

Call for Papers

For a special issue of the quarterly journal *Afrique Contemporaine*

Is the Data Revolution in Africa a Myth or Reality? Challenges posed in the production and use of African statistics

A special issue edited by Florent Bédécarrats (AFD), Jean-Pierre Cling (MAEDI) and François Roubaud (IRD/DIAL)

In 2013, Shanta Devarajan, the World Bank's chief economist for Africa, published an article about the state of African data with the arresting title "Africa's Statistical Tragedy"¹ (Devarajan, 2013). This essay paints an alarming portrait of the data situation in Africa. In addition to analyzing the "tragedy," Devarajan examined the reasons for it, found that they were primarily political, and proposed ways to remedy the situation.


Devarajan does not stand alone in his assessment. He builds on the work of economic historian Morten Jerven, as shown in his well-known 2013 book, "Poor Numbers" and in his guest-edited 2014 issue in the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*. A 2010 re-evaluation of Ghana's GDP that increased it by 60%, making Ghana a middle-income country, sparked Jerven to attack the validity of categorizing African countries by per-capita GDP, except for a few cases such as Botswana or South Africa.

According to Jerven (2010), the same uncertainty marred economic growth figures. After closely studying data from Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia, he went so far as to hypothesize that the real GDP growth numbers were equally unverifiable (Jerven, 2010).

At the same time, Africa's public statistics production of the past 20 years has seen a more insidious, although no less troubling controversy. International databases have proliferated, created by all kinds of institutions — from universities to nongovernmental organizations, aid agencies, consultants, global market-research firms, credit rating agencies, and so forth — and covering the most diverse domains — governance, democracy, institutional quality, family planning, and access to water, healthcare or financial services, among others. These new data sources have raised questions about the monopoly of public statistics production. At first, privately-produced statistics were confined to databases created and used by experts; new statistics produced outside the public sphere now include those created from household and company surveys, previously the domain of national statistics institutes. Increasingly, random impact evaluations, conducted with ad hoc survey protocols, have also contributed to the trend. "Big data" may prove the latest manifestation of a movement to marginalize (and partially privatize) public statistics production.

The developed world's destabilizing effect on African public statistics production has provoked criticism — some viewing it as a coordinated attack, others as a gradual reach for a share of a flourishing statistical-information market. Responses to the criticisms

¹ The title parodies a much-cited, similarly named article, "Africa's Growth Tragedy" by Easterly and Levine (1997), which tried to show that Africa's ethnic diversity caused the continent's "economic growth tragedy". The article used statistics about ethnic and linguistic divisions that were gathered privately, outside national public statistics institutes.



have taken a political turn that goes beyond doubting Jerven's skill in calculating national accounts (see e.g., Raffinot, 2014; Tedou, 2014; Wall, Labrousse and Oya, 2014). Some African statisticians, — including several of the best-respected — see a new form of colonialism in the Global North's critical studies, one that aims to denigrate large-scale African initiatives.² Notable attempts to retake leadership of statistics “by Africans for Africans” have marked the last decade. For example, the African Development Bank, United Nations Economic Committee for Africa, and African Union have jointly launched an emblematic initiative known as the “Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa” (SHaSA); other initiatives include creating or strengthening regional statistical services.

More generally, never before has the international community called so heavily upon statistics to help guide development policy.

The beginning of the 2000s, with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and new international poverty-alleviation strategies (Cling et al, 2013), brought a shift in statistical usage that subsequent events have reinforced and even accentuated. Paradigms featuring “evidence-based policies” and “managing by results” have risen to prominence, their premises emphasized by a series of validations, from the 2005 Paris declaration on aid effectiveness to the 2011 Busan declaration. This has led aid agencies to put statistical measurement at the center of their efforts to monitor and evaluate foreign aid. Paris21, the international community's army for development statistics, has pushed for the broad adoption of so-called “National Statistics Development Strategies.”

The post-2015 agenda appears to have spawned a statistical monster, since it aims to cover all the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development. The expanding universe of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – to be adopted by the United Nations in September 2015 – has undergone its own sort of data “Big Bang,” linking 17 goals with 169 targets and several hundred statistical indicators. Since African countries already experience difficulties in producing the 60 indicators that monitor MDG progress, few expect that they will keep pace with the SDG indicators. The estimated annual cost of additional surveys is USD 300 million (Demombynes and Sandefur, 2014).

In this context, the Independent Expert Advisory Group (IEAG), an initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General, has called for a “data revolution” in its 2014 report (IEAG, 2014). The IEAG acknowledges the growing need for statistics in the world, and the ever-increasing information gap between developed and developing countries. The report makes several recommendations about appropriate use of technology innovations and financing to support a statistics partnership between all producers.

The international community faces major challenges in supporting and participating in this revolution. Even though France had long spearheaded an internationally-recognized effort to aid statistics production (Cling and Roubaud, 2006), the country currently dedicates fewer and fewer resources to that policy, with withering results for its statisticians' skills in this field. This decline increases the need for a new statistics strategy in the tropics. It also puts France in a poor position vis-à-vis Britain's

² For example, in 2013, Pali Lehola, the chief executive of StatSA and founder of SHaSA, declared that “Morten Jerven will highjack the African statistical development programme unless he is stopped in his tracks” and forced the cancellation of a planned September 2013 appearance by Jerven at the African Economic Commission (Taylor 2013).

Department for International Development (DFID) and other international agencies, such as the World Bank and Eurostat, which have increased their means and intervention capacity to meet new statistics challenges (DGM, 2015).

In short, the gap has never been greater between the need for statistics in Africa, symbolized by the new buzzword “data revolution,” and the production of reliable public statistics.

On this premise, three specialist editors — all statistics producers-cum-consumers from the research and donor sphere (AFD is the French development agency, MAEDI the French ministry of foreign and international affairs, and IRD is a French development-research institute) — call for papers on this subject for a special edition of *Afrique Contemporaine*. Contributors may study the subject from many angles, past or present, and from the point of view of several social sciences.

The editors welcome submissions on the following topics:

- (1) Since data quality is not a new subject (Naudet, 1999; Razafindrakoto and Roubaud, 2002), contributors might examine whether the situation has improved or deteriorated in recent years. They might also ask if African countries can and will meet the post-2015 data revolution challenge. From this point of view, do recent innovations, particularly new information technologies, make any difference to data quality?
- (2) Since numbers have always served as an instrument to legitimize various scales of authority, contributors might naturally pursue questions about international relations and the economics and politics of measurements. Is a new “surveil and punish” era dawning in Africa?
- (3) Such interrogations inevitably lead to a sociology of statistics, given that African statisticians are still waiting for their own “Desrosières” (2000 and 2014). He believed the potential for statistical innovation was highest in developing countries, particularly in Africa, because their data collection began at a less advanced level. The editors would therefore welcome analyses through a sociology of sciences lens.

Submissions:

Interested authors will submit an article proposal composed of a **one-page summary, describing the topic, argument outline (in brief), and the relevant data or fieldwork.**

Articles must be 35,000 characters in length at time of publication, including spaces, footnotes and bibliography. Submissions must include an abstract of 800 total characters, key words, and a 150-character author(s) biography.

We especially welcome articles that feature maps, drawings, chronologies and photos.

Each article will be blind peer-reviewed by two anonymous referees, the *Afrique Contemporaine* editorial board, and the special issue editors.

Please submit your response to this call for papers via our online Editorial Manager: <http://www.editorialmanager.com/afriquecontemporaine/>

For questions or clarifications, contact Florent Bédécarrats at bedecarratsf@afd.fr, François Roubaud at roubaud@dial.prd.fr and Isabelle Fortuit at fortuiti@afd.fr

Timeline:

Submit article proposal by 30 September 2015 at latest.


The editors will select article topics and notify authors by 10 October 2015 at latest.

Selected authors must submit a first draft of their articles by 2 January 2016.

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