

Promoting Linkages of Census Results to Social Policy

by

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“Census statistics have no value unless they are used for the benefit of correctly diagnosing problems, guiding policies and decisions and evaluating progress made.”¹

When an investment project is completed, the project implementor is expected to render a report to the stockholders on the accomplishments of the venture. In parallel, the undertaking of a population and housing census is a major public sector investment much like an infrastructure project like the construction of an expressway: the project implementor, the national statistical organization (NSO); the project achievements, the census results; and the stockholders, the stakeholders. However this is generally not seen as such; often the census project is seen more as a current cost than a capital cost in financial accounting. But one can treat it as an investment, or capital² good if it is defined in a broader macroeconomic sense: any activity that increases the economy's ability to produce output in the future.³ Arguably labeling a census exercise as part of investment is seminal but the point that the results must be used to help plan and decide for a better future must not be lost. The end of the census exercise is not that point in time when the published results come out and are announced over the media.

The challenge is how to bring the results to the stakeholders so that they can appreciate the benefits of the census undertaking, be active in supporting the census and its related activities, and be able to apply these in their concerned areas in the socio-economic policy development sphere.

This paper follows from two discussions that I have earlier written on related topics:

- Involvement of Stakeholders in Promoting and Disseminating Census Results, for the Workshop on Promotion and Dissemination of Census Statistics in ASEAN Countries in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in June 2002; and
- Social Statistics in the Development Agenda: Two Cases for Relevance and Sustainability, for the Expert Group Meeting on Setting the Scope of Social Statistics organized by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) in New York in May 2003. Some proceedings from this meeting are liberally quoted towards the end of the paper.

The paper first revisits the census processes and the various uses of its results to development planning and policy, as presented in the United Nations Handbooks on the Population and Housing Censuses. It also touches upon the need to consider promotion of census statistics as a strategic part of the whole cycle. It then moves on to establish that official statistics such as census results must become relevant to policy-making for these to be regularly and adequately supported, funded and sustained. However the

¹ Bounthavy Sisouphantong, Some Thought about Designing a Population Census in Lao PDR, Bulletin of the International Statistical Institute, 53rd Session Proceedings Book 1, August 2001, Seoul, Korea, pp. 101-128.

² Arrow (2000) characterizes capital as (1) having a time dimension, (2) requiring deliberate sacrifice of the present for future benefit, and (3) 'alienable', that is, transferable from one person to the other.

³ Abdessatar Ouanes and Subhash Thakur, Macroeconomic Accounting and Analysis in Transition Economies, International Monetary Fund, 1997

above expert group meeting convened by the UNSD admitted that, unlike economic statistics, statistics on social conditions are less linked to social policy and face critical challenges for onward and purposeful development. The paper closes with some recommendations to address these inadequacies.

The census cycle revisited

The Handbook on Census Management for Population and Housing Censuses (Series F No. 83/Rev.1) published by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) enumerates the different major phases of the census cycle together with brief descriptions of activities associated with each, as follows:

- Planning: setting strategic directions for the entire census programme and developing project plans;
- Preparation: establishing the basis of enumeration, form design and testing, mapping and printing the census forms;
- Field operations: recruiting and training the field staff, public relations campaigns, form distribution and return;
- Data processing: recruiting and training data processors, selecting and managing premises, processing various forms;
- Dissemination: user consultation, product development, marketing and sales strategies; and
- Evaluation: review of results, plans and processes upon completion.

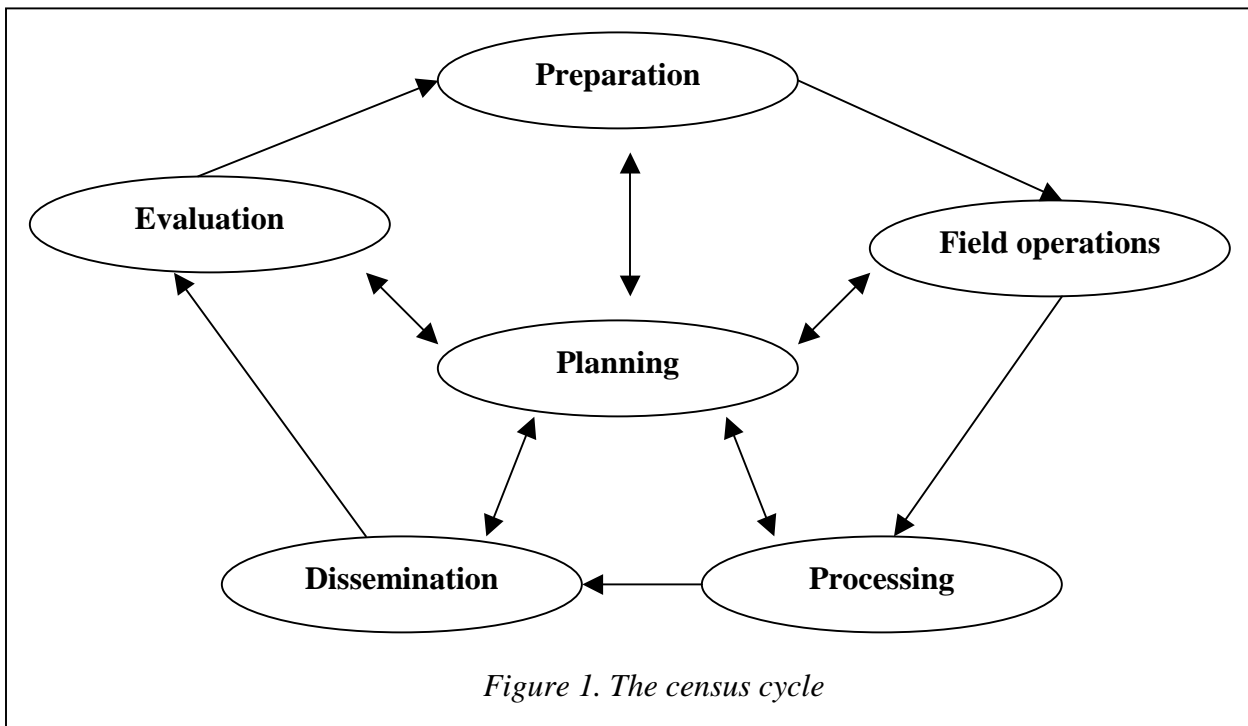


Figure 1. The census cycle

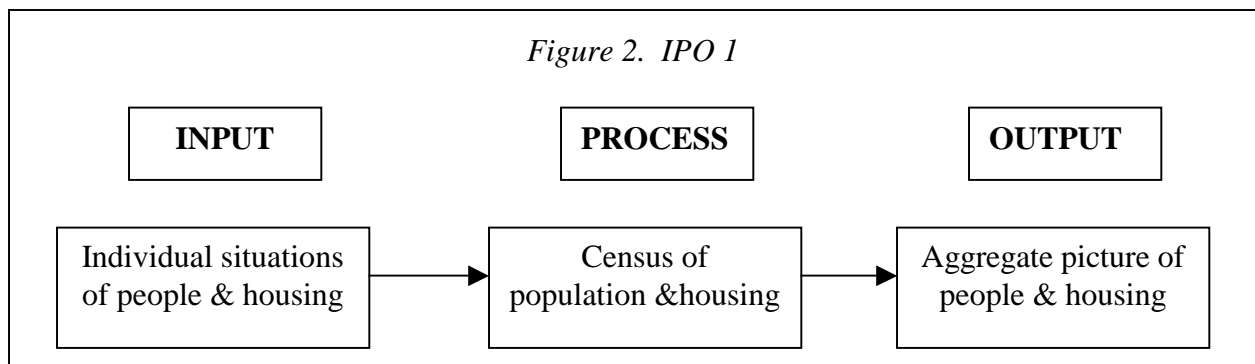
I would go a step further by including promotion.

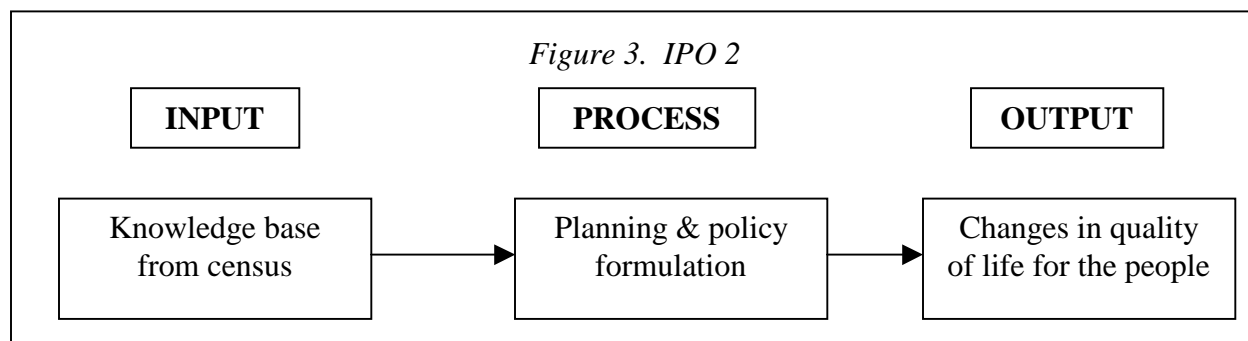
Promotion, in the context of this paper, is the act of furthering the growth or development of something, especially the furtherance of the acceptance and sale of merchandise through advertising, publicity and discounting. Among the phases of the census cycle as shown previously, promotion is seen as a vital element in the field operations and in dissemination. However, promotion activities can be extended beyond these two phases. While promotion is admittedly part and parcel of the field of marketing commercial products and services, it can also be shown to belong in technical (essentially non-commercial) endeavors like the census, which involves the whole populace. The drive to move the census results to the appropriate markets or audiences further reinforces the role of promotion in the overall project.

Moreover Principle 1 of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, first adopted by the Economic Commission for Europe during its 47th session and subsequently endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission (with some amendments), emphasizes the importance of relevance, access and impartiality and has some bearing on our discussion, particularly on the first two.

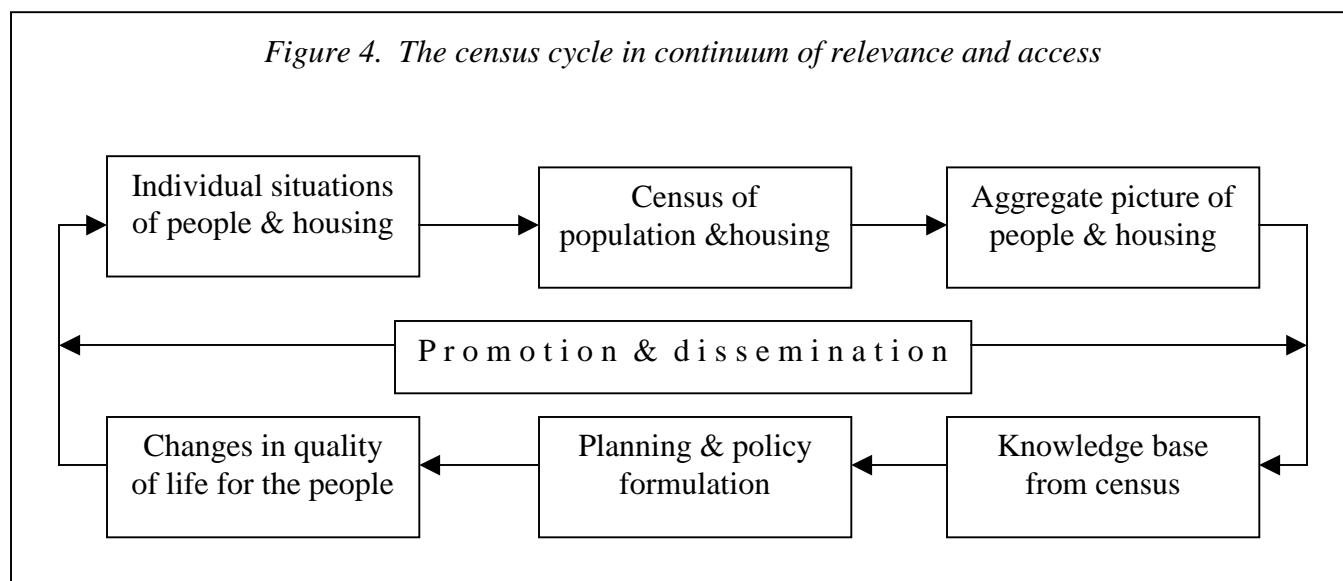
Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a society, serving the government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honor citizens' entitlement to public information.

The relevance and access of census results can be depicted using IPO (input-process-output) charts. The first chart (IPO 1) shows the census process converting individual data into aggregate characteristics of the population. The second chart (IPO 2) depicts the knowledge base from the census being used in plan and policy formulation to influence the quality of life of the population.





Through appropriate promotion and dissemination strategies, the right parties, or stakeholders can get hold of the results, appreciate the importance of these in their own work milieu, and bring about desired changes in the quality of life of the people through appropriate plans, policies and programs. This is depicted when the two charts are brought together as shown in Figure 4.



At the same time, these partners or stakeholders can help secure increased financial and logistical support in future undertakings of the census, as the beneficiaries become its champions.

The utility of census data

There is an extensive discussion of the uses of census results by government, business and research institutions in the Handbook of Population and Housing Censuses, Part I: Planning, Organization and Administration of Population and Housing Censuses (Series

F, No. 54) published by the UNSD. For this paper the enumeration is limited to its importance in development planning, and how the government can make use of it. It is after all the government that funds and runs the census, although there seems to be a gap between the offices responsible for the funding (public finance ministries) and the running (NSOs). The users definitely have a role in closing this gap, as evidenced by the following⁴.

- assessment of current levels of and differentials among important population and housing characteristics and evaluation of the availability of basic household needs in key sectors.

No other activity of government seeks to cover and discover the actual situation of households and housing in every nook and cranny of the country. From the census results, disadvantaged areas can be identified and given priorities in action plans of the government to correct and alleviate their situations.

- evaluation of benefits of development programmes at the small-area level over a period of time.

After some time, the government and other development groups will need to be informed of the changes in the characteristics and conditions of the population at basic administrative levels, like villages and towns. The census results can be used to evaluate if their action programs on literacy, employment, rural development, family planning, etc., have brought about the desired changes as they have at the outset outlined as their goals and targets.

- assessment of current demographic and social situation.

Areas within a country respond to development programs differently due to variations in the composition of population in terms of size, age and sex distribution, density, and growth patterns. Intervention programs can be designed and aligned to suit specific needs of people in particular situations and locations.

- assessment of manpower resources.

Census data can help establish the educational levels and skills of the population, along with the geographical distribution, by sex and age. Determination of the natural growth rate and net migration rates with sub-national breakdowns can help both education and manpower planners of the extent and nature of area-specific training programs to be pursued.

- identification of special population groups

The census is an effective identification and monitoring tool for 'rare' populations like the differently abled (disabled), and the elderly spread across the country. Integrated area planners can have a better understanding of the dynamics influencing their activities with data on the location and concentration of cultural communities (cultural minorities) in

⁴ That I have chosen to not to include the stakeholders in business, industry, research, and the academe in this paper does not indicate whatsoever that they do not have a role in being effective champions for the census. The appreciation for census results has to begin at "home", in the government.

particular areas of the country. Projections on the size and distribution of the children and youth can be improved with the solid database available from the census.

- planning of social welfare programs.

Improved policies for specific beneficiary groups can be formulated with the knowledge to be obtained on specific work characteristics, age groups, educational attainments, and housing conditions of the population.

- improvement in the social and economic status of women.

Women generally make up half of the population. Shedding light on their socio-economic conditions and qualifications will greatly aid in planning for stronger and happier families, healthier and better educated children. Their participation in the development process can likewise be made more productive and meaningful.

- formulation of housing policy and programmes.

It is only when a census is taken that wide-ranging data on housing can be obtained, such as specific characteristics of housing stock, distribution at the lowest administrative levels, and housing materials. Housing needs can be forecasted into the future with these data along with population size, its growth rate, and rates of urbanization and migration.

- formulation of policies for investment of development funds.

The distribution of population can be a key factor for allocating funds (both external and internal) and determining the scale and location of public sector investments in housing, water supply, transportation, education and health facilities, banking and communication services.

Other (administrative) uses in government

- Demarcation of constituencies for electoral purposes
- Classifying and designating areas as urban or rural,
- Redrawing territorial jurisdictions of regions, districts and other administrative areas, and
- Division into manageable units as wards for planning and delivery of facilities and services in their jurisdictions.

Relevance and Sustainability of Official Statistics

Official statistics have to be relevant and be able to generate impact from its use by policy and decision makers in their planning and programming, as enumerated in the above case for census results. It is not enough that the NSO produces the results from its surveys, censuses and processing of administrative records, run these through some form of analysis and interpretation, and have them available in a timely and accurate manner. Merely handing out the results to 'users' when they walk through the doors of the NSO does not optimize the utility of the statistical series. It is achieved when policy decisions and formulated action programmes have been guided, if not influenced, by the provision of related information and knowledge embodied in these statistics. But I wonder how

extensively these statistics have been used in various development planning processes in developing countries as described above where sustainability of statistical activities is always at funding risk.

Sustainability is important in the face of financial difficulties being experienced in the developing world as well as budget deficits in their public sector accounts. Additional funds will hardly flow to the budgets of NOSs unless the results of their censuses, surveys and administrative records processing provide the basis and evidence of key policies and decisions.

In two recent seminars in the region, there were calls for increased relevance to policy as a means to building sustainable statistical capacity. At the Asian Development Bank (ADB)/PARIS21 Joint High Level Forum on Statistical Capacity Building for ASEAN Countries held last November 2002 in Manila, the ADB President emphasized a need for a road map for strengthening statistical systems that are capable of generating policy-relevant data sets. He suggested a number of key principles that should underpin a new strategy for capacity building.⁵ These include:

- capacity building demands a national commitment to allocate adequate financial and human resources;
- adoption of sound management practices to enable effective and efficient use of all available resources;
- demand for statistics should be the driving force in adopting balanced work programs;
- pursuit of policies that ensure data transparency and credibility; and
- improved data dissemination.

In the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP)/ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) Management Seminar for the Heads of National Statistical Offices in Asia and the Pacific held last February 2003 in Bangkok, it was concluded that the depth and extent to which an NSO will undertake analysis and interpretation of its statistics is directly related to how high it wishes to place statistical development among the competing priorities in the national funding agenda.

This is quite a departure from the thinking that still prevails among some heads of NSOs that they only provide data and users should be able to figure out what to do with it once these are in their possession. This view is equated with being neutral, with being independent, that of not siding on any issue by not doing analysis; however it actually results in its being increasingly isolated from the policy mainstream. It defaults on providing meaning, relevance and returns to the provision of public monies for the conduct of often massive data collection programmes, such as censuses and large-scale national surveys. Not only does this thinking keep the statistical system away from the

⁵ Asian Development Bank, Report of the ADB/PARIS21 Joint High Level Forum on Statistical Capacity Building for ASEAN Countries, Manila, November 2002.
<http://www.adb.org/Documents/Events/2002/ADB_Paris21/default.asp>

national priorities, it also misses out on the opportunity to input to the key policies that may spell the difference between success and failure in programmes and projects that affect society and the economy.

To be relevant statistics should support the development process in the economy by monitoring the consequences of events, intended and unintended, and effects on segments or totality of the social or economic units, like a firm, an industry, a family, a community, etc. It is generally accepted that economic statistics have been instrumental in guiding economic policy. Since the 1940s an understanding of the linkages between economic statistics and economic policy issues has guided the development of statistics in area such as labour, prices, national accounts, government finance and balance of payments to the benefit of economic policy monitoring and development.⁶

However the same cannot be said in the case of social statistics influencing social policy. The present situation in social statistics, of which the census was mentioned as a “pillar”⁷, is far from what have been described above and not as close to the relationship found in economic statistics.

Some Challenges in Social Statistics

Despite the demand from national and international fora, however, progress in social statistics has been lagging. Social statistics are often produced in an ad hoc manner, without a clear strategy or programme of work. Coordination among producers of social statistics at both the national and international level is still insufficient, resulting in inconsistent statistics and under-utilisation of data. Furthermore the needs of stakeholders are not always adequately met in terms of timeliness and relevance.

I would like to attribute the lack of aggressive promotion and dissemination of census results as one among those factors creating these situations. The seeming absence of statistics both on the overall social conditions and at smaller geographical dimensions, like those available from census statistics, tends to perpetrate the fragmented development of both statistics and standards in the social sector.

Most social statistics have traditionally served the purposes of administration. They have been developed independently by each social agency and one of their major functions has been to record the execution and performance of their several undertakings in a form primarily designed to meet administrative needs. Social planning and policy has been based more upon political and social imperatives than on an analysis of past trends and current achievements, particularly in those developing countries, in which social pressures were more likely to lead to political instability.

⁶ ‘Improving Social Statistics in Developing Countries: Conceptual Framework and Methods’ Studies in Methods Series F No. 25, United Nations, 1979. Social statistics are taken to include statistics describing social conditions, the main components of which include statistics of food and nutrition, housing and provision of water, health and medical care, labour, education and training, social welfare, and major elements of demographic statistics.

⁷ Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Setting the Scope of Social Statistics, United Nations Statistics Division and Siena Group on Social Statistics, New York, May 2003

Perhaps if statistics on the macro-picture of social conditions were available, standards could be set more easily, responsibility for statistics could be designated more efficiently, policy setting could be made more objective and evidence-based. Having a set of good, available and accessible statistics, as obtained from an efficient census undertaking, can help in firming up and standardizing existing concepts and methods which would respond to the needs of issues and policies of the day.

The 2000 Millennium Summit and International Conferences held in the 1990's clearly and explicitly emphasized the importance of social development. Sound statistics and information play a key role in monitoring and evaluating the impact of social policies. The increasing demand for policy-relevant statistics on an ever-growing number of social issues calls for an integrated approach to social statistics that recognizes the links among the various areas of social concern.

Links like this to social policy will make social statistics more relevant, enable the NSOs to be more proactive in the direction of its development, bring in the resources from the government and the international community to spark and sustain the development of social statistics. Influential offices like the Ministries of Finance, of Planning and the Central Bank as well as the Legislature may still focus on the economic issues and fund the economic statistics sectors internally or get external donors to pitch in, but they are likely to provide support also for social statistics since the last decade has increasingly seen the emphasis on the reduction of poverty and related social issues as the desired impact of economic policy. Statistical systems will definitely benefit from being in the mainstream as these people-centered advocacies and initiatives figure prominently in programs of government.

Strategies for More Policy Responsiveness in Social Statistics

In this light, the United Nations Statistics Division, in collaboration with the Siena Group, convened an expert group in May 2003 to address these challenges and develop a concrete strategy on how to move forward and propose a programme of work for furthering the development of social statistics, with a view to presenting it to the Statistical Commission for action. For purposes of this paper, I highlight the discussion on low political commitment and visibility.

An issue that the expert group meeting discussed actively was the lack of visibility of social statistics and a weak or non-existent commitment from some governments, manifested in the low priority given to social statistics. This is glaring when compared to economic statistics, which has solid support of the Central Bank and the ministries of finance, development or planning.

Experts proposed several strategies to increase support for social statistics.

First, social statistics must be driven by key information needs of policy makers and other users in the broader community. Statistics must focus on social phenomena rather than on data in order to catch the attention of government, the media and the general public.

Some experts further argued that NSOs need to go beyond providing raw data and statistics to organizing and analyzing those data and presenting them in a format that would make their results available to broad audiences. Production and research must be combined to offer information, not just statistics, as basis for informed discussions about relevant policies. Others were cautious about the role of analysis, fearing that it would harm the independence and neutrality of NSOs and other statistics generating agencies. It was clarified that analysis in this context referred to the presentation of social statistics objectively by bringing out clearly and simply the social phenomena that the data address. This can be done by

- making products more user-friendly; for example, to improve the analysis of statistical data by making figures understandable, explaining the numbers in the tables produced,
- and making statistics into information products and services addressing specific user needs, e.g., government, media, policy analysis, the public, students, researchers, social partners and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Another strategy offered was the training and sensitizing of policy makers to the power of statistics for policy formulation and monitoring; and of the media to the power of statistics to provide a factual base for their stories. NSOs need to advocate and promote the importance of sound social statistics for policy, and to work with policy makers in order to build the latter's capacity to appreciate statistics. It was also recognized that the role of the media is an important one that should be put to good use for social statistics. For example, statisticians could improve their relationship with the media by preparing press releases on topics of general interest and providing help to the media in interpreting and analyzing social statistics. In their reporting, mention of the statistical activity and the institution responsible for the activity would mutually benefit the media and the statistical office.

And recognizing the high profile of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the political commitment to produce their associated indicators, experts felt that the MDGs could be used to provide momentum to advance development work and policy relevance in the field of social statistics. While they view the MDGs as a good candidate to initially focus on, experts were in agreement that this was only a convenient and strategic approach and that the MDGs should not determine the full scope of any social statistics initiative.

The opportunity offers that the NSOs review the results as well as the data files of the last Population and Housing census rounds to assess if any further processing can improve the monitoring of the MDG indicators. Needless to say, the planning for the next census round should take the needs of the MDGs and other development advocacies into account.

And as in the case of economic statistics, the NSOs should eventually assume a prominent, if not dominant, lead role in the production of social statistics in a country. Promoting the use of census results in social policy is a step in that direction.

Summary

The results of the census should be brought to stakeholders for them to appreciate the benefits arising from knowledge and understanding of its implications and repercussions, to be able to apply these effectively in their own lines of work, and to be active in supporting the census and its related activities. This can be done through appropriate dissemination and promotion activities.

There have been calls for increased relevance to policy as a means to building sustainable statistical capacity. But it appears that official statistics have not been used extensively in various development planning and policy processes in developing countries where sustainability of statistical activities is always at funding risk. And this situation is more serious in the use, or lack of it, of social statistics, in which the population census has been regarded as a pillar.

The lack of aggressive promotion and dissemination of census results can be given as one among those factors creating this situation. The seeming absence of statistics both on the overall social conditions and at smaller geographical dimensions, like those available from census statistics, tends to perpetrate the fragmented development of both statistics and standards in the social sector.

An expert group was convened in May 2003 by the United Nations Statistics Division, in collaboration with the Siena Group, to address these challenges and develop a concrete strategy on how to move forward. It proposed, among others, the following to respond to the prevailing low political commitment for and visibility of social statistics:

- NSOs need to advocate and promote the importance of sound social statistics for policy, and to work with policy makers in order to build the latter's capacity to appreciate statistics.
- Another strategy offered was the training and sensitizing of policy makers to the power of statistics for policy formulation and monitoring; and of the media to the power of statistics to provide a factual base for their stories.
- Recognizing the high profile of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the political commitment to produce their associated indicators, experts felt that the MDGs could be used to provide momentum to advance development work and policy relevance in the field of social statistics.

The conference may come up with other suggestions to advance the importance of census results in particular and social statistics in general to bring about desired changes in the quality of life of the population. The role of the NSOs in making these happen could not be overemphasized.

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