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Human settlements and urban development: how to monitor

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"Man er ikke vant til at se offentlige afhandlinger om sådanne ting som køkkener, og derfor vil det måske synes en og anden altfor besynderligt, at jeg kommer med så vidtløftige tællinger og beregninger også om denne del af husvæsenet. Men ingen undersøgelse bør agtes ringe, som leder til at erkjende en talrig befolknings tarvelige kår og mangel på savn."

"One is not used to see public dissertations on such things as kitchens, and therefore it may seem to one or the other as too strange that I present such elaborate enumerations and calculations regarding this aspect of house holding. But no inquiry should be diminished, if it leads to understanding of the destitution and copious wants of a numerous population."

Eilert Sundt, 1858, "Om Piperviken og Rusløkbakken. Undersøgelser om arbejderklassens kaar og sæder i Christiania.

The pioneering Norwegian poverty researcher Eilert Sundt wrote this in 1858, in one of the world's very first studies of slums and urban poverty. Charles Booth's "Labour and life of the people" describing pauperism in East London only appeared 31 years later. The location of Sundt's study was actually exactly where we are at the moment.

Although the slums he described are long gone, his point was well made. Kitchens, roofs, wall materials, sanitation, water and electricity supply are all things that people care about. For example, one of the stakes in the ongoing conflict in Iraq is whether or not the coalition will be allowed time and peace to restore basic facilities to the Iraqi population.

Nevertheless, researchers, before Sundt as well as after, has tended to shift their focus away from the mundane issues of crowding, access to infrastructure and basic facilities, and instead focused on the more exotic aspects of social organisation. In my own organisation, Fafu, it has always been difficult to get researchers to write the chapter on basic infrastructure and housing in our reports. This is despite the fact that we go to considerable lengths in order to collect such data in our surveys. It is also despite the fact that our researchers themselves use a considerable proportion of their wages and time to improve their own kitchens, bathrooms and housing.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have, at least in our case, to a large extent changed this, by putting slum dwellers on the agenda through Goal 7 "Ensure environmental stability" and target 11, "Have achieved, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers".

A significant feature of the MDGs is that they also include indications of how to monitor progress. In the case of target 11, the main MDG text proposes two indicators, namely no 31 "Proportion of urban population with access to improved sanitation" and 32 "Proportion of households with secure tenure".

So it is easy, is it not? We just measure improved sanitation and how many households that have secure tenure. Not quite. If we compare with Goal 4, "Reduce child mortality" and target 5, "Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate", Goal 7, target 11 appears somewhat wishy-washy

Goal 4 and target 5 are very precise, and its indicators are well defined in international statistics. In contrast, the meanings of “significant improvement”, “improved sanitation” and “secure tenure” are not all that clear-cut.

Let us consider slums. UN Habitat defines slums by insecure residential status, inadequate access to safe water, inadequate access to sanitation, poor structural quality of housing, and overcrowding.

This can be seen in two ways: a slum household is a household with one or more of those characteristics; or, a slum area is an area where the majority of the households are slum households. So depending on whether you measure population in households or areas, you will get different figures. And there is, I have to say, a surprising amount of confusion in international statistics on what safe water is or what adequate sanitation might mean.

Understand me right: It is not that the people who design water systems and sanitation do not know. It is people such as I, who design large-scale surveys and censuses that create the problems. It turns out for example, that the Arabic word that in the dictionaries translates as “septic tank” is not actually a septic tank, at least not in Iraq, where we are currently running a survey. What is termed a “septic tank” in Iraq is not what we would consider “improved sanitation” while what I would normally consider a septic tank *is* improved sanitation.

Similarly, “crowding” seems like a simple term. It is usually defined as three or more persons living per room. Except of course in the instances when it is defined as two or more persons per room. However, a more fundamental difficulty is what should be counted as a room. For example, should kitchens, glassed in verandas and hallways be included? Often we exclude these rooms, because of the difficulties of their definition.

One of the follow up questions to the question of number of rooms is that of “How many rooms are used for sleeping?” However, if we exclude some rooms to begin with, we easily are put in a situation where the members of a household sleep in more rooms than they are reported to have.

The real party crasher, however, is “secure tenure”. It is actually very difficult to ask, in a household survey, or otherwise, if people have secure tenure. In a survey Fafu did in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, where people in principle have their residence on unpaid lease from UNRWA, still 78 percent of households say that they own their house. Only about 6 percent state that they lease from UNRWA. So what people believe is not necessarily a good indication of their rights of tenure. To decide if someone lives securely or not depends on the whole legal and political context of the residence, and the analysis of that, especially when it might be contested, is a large task in itself.

Even urban development itself is not all that obvious what is. For example, Syria has 55 percent of its population living in urban areas, while Jordan has 79 percent of its population resident in urban areas. So Jordan is more urbanised than Syria, except for the fact that an urban area in Syria is a locality with 20,000 inhabitants or more, while only 5,000 souls are needed for making a locality urban in Jordan.

We know that we often underestimate slums and the number of slum dwellers. Slums are difficult to cover in population censuses because of their complexity. Both in Britain and in the United States there has been a substantial undercount of inner city dwellers in the most recent population censuses. In Britain this has been corrected for

by statistical methods in the published results, but in the US the heated political debate brought no correction.

Slums also pop up between censuses making the sampling frames used by statistical agencies obsolete. When we draw samples for household surveys we usually draw geographically located clusters of households that are identified by population censuses. But if the slum has appeared on formerly unused land after the census was made, then its households will not be present on any list, and will never be included in a survey. In some areas security concerns also make it difficult to include slums. For example, a survey we did in Port-Au-Prince (Haiti) probably suffers from this.

There are ways around this. One may for example use high resolution satellite imagery to identify newly built areas and incorporate them into sampling frames. Or one may do solid work on the ground with the help of local governments and citizen's groups.

So we know a city or a slum when we see one, but at the same time, we should not overstate the accuracy of current statistics on the issues.

Let us take one step back. If everything is so difficult, why would we want to monitor human settlements and urban development in the first place? That question has two sets of answers.

The first concerns the interest in the phenomenon itself. It is clear that the growth of urban agglomerations and changes in settlement patterns in the world have been and continues to be one of the major social, economic and environmental transformations in existence. Although urban rural population forecasts are a rather uncertain business, in the period 2000-2025 the rural population of the world may be expected to be approximately stable in absolute numbers while the urban will double.

Accompanying this population change is the fact that the change has changed its character, but may be doing so again. Living conditions in European cities were far worse than in the countryside during the industrial revolution. London did not reproduce itself demographically before the start of the twentieth century. Because of the horrendous conditions, immigrants were needed to keep the population from falling before that time. However, today the average living conditions in cities in developing countries are better than those in the countryside.

But note the word average. Conditions for slum dwellers are as bad or worse as those on the countryside.

It may be that the location of poverty is shifting from the countryside to the cities. For example, in India the proportion of poor people living in urban areas increased from about 15 percent to 23 percent from 1952 to 1994. Few countries have more than 40 percent of their poor living in cities. Although we are still some way off, we may well come to a situation where the majority of the poor live in cities.

There are also indications that undernutrition and poverty is increasing for urban dwellers. Thus, it may well be that what we have seen is a brief respite from the general human condition: that cities are worse than the countryside as places to live for a majority of the population.

The growth of urban slums has been a favourite one for science fiction writers for a long time. They depict future mega slums constructed from derelict oil-tankers or aircraft carriers with social organisation that strangely diverges from mainstream

society. Regardless of the accuracy of such visions, they point to a fact that we cannot overlook: that marginalized urban dwellers, such as the floating people of China, of street children and youth gangs in Brazil, or the residents of Cité Soleil in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti are developing forms of interaction and coping mechanisms that are to some extent new, if only because their scale is much larger than what has been seen before.

Thus, there are several good policy reasons why one would want to be concerned about monitoring the conditions in urban areas, and the growth of urban areas. They are summed up in a simple statement: we have to keep track of one of the most major transformations of global social systems.

Given that our first set of answers to why we should monitor can be accepted, the second set relates more to the reason for monitoring and measurement generally. There are at least five aspects to our second set of answers to the question of monitoring.

The first is the need for establishing a baseline. We simply do not know where we are: we do not have internationally comparable sets of data. We are starting to know quite a lot about particular cities or particular slums, but the overall picture still eludes us.

The second aspect is the need to set realistic and feasible policy targets. Is it feasible to “significantly improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers”? To know that, we have to know what their actual conditions are.

The third aspect is formulating ways to achieve our aims. If we know what the problems are, it is, obviously, easier to do something about them.

The fourth aspect is that of measuring progress. We need to find out if our interventions actually work, or perhaps more cynically, if our lack of intervention makes things worse.

And finally, the monitoring may help decide what needs to be changed along the way.

Now, *you* all know these good reasons for studies and monitoring, but *I* know that the most common question I get when I present a plan for studying something is the rather smug one of why should we study and monitor while the money might be better used for helping poor people improve their life in a more direct way. After all, we know a slum when we see one.

It might be true. But I doubt it. After all we learn from our errors, but in order to do that we have to find them. And to do so, we have to carry out studies, - many studies.

However, what I have indirectly stated above is that successful monitoring depends on both a clear policy concern, and integration with a policy process. Then come the technical questions. They relate to definitions and measurement, they relate to statistical sampling issues and a host of other concerns.

But, as I have indicated, many of the technical issues can be solved and I will not bore you with the details of how to go about doing so. I will rather deal briefly with the other issue, namely how to deal with the integration of the policy process and the monitoring.

A study or data gathering exercises necessarily occur within a social and political framework. One way to conceptualise such a framework is to situate the data within what may be called a “data diamond” where actors, quality, presentation and

relevance define the dimensions. Like a radar graph, marking off the distance from the centre can diagram the degree to which the various aspects are involved. By drawing lines between the marks, a profile of a given data production context emerges.

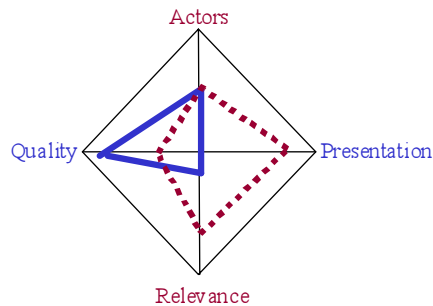


Figure 1: A framework for understanding data

The framework may be illustrated by contrasting various approaches. The traditional statistical office has been one where the emphasis has been on quality, a set of actors that has been partly traditional: the office itself, a few users in government departments and an more or less imagined set of users with whom communication only took place through tables. The producer also often defined the quality of data and presentation. Thus it had a profile that is illustrated by the heavy line on the figure.

In contrast, the typical NGO driven project emphasises presentation, and much less quality. It may involve a wider set of actors and also different actors than the statistical office. It may involve its beneficiaries through participatory methods and puts heavy emphasis on relevance of the data. This is illustrated by the dotted line on the figure.

The ideal aim is to have a profile that follows the outer limits of the graph, i.e. one where emphasis on for example relevance does not come with a cost in quality.

Monitoring slum development faces a conundrum here. Studies relevant for action are often better the more localised they are. The strength of the NGO or city government for monitoring is that it can adapt its instruments to local conditions without concern for the wider global monitoring.

However, relying solely on local approaches to monitoring, while conducive to local action also leaves us with few ways in which to understand and compare regionally and globally. As I have pointed out, there is considerable imprecision and outright confusion in international statistics. If that is not sorted out we have little chance of actually discovering if MDG target 11 will be fulfilled or not. Thus, the work currently going on in UN Habitat and elsewhere, in order to make sense of the many forms of reporting on slums and cities and find ways of measurement that are valid across cities, regions, countries and the world is very necessary.

As yet we cannot really answer the question “How to monitor?” But we are getting there. And we are getting there through cooperation between statisticians and survey specialists; town planners, local governments and NGOs.