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**SOURCES OF DATA ON SOCIAL STATISTICS – CENSUSES, SURVEYS
AND POPULATION REGISTERS: LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE**

1. INTRODUCTION

There are three major sources of data on social statistics, namely, Censuses, Surveys and Administrative Registers. This Paper focusses on their strengths, weaknesses and their usefulness as data sources currently, and in the future. The Paper first presents some brief background information on each source, focusing on their historical origin. For each data source, the information is then followed by an analysis of their advantages and disadvantages as reliable sources for social statistics.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

(i) The Population Census

- (a) Perhaps the oldest method of collecting social statistics is through a population census. The conduct of population censuses certainly dates back to biblical times, but some authors have even made reference to headcounts being done during the 'hunter gatherer' era. The fact is that at some point in time, every tribe, indigenous group, ethnic group or other population sub-group finds it necessary to take stock of their numbers, and history has shown that one of the most efficient ways of doing so is through a population census.
- (b) However, in the past, people referred to a census as a mere headcount of the population, and this misconception has sometimes become haunting even in this modern day and age.

Indeed, many persons today still equate a population census with a mere headcount and in the process cannot appreciate the 'goldmine' of information, other than a population count, which a census often yields. In modern times, the most comprehensive definition of a population census is that coined by the United Nations which describes it as **“the total process of collecting, compiling, and publishing demographic, economic and social data pertaining, at a specified time or times, to all persons in a country or delimited territory”**.

- (c) Most countries conduct censuses on a decennial basis, and since for some countries this may be the only or main source of information for ten years, international agencies or bilateral arrangements are often quite disposed to assist in mobilising resources to support this exercise. For similar reasons also, it is common nowadays, to have census questionnaires whose contents are quite broad in scope. It is argued that since this opportunity is rarely available, and since fieldwork on this massive scale is such a costly exercise, as many questions as possible should be answered through this means. Recently, a few countries have even been going beyond the social, economic and demographic questions and have been including environmental questions as well. Topics that are common to census questionnaires, even today, include **Age, Sex, Ethnicity, Religion, Educational Level attained, Fertility of Females, Labour Force Status, Disability and Income**. More recently, some countries have been including questions on **Crime**, the **Environment** and on **Information Communication and Technology (ICT)**;
- (d) The inclusion of a variety of questions yielding a rich database is one of the major advantages of a census. Both the public and private sectors use census databases quite effectively, to improve the education and health conditions of the population, as well as the physical infrastructure, and to guide business investment. The Non Governmental Sector also relies heavily on information from the census in order to plan, monitor and evaluate their specific programmes. Indeed, if census information could be updated more regularly than after ten years, most of the data requirements could be solved;
- (e) However, there are also some serious obstacles to the conduct of a census, even in these modern times. The first and perhaps the major problem relates to the exorbitant cost to carry out a successful census in these times. Experience has shown that this high cost is a function of several variables, namely the increased cost of training and remunerating the field staff, the publicity

campaign, data processing and analysis. The fact that the public, in these times, are much more reluctant than in the past to divulge their personal information means that the cost of collecting the information successfully will increase. In terms of publicity, also, the visual media is the most effective source of getting key messages across, but it is perhaps the most expensive means. Even data processing cost can be prohibitive in this modern era, as has been experienced with the scanning technology.

(ii) Sample Surveys

2. Arguably, it is quite difficult to identify major differences between a census and a survey in terms of the quality of results, but even in terms of the scope of the research. Indeed, it has been shown quite convincingly that a survey can yield results that are as reliable as those from a census. It is also a scientific fact that a survey is the appropriate vehicle for the more in-depth studies. However, there are some situations that can only be supported by census results. For example, it has been shown that for more meaningful intervention to alleviate Poverty, more detailed information of a broader scope is required. Often, a census may be the only vehicle to provide such information. Further, the results of a census are also essential to provide denominators for various key indicators in the social sector. For education indicators like “Enrollment Rates”, for example, or health indicators like “Immunization Coverage” it is crucial to have the ‘total population at risk’. Even though one can generate reliable estimates of the total population at risk, for micro areas, for a few years after a census has been taken, experience has shown that especially in the more dynamic circumstances of population change, these estimates can be quite misleading. The need for a full count is therefore necessary, under these circumstances. Of course, the major advantage of the census here is the fact that all members of the target population are interviewed in this exercise, whereas in a survey, only a sample is involved. Notwithstanding the above, many results obtained in a census can be reliably updated by means of a survey, which remains one of the hallmark advantages of a survey. Added to this is the reduced cost to collect these data.

(iii) The Population Register

3. The third source of data on social statistics that is being discussed in this paper is the Population Register. It should be noted here that other registers like, the Vital Statistics Register, can also be a potentially rich and economic source of data on social statistics. The intent of a Population Register is to cover all persons of all ages, sex, ethnic groups, social classes and so on. It should be distinguished from a partial register, such as the electoral register, which targets only those who are eligible to vote. Population and Vital Statistics Registers are often described as universal registers since they target all persons in the population. However, even though most countries have Vital Registers, only a

few, mainly in North Western Europe, especially Scandinavia and the Far East, continue to maintain Population Registers.

4. The United Nations best defines a true Population Register as a **“mechanism which will provide for the continuous recording of information about the population in such a manner that data on particular events that occur to each individual, as well as selected characteristics describing him, are maintained on a current basis”**. Originally, Population Registers were established primarily for identification, control and police purposes. Very little use had been made of them for population statistics. This was true particularly in the far eastern countries like China and Japan. Scandinavian countries in the early twentieth century recognised their usefulness as a powerful data source, and a few countries like Denmark, Sweden and Singapore have developed very reliable registers, from which timely data are obtained. A very significant use of a population register was made recently, by the island state of Singapore when conducting their population census of 2000. Singapore demonstrated quite successfully how a good register of the population can be used to supplement the conduct of a population census, but involving only a sample of the population in the traditional way and supplementing these results with those of the register.

3. THE CASE OF THE POPULATION REGISTER OF SWEDEN

5. Population registration system is the basic register of the Swedish population. It provides current information on who lives in the country and where they live. The system is intended to meet society's need for basic information on population, i.e. information on the identity (name, personal identity no., nationality etc.), family relationships (marriage, children etc.) and place of abode (residential address etc.) of people who are or have been resident in Sweden.

6. The population records are computerised and can be easily retrieved and used in a variety of ways e.g. for general elections, statistics, taxation, planning of schools and hospitals and payment of pensions and other benefits. There is therefore a quick and continuous reporting of information from these records to authorities with responsibility for different social functions. In this way the population registration system becomes a basic register for society as a whole and an important means of directing rights and obligations to the correct person. The individual need not report changes of address etc. to numerous different authorities. Informing the population registry is enough.

7. The fact that one is registered for population purposes, and where one is registered, is very important in order to exercise many rights and obligations such as the right to child allowance, housing allowance and where one is assessed for

taxation purposes. Extracts from the population records enable a person to substantiate his or her personal particulars and family situation in various contexts, e.g. for the distribution of an estate or in order to marry.

8. Population registers have been kept in Sweden for a long time and the modern computerised registers contain references to the manual registers that were kept earlier. The population registration system therefore makes it possible to trace families a long way back into the past. Hence, the register is widely used by researchers and other interested persons.

9. Originally, population registers were administered by the church and were used mainly for ecclesiastical purposes. With time, they came to be used more and more by secular society for taxation, statistics, social care, schools etc. On 1 July 1991 responsibility for population registration was transferred from the Swedish Church to the tax authorities, which thus acquired a new duty alongside their taxation duties.

10. Presently, ongoing population registration takes place locally at each tax office. Activities are regulated by two acts, the Population Registration Act and the Population Registers Act, both of which came into effect on 1 July 1991.

11. The Population Registration Act contains a definition of the term Population registration and also states when and where a person has to be registered, when change of address has to be reported and how a population registration decision may be appealed against. The Population Registers Act states which registers must be kept, the purpose of the registers, what they may contain and how one may search in them. The Act is supplemented by an ordinance on population registers that states among other things when information is to be transferred between the different registers.

12. An important principle, known as the principle of public access to official records, is contained in one of Sweden's constitutional laws, the Freedom of the Press Act. The principle implies that any person is entitled to study official documents. In this way people are ensured a right of insight into the activities of the authorities and the opportunity of inspecting and discussing them. However, in certain cases exceptions must be made to the right of access with regard to particularly sensitive information. These exceptions are stated in a special Official Secrecy Act.

13. As far as population registration is concerned, the principle of public access means that anybody normally has the right to obtain information from the population registers. Under the Official Secrecy Act an exception is made if there

is special reason to assume that the person to whom the information applies will suffer disadvantage from the divulging of the information. An example is information concerning the address of a person who feels threatened or harassed.

14. Each tax office keeps a local register of the population in its area of operation. For each person the register has particulars of:

- (i) Personal Identity Number; Name; Residence (address, property, county, municipality and parish where the person resides); Civil Status; Parents, Spouse, Children, Guardian of children under the age of 18, Adoption; Place of birth; Nationality; Immigration from abroad; Removal from the population registers (due to death, migration abroad or other circumstance); Place of burial;
- (ii) Under the Population Registration Act the birth of a child must be reported to the tax office as soon as possible by the hospital where the child is born or by the midwife who otherwise assists in the delivery. If the child is born neither in hospital nor with the assistance of a midwife the parents must themselves report the birth within a month;
- (iii) When the newborn child has been registered for population purposes the tax office sends an extract from the register to the parents with the child's personal identity number. At the same time forms are sent for stating the name of the child. The parents must inform the tax office of the child's name within three months;
- (iv) A person who changes address must report this within a week. The information may be given to the post office or the social insurance office, which will then forward it to the tax office. A person wishing to do so may on request also have a separate postal address recorded in the population register as well as the address of the place of abode;
- (v) If a person fails to give a prescribed item of information, e.g. concerning the name given to a child, on time, the tax office may require him to supply

the desired information. If the information is still not supplied the person liable to provide it may be fined;

- (vi) Aside from reporting births and movements, all other information about the individual must be reported to the population register by the agency involved. For example, the marriage officer has to report the marriages he or she administered, the doctor has to report deaths which he certified, and so on;
- (vii) Sweden has nearly nine million inhabitants, and the 116 tax offices maintain ongoing population registration of them. In 1997 population registration occupied the equivalent of 614 fulltime employees and the cost of activities was SEK 381 m (US\$49.4 m);
- (viii) Each year the tax offices issue some 1.8 million certificates and deal with approx. two million items of population registration business. Of these approximately half are changes of address. Among others may be mentioned 92,000 births, 41,000 marriages, 29,000 divorces and 96,000 deaths (1998 figures). These items involve approximately 2,600,000 notifications of changes to other authorities and organizations annually.

CONCLUSION

15. Serious challenges face smaller developing states with respect to the provision of the required information they need, to facilitate informed decision making. Decreasing fiscal budgets coupled with declining assistance from the international development agencies are compelling reasons for these countries to adopt the most cost effective methods, which will yield data of a high caliber and in a timely fashion. Without any doubt, existing administrative structures, such as the Vital Statistics System, should quickly be strengthened since these can be an effective and efficient source of social statistics. Establishing Population Registers should also be considered particularly in the small island states where the movements of people can be more easily controlled. The case of Singapore has demonstrated how the high costs of conducting a conventional population census can be curtailed by supplementing census information with information from a good population register. This is certainly an avenue that Member States may want to consider as a short-term plan. For the immediate future, however, countries may still have to rely on the traditional way in conducting censuses. In the case of surveys, these may always remain as the best method to focus on collecting data on highly specialised issues. What is certain though is that more

economic methods of conducting these will have to be pursued. In this context, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) looks promising. Countries will also have to identify and implement strategies to ensure that the results from these exercises, particularly censuses are released in a timely manner, shared with the public and recognised by the public as useful for their personal improvement.

ACTION REQUIRED

16. The Meeting is invited to:
- (i) **consider** the Paper on Sources of Data on Social Statistics – Censuses, Surveys and Population Registers: Looking towards the Future;
 - (ii) **note** the review of the Population Register System in Sweden;
 - (iii) **also consider** the potential use of a population register as a supplement to census inflation;
 - (iv) **ensure** the need for countries to enable rapid processing and dissemination of census data for users.
