

Epilogue

Urban Indicators

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Data Adequacy

There is almost complete unanimity among local and national governments and planning agencies that accurate, timely and policy-relevant data are a prerequisite for good governance, good planning and good management. However, the capacity of many countries and cities to design and articulate their data requirements, to access and obtain the appropriate data and to use it for policy design and monitoring is often inadequate.

For local authorities, the absence of reliable data and the capacity to use that data means that planning decisions are being made in the dark. There is no basis for problem solving, visioning or management by objectives and it is often impossible to form a consensus as to what the real situation is. For the private sector, no local data means a scattergun approach to investment with poorer business plans and increased risk, uncertain supply conditions and less market awareness. For the community and constituents, good data means feedback, transparency and the ability to conduct advocacy on local issues and assess the performance of government.

The problem is not so much the quantity of data, since many statistics are being provided by a whole range of data providers in the public and private sectors and through one-off specialized studies, but rather in how to apply it to the most pressing problems at the time it is needed and how to identify emerging trends upon which action is required. This is true in a large number of cities from developed and developing countries alike.

Some of the problems include:

- Lack of local level skills to collect and analyze fresh data and to conceptualize data needs;
- Administrative data appropriate for daily operations is not always suitable for policy, but resources to rework the data are not available;
- Political bias in the collection and presentation of data;
- Poor consultation between national agencies and local governments regarding data requirements;
- Lack of capacity at the national level to disaggregate information for local analysis;
- While social data are often locally available, local economic data are usually poor;
- Lack of funding for data collection, as political leaders see little benefit in an accurate picture of

the urban reality;

- Few rewards for good practice, leading to loss of staff from local or government agencies when they gain skills that can pay better in the private or international sectors.

The Urban Indicators Programme and the Global Urban Observatory within UNCHS (Habitat) have attempted to address the need for city-level data through a consistent, harmonized set of indicators relating to key urban issues, that can be assessed at any spatial level. These indicators are intended to help city managers and local agencies prioritize needs and actions in line with urban objectives or strategy plans.

The indicators used in this report were collected in 1995-6 for 237 cities using **1993 data**, and in 2000-1 for 151 cities using **1998 data**¹. These data sets allow comparison between countries and cities as to the relative speed at which problem areas are being addressed and clues as to why there are inter-city and inter-country differences in dealing with the problems. They are also intended to provide baseline data for cities to focus their own data collection efforts and to provide benchmarks from similar cities that can assist in identifying problem areas. Another important usage of indicators is in the development and exposition of national sectoral strategies or city action and development plans, such as various rapid assessment techniques offered by different agencies.

International data provision

The official source of national data used in international comparison is National Statistical Offices coordinated through the United Nations Statistical Division. Such data have the advantage of negotiated international protocols and definitions, and formal approval from national governments. With few exceptions, in practice, these data are not very useful for analysis because they are usually out of date, incomplete, and, apart from demographics and economic aggregates, they are seldom directed towards key policy concerns. They are, moreover, usually not available at the local or city level.

A related constraint is the frequent long gaps (mostly 10 years) in the timing of government census and other surveys, as well as the delay in processing and publishing the data. Such time periods may not be

‘They say that figures rule the world. I do not know if this is true, but I do know that figures tell us if it is well or poorly ruled.’

*Goethe (German writer),
1814*



On Evidence

‘The government ministries are very keen on amassing statistics. They collect them, raise them to the n th power, take the cube root, and prepare wonderful diagrams. But you must never forget that every one of these figures comes in the first place from the village watchman, who just puts down what he damn well pleases.’

Stamp (English economist), 1911

appropriate for measuring many aspects of urban interdependency and dynamics such as land prices and housing affordability.

Various international bodies now provide more complete and timely sectoral data through their own networks and local agencies. Chief among these are UNDP through their Human Development Reports, ILO, UNESCO, WHO, IEA, the World Bank and organizations such as OECD, OPEC, etc. The means by which these data are sourced is often opaque and may involve estimation rather than confirmed figures, but they are usually up-to-date and ‘good enough for policy purposes.’

Methodological approach to implementing the present collection

The present collection, like all previous UNCHS (Habitat) indicators efforts, has operated under a third, relatively low-cost model that does not require a formal international network. Cities are invited to participate. In those cities that respond, a consultant is hired to obtain data, make estimates of data not directly available (using UNCHS or their own methodology), document the results and provide other reports as necessary. Regional contracts were also let to consulting organizations to locate the cities, hire the local consultants and assemble the data. This methodology, in theory, has the advantages of both independence and control. Consultants can also be required to correct their data, document their methods, explain divergences with other sources etc. In practice however, the main problems have been: a) sample design; and b) quality control.

Conclusions

Habitat’s urban indicators collections comprise the only truly international database providing a full range of comparative information on city conditions and policy, using standardized definitions and instruction sets. Two collection rounds have now been undertaken, using slightly different methodologies. The main conclusion is that comparative city data can definitely be collected by this method, but the quality of results tends to reflect the abilities, perspective and diligence of the local consultants more than the actual data situation in the country. If it is possible to make a mistake or misinterpret an indicator, such a mistake *will* be made repeatedly and by a significant proportion of the collectors. This puts a heavy load on central office to correct data that are clearly wrong; to estimate results when partial data have been provided; to create internal consistency with other indicators and with past collections; and to harmonize the data with national and other sources.

Generally, local and city data can be improved by:

- Supporting data and indicator-related initiatives for local government, including management information systems and capacity building;
- Including data improvement components in larger infrastructure or capacity building programmes;
- Providing a modern GIS base for future national census collections, which will permit the display of small-area data;
- Documenting examples of good practice in local data use, and encouraging local benchmarking initiatives; and
- Developing flexible software solutions which can be rapidly adapted for use in those local governments with computer networking capability.

The problems of poor data at the national level

At the national level, data sources are often poorly coordinated between different agencies and the potential for the most expensive planning mistakes due to data misuse exists at this level. Poor data and methodology can cause gross errors in national and city planning and wasteful funds distribution. A few examples of misuse of national data include the following:

- **Political influence** The official population of one African country fell by 10 million overnight when it was discovered that all regions had been overestimating their populations because funding was distributed on this basis.
- **Lack of policy direction** One data-rich city known to have very poor transport conditions has never conducted a survey of transport usage, but conducts around 15 other annual surveys including a survey of dog ownership. One reason put forward by local planners for the lack of interest in transport data is that it might interfere with complex machinations surrounding very large infrastructure projects.
- **Poor methodology** Some \$4 billion of Asian crisis recovery money was distributed almost entirely to rural areas in one country on the basis of poverty estimates that did not allow for higher urban costs and which found almost no urban poverty. Most of the crisis impacts were in fact in urban areas.