UN Intergovernmental Negotiations on post 2015 Agenda

A matter of data and the need to know[1]

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[1] The narrative has an accompanying power point presentation

I would like to argue that despite ample evidence that space and location matters, statisticians have preferred the temporal series of statistical outputs without paying attention to spatio-temporal determinants, correlates and consequences of measurement in development. This often ignored truism is elegantly captured in Daniel Elazar luminous article titled Political Science, Geography, and the Spatial Dimension of Politics.

Elazar "A popular story tells about a man who returned to his home to find an intruder hiding in his closet. Turning to the intruder in outrage, the householder bellowed, "What are you doing here?" The intruder, a meek little man, replied, "Everybody has to be somewhere." The point of this truism should be so obvious that it need hardly be stated. Recent efforts to explain human behavior, however, have too often neglected or overlooked the factor of location. Everybody does, indeed, have to be somewhere, and where one is plays a crucial role in determining who and what one is and what one does (or, in other words, how one behaves). What is true of individuals is equally true of groups, societies, peoples, and nations."[2]

This paper is a contribution to the discourse on Sustainable Development Goals and makes a bid on a matter of data and the need to know. It explores the following themes:

1. What issues does the Post-2015 agenda address?

2. Do these issues fit the Human Activity Model?

3. What is the polity of information society?

4. Are statistics agencies fit for purpose?

- Does location have meaning in this agenda?
- Does cybernetics have meaning in this agenda?
- Does informatics have meaning in this agenda?
- What are the challenges of the sovereign over the cyber in this agenda?
- Does autonomy have meaning in this agenda?

5. Why now?

6. Goals Target and Indicators an issue or a red herring for measurement

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

What issues does the Post-2015 agenda address?

In order to ground our thoughts let us articulate the deliverables of the Sustainable Development goals as articulated by the Secretary General of the United Nations. These are The Secretary General of the United Nations has articulated what the Sustainable Development Goals should embrace. Namely they should leave no one behind, they should put sustainable development at the core, they should transform

[2] Daniel J Elazar Political Science, Geography, and the Spatial Dimension of Politics

economies for jobs and inclusive growth, they should build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions, and finally they should forge a new global partnership.

In this instance the correspondence of thought in action towards addressing the epistemological essence of geography is captured in an illustrious account of the evolution of the statistics system of Brazil over the last 74 years. So perhaps one could arguably say, there is nothing novel in what the Secretary General is asking for. The account is also accompanied by the Mexican experience which adopted the same naming taxonomy to succinctly explicate the ontology of data systems. But perhaps the problem is we have the scarcity of the foresight, courage and implementation resolve of the Brazilian Mario Augusto Teixeira de Freitas. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics or IBGE, was created in 1934-1936 under the name National Institute of Statistics. It is said its founder and chief proponent was the statistician Mário Augusto Teixeira de Freitas. The current name Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics was his construct and dates from 1938. This thought leader was born in São Francisco do Conde, Bahia, on March 31, 1890. At the age of 18 he worked for the General Directorate of Statistics of the Ministry of Agriculture, Roads and Public Works. He was a scholar and by 1911 he graduated with honors in Laws from the College of Legal and Social Sciences of Rio de Janeiro. At the ministry Mario's innovative work was unparalleled. Consequently by 1920, he was nominated General Supervisor of the Enumeration in Minas Gerais, his duty bound mind saw him founding the state statistical structure on the invitation of the governor of the state. This gave Mario the laboratory to test the application of his thoughts and experiences in the field of statistics, the praxis of the complex inter-administrative cooperation system, relating federal and state spheres were sharpening his understanding of complexity and how to guide it including understanding critical tools that would consolidate and build durable systems. His work saw him take charge of the State Statistical Yearbook, the Demographic Yearbook and the Municipal Chorographic Atlas of Minas Gerais. Essentially this experience opened Mario to notions of statistical geography.

Do these issues fit the Human Activity Model?

Joining the dots backwards suggests that Mario was endowed with the art of challenging and managing complexity. The transformative political system installed in 1930 transferred him to Rio de Janeiro to cooperate with the creation of the Ministry of Public Education and Health, in which he was head of the Directorate of Information, Statistics and Dissemination. Then, he developed the inter-administrative cooperation plan, at national level, aiming at structuring and unifying the education statistics in the whole country in order to make it the starting point of the evolution of the Brazilian statistical system.

The ultimate implementation of the thoughts and projects of Teixeira de Freitas was, undoubtedly, IBGE. Based on his inter-administrative cooperation plan among the three governmental spheres - federal, state and municipal, the National Statistical Institute was created in 1934 and installed in 1936. In 1938, it becomes the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, due to the inclusion of the system of geographical activities aligned with the inter-administrative cooperation. In the period between 1936 and 1948, he conceived, planned and consolidated the Brazilian

statistical organization as Secretariat-General of the National Council of Statistics, an organ of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics.

What is the polity of information society?

Mario was a technocrat with no political power yet provided immense technocratic input in political decisions that modernized Brazil and seventy four years later, we are gathered here at the United Nations on the process of intergovernmental negotiations with one critical input amongst many 'a matter of data and the need to know.'

The charge of a matter of data and the need to know Mario understood too well and first he constructed an Institute of Geography and Statistics to address what Daniel Elazar in his treatise Political Science, Geography, and the Spatial Dimension of Politics attributes to Tocqueville the notion of multi-dimensionality of location. Elazar argues that the twentieth century political scientists have taken the spatial dimension of politics more or less for granted. He opines that location has three fundamental attributes, namely, spatial, temporal, and cultural. Mario understood this too well and believed in science as the prime mover of change. His single minded determination to address education, structures and interregional relations and globalisation are captured hitherto in the penetrating thought in action of indefatigable Mario:

"His texts evoked a global thought of the socioeconomic, political and administrative reality of Brazil. Ideas, such as: expansion and adequacy of education to the country's needs; revitalization of the municipalities; new division of the territory, including the interiorization of the Federal Capital - which would inspire the construction of Brasília; prevalence of the decimal metric system; inter-administrative cooperation in several areas of the governmental activities; spelling standardization; adoption of the Esperanto as an auxiliary language; creation of municipal libraries and museums; and restructuring of the Brazilian administration, guided the government towards the rationality that the illuminist Teixeira de Freitas desired for Brazil in a context of globalization of progress and welfare of the populations, under the urge of the technical and scientific revolution."[3]

Mario was destined for greater things and the Americas had to be his theatre and he bestowed them the Inter-American Statistical Institute, (IASI) in Washington and was its first President and thereafter an honorary president having played a fundamental role at IASI.

So what really is new in what the Secretary-General is asking us to do? Mario if alive, would say I have seen, I have been and I have done. More importantly he would argue that the record of his enterprising work has hitherto not been broken. We in the first instance do not wish to break Mario's record, but indeed intellect suggests that he has pioneered and opened for us a complex ensemble of statistical, geographic and informatics palaces that we should now work with.

He has made it possible that in addressing matters statistics and geography, it has to be in the context of the human activity model that recognises the determinants,

[3] Memory of Mário Augusto Teixeira de Freitas http://cod.ibge.gov.br/216BY

correlates and consequences, including stylized hierarchies, of human endeavour in space and time. These dimensions give birth to spatio-cultural and temporal necessity of measurement and the inquisitive mind of the human being to know, research and understand his/her environment in order to plod a development path that is ideally beneficial to the propagation of his/her species.

The imperatives of an information society are articulated by HF Spinner[4], as that society that is well informed and in fact, society that should become increasingly gets better informed. In a complete knowledge society, all the knowledge of the world will be available to everyone, available everywhere, available simultaneously and available freely. The notions of an information society are spelt out in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics that were endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly.

Spinner argues that however there are pre-conditions for achieving such an information society, in which the Secretary General of the United Nations has given an injunction of leaving no one behind. The pre-conditions Spinner suggests relate to the upgrading of the non-technological infrastructure and in the main ensuring that society is literate thus putting paid the dream of H G Wells that in the future numeracy will be as essential to humanity as is the ability to read and write. Secondly society must use the data but it can only be used when it is accessible and finally a fundamental condition is to guarantee basic freedoms.

Are statistics agencies fit for purpose?

Perhaps the most palpable deficit in our system of statistics is ability to adapt and move with the times. In many an instance they are too slow and measure by profession what has happened. Increasingly policy is about predicting with some degree of certainty what is likely to happen. Herein lies the technically allowable space by the profession and the risk taking behaviour that could plunge the reputation of the organisation for speculating. However, it is conceivable with high speed date that better and timely data are now within reach. The point of collection is eased by technological devices that can speed up the processing and significantly compress the time for data delivery.

- Does location have meaning in this agenda?

Locational attributes embedded in statistics constitute a beneficial promise to society. Policy prescripts based on aggregated results miss the point and the demand for disaggregated data whilst maintaining confidentiality no doubt is the route to go. With much better open source analytical tools, geographically weighted regression classically shows the Simpson paradox of aggregation and how policy and resources can be misallocated in public policy. So location is key and enhances democracy as it is a spatial representation of service delivery across space.

[4]Helmut F Spinner (1999) Conference on policies and statistics in the European Union: Challenges and responses

- Does cybernetics have meaning in this agenda?

On the question of cybernetics, indeed we draw inspiration from Mario, the Brazilian, who a century ago demonstrated how he could apply his analytical mind and use a cybernetic approach in the development of statistics in Brazil. As early as then he recognized that the complexity of development data amongst others requires locational containers to manage and respond to feedback. More importantly he was alive to a configuration of systems and their constellation as a variety resource in order to manage variety. He was immersed in cybernetics. He also demonstrated by progressive development that he understood the power of recursive systems for standardization and management including networks. Current systems especially in the developing world are week on cybernetics as a method of work and shaping our understanding of what we are up against.

- Does informatics have meaning in this agenda?

Informatics as a science of information leadership is central to the architecture of statistical systems. The engineering aspects of information management in statistical organisations are essential in order to manage the complexity inherent in these systems.

- What are the challenges of the sovereign over the cyber in this agenda?

Notions of the sovereign are increasingly challenged by the mobile citizen. Such citizens without borders are also drivers of regional integration. Information technology on the other hand facilitates transactions independent of location, thus movement of humans is no longer constrained by availability of what could be considered sovereignty specific services.

- Does autonomy have meaning in this agenda?

Statistics systems are systems of governance. In developing jurisdictions they have the necessary but not sufficient elements for evidence and statehood. They strive to be transparent and are increasingly improving as they are driven by peer compliance frameworks. They wish and strive to be accountable but they are largely focused on inputs and fall short on being effective instruments in state plans, negotiations, long-term planning and governance.

Why now?

More than ever before and especially in Africa, countries are embracing measurement and evidence as the basis for policy making. We have witnessed a record participation of African countries undertaking Censuses of Population and Housing in the 2010 Round of Censuses. Countries have concluded the International Comparisons Programme (ICP) and this should serve as a framework for informing and understanding regional consumption markets.

The most important innovation whose time has come is importantly the pilgrimage by countries on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics. This is the single most ubiquitous data system that can revolutionarise the world, and it is happening in Africa, Asia

and Latin America. Countries are reviewing their national strategies for development of statistics as a natural consequence they are amending statistical laws and legislation. There is an increasing emphasis on regional blocks, including those with variable geometry such as BRICS, but essentially their coming together stimulate need for statistical production. Countries have embraced technology and the SDGs provide a window and possibly the last to do right without war. So we need to act boldly whilst the gods are on our side.

Goals Target and Indicators an issue or a red herring for measurement

- There are 17 Goals, twice the number of MDGs,
- The targets are 169 four times the MDG targets
- Indicators are just over a 1000 almost five times the indicators
- Statisticians and statistics offices are barely coping with MDG measurement, How then can they cope with SDGs with so many indicators especially in developing countries
- There is however no principled objection to the importance of the SDGs especially the five outcome areas
- In fact the spectrum of goals is covered in totality albeit variably per country. So there is a blue print.
- However asking countries to measure these, will break the existing fragile systems especially the developing world
- But strengthening systems in countries and at a multilateral level will enable countries and global systems to progressively cope with the indicators
- Systems integration to increase capacity to manage complexity is a critical point of departure and can run concurrently with production
- Perhaps the interpretation of the question should be focused on the five strategic intentions of leaving no one behind, putting sustainable development at the core, transforming economies for jobs and inclusive growth, building peace and effective, open and accountable institutions, and finally forging a new global partnership. Otherwise the noise around numerals drowns the essence of what needs to be done. Amongst which central is addressing leadership and transformative configuration of governance institutions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I have chosen to address institution building rather than the most feared burden of indicators. I have chosen to do so as the one focusing on how big or small the load is addresses or poses the wrong question of more of the same or less of the same. The discourse of more of the same or less of the same miss the fundamental question of transformation. The recommendations thus that come out of the

document discuss three key areas that are transformative actions for transformative measurement outcomes.

How to create institutions that are fit for purpose

1. Complete the lifecycle of oversight by radically reviewing the location and authority of statistics/information systems in sovereigns;

2. Sovereigns should purposeful and speedily pursue institutionalising the integration of information systems and institutions, particularly: geography, informatics and statistics (e.g. Brazil and Mexico); and

3. Transform the UN Statistics Commission by creating a UN Commission that integrates geography, statistics and informatics as a transformative catalyst for meaningful and faster delivery through science based measurement.