

42

THE MANAGEMENT AND MISMANAGEMENT OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL RESOURCES IN THE AMERICAS

If the 1960s brought with the Alliance for Progress a consensus among policymakers about generally accepted guidelines for management of statistics needed to measure comparative change in Latin America, by the end of the 1970s that consensus had evaporated. At the onset of the 1980s, there are policymakers who see little use in retaining older data resources, and others who have misplaced faith that data banks can resolve the qualitative problems of statistics. And some even question the very usefulness of statistical series. Such contradictory views are represented in the analysis here of the management and mismanagement of statistical resources on Latin America by the U.S. government, the Mexican government, and the Organization of American States.

U.S. Government

During the halcyon days of John F. Kennedy's presidency there appeared to be no limits on state policy. Even the troublesome matter of inflation seemed to have been bested and all that remained was some fine tuning of the economy in order to establish lasting and meaningful change. To this end, the Kennedy administration decreed that funds would be forthcoming for the development of Latin America, once wasteful duplication of efforts within the countries was replaced by rational planning. State planning in Latin America, which has never existed in the United States, was to be based on statistical goals, thus requiring that statistical agencies be given the funds and necessary researchers to eliminate Latin America's social and economic poverty in the ten years following the establishment of the Alliance for Progress in 1961. Although the Alliance could not have eliminated poverty in ten years, its "failure" has had a devastating long-term impact on the politics of data gathering in the United States and Latin America.¹ As I have written elsewhere:

If we can marvel at the official naïveté in the 1960s that could see the possibility of solving Latin America's problems in only 10 years, it is appropriate, then, to marvel at the notion that the Alliance could be seen in the 1970s to have failed. Not only does the persistence of the latter concept suggest that observers still maintain the faith that initiated the Alliance, but it involves a serious misreading of history. If the Alliance were to follow the Marshall Plan meaningfully, not only should external funding for Latin

America have been double what it has been since 1946 but it would have had to be concentrated in one-sixth of the time span to date. Moreover, the Marshall Plan had mainly to rebuild factories destroyed by war, not build them in the first instance, let alone educate the manpower necessary to run them. In short, whereas the Marshall Plan was based upon tradition, the Alliance's job was to break old traditions in order to forge (or at least reinforce) new ones.²

The point missed by most observers is that the Alliance for Progress successfully fostered the collection of statistics to measure "progress." After nearly twenty years of generating statistics and organizing them in such a way that it is possible to begin to assess long-term social and economic change, however, we are confronted by a decline in interest in statistics on the part of U.S. and OAS policymakers and, ironically, a rise in interest in Mexico. The data-gathering function of the Agency for International Development (US/AID) has been severely crippled, the Inter-American Statistical Institute as a resource base for statistics has been dismantled, and Mexico, in contrast, has expanded its statistical program, through the creation of a misorganized Mexican statistical agency.

Loss of interest in data by many U.S. and OAS policymakers probably began when the statistics of measurement could not be made to show that the goals of the Alliance for Progress had been achieved. Too, the misuse of "body-count" statistics by the U.S. government during the Vietnam War tended to call into question the use of statistics. Finally, the shift from analysis of social data to obviously erroneous political data by observers of the guerrilla war in El Salvador since 1980 has continued to cause statistical data to be viewed as less than useful. (Some observers point out similarities between the war in Vietnam and that in El Salvador, but the only connection is in the misuse of body-counts—by the right in the former case and by the left in the latter.)

In the United States, government budgetary reductions in offices such as US/AID paralleled the declining importance of social policy during the 1970s as the socially oriented Alliance for Progress passed into history.³ Only economic statistics remained of major interest to U.S. policymakers, but the generation of such economic data was left

¹ Ibid., p. 428.

² US/AID last published its *Summary of Economic and Social Indicators: 18 Latin American Countries* for the period 1960-1971 (Washington, D.C.: Office of Development Programs, Bureau for Latin America) in 1972; a draft volume in computer format (1973) was never published.

¹ In "The Alliance for Progress and Latin American Development," SALA-SNP, James W. Wilkie tests statistically major goals of the Alliance.

currently being saved or utilized. Vision is needed to assure that these records are as fully protected as possible. And only an appropriately staffed US/AID Historical Office can assess materials and make them available to the public in a coherent way.

Organization of American States

In early 1982 the Organization of American States (OAS) ceased supporting the Inter-American Statistical Institute (IASI) Focal Point Library in Washington, D.C. An extremely valuable collection of statistics on development in the Americas, the library had served as the single repository for statistical publications from OAS-member nations. The IASI staff, in coordination with the OAS, used these publications to assemble statistical series and organize them in comparative form for publication under the title *América en Cifras* issued at regular intervals (1961, 1963, 1965, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1974, 1977). In addition to its publishing function,⁵ IASI archived the statistical sources received in the Focal Point Library, where materials on OAS-member countries date to the 1930s.

Plagued by financial problems in the early 1980s, the OAS chose to sacrifice its data-gathering operation in Washington, D.C. The organization abandoned its statistical research with the IASI on development in Latin America and ceased publishing *América en Cifras*. Lacking OAS funding, the IASI stripped mainly methodological works from the Focal Point Library and, without bothering to remove the titles of the books from the library card catalog, shipped the works to the farthest corner of the hemisphere—Santiago.⁶ The IASI Focal Point Library of statistical data was thus closed, the basic volumes of historical data remaining with an incomplete card catalog.

In light of these circumstances, the Latin Americanist community must move decisively to save and consolidate the IASI collection of research materials. Specific reasons for this proposal are as follows:

1. Detailed benchmark statistical data need to be preserved on a continuing basis to quantitatively assess social and economic change in the Americas.
 - a. Generation of such data was stimulated by provisions of the Alliance for Progress that quantitative targets be set as part of national planning efforts to achieve "social and economic progress."
 - b. Although the Alliance targets were often unrealistic, the data generated since the early

⁵The IASI coordinated statistical data-gathering in the hemisphere and published analyses of the quantity and quality of data for each country; see the IASI series *Actividades Estadísticas de las Naciones Americanas*, published by the OAS for each country beginning in the 1950s.

⁶The Economic Commission for Latin America, headquartered in Santiago, had published twice yearly the *Boletín Económico de América Latina* (1964-1972) which in 1973 became the ECLA *Anuario Estadístico de América Latina*. These works did not compete with *América en cifras* in coverage or detail.

1960s is absolutely necessary for realistic planning and providing criteria for international aid as well as for permitting basic scholarly assessment of the changing social and economic situation in the Americas.

2. Benchmark statistics (mainly since the 1960s), until recently brought together in the IASI Focal Point Library in the OAS Office Building in Washington, D.C., are no longer being assembled in one place. A valuable collection of statistical yearbooks, population censuses, public health, housing, and agricultural data, for example, still remain at the IASI Focal Point Library but the collection is closed. Without a staff, with incomplete records of holdings, and with no plans to centralize new data now being generated by the IASI Program of the 1980s Census of the Americas, a major resource base is deteriorating.
3. Pre-1960 historical statistics for the Americas are held in the OAS Library in the headquarters building. These historical statistics need to be fully cataloged and gaps in holdings completed in order to provide a link between long-term data and benchmark statistics in the IASI Focal Point Library.
4. It is proposed here that the OAS and IASI collections be consolidated and cataloged in a new OAS Statistical Reference Library. With a full-time staff of as few as three persons, and at relatively little cost, the Statistical Reference Library could be maintained and expanded to cover the 1980s and future decades as well as linked to historical data needed by scholars interested in assessing long-term change.
 - a. The now closed IASI Focal Point Library could be transferred to the control of the proposed new OAS Statistical Reference Library.
 - b. The OAS Library collection of historical statistics could be transferred to the control of the proposed new OAS Statistical Reference Library.
 - c. The proposed OAS Statistical Reference Library could be housed in the OAS office building where the IASI collection is still located.
5. Although the IASI was originally established in 1940 as an independent professional organization coordinated with the Pan American Union (after 1948, the OAS), and it may have made sense to develop statistical collections at both the IASI and the OAS, the IASI never had significant funding outside of the OAS. Even if the two organizations did not face an era of financial stringency, it makes better sense to bring all OAS/IASI statistics together in one place.

There is time to consolidate the OAS and IASI data collections because the avalanche of 1980 statistics scheduled

Table 4100

CENSUS DATES IN THE COUNTRIES THAT WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAM OF THE 1980 CENSUS OF AMERICA

(As of September 1981)

Country	Population	Housing	Agriculture
A. ARGENTINA	22-X-1980	22-X-1980	1982
B. BOLIVIA	~	~	~
C. BRAZIL	1-IX-1980	1-IX-1980	1-1981
D. CHILE	IV-1982	IV-1982	~
E. COLOMBIA	~	~	~
F. COSTA RICA	IV or V-1983	IV or V-1983	IV or V-1983
G. CUBA	1981	1981	~
H. DOMINICAN REP.	XII-12-13-1981	XII-12-13-1981	~
I. ECUADOR	VI-1982	VI-1982	1984 or 1985
J. EL SALVADOR	~	~	~
K. GUATEMALA	23-III-1981	23-III-1981	IV-1979
L. HAITI	VIII-1982	VIII-1982	IV-1983
M. HONDURAS	1984-85	1984-85	1984-85
N. MEXICO	4-VI-1980	4-VI-1980	1-IV-31-V-1981
O. NICARAGUA	1982	1982	~
P. PANAMA	11-V-1980	11-V-1980	V-1981
Q. PARAGUAY	VII-1982	VII-1982	VII-1981
R. PERU	VII-1981	VII-1981	1982
S. URUGUAY	~	~	~
T. VENEZUELA	19-X-20-XI-1981	19-X-20-XI-1981	1981
UNITED STATES	1-IV-1980	1-IV-1980	1978

SOURCE: IASI Document #7729a-9/24/81-20 and U.N. Demographic and Social Statistics Branch.

for generation by the most recent population, housing, and agricultural censuses of the Americas will not be available for centralized collection until after the mid-1980s, by which time the proposed OAS Statistical Reference Library could be formed. The schedule for conducting the 1980s censuses is given in table 4100. The earliest scheduled censuses for the decade were conducted in 1980 and the latest planned for 1985, in politically troubled El Salvador. For some countries no schedule was available because of social and economic turmoil (Nicaragua, for example) or because the 1970s censuses did not take place early in the decade, thus postponing the scheduling of 1980s censuses (Bolivia and Uruguay, for example).⁷

Mexican Government

Contrary to the trend elsewhere away from emphasis on, and confidence in, the statistical basis for assessing past development and planning for the future, the Mexican government since the mid-1970s has placed increased faith in statistics. Ironically, so much faith was placed in data and in the idea that all could be stored in one comprehensive computer bank that Mexico severely crippled its ability to assess change or plan for the future.

During the presidency of José López Portillo (1976-1982), Mexican policymakers decided to convert the typeset statistical yearbook published by the Dirección General de Estadística (DGE) to a volume printed directly from the new computer bank. At the same time, the DGE was transferred from the Secretariat of Commerce and Industry to a new Secretariat of Planning and Budget, charged with responsibility for reorganizing all official data-gathering functions into one ministry with one efficient data bank that could at the push of a button reveal the daily status of Mexico's position on the road to development. Last but not least, planning began for conducting the 1980 population, housing, and agricultural censuses by disbanding the prestigious advisory board comprised of former census directors and others cognizant of the problems in gathering, processing, and making data available. This three-pronged attack on the well-established Mexican statistical system (certainly one of the best in Latin America and in some ways more efficient than the U.S. system) upset Mexico's ability to understand from whence the country is coming and where it is going.

First, the yearly statistics necessary to gauge Mexico's near-term development could not be made available in the country's statistical yearbook because inept reorganization of the DGE meant that the process of gathering regular series was completely disrupted—indeed the yearbook could not be published until 1978, more than two years later than sched-

⁷Although note that Bolivia has yet to undertake an agricultural census since its first in 1950.

uled. In the meantime, planners, scholars, and observers had little data upon which to base investigation of the trajectory of affairs in relation to many dozens of historical time series. Worse, when the statistical yearbook finally did adopt a computer-printed format in 1980, only 154 series were included, compared to the 458 in the typeset volume—a 66% reduction in available series. The decline in production of data has continued.

Second, the elimination of a number of series seems to have been made on political grounds. Witness the suppression of the wholesale price index compiled by the DGE from 1899 to 1976. Apparently because the DGE index showed greater inflation than the Bank of Mexico wholesale price index, the former was discontinued to emphasize the more favorable Bank view. (Theoretically the Bank of Mexico index is more complete but that hardly compensates for the time-series value of the DGE index.) The idea that there should only be one index of wholesale prices so as not to "confuse the public" is specious and counterproductive for thoughtful analysis of the Mexican scene.

Third, by revising the population census of 1980 without reference to Mexico's historical experience in taking censuses, and by omitting many important historical time series revealing the welfare of the Mexican population, Mexican officials gravely harmed our ability to assess long-term change in Mexico. Data on food consumption and the wearing of shoes, for example, was omitted in the 1980 population census. The 1980 census questionnaire was prepared by persons who, if they had sought to "reinvent the wheel," would not have asked whether or not wheels ought to be round.

Regardless of decline in quantity and quality of data, the Secretariat of Planning and Budget drew up the most exhaustive series of plans in Mexican history, filling many rooms with volumes of detailed projections. It is doubtful, however, that they will be read or understood. Such a problem might not have mattered in the past when each new president of Mexico discarded plans of his predecessor and started anew. But Miguel de la Madrid, who will take office in December 1982, was the minister of planning and budget who drew up the plans during the López Portillo regime. For the first time in Mexican history, then, plans that take too many years to conceive to be carried out under one president now will stand a good chance of being implemented. If the plans were based on the former quality and quantity of the Mexican statistical system and upon the realization that the government had overextended its ability to effectively accomplish even half of what it intends to do, then the new use

of data would be welcome. In reality, though, the Mexican government has neither foreseen all of the problems that hinder planning and budgeting nor, in many cases, based its plans on a consistent statistical view of the past.

Conclusion

The United States, particularly since 1981,⁸ and the OAS/IASI have unjustifiably deemphasized the statistical basis for research and planning, while Mexico has placed too great a focus on limited statistics. If balance is to be found between these extremes, adequate emphasis must be given to gathering and maintaining many historical series in published form. We must not, in the name of "clarification" or "data banking," permit the suppression of alternative data, especially time series figures needed to measure what happens to societies and economies. The computer data bank is useful particularly if alternative series are included, but the methodological notes necessary to make sense of the statistics may not fit into the computer format. The creation of a historical office in US/AID and the establishment of an OAS Statistical Reference Library would constitute positive steps toward improved management of national and international data. As for Mexico, perhaps it is not too late to propose that planning there be undertaken on the basis of long-term, historical data series. Dependence upon limited data now available to the Mexican government has resulted in the elaboration of grandiose plans unrealistic in scope and detail.

Clearly, there are obstacles in the road toward the judicious management of national and international statistical resources in the Americas. Overcoming them requires institutional and governmental vision and cooperation if we are to make progress toward assessing change in Latin American societies and economies in the decades ahead.

⁸President Ronald Reagan, more than any other post-Lyndon B. Johnson president, has severely damaged the U.S. bases for statistical research. His budgetary cuts have incorporated the following orders: cancellation of surveys (e.g., on multiple job holding), reduction of frequency of observation (e.g., of health and nutrition), reduction of sample size (e.g., for income tax data), delay of revisions in sample surveys (e.g., to reflect changes in the population that occurred between 1970 and 1980), abandonment of plans to collect data crucial to interpretation of survey results (e.g., transcript and admission test data), delay in revision of critical time series (e.g., export and import price indexes), delay of schedules for publication of data (e.g., 1980 census of population and housing), curtailment of publication programs (e.g., publications of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service), involuntary reductions in staff (e.g., at the Bureau of Census), the involuntary furloughs of staff (e.g., at the Bureau of Labor Statistics). See the Social Science Research Council's *Items*, June 1982, pp. 12-13.