

ONE SMALL STEP FOR A SUMMIT

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The Progress of Nations Unicef 1994, pp. 3-5

The Progress of Nations is a flawed publication. It uses statistics to measure and compare national achievements in social development – in health, nutrition, education, family planning, child rights, and progress for women. But its statistics are frequently out of date, incomplete, and sometimes based on extrapolations or mathematical models rather than on vital registration systems or on the systematic collection of representative data. The facts and figures assembled in these pages are the best and the latest available, but they are not nearly good enough.

Half the nations of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, have not measured their child death rates by any direct method for at least the last ten years: 15 of them are still working with data from the 1970s. In Asia, the position is marginally better, but four nations are still using under-five mortality statistics from the 1970s and only Hong Kong and Singapore have data from the 1990's. Even Brazil and Mexico – populous nations capable of great and sophisticated undertakings – have not published national figures on child deaths in the last decade.

Faith in statistics

This statistical arthritis affects almost every bone in the body of social development. Three quarters of the developing countries, for example, are still using 1980s statistics for the percentage of married couples who use family planning. Easier-to-collect statistics like the proportion of children who complete primary school tend to be more up to date, but 15 nations have still not produced any new data since 1980. And when it comes to more difficult statistics, such as the percentage of children malnourished, then we find that at least half the world's nations have no data for at least half the last 10 years. The average ages of key social indicators can be found on page 54.

Many of these social statistics, it is true, are regularly massaged in an effort to keep them alive, and some are permanently hooked up to life-support machines, computers which busily interpolate and extrapolate in order to produce signs of statistical life. Fresh-looking figures are therefore generated and published annually in most fields of social development, but faith in this process cannot be absolute when it leads the United Nations family to publish steadily declining under-five mortality rates for, say, Indonesia which then have to be reversed when real measurements are taken. Best estimates of Indonesia's child death rate reported a steady decline from 119 per 1000 births in 1988 to 86 per 1000 in 1991 – a fall of almost 30%; but in 1992 the figure leapt back up to 111 per 1000, as the results of new surveys became available.

A statistic like the under-five mortality rate should serve as a child-minder to governments and social policy makers, but who can trust a child-minder that loses well over 100,000 children in a single year?

Similarly, extrapolations of early 1980s trends in China's under-five mortality rate led to a widely published estimate of 27 deaths per 1000 births for 1991. When new survey data became available in 1992, it was found that the trend had not continued downward as expected, and that the actual under-five death rate had remained at over 40 per 1000. The difference between the extrapolated rate and the surveyed rate represents a difference of approximately 400,000 in the number of children dying before the age of five.

Starting with the pioneering work of William Brass, two generations of measurement specialists have developed ingenious ways of collecting essential data in societies which do not have the institutional capacity to collect cradle-to-grave social statistics. These tools are becoming widely used by, and invaluable to, programme managers. More statistics are therefore being gathered than are finding their way into national or international use. In part, this is because their often rough and ready appearance means that they are turned back by, or never presented to the world of published statistics. But in part also, the problem is that most of the available resources are being used for the collection of economic statistics alone. Not enough effort is being made, either by national governments or by the major international organizations, to collect essential social statistics and to open up the restricted capillaries by which the statistics that do exist can more quickly enter the world of nationally and internationally available information. Even if such information were to flow more freely, the new measurement techniques need to be deployed more widely in order to provide more frequent and more comprehensive data on a wider range of social trends.

Social summit

With the widespread realization that economic statistics alone are inadequate indicators of human progress, the case for better social statistics has become more urgent.

The idea that GNP per capita is all that counts, and therefore all that needs to be counted, has been laid to rest. And many more nails for the coffin can be found in these pages. Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe both have per capita GNPs of less than \$600, but both manage to provide 90% of their children with at least four years of primary school; Brazil, with a per capita GNP of almost \$3000 a year, cannot boast even half that figure. In Guatemala, about 30% of children are malnourished; in Paraguay, only marginally better off, less than 5% are malnourished. Viet Nam has a per capita GNP of only \$240, but a better child survival rate than Algeria, where per capita GNP is approximately seven times higher. Similarly, many of the world's poorest nations have succeeded in reaching the goal of 80% immunization coverage while several richer nations lag behind.

Last year, *The Progress of Nations* introduced the concept of the national performance gap (NPG) as an approximate measure of these discrepancies between actual and expected-for-GNP levels of social progress. NPGs for 129 countries – in child survival, nutrition, and education – are given on pages 48 and 49.

The clear lesson of these disparities is that social policies and priorities, and well-managed strategies, are critical to human progress. Social development is a goal to be pursued and measured directly, not taken for granted as an automatic by-product of economic advance.

None of this detracts from the importance of economic growth, or the need for changes in the unjust international economic system within which the developing world must earn its living. But there is today a clear consensus that development also means action to protect the vulnerable and to invest in adequate nutrition, safe water, primary health care, basic education, and family planning. Social investments of this kind are both an end and a means of progress, meeting human needs today and laying the foundations for the economic development which will help to meet human needs tomorrow.

United Nations agencies, in particular the UN Development Programme and its series of *Human Development Reports*, have done much in recent years to give birth to this consensus.

And it is a consensus which will come of age at the first World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen during 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations.

The reason for bringing the world's Heads of State together on this issue, as the Secretary-General of the United Nations has stressed, is that social development "goes far wider than the mandates of social ministries. It lies at the heart of economic development, of human rights, and of peace and security."

But if a major effort is now to be made to move social development to centre stage, and to spotlight the strategies which can most efficiently translate economic resources into real human progress, then there is a clear need for better social statistics to accompany that effort.

Among the many important issues on the agenda in Copenhagen, the Summit should therefore make a determined attempt to underpin the social development effort of the next few decades by helping to institute the collection of regular, reliable, and timely social statistics in the most basic areas of human progress.

Small price to pay

In the past, the weakness of social statistics could be put down, almost entirely to poverty and underdevelopment; it is not easy to collect data in countries where births, marriages, and deaths are not routinely registered and individual health and education records are haphazard or non-existent, but as the years go by, inadequate infrastructure is receding as a reason and emerging as an excuse. A majority of countries now publish annual, even quarterly, data on GNP growth, inflation, unemployment, manufacturing output, and the balance of payments. More and more nations are also regularly providing information on everything from energy use to television viewing figures. Yet very few produce statistics even every five years to show what percentage of their children are malnourished, or suffer from preventable illnesses and disabilities, or have access to safe water and sanitation, or on what proportion of women receive antenatal care, or die in childbirth, or have low-birth-weight babies.

It is statistics such as these that speak to real human progress. And it is statistics such as these that need to be collected every two or three years if the commitment to social development is to be taken seriously.

The overall cost of collecting such statistics might be in the region of \$10 million a year – a small price to pay for information which is essential for the efficient allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars of public resources. It is an old adage, and a true one, that if you want to change something, then first measure it.

Accountability

Improved social statistics are needed, in the first instance, by governments. They are an indispensable management tool for any government committed to extracting maximum social development mileage from every economic gallon.

But in the world's growing number of democracies, timely social statistics are also needed by opposition parties, by the media, by academic institutions, by non-governmental organizations, and by the public at large. Accountability is at the heart of democracy. And the collection and dissemination of up-to-date information on progress and problems in complex modern societies is essential to that accountability. If democracy and social development are to

reinforce each other, then social statistics should become a part of the mainstream of political and public debate. Changes in annual rates of economic growth are grist to media and political mills; changes in the proportion of children who are malnourished, or who drop out of school, or who die or become disabled from preventable illnesses, should also now become the stuff of political debate, media coverage, and public concern.

More sensitive statistics on social trends are also required by the United Nations agencies, by aid ministries in the industrialized nations, and by non-governmental organizations. If mounting debt in the developing world causes child malnutrition to rise, then at least the world ought to know about it. If economic adjustment policies are causing schools and health clinics to be shut down, as undoubtedly happened in several countries in the 1980s, then it ought not to happen quietly, without the world noticing. If the \$60 billion of taxpayers' money given in aid every year is not improving the lives of the poorest, then this ought to be a matter of public knowledge and concern. UNICEF and many other organizations have tried to draw the world's attention to the real human consequences of debt and adjustment policies over the last decade. How much more effective would that message have been if those consequences had been measurable, systematically documented, rather than being suspected, guessed at, pieced together from the inadequate scraps of information that happened to be available?

First call

Because of the obvious but profound connection between the mental and physical development of children and the social and economic development of their societies, the protection that society affords to its children is the touchstone of social development. And because long-term damage can result from even short-term deprivation, social trends that directly affect children should be all the more closely monitored. Statistics such as the proportion of children who are seriously malnourished, or the percentage of infants who are immunized, should be collected and published not every three years but every year in every country.

For more than a decade, UNICEF has argued that the child's one chance to grow properly in mind and body should be shielded from the mistakes, misfortunes and malignancies of the adult world, and this protection should have a first call on society's concerns and capacities so that it can be maintained in bad times as well as good. Whether a child has health care, whether a child is immunized, whether a child grows normally, whether a child has a school to go to, should not be contingent upon the vagaries of adult society, on the rise or fall of commodity prices or debt rations, on export levels or interest rates, or on whether or not a particular political party is in power.

This principle of 'first call for children' is the great ideal at the heart of social development. But it is a principle which cannot be upheld without strong statistical support. For in addition to doing everything possible to ensure that children are the last to suffer from economic or other setbacks, it is also essential to know how well or how badly policies to protect children are working. It is not good enough to discover five or six years later, when the statistics become available, that malnutrition rose sharply when food subsidies were withdrawn during a structural adjustment programme, or that immunization levels fell sharply during a period of acute foreign exchange shortages.

Accepted goals

Better and more current social statistics would also help to achieve the social development goals that have already been accepted by the great majority of the world's nations.

In a perfect world, the contriving of goals and targets might be unnecessary. But in the real world, goals have repeatedly proved their value: they provide benchmarks for management by objectives; they are a unifying and enthusing force for the many different people and organizations involved; they serve as a rallying point for public and media awareness; and they help to ensure that political promises are not forgotten. Vaccines would not now be preventing 3 million child deaths a year had it not been for the setting of the 80% immunization goal. And without the goal of universal salt iodization by 1995, it is very doubtful whether the world would now be making such substantial progress towards eliminating the iodine deficiency disorders which are the world's major cause of preventable mental retardation (pages 8 and 9).

The social development goals that have been accepted for the years 1995 and 2000 are set out on pages 52 and 53. But the value of such targets, and their capacity to galvanize and guide all those who participate in their achievement, is diluted by the lack of timely social statistics that tell the story of how far the effort has come and how far there is still to go.

The 1995 World Summit for Social Development is therefore an opportunity not only to make a new commitment to the great social development goals that have been agreed by almost all the world's governments, but also to begin the practical work of more closely monitoring progress towards them.

Disparity

Finally, if a new effort is to be made to monitor social development, then it is important to stress that social statistics will increasingly need to be disaggregated. Even though most social indicators are not as susceptible to distortion by extreme inequalities as GNP per capita, national averages often mask deep disparities between urban and rural, between different men and women, and especially between different economic strata of society.

As the monitoring of social development gathers pace, it should therefore become more sensitive to inequality, focusing more and more on those who are being excluded – identifying who they are, where they are, and why they are being marginalized. In this way, social monitoring can also serve one of the greatest tasks of social development – the task of reaching out to the unreached and the unserved, to the illiterate and the unconfident, to the socially and culturally discriminated against, to the poorest and the most disadvantaged, to the girls and the women.

The World Summit for Social Development sets out to promote a style of development that will enable the poor majority to share in the decisions that affect their lives and to meet their own and their families' needs for adequate nutrition, safe water, primary health care, basic education, and family planning. If the Summit fails to take the small but practical step of strengthening the capacity to measure these different facets of real human progress, then it will have lost an important opportunity to introduce more efficiency and accountability into the policies and the promises. Copenhagen 1995 is a good place and time to change a style of development which has for too long regarded the poor as statistically insignificant.