Proposals for a Minimum Programme for Statistics in developing countries

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1. Introduction

As many statistical offices in developing countries, Afristat - Observatory for economics and statistics in sub-Saharan Africa - has studied the issue of introducing, with limited means, methods and tools ensuring the production of durable statistics satisfying regional, national and international requirements: how could a Minimum Programme for Statistics (MPS) be defined (the word "Statistics" being understood here in its widest sense, from setting up a system through to making the information available)?

2. Priority areas

Any statistical office is permanently facing a double requirement: building a robust and consistent system, ensuring long term reliability; satisfying the short term needs related to closely run economic management. Solutions may vary according to countries but, invariably, they have to satisfy both demands equally: "immediate" statistics, without structural references, will lack in strength, reliability and permanence; "structural" statistics, unrelated to the economic actors' requirements will be considered as luxury with doubtful benefit.

These two contradictory requirements have inspired the study. They lead to the proposal of focusing the MPS on five areas: coordination; national accounts; economic and social short term analyses; dissemination; social statistics (Education and Health).

2.1 Coordination

Coordination is essential: it avoids duplication of work; it ensures harmonisation of concepts and methods; it facilitates experience exchanges; it improves relationships between interviewers and interviewees; finally, it constitutes a factor in favour of budgetary economies. As it happens, coordination has not reached a satisfactory level in developing countries.

The gaps observed today are often a reflection of the past, when Statistics were related to planning and concentrated the various types of information needed by the authorities. The situation has changed radically with economic liberalisation. Statisticians are now faced with the new challenge of organising coordination and making it an objective shared by all partners.

2.2. National accounts

There is no need to highlight the structuring nature of national accounts: even if the information they convey is retrospective, and if the necessary investment they require is heavy, the consistency they impose, the objective base for discussion they provide to social partners, the advantage they offer for adjusting short term analyses, the macroeconomic framework they provide for modelling, all these assets make national accounts irreplaceable.

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However, national accounts is a vast area into which, sometimes, one fears to enter. These fears are not totally unfounded, but a reasonable limitation of ambitions and an intelligent use of ongoing works should allow the matter to be tackled: one could, for instance, first be satisfied with an account of goods and services.

2.3. Economic and social short term analyses

Economic liberalisation, as it multiplied the actors, imposed on the Statistics of developing countries to renew their methods as well as the relationships with their partners and users. The latter need information to be provided rapidly.

However, dealing with all issues at once cannot be envisaged. Reason dictates that one should start with shaping, analysing and publishing, from a point of view in line with short term analysis, infra-annual indexes, information on employment and salaries resulting from various surveys, etc.

2.4. Dissemination

From a user's point of view, belatedly issued figures are useless. Publications are not subsequent to Statistics but are an integral part of it. This responsibility falls on the highest level of authority within the statistical office; the demands for quality published figures should be maximal: publications being the “showcase” of Statistics, erroneous or imprecise information will ruin all other efforts.

Today, dissemination in developing countries is unsatisfactory, particularly due to the fact that expectations have not been measured. A policy has to be defined: what should be published? Who is targeted? What pedagogy should be used towards users? Who should pay and how much? Etc.

2.5. Social Statistics (Education and Health)

Quality information on the population’s living conditions is essential, particularly with regard to Health and Education. Yet, in the scope of structural adjustment programmes, the "social" aspect was not considered a priority. Today, the funding partners seem to be prepared to adopt a more subtle position on the matter. Much remains to be achieved as these statistics present many gaps: insufficient cover, absence of relevant indexes, belated publications, etc.

REFERENCES


FRENCH RÉSUMÉ

Les organismes statistiques des pays en développement (PED) souhaitent mettre en place, avec des moyens limités, des méthodes et outils permettant d’assurer une production durable de statistiques satisfaisant les demandes nationale, régionale et internationale. La présente communication propose que soit établi, dans chaque PED, un programme statistique minimum centré sur cinq domaines : coordination statistique ; comptabilité nationale ; conjoncture ; diffusion ; statistique sociale (Éducation, Santé).