

Statistics, Development and Human Rights

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“The subject... Statistics, Development and Human Rights, is nothing less than a quest for a science of human dignity. When the target is human suffering, and the cause human rights, mere rhetoric is not adequate to the task in hand. What are needed are solid methodologies, careful techniques, and effective mechanisms to get the job done”.

Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

1. Introduction

For many years, the potential application of statistical methods in the field of human rights remained largely unexplored. In spite of some pioneer studies (Claude and Jabine, 1992; Spierer and Spierer, 1993) and brilliant recent work (Ball, Kobrak and Spierer, 1999; Ball and Spierer, 2000), the statistical community has paid little or no attention to the potential contribution of its science and profession to the measurement and analysis of the implementation of human rights. It was only some months ago that a large number of statisticians and users of statistics tackled together the issue within the framework of the international Conference on « Statistics, Development and Human Rights », held in Montreux, Switzerland, on 4-8 September 2000. The aim of this Conference was **to put in evidence the potential that is concealed in statistical information and methods for the reinforcement of mechanisms aiming at monitoring the achievements of human development and the respect of human rights**. It gathered 740 persons from 123 countries and 37 international organizations. Its success went far beyond the expectations of the organizers: it gave rise for the first time to a lively, serious and fruitful encounter between **three groups of experts: statisticians, development specialists and human rights practitioners**. Attendants came from universities, national statistical institutes, development agencies, national ministries, national human rights commissions, international organizations and non-governmental organizations active in the fields of development policy and human rights defense. Especially noteworthy were the high number and quality of contributions from developing and transition countries. Some 300 written contributions were submitted and discussed during five days of intensive work punctuated by 10 plenary sessions and 39 parallel workshops (cfr. IAOS, 2000).

The success of the Conference is now raising high expectations in the international community, which now looks at statistical methods as a precious tool that would allow to substantially improve benchmarking of human development and reporting on human rights issues. This paper intends to draw up the major elements that the statistical profession should take in consideration for responding to such a challenge.

2. Statistics and human rights reporting

Concrete experiences show that statistical professional skills are considerably enhancing quality, reliability and fairness of reporting on human rights violations. Indeed, there are three areas in which non-quantitative analysts often do not get the interpretation correct – and which they cannot

defend scientifically even if they do get the interpretation correct: **estimates of the magnitude** of violations, **bias** that may have affected the data collection or interpretation, and **relative proportions of responsibility** among perpetrators. Appropriate use of statistical methods can therefore help to better evidence massive human rights infringement and in fact these methods are becoming an inherent part of the investigations of the International Criminal Tribunals. Authoritative scientific bodies such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) are currently providing scientific support, training and advice to national Commissions for Human Rights as well as to serious non-governmental organizations that need to increase their quantitative analysis capacities.

It is worthy of note that the contribution of professional statistical skills to human rights reporting has not only to do with measurement of the magnitude of violations, it should also aim at **benchmarking progress in the implementation of human rights over time**. Indeed, the role of statistics and indicators could be determinant for allowing effective assessment of key public policies as well as for the evaluation of governmental redressing action. In this sense, current work of international organizations like ILO or UNICEF attests of the importance that proper survey design and statistical analysis have for ensuring a consistent monitoring of the effective national implementation of international instruments such as, for instance, the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

3. The human rights approach to development issues: statistics and accountability

A second area of contribution of statistical science in this field is related to the human rights approach to development issues. Indeed, while development and human rights have long been pursued in isolation from one another, the two concepts are now being reintegrated. The challenge consists today in the need for building solid, reliable and consistent **indicators for rights-based development**. Only such kind of indicators would allow meaningful measure of human development as mirroring effective access to human dignity.

The rights-based approach to development is a general conceptual framework that relates the development policies and processes to the international norms, standards and principles of the international human rights instruments (international charts, treaties, conventions and declarations). Here, participation, accountability, non-discrimination and empowerment of human beings and target human groups become essential principles. Assessing human development from this perspective requires relevant data and indicators that can not always be provided by traditionally restrictive socio-economic statistics alone. There is thus an urgent need for developing relevant “rights-based indicators” of development as well as for integrating the “rights element” into the existing socio-economic statistics and indicators.

In this context, it is essential to understand that, for instance, the “right to health” is something quite different from “health”. Because rights-based development focuses on accountability and incorporates notions of entitlement and obligation, simply measuring status, or degree of realization, is not sufficient. Accountability means beginning with the identification of (1) an explicit standard against which to measure performance, (2) a specific person/institution owing performance (3) a particular right-holder (or claim-holder) to whom performance is owed; (4) a mechanism of redress, delivery and accountability. In other terms, statistical information and indicators should be redesigned and used as **policy-oriented tools** that really allow to test equality and non-discrimination, to assess effective access to economic and social rights and thus to benchmark progress or regression in the human development process.

4. Statistics, democracy and governance

Prior remarks on the links between statistics, development and human rights lead me to stress that statistical information should not any more be confined to a role of mere technical support for governmental services in charge of policy design and evaluation. “Official” statistics must play the role of an open information system aiming at promoting public awareness and increased participation of citizens in public affairs. Indeed, during the last decade, many countries and regions of the world embarked in two parallel processes that are highly significant in terms of human development: democratization and broader access to information. As a result of this, there is an increasing public demand for reliable, impartial and fresh statistical information that explains the economic and social development. The citizen feels that there can be no fair or accurate diagnosis without proper statistics, failing which one descends into the realm of rumor. And the public institutions that produce the statistical information are increasingly being considered as **impartial central actors within the democratic debate**: their role consists in shedding light on democratic debate by making it clearer and more understandable so that everybody can take part in it.

Today everybody would agree that there are strong links between the institutional building of official statistics, good information support to democratic process and effective monitoring of good governance. And, in fact, national experiences in various regions of the world clearly attest that enhanced statistical capacity normally increases transparency of governmental activities and constitutes a powerful spring for injecting professional skills in public administrations. Nevertheless, there is a general lack of conceptual reference frameworks, as well as many controversial approaches that are impeding that the enhanced statistical capacity be translated in the development of solid mechanisms aiming at truly monitoring governmental action. Part of the problem of monitoring governments and what they do (such as public spending) is that there is no overarching international agency responsible for monitoring and overseeing the role of government as an agency for public good. There is therefore a need to formulate basic statistical standards and analytical formats that would help to enhance capacities, at the national level, to monitor how efficaciously and how efficiently governments deliver goods and services.

5. Conclusion: towards concrete implementation of work

In the course of last months numerous meetings and consultations aimed at exploring ways and means for materializing the innovative “spirit of Montreux” into concrete work. Most of our partners consider that the main lesson of Montreux consists in the perspectives opened by the successful experience of integrating and inter-linking the existing statistical expertise and the policy-oriented research that is carried out by universities, research institutes, national statistical institutes and non-governmental organizations. Further work in this direction would allow joining forces in order to make available the statistical know-how and to provide high quality scientific support, reporting services, training and professional advice to national and international organizations active in the fields of human rights and development policies. Views thus converge today in the proposal of launching an independent international project, based of the international network of expertise that since the Montreux Conference is expanding and growing. Such a project should reflect the Conference’s aims, constituency and dynamics: it should therefore be of a cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional and non-governmental nature, and should focus on policy-action applied research linking statistics, development and human rights policies.

On the basis of these orientations, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and the Graduate Institute of Development studies jointly designed and proposed an ambitious project aiming at setting up a “**Development and Human Rights Observatory**” (**DHR-O**). The objective of this project is to support and organize scientific-

based design, implementation and evaluation of mechanisms, methods and indicators for improving benchmarking of human development and reporting on human rights issues. Thus the Observatory will facilitate, organize and implement applied multidisciplinary research, training programs and provision of advice and services. It will be multidisciplinary in approach, inclusive and participatory in method. It will work on the basis of a decentralized, networking-based approach, and will consist essentially on locally-based research, reporting and training action. It will be serviced by a core secretariat that would act as facilitator for identifying expertise, organizing and supporting the implementation of research projects, pilot studies, consultancy and reporting services, as well as for enhancing North/South partnership and twinning between institutions and between experts. As of today, many academic institutions, international organizations and national statistical institutes decided to join and support this project, that will be operational in the forthcoming weeks.

In other terms, it is now time to proceed to concrete implementation of work. As Mrs. Mary Robinson stated in Montreux, “mere rhetoric is not adequate to the task in hand. What are needed are solid methodologies, careful techniques, and effective mechanism to get the job done”. I am therefore glad to invite all the members of the ISI family to adhere and to take an active part to this work. I am convinced that they could make an invaluable contribution to the construction and action of an efficient international network on statistics, development and human rights policies.

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