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# **QUALITATIVE INDICATORS OF DEVELOPMENT**

by

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## Preface

Measurement and analysis of socio-economic development through a system of indicators has constituted a major theme of UNRISD's research programme since 1963. This has comprised conceptual and empirical work in selection of indicators; compilation and evaluation of data for a large number of countries; analytic work on interrelations of indicators and the relationship between social development and economic growth; and critical examination of the comparability and validity of internationally available data in such fields as poverty, income distribution and conditions of children.

At its fortieth session, the General Assembly of the United Nations invited the Institute's participation in a project for study of "patterns of consumption and related socio-economic indicators" (later identified as "qualitative indicators"). In response to this resolution, and to subsequent related resolutions of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Statistical Commission of the United Nations, the Institute commissioned country case studies in Côte d'Ivoire (by José Trouvé), India (by K. Sundaram and S.D. Tendulkar), Kenya (by Judith Heyer) and Morocco (by Pierre Vellas), to examine relevant national experiences in relation to the use of qualitative indicators of development.

The present paper (with minor changes) is a report on the case studies, submitted by request to the Statistical Commission for its 1991 session. It summarizes major points and conclusions of the studies, adding information and commentary based on past work at UNRISD. The report contains proposals for improvements in methods used to assess and monitor living conditions. While there is no consensus in the case studies on a specific set of indicators, the items on which there is a modicum of agreement are indicated.

On the basis of information in the case studies, the report stresses the risk of data overload in developing countries, as a result of long questionnaires and a heavy programme of successive comprehensive surveys, or as a result of substantial enlargement of samples to meet the requirements for district level data and other disaggregations.

A two-pronged approach is suggested in the report, consisting of (a) "light" surveys, supported by (b) in-depth enquiries in a relatively small number of "sentinel" or "observation" areas. The light surveys would contain only a small number of essential questions on key items. Problems thrown up by the light surveys would be further investigated by means of the in-depth studies in the selected areas which could be used also to obtain information in respect to other items where routine national survey questions appear inappropriate and where intensive probes and observations would be more suitable.

It is a conclusion of the case studies that identification of indicators or data collection may not be the only major problems in some national reporting systems. Delays in data processing or drafting of reports, seriously delaying issuance of the results, may undermine their effective use.

The organizational framework within which statistical work takes place is discussed in some of the case studies, including questions of suitable forms of co-ordination between producers and users of data, the role of the international community, and the role of demand for data by governments.

The authors of this paper have in the past worked extensively on social indicators and on the improvement of development data. Donald McGranahan is a former Director of UNRISD who has written widely on questions of measurement in the social field. Wolf Scott is a former staff member, author of several publications on the same subject. Claude Richard is a statistician and staff member of UNRISD.

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Dharam Ghai  
Director

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## Introduction

The present report, prepared at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, is in partial fulfilment of requests in several resolutions and recommendations for an enquiry into "qualitative indicators of development".<sup>1</sup> Information from four country case studies that have been carried out for the project is reported in this paper.<sup>2</sup> Additional information and commentary by the Institute has been included as judged appropriate. The number of case studies is smaller than originally intended and narrower in geographic coverage, owing to limitation of resources.

The project on qualitative indicators of development as set forth in the above resolutions and recommendations, is broadly conceived and intended to serve several purposes:

(a) to help orient national development and support international co-operation by helping governments to formulate and follow policies better geared to the well-being of the population (Economic and Social Council, 1989);

(b) to promote the evaluation of progress (General Assembly, 1990);

(c) to promote the application of concerted objectives (General Assembly, 1990);

(d) to provide early warnings regarding conditions that demand attention and action (General Assembly, 1990).

As one of the country case studies notes, the same indicators may not equally serve the different purposes. The monitoring of progress over time requires a strict comparability and consistency in definition and data collection method; this can make it difficult to apply to monitoring improvements in definition and data collection methods adopted in work serving other purposes.

### The meaning of "qualitative indicators"

While "qualitative" is often used in social science in opposition to "quantitative", it is not so understood in this project. According to the 1989 Economic and Social Council resolution, the concern here is with "numerical indicative objectives" and "the adequate level of satisfaction of basic economic and social-cultural needs in regard to food, housing, clothing, education, health care and necessary social services". Typical qualitative indicators are here taken to be indicators that give the percentage of the population (or of a population group such as children or women) having or not having a defined quality, such as literacy, or meeting or not meeting a given standard of adequacy with regard to some condition of living such as food consumption. Indicators may show not

1. General Assembly resolutions 40/179 (1986) and 44/234 (1990); Economic and Social Council resolutions 1987/6 and 1989/4; Statistical Commission, Report of the Twenty-fourth Session, E/1987/19, recommendation in para. 140 (e), Report of the Twenty-fifth Session, E/1989/21, draft resolution II.

2. **Eléments pour l'approche des indicateurs sociaux en Côte d'Ivoire**, J. Trouvé; **Measurement of Living Standards in India**, K. Sundaram and S.D. Tendulkar; **Monitoring Living Conditions and Consumer Patterns: Kenya Case Study**, J. Heyer; and **Projet d'élaboration d'indicateurs sociaux qualitatifs du développement** (Morocco), P. Vellas.

## **The Data Sources for Qualitative Indicators**

only the percentage falling below a given standard but also how far below they fall; or they may simply yield a distribution along a scale with the adequacy level left for subsequent decisions. In practice, the relevant indicators are much the same as those employed in measurement of "levels of living", "basic needs", "social development" or "human development".

Statistical data for the indicators under study are derived primarily from three main sources: administrative records and registrations; censuses; and sample surveys, especially household sample surveys. Indicators for which data may be collected by one data collection method may not be obtainable by other methods, or not obtainable in satisfactory form. Different methods of data collection may give quite different quantitative results for the same indicator in the same country or area (as may also different methods of estimation in the absence of direct data). This will be illustrated below from country studies. Unfortunately there is in general relatively little scientific validation of quantitative results in this field - validation, that is, by tests comparing results obtained for a particular indicator, using a particular method of data collection for a given group, with indisputable facts known independently about the test group. While complete assurance of the superior accuracy of one method over others can not be claimed, indirect considerations (including the known quality of the collection machinery) may suggest that one method will probably give better results in a particular situation than another. Variations within the same method, such as variations in ways of measuring literacy by tests, or variations in wordings of sample survey questions about consumption, can also produce significantly different results, with questions of validity left unanswered.

### **Administrative records and registrations**

Administrative records and registrations, already on hand because originated for other purposes, are the least expensive and most easily available statistics for use in developing countries to measure living conditions. Unfortunately, they are also the statistics most likely to be seriously inaccurate or to dictate use of indicators of poor quality. Conventional registration systems of vital statistics, although yielding good indicators (of infant mortality and other age-specific mortality rates), are incomplete in most developing countries. None of the case studies suggests their use for obtaining data on basic health indicators. Hospital beds per 10,000 population is an example of a widely available indicator of health that is also a poor quality indicator because of problems of geographical mal-distribution of hospitals and inaccessibility to lower income categories of the population. The unreliability of hospital records has also been noted in the case studies. In education, one of the most commonly used indicators derived from administrative statistics, namely school enrolment as a percentage of school age population, is sharply criticized in two of the case studies for inflated and

vacillating figures and for mistaken assumptions about ages of children enrolling in the schools.

While administrative statistics and registrations, which have been designed for purposes other than measurement and monitoring of living conditions, are frequently fallible, the collection of statistics by these techniques can often be improved to give more satisfactory data. This may involve restructuration of the method of collection. In India, a "sample registration system" combining sampling of areas with carefully supervised registration has been established for two decades, with apparently successful results.

As described in the India case study, a number of villages (or parts of villages if the population exceeds 2,000) and urban blocks are selected. In each, data on births, deaths and marriages are collected by a local part-time registrar (e.g. a teacher). Independently, a supervisor conducts every six months a survey of households to collect the same data. The results are then compared and discrepancies removed as possible. As of 1987, 4,149 villages and 1,873 urban blocks have been included in the scheme which provides vital rates at union and state level and for a small number of natural sub-areas within most of the states. As a result, India is one of the few countries without a comprehensive vital registration scheme that can nevertheless supply reliable vital data on an annual basis.

It has been suggested in the literature that greater use might be made of available administrative and registration statistics by compiling systematic inventories of relevant community facilities and mapping their distribution in a country. This could involve use of available information on electricity, telephones, postal facilities, transport facilities, health facilities, education facilities, etc.

### Censuses

Censuses have the advantage that they cover the entire population and permit numerous kinds of breakdowns of data (if the data are appropriately tagged). This permits identification of groups in special need when relevant questions are asked. Censuses provide a necessary informational basis for many indicators that by their structure require knowl-

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