in the “developing world” (della Faille, 2011b). The following sections present some results of our analysis.

3. Results

This exploratory study allowed us to better understand how social statistics are being produced in the so-called “developing world” and thereby reflect on the challenges faced by those who produce and use the data. During our research, we expected to be told about problems encountered by statisticians in local education, or about difficulties in accessing appropriate equipment. However, very few interviewees touched upon these challenges. Rather, they revealed many unsuspected dimensions of this world with which we were very unfamiliar: the challenges of social statistics in the “developing world” as experienced by its actors.

The following paragraphs present some insights into our interviewees’ perspectives on the current state of affairs and the challenges they meet. We will begin with a number of challenges arising from institutional arrangements, followed by those related to the international system, and finally discuss issues linked to surveyed populations.

During our research, most interviewees spontaneously admitted that there might be some “cooking the numbers.” When asked about the quality of data, a statistician working for an international organization in West Africa stated that “poor quality

² The main researcher would like to acknowledge the assistance of his research assistants Valérie La France-Moreau, Laurent Paradis-Charette and Alexandre Lefebvre, M.A. students in international development studies at l’Université du Québec en Outaouais, Canada.

statistics are simply not statistics”. Both civil servant and international organization interviewees indicated that given the increase in data monitoring, tampering with data is decreasing proportionately. But our interviewees also indicated that even though producing and gathering good quality data remains a challenge, the real dilemma is meeting deadlines. Beyond risks of fraud and difficulties arising from the lack of infrastructure needed to access surveyed populations, our interviewees contend that more often than not, the competing needs and objectives of government agencies make it difficult for them to produce good data in a timely manner.

During the course of our interviews, interviewees depicted a social statistics system composed of information from administrative data, surveys, censuses, and, to a lesser extent, national accounts and data on industrial activities. They explained that the multiplicity of information sources used to develop social statistics translates into a complex yet unevenly integrated and partly dysfunctional system. The division of labour among the various agencies sometimes seems arbitrary to them. One interviewee, a civil servant and academic from North Africa, stated that “everyone has their own data, sometimes on the same subject. This is a major problem. Everything is fragmented. When you finally compare data on the same phenomenon, the figures do not concur.” A civil servant from West Africa declared that “data collection is poorly coordinated. Reform is badly needed. There are too many failures”. This lack of coordination and fragmentation do appear to constitute important issues for social statistics. Paradoxically, this view is one-dimensional, and blames the “developing world” for its problems.

When our interviewees reflect on the challenges they face, they are not prepared to agree that the blame is theirs alone. They believe that international system plays a major part in these challenges, which appear to fall into four main categories.

Firstly, overall misgivings, or even a growing discord about the objectives and methodology of cross-national statistical comparisons emerged from our interviews. Social statisticians agree on the necessity to develop evidence-based policies in order to determine the distribution of multilateral and bilateral aid, but they are very wary of wide-ranging comparisons involving countries whose realities and social achievements are not well reflected in indicators such as the Human Development Index. There seems to be growing discontent among our interviewees about norms, concepts and composite statistics imposed by international organizations and donors. Many of our interviewees contend that they are uncomfortable with administering some of the questionnaires they are required to use. There is a need, they say, for further public debate on definitions and concepts. They cited numerous examples of problems in translation, problems of ethnocentrism, culturally insensitive questions and concepts that do not reflect local realities. One former civil servant now working at an international organization in Southeast Asia gave an example from a cross-national survey on housing quality. One question enquires whether the housing is connected to a main electricity supply. But, says the interviewee, the survey lacks a very relevant question: “How often is this service interrupted?”

It is thus the definition of the elements essential for cross-national comparison – and the lack of options for local input – that appear to generate the most discontent. These definitions include those for occupation, ethnicity, gender or sexuality, among others. Some interviewees also expressed discontent with the nomenclature used by international organizations for territorial divisions and with the regional clusters used to group countries together.

Civil servants working for government agencies were not the only ones who expressed dissatisfaction with the goals and methods of cross-national comparisons. An economist working for a regional office of an international organization in North Africa agrees that comparative benchmarking is “not as useful as we may sometimes

suggest. It should only be used to set the stage... as a narrative... to introduce an issue, but not to implement development policies.”

The second category involves frequent criticism of the demands made by international organizations as well as multilateral and bilateral donors. Many interviewees feel that the workload generated by requests from the international system is too heavy. In their view, there is too much data to produce or provide given the local capacity to respond appropriately. A demographer working at the headquarters of a United Nations agency recognizes that “building statistical capacity is difficult, and we do not help when we set too many tight deadlines.”

Thirdly, some interviewees indicated that their work is hampered by the mistrust in their data exhibited by international organizations. And, they add, this mistrust is found elsewhere. In fact, they contend, these organizations send foreign experts who make decisions behind closed doors. One statistician for a United Nations agency agrees that this practice still exists, but is overstated and has decreased substantially.

The mistrust between statisticians from the “developing world” and international organizations also arises from transparency requirements, which seem to be unidirectional. Information on the origin of data and details of calculations used by international organizations are very difficult to obtain.

Finally, some of our interviewees see the recruitment policies of international organizations as contributors to some of the difficulties they encounter. They point out that a good national statistical system requires an institutional memory, and that the widespread “poaching” of competent and experienced civil servants practiced by international organizations and donors impedes national capacity-building efforts. A civil servant and team-leader in Southeast Asia comments that the reality she “is faced with is important for [her] team, but also a serious problem for the entire institution.” She explains that employees take their experience with them when they leave, and very often, the methods they have mastered are not documented.

All of these challenges contribute to a negative view of the international system, which is to blame in part for the obstacles to producing social statistics in the “developing world.”

Our research revealed another set of challenges we did not initially expect, and that are not directly attributable to either national or international statistical systems.

One of the tools used to collect data on social dimensions of development is surveys. Many interviewees in Africa and Asia explained that using this methodology raises complex issues within the surveyed populations. In countries currently experiencing a democratic transition, people do not trust government agents and are reluctant to participate. Surveys are viewed as tools of surveillance and control. Interviewees told us that this aversion influences both response rate and response quality. The second difficulty is that the continuous monitoring of social dimensions of development has generated too many surveys. There is a feeling among the civil servants we met that people are tired of repeated surveys, many of which contain too many questions.

At a more general level, our study revealed how data production is embedded in current dynamics associated with both waning political interference in this field and the rise in global scientific and ethical debate. These dynamics seem to be systemic responses to the challenges outlined above. The building of statistical capacity in the “developing world” is increasingly responding to aspirations of scientific and methodological freedom. However, scientific and methodological freedom is limited by a series of political and systemic challenges. Some of the situations we observed and that were described to us in the course of our research suggest that several trends toward empowering statisticians are currently at work.

One trend we observed is the separation of data production and analysis from political influence through the creation of autonomous national statistical offices separated by “Chinese walls.” There appears to be general acknowledgement that this separation must be achieved, and some incentives in this direction are being provided by international organizations and donors. A second trend is to offer statisticians enhanced social and economic recognition. Among other things, governments are working towards offering competitive salaries, better pay scales and position status. A third trend is toward heightened intellectual prestige. Some statisticians contended that they should be entitled to take part in scientific discussions and meetings, and be authorized to publish under their own name. In fact, one Southeast Asian country we visited has allowed its statisticians to publish methodological notes signed with their own names. And finally, we learned of emerging South-South cooperation, which will allow countries in the “developing world” to share their experience under better conditions. There are some promising projects such as regional integration of statistical systems (ie. in Africa and Central America) and Brazilian technical cooperation in Africa. However, this movement is only emerging. These are some of the trends that statisticians suggested as possible solutions to the problems they identified.

4. Discussion

The previous section presents but a few challenges expressed by the actors of the statistical system. Let us now reflect on our research objectives and compare our results to what we learned from the literature.

It is an understatement to say that the state of social statistics has changed since its portrayal by authors such as Lievesley (2001) and Ruddock (2002) over ten years ago. Immense efforts have been made to build or strengthen statistical capacity in the “developing world.” Some programmes have shown results, others have yet to produce concrete outcomes. It is not for us, external observers, to judge past, present and future policies and practices. What we can do at this point, however, is reflect on what we have observed from the perspective of a political sociologist.

Our research started as an exploration into the ways in which statisticians, demographers and economists represent the system they are part of and how they view their own role. In order to comprehend the nature of interactions between the various actors in the system, we asked them to tell us about the successes and set-backs of their immediate professional experience. Narratives about their own experiences and perspectives allowed us to examine political, social, cultural and scientific dynamics that authors have described as the “depoliticization” of world politics and international development (Hout & Robison, 2009; Jaeger, 2007; Jayasuriya & Hewison, 2004; White, 1996). This “depoliticization” is a process through which decision-making is being transferred from the public sphere to a technocratic or expert sphere. In fact, the insistence on evidence-based policies and the continuous progress monitoring through data seem, at least on the surface, to contribute to that process. But, at this stage, our research suggests that in the case of the production, analysis and dissemination of social statistics in the “developing world,” the growing demand for data has had a noticeable effect on the professional practice of statisticians, demographers and economists. The challenges outlined to us express an important wish to transform a system and act upon transforming the social fabric. In our view, this tendency exposes a polemical view of the relationship between knowledge production, expertise and the transformations of social relations, communities and the material environment. As stated in the introduction, the production of social statistics is inherently polemical and, by extension, political. Our research has shown that beyond discourses about social statistics, there is a normative discourse on the international system. If the

“depoliticization” process described above does actually exist, it would be surprising if technical or scientific experts were not in some way empowered by the increased legitimacy, prestige and social role being conferred upon them.

Nevertheless, our study of this process has some limitations. Systems, institutions, practices and policies tend to change very slowly. Sociologists must rely mainly on narratives to analyze social institutions as they are experienced by actors. But these narratives are constantly being reinterpreted. It would be methodologically flawed to base our study solely on these narratives. This is why we are, concurrently with this study, analyzing technical documentation and its changes over several decades.

5. Conclusion

Statistics are often said to be neutral descriptions of reality. But they are in fact the results of many human decisions. Our study attempts to pinpoint the polemical sources of quantitative data. It seems to us that a number of questions in areas that extend well beyond statistics themselves must be debated. If we need to reflect on how decisions are made, we also need to reflect on why these decisions are made in the first place. This is a highly polemical debate. Let us not confine that debate to professional politicians.

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