

Introduction

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Three years ago the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO) and the Swiss Development and Co-operation Agency (SDC) decided to jointly organize an international conference focusing on the application of statistical methods to the analysis of development and human rights issues. The aim of this initiative was not of a mere academic nature: the intention was *to put in evidence and to promote the potential that is concealed in statistical methods for the reinforcement of mechanisms aiming at monitoring the achievements of human development and the respect of human rights.*

The Executive Committees of the International Statistical Institute (ISI) and the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) willingly endorsed this aim as well as the multidisciplinary approach proposed by the Swiss organizers and thus accepted to host the initiative under the aegis of the scientific authority of both institutions. Moreover, heads of many international organizations, UN programs and major international non-governmental organizations active in the fields of development and human rights enthusiastically supported the initiative and committed to deliver policy-oriented keynote addresses.

The Conference on “*Statistics, Development and Human Rights*” was therefore held in Montreux, Switzerland, on 4-8 September 2000, gathering 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 defence. Some 300 written contributions were submitted and discussed during five days of intensive work punctuated by 10 plenary sessions and 39 parallel workshops. Especially noteworthy were the high number and quality of contributions from developing countries and transition economics.

In her opening speech, Mrs. Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, summarized the spirit of the Conference as follows:

“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.”

And Mr. Juan Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Office complemented:

“The theme . . . is a challenging one, some might even say *mission impossible*. Ever since human rights instruments were first adopted, we have been struggling to find statistical ways of measuring their success, their real impact on people’s lives. Sceptics say it’s difficult; others don’t want to be

monitored. But victims of abuses and social and political exclusion deserve better than that. So this Conference marks a great step forward for development and human rights by bringing together the technical expertise of statisticians, development experts and human right specialists. It was time to do this (. . .) Statistical indicators make it possible to do many practical things for human right and development, including: make better policies and monitor their progress; identify unintended impacts of laws and practices; identify actors and hold them accountable; give early warning of potential violations; inform social dialogue; and expose issues that are neglected or silenced for public debate. (. . .) I am sure that in your hands *mission impossible* can become *mission achievable*.”

Indeed, expectations were high, as indicated by the high-level political support and participation to the Conference’s debates. Addresses from the Minister of Finance of Niger, two Swiss Ministers, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Director General of the International Labour Office, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, the Executive Director of UNICEF, the Executive Director of the UNFPA, the Administrator of UNDP, the Representative of the President of the World Bank were delivered, claiming for increased efforts and results in developing accurate quantitative information and indicators to support human rights and human development policies.

The attendants to the Conference tackled the challenge with strong scientific commitment in the course of a series of sessions focusing on seven main thematic streams:

- fundamental conceptual issues and emerging monitoring methods;
- the role of statistical information within the democratic process;
- current and potential contribution of statistics for monitoring the implementation of civil and political rights;
- statistics and demographic analysis facing major human rights issues related to population structure and changes (women’s empowerment, minorities, refugees, displaced populations, demographic effects of war, etc.);
- human development, poverty and monitoring access to economic and social rights;
- statistics for monitoring the implementation of the rights of the child; and
- respect and promotion of human rights in the formulation and implementation of statistical public policies.

The debates of the Conference recurrently referred to the 1990s’ UN world summits and conferences that have stressed the need for new or more efficient measurement of progress in the implementation of development and human rights. Many speakers commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the statistical component of initiatives and programs focusing on this aim that have been launched by intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations, UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, UNESCO, OECD, etc. In particular numerous interventions pointed out the challenges emerging from the Social Summit and the “Copenhagen +5” Conference which took place in Geneva in June 2000, in which the UNECE and its Statistical Division took an active part. In this context, many participants stressed the increasing role that the UN Statistical Commission should play in guaranteeing consistent coordination of the statistical work that is being carried out by many international agencies in view of setting-up reliable indicators of progress requested by major UN world conferences and summits.

The Conference was however not intended to be an inter-agencies meeting, neither to serve as a platform for launching an intergovernmental process. Its original and major aim was to allow an informal and lively exchange of national experiences, and to inform statisticians, development specialists and human rights experts on current and potential application of statistical methods to the monitoring and analysis of development and human rights issues. The Conference showed in particular that professional

application of statistical methods could considerably enhance the quality and accuracy of numerous *policy-oriented research programs* that are being carried out by universities, research institutes and independent organizations in the Northern and Southern hemispheres. In this regard, the Conference allowed researchers from various regions of the world to create links and to discuss on their current projects. Moreover, it also allowed the attendants to get a better picture of the large variety of initiatives taken by organizations active in different aspects of human rights research. In other terms, the Conference not only revealed new grounds to explore, but also created the conditions of mutual knowledge and communication that were required for starting the exploration of those new grounds. This is perhaps one of the most important achievements of the Conference: an international, multi-disciplinary and cross-institutional network of experts was born in Montreux and committed to further work.

The debates of the Conference clearly showed that “official” 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*. As Mr. Hasan Abu-Libdeh, President of the Palestinian Central Statistical Office stated:

“Maximum return from investment in statistical activities can be achieved only when we reach the stage in which stakeholders and public at large perceive the statistics we produce as a public good. It becomes then a very effective tool for energising public debate about government policies in various fields, leading to transparency and accountability within the government and civil society.”

And Mr. Jean-Pierre Behmoiras, from INSEE (France), complemented:

“It is thus indispensable for public statistics to be, for their part also, produced in democratic conditions, that is to say in a transparent and consensual manner. Should the opposite be the case, statistics would be challenged by public opinion.”

Indeed, the contribution of official statistics to the promotion of human development and human rights can be effective only if professionals and institutions in charge of producing such statistics are impregnated of the values and principles that are inherent to a democratic conception of human society. In this sense, *scientific independence, political impartiality, professional ethics, as well as relevance, timeliness and accessibility of statistics to the whole society* are all essential characteristics that National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) should adopt and firmly preserve. The Conference not only reiterated the crucial importance of this issue, but it also allowed many development specialists and human right experts to get to know of the achievements that the international statistical community has reached in adopting and implementing the *UN Charter of “Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics”*.

Many papers and oral interventions commented on the links between official statistics, support to democratic process and good governance. It was noticed that 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*. In many transition and developing countries NSIs are among the most professional public institutions and are thus often considered as models by the civil society and by national planners who aim at developing modern, fair and rigorous public management. However in numerous countries the institutional situation of NSIs with regard to the political power appears precarious: here, lack of a modern legal basis and authoritarian pressures from the political power can easily jeopardize the impartiality and scientific independence of official statistics.

In this regard, there is therefore a need to pay increased attention to ensure a “statistical component” in the international aid to transition and developing countries. This aid should better help to increase

national statistical and analytical capacities, and in particular *capacities to monitor governmental action, such as public spending*.

The task of monitoring governmental action therefore should be developed at the national level on the basis of increased statistical capacity. The Conference showed that current initiatives, such as a project launched by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (presented by Mrs. Awa Thiongane) are promisingly enhancing the role of statistics in defining the standards and assessing the progress of governance. But, of course, this aim could be reached only if from now on NSIs are fully recognized by law and in practice as true independent “statistical authorities”. And here, once again, the international aid could play a major role in reinforcing the institutional building component of existing and future technical assistance programs in the field of statistics. As Tony Williams, from DFID (United Kingdom) summarized,

“the papers presented at the Conference confirm that ... statistics are fundamental to provide transparency, accountability and underpin democratic processes. It is important that approaches to statistics, and supporting technical co-operation, are consistent with the values underlying human rights. This co-operation should highlight the role for a Code of Conduct of statisticians and how this does link to human rights values. It should insist on the need to raise awareness of civil society of their rights in relation to access to statistics for effective participation in, and commentary on, government policy and performance.”

At the request of many attendants and after a large consultation of the sessions’ chairpersons, the Author of these lines used the opportunity of the closing session for presenting a summary of conclusions of the Conference, that were intentionally turned *towards tangible follow-up action*. And, indeed, since the end of the Conference, many initiatives have been taken or are being planned at the national and international level in order to translate the spirit of Montreux into tangible reality. Clock-likely six months after the end of the Conference, on 8 March 2001, Switzerland convened an informal meeting of international organizations, national institutions and personalities who supported the Montreux initiative, which took place in the UNO headquarters in New York. As a result of this meeting, numerous proposals converged in the idea of launching an international, multidisciplinary and cross-institutional project aiming at strengthening scientific basis and effective national capacities for implementing consistent benchmarking in the fields of human rights and rights-based human development. This idea matured in the form of an ambitious project entitled “*Development and Human Rights Observatory (DHR-O)*” which has been submitted for grant to the Swiss authorities.

We would like to express our warm thanks to Prof. Paolo Garonna and his staff for having taken the initiative of publishing in this special issue of the UNECE Statistical Journal a set of key papers which were presented in the Montreux Conference and which were selected with assistance from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.¹ The selection is not intended to give a complete picture of the Conference’s scope or outcome but focuses on some of the methodological issues that are specifically related to the measurement of human development and human rights. The first three papers introduce general issues that describe the need and use of statistics for the monitoring of human rights and human development. These papers also discuss the need for statistics and indicators that emerged from the UN World Summits of the 1990s and which has led to the development of indicators and the Common Country Assessment (T. Hammarberg, E. Omar, C.G. Mokhiber). The next set of papers examine specific dimensions of

¹The reader will find the complete set of some 300 papers submitted to the Montreux Conference published on the Internet site <http://www.iaos2000.admin.ch>.

the measurement of human rights and human development, including some concrete examples of how statistics contribute to human rights reporting (P. Ball, D. Kucera, K. Ashagrie, G. Goldman, M.D. Raines, H. Brunborg, S. Fukuda-Parr, M. Guzman). A final essay addresses problems and limitations encountered in the quantification of human rights, including the establishment of quantitative targets and benchmarks (N. Thede). A paper by C. Mottet and R. Suarez de Miguel complements the selected papers by providing some consideration on the perspectives and aims of the Conference's follow-up project. Taken together, these papers clearly illustrate the importance and the complexity of the challenges that emerged at the Montreux Conference.

We are convinced that this publication will stimulate numerous statisticians, development specialists and human rights practitioners to contribute to the process of creating and developing an efficient international network on statistics, development and human rights policies. We are also convinced that when commitment to concrete action goes hand in hand with adequate professional and timely resources, concrete results will ensure relevant statistics, better governance, improved human rights reporting and more effective benchmarking of human development.

Mr. Carlo Malaguerra holds since 1987 the position of Director General of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. In the course of these years Swiss statistics experienced a modernization process at different levels: at the scientific level, with the introduction of sample survey methods and high-tech tools; at the institutional level, with the entering into force of a new federal statistical law; at the corporate level, with the qualitative and quantitative growth of resources and with reuniting the staff of different spread out services within a single common house; at the political level, with the growing social acknowledgement of the professionalism and impartiality of Swiss official statistics.

Since his appointment as Director General of SFSO Mr. Malaguerra was strongly committed within the international scene: he was elected for two consecutive periods as Chairman of the Conference of European Statisticians within the framework of UNECE (1989–1993). He contributed to the work of the UN Statistical Commission, to the Steering Committee of the Euro-Mediterranean statistical co-operation and to the European and World Population Conferences. He has been elected member of the Executive Board of the International Statistical Institute (ISI), Chairman of the Committee for the review of the mission and functioning of the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) and member of the Board of Trustees of the TES Institute. He is also co-Chairman of the Organizational Committee for the Conference IAOS 2000.

Prior to joining the SFSO, Mr. Malaguerra has held several professional positions in Switzerland, serving as economist, and in Paris at the OECD Division of economic statistics and national accounts. In the course of his career, he published numerous studies and papers. He has been the organiser of many scientific Conferences and symposia and during eight years he has been member of the Swiss Scientific Council.

Mr. Malaguerra was born in 1939 in Locarno, in Southern Switzerland. He graduated in Economics and Econometrics from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, where he was awarded his Ph.D. in 1970.