

Preface

For social statistics 1995 was a year to remember. The World Summit for Social Development was held in Copenhagen and on that occasion the Conference of European Statisticians at its 43rd Plenary Session issued a Declaration on Statistics for Social Progress, where the interdependence between statistical information and policies was emphasised. By describing statisticians as “the eyes and ears of policies, the non-partisan and science-based input into the eclectic process of decision-making” the Conference of European Statisticians openly recognised the vital role statistics is called upon to play.¹

The World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) attracted high-level participation from governments who acknowledged their need for statistical information. By proposing a framework for linking social policies to statistics, governments were asking for guidance in designing, monitoring and evaluating the commitments that were underwritten in Copenhagen. A few months later, in Beijing at the Fourth World Conference on Women, these needs were not only reconfirmed, but the generation and dissemination of statistical information were set as strategic objectives for planning and evaluation, and actions were outlined for governments and the United Nations in this respect.

In many ways these events marked a turning point in the way social statistics are perceived and five years later we are in a position to evaluate their impact on the statistical community and policy makers. The Statistical Division of the Economic Commission for Europe has organised, with the support of the UN Statistical Commission,² the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and the Governments of Italy and the United Kingdom, a seminar, held as part of the Geneva 2000 Forum.³ The aim of this seminar was to review the progress made by governments and international organisations in bridging the gap between policies for social development and statistics.

This special edition of the Statistical Journal attempts to examine some of the outcomes of this seminar, while at the same time raising questions for further work. The focus of this collection of essays is mainly on the impact the 1995 WSSD and Geneva 2000 meeting had on the social statistics generated by national and international statistical agencies. Other important statistical initiatives, adopted as a consequence of the other major United Nations conferences of the 1990s, are also considered.

All three essays adopt a regional rather than global perspective, focusing on the member countries of the Economic Commission for Europe, one of the United Nations five regional commissions.⁴ We hope that this regional approach will serve as a stimulus for future initiatives by highlighting some of the advantages and shortcomings of the statistical frameworks developed so far.

The objective of this special edition is to further involve the statistical community in a discussion on a suitable process for operationalising monitoring mechanisms for social development. We hope that

¹CES/1995/R. 18/Add.1.

²At its February 2000 session, the Statistical Commission “expressed support . . . for this initiative to strengthen capacity building in social statistics in connection with the forthcoming Geneva 2000 Special Session on Social Development”.

³The Geneva 2000 Forum gathering of non-governmental organizations took place along side the General Assembly Special Session on Social Development.

⁴The Economic Commission for Europe comprises 55 states. Its member States include the countries of Europe, but also countries in North America (Canada and United States), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and Western Asia (Israel).

by discussing some of the issues, which were addressed at the UNECE Seminar, a wider audience will become involved in the discussion on how to improve the measurement of social phenomena and how to create appropriate institutional processes and mechanisms for monitoring social policies. Statisticians, social scientists, policy makers and general users all need to be involved in this dialogue.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UNECE have a long-standing association in their work in Eastern and Central Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. This partnership has found its expression in a wide range of statistical projects spanning a variety of fields from computing expertise to projects supporting the development of social statistics and poverty measures. The current publication is part of a larger joint project begun in 2001 which aims at improving human development statistics and social trends reporting.

The UNDP is conscious of the importance of social statistics and their role in assessing and monitoring the success of government policies at the national level. UNDP has invested substantial technical and financial resources in improving the quality of statistics, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS countries. This was done through training and systematic analysis of the human, social and economic conditions in each of these countries, reported mainly in the National Human Development Reports (NHDRs). The preparation of annual NHDRs was begun by the Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS (RBEC). RBEC initiated and led this work in more than 25 countries of the region since 1995. As a result, the preparation of NHDRs has become an integral part of UNDP's work globally.

The NHDRs make extensive use of available economic and social statistics for policy analysis and formulation. Where data were lacking, the NHDRs have been instrumental in mobilizing support for the collection and development of needed statistics. There are many examples from countries of the region where use of statistics from NHDRs has directly led to policy change. In the majority of the countries, the NHDRs encouraged disaggregation of data by region, gender, age and ethnic groups. In many instances, this has contributed to raising public awareness about shortcomings in specific policies. The impact on policy formulation ranges from changes in legislation to improved allocation of public expenditures. In Latvia, the NHDR has helped to improve legislation in favour of greater social integration of minority groups. This resulted in increased government financial support for language training and skills upgrading for minority groups. In Turkey, the NHDRs contributed directly to the decision to increase and redirect social spending towards the most impoverished areas in the eastern part of the country. The NHDRs work on gender statistics in all the countries of the region has increased support for improved national legislation on gender equality. Recently, and as a direct response to the WSSD framework, UNDP has intensified efforts to link statistical data more directly to policy formulation. This involves elaborating frameworks and mechanisms for improving the monitoring and evaluation of social, economic and environmental statistics. One concrete example is the new RBEC initiative aimed at developing the concept and statistical measurement of human security in the region in collaboration with ECE.

The role of statistics in relation to policies touches not only on the methodological aspects of collecting data and developing suitable indicators but addresses the subject of public debate in democratic societies. An informed and active public must be able to monitor the performance of their governments. We believe, given the complexity of the issues, that partnership, peer-dialogue, and regional cooperation are the most viable approach to begin to meet these challenges.

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