

# African statistics have come of age

— Pali Lehohla

**P**ali Lehohla, Statistician-General of Statistics South Africa, was recently at UN headquarters in New York attending the annual conference of the Commission on the Status of Women. *Africa Renewal's* Masimba Tafirenyika caught up with him to talk about the challenges of statistics in Africa and the progress the continent has made improving the quality of its statistics.

**Africa Renewal: Some experts say there is a major problem with how statistics are collected in Africa. What is the problem?**

**Pali Lehohla:** There is a major challenge on the continent with statistics. But in interpreting the problem, there are two major trends. There is one based less on facts and more on hype. This one gets very popular and is widely publicized. There is another that says yes, there might be difficulties, but Africa is getting its act together. There is very little of that being said.

There are many publications like the one by Morten Jerven\* on how Africa misleads the world with poor numbers. But when you scratch the surface of these documents, you find that little research has been done to justify what these authors are saying. When you look at African statistics across domestic products, national accounts and the international comparisons programmes, Africa matches quite well with the rest of the world because it couldn't participate in international statistics programmes if its data were that poor.

Indeed, there are deficiencies. For instance, if Africa wants to understand the future of its population and how it can benefit from statistics, we have to understand labour markets and the results of education. But not many countries run the employment statistics annually or quarterly. In terms of censuses, Africa has got its act together. Though the situation varies, Africa is on an upward trajectory. Its narrative on statistics is positive despite some problems.

**But still people ask: can we trust statistics from Africa?**

That's a very interesting question. We are governed by a number of principles – the UN Fundamental Principles for Official



**Pali Lehohla, Statistician-General of Statistics South Africa.**  ITU/R. Farrell

Statistics. We now have an African Charter on Statistics. We have a Strategy for the Harmonisation of Statistics in Africa. All these are official documents that govern our production of statistics. And then of course there are global partnerships that ensure that the quality of our data is good. We now compare data and run peer reviews, including those conducted by the African Development Bank. There is a lot activity

that looks at our data. Then of course we have the harmonised consumer price indexes. The French-speaking countries are quite organized on this. We have training schools in Côte d'Ivoire. So it's not a question of whether you can trust African statisticians but whether the training they get generates the kind of people that produce quality statistics. And indeed, we have training institutions that produce statistics equal

to those produced elsewhere in the world. There may be issues of sources to cover the broad spectrum of statistics, but in as far as the quality of statistics that Africans produce is concerned, it is as good as any you can find elsewhere.

There have been suggestions that rather than relying on occasional efforts, it would be better for national statistical offices to make short and frequent surveys. We have declared 2015 to 2024 as the Decade of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics so that every birth and death can be registered, including the causes of death. It's a very positive move towards harvesting important data on a continuous basis in a slightly cheaper way.

### **What can other countries learn from South Africa on collecting statistics?**

They can learn how South Africa learned from others. Post-apartheid South Africa was no better than any other country in Africa in collecting statistics, except in economic statistics where we were quite sophisticated, servicing a modern economy and a modern banking sector. But the other statistics were in bad shape. The apartheid government paid very little attention to statistics, except for the key indicators that they wanted, like consumer price indexes.

The UN body on statistics is an asset because everybody who knows something about statistics is there to help you. The International Statistical Institute is also very important. All these were essential communities of practice that helped us move forward faster in statistics. It's important to put resources into people and train them, and then of course to invest in universities, as for example, the Centre for Regional and Urban Innovation and Statistical Exploration (CRUISE) in Stellenbosch. Statistics South Africa has created a chair at the University of Stellenbosch to focus on intellectual leadership of making statistical geography the driver of the so-called data revolution.

### **What is the degree of cooperation between African governments and UN agencies who publish statistics on African social and economic issues?**

We have done quite a lot in Africa just by identifying and addressing our problems. For instance, it was utter neglect of the importance of statistics when in 2004 the

Economic Commission for Africa almost ruined their centre for statistics. When we picked up the pieces, we realized the ECA is about ourselves, not about somebody else. If we have to strengthen the ECA, we have to strengthen ourselves as Africans. In order to strengthen ourselves, we have to build relations with the United Nations Statistics Commission and increase our view on the methods that are emerging from there. With the Africa Symposium for Statistical Development and other initiatives, we found ourselves moving much faster and catching up in our methods. And the civil registration and vital statistics initiative has raised a lot of interest among partners. The revitalization of the ECA has brought in new energy but dark clouds are accumulating, we know the signs because we know what success looks like.

### **Nigeria has now become Africa's largest economy since they rebased it. What is involved in the process?**

There's quite a lot that is involved. We talked about the neglect by African governments of statistics and investments. Nigeria is guilty of that too. They have ignored this for years; they never rebased their economy. The structure of their economy changed rapidly and Nigeria was not measuring it accurately. I think they just relied on measuring how much oil they kept pumping, ignoring the formal sector, ignoring Nollywood. They have now got it right.

In rebasing, you know what the contributions of different sectors and structures to the economy are, and you allocate the weight and then do the estimate to see how weak the economy is. Nigeria is the biggest economy in Africa at the moment, both in terms of purchasing power parity as well as nominal GDP numbers. The big challenge is that poverty is still immense and unemployment is still high. Growth has to bring with it benefits to communities. First step, get the statistics right, which I think Nigeria has achieved. Second, see the benefits of growth, which I think policymakers are now grappling with.

### **Has the failure to rebase been confined to Nigeria only or there are other African countries that have not rebased their economies in a long time?**

There is still a lot of catching up to do because we need to capture the structure of the modern economy and get our source information, which is your trade statistics, your agricultural statistics, your wholesale and manufacturing statistics, built into national accounts. Not rebasing has brought us a terrible name in Africa. People say: 'Oh, look at how much their economies have just grown.' Then you have to rebase using the best methods and the world turns around and says, 'Those cannot be the results'. They say, 'You are not measuring'. When we measure and we show change, they say, 'This change is incredibly huge.' They start doubting the methods, because we do not do it regularly. This is how cynical people can be. But we must do it regularly, so we can deal with this cynicism.

### **Does part of the cynicism come from the fact that a lot of the African economies are dominated by informal sectors which are difficult to measure?**

The informal sector is measurable and we come into this system with credible methods as champions of the informal sector. For instance, in the SADC, our informal champion is Tanzania, which has established well-developed methods. In South Africa, the sector is fairly small, but we still have a method to measure it.

### **Overall, what's your message to our readers on the importance of statistics?**

Africa has come a long way; but it still has more to go. We have a very professional team of African statisticians that are trying to do the right thing and now the political environment allows for that. We have the African Charter which prescribes a code of conduct. African statistical laws have been changed. Statistics offices are being revolutionized and getting better at their work and human capacity is at the top of the agenda. African statistics are really as good as any other statistics. It may well be short in terms of scope of coverage of subjects; but we are not far on that too. I think Afro-pessimists and sceptics have to start thinking twice when looking at African statisticians. 🦋

*\* The title of Morten Jerven's book is Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It (Cornell Studies in Political Economy).*