Africa Statistics Day 2019

Workshop on Quality of Life Statistics

Caudan Arts Centre, Port Louis, 20 Nov 2019

Official Opening Speech

by Mr Patrick YIP WANG WING, Chairperson Statistics Board

Colleagues of the Statistics Board

Director of Statistics and staff of Statistics Mauritius

Members of the National Statistical System and of the user community of statistics

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning and thank you all for taking time for participating in this annual African Statistics Day Workshop.

On the same occasion, last year, we explored together the opportunities for Statistics - as well as the challenges - being opened up by digital technology revolution and the new open data policy, especially for fully and efficiently tapping data available from administrative sources. The topic selected for this year’s workshop - “Quality of Life
statistics” - is yet another challenging area of increasing priority for statisticians - and I trust, for all of you personally.

Both topics are good illustrations of the commendable efforts by Statistics Mauritius to come up with improved tools and new metrics that would be more attuned to the country’s changing structures and circumstances, and thus help better respond to users’s emerging needs, particularly policy-makers.

Indeed, as Mauritius moved up the GDP ladder to become quite rapidly an Upper Middle-Income Economy, in the process has been transformed - sometimes quite radically - production patterns, physical infrastructure and amenities, the social fabric, the material living standards, the lifestyle of various population groups as well as their aspirations. With Government’s stated ambition to join rapidly the World Bank group of the 80 or so High Income Economies (i.e., having a per capita Gross National Income (GNI) above USD 12,375) and given the globalisation phenomenon and communication technology trends, we should expect continued acceleration in the pace of transformation of our economy and our society.

The formidable agenda before statistical authorities and agencies is how to ensure that those economic and societal changes are adequately captured and reflected in their statistical coverage and production within their resource, technological and institutional constraints, given their current resource, technological and institutional constraints.

For, besides the need to devise new appropriate measurement instruments on such societal issues, there is the continuing efforts on finetuning methodologies in well-established macroeconomic aggregates such as the National Accounts, and on keeping pace with sector developments in the economy. Moreover, increasingly and in line with the core concept of “Every One Counts” and “Leaving No One Behind” underlying the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), there are new demands for
**disaggregated high-quality data** to identify and better profile, within national averages, diverging trends between population groups and sub-groups and growing inequalities.

And all this, whilst respecting at all times the fundamental principles of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, such as professional independence, objectivity, appropriate statistical procedures, soundness of methodology and also non-excessive burden on survey respondents.

Indeed, the challenge to statistical authorities, agencies and personnel is tremendous. It is really an uphill battle. As requests from various quarters for new, disaggregated, more frequent and sophisticated statistics grow, there is bound to be trade-offs and an order of priority at Statistics Mauritius, that is often influenced by methodological and data source considerations.

It is hardly surprising therefore that the recent Quality of Life statistics project, launched by the Statistics Board and Statistics Mauritius in 2012 has not gone far beyond its initial phase. It is, however, to the credit of SM that the first database on Quality of Life that was built using available information from various sources has been regularly updated and is publicly accessible. Likewise, the steps taken to capture new data on household wellbeing through the existing Household Budget Survey and the new Living Conditions Survey and a Time Use Study are to be commended.

The project was itself largely inspired by the landmark *Report of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission entitled “Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress”* published 10 years ago that highlighted the limits of GDP as a measure of well-being and extensively discussed measurement issues of Quality of Life as well as Sustainable Development and Environment.

There have been, of course other initiatives and discussions, especially during this decade on how to better measure the progress of societies and their well-being and
how to sustain quality of life in the future, such as the Human Development Index of the UNDP, the Better Life Initiative: Measuring Well-Being and Progress of the OECD and the ‘GDP and beyond’ project of the European Commission.

It is now widely acknowledged that GDP was never designed to be a comprehensive and accurate measure of prosperity and well-being, although as an indicator of economic market activity, it remains an invaluable tool for economic policy. In the words of the Commission, “the purposes of our statistical systems are multiples, and a metric that is adapted to one purpose may be ill suited to another.” In this respect, an excessive focus on GDP metrics, combined with failure to understand the limitations of that measure, would misguide policy response.

There is now a growing consensus that authorities and the society need to be provided with information and data to complement that provided by GDP figures. We also know that good quality of life is an individual aspiration as well as an objective for society as a whole. But the question remains: what constitutes good quality of life and how can it be measured?

All reports and studies by experts underline the multidimensional nature of well-being. There is broad agreement that well-being or quality of life cannot be measured only in economic and monetary terms. According to the Commission, besides the material living standards such as income and wealth, housing conditions, it must also include people’s objective conditions and capabilities (e.g. health, education, personal activities, political voice and governance) as well as their subjective experiences of quality-of-life (e.g. self reported levels of happiness and satisfaction).

The standard approach seems to come up with a dashboard of selective indicators on aspects that have a direct bearing on people's life such as work-life balance, economic insecurity or pollution, organised under key dimensions of Quality of Life that have to be considered simultaneously. Or can we dream of development of metrics that would capture the essence of well-being and that have the appealing simplicity of GDP?
I am sure Professor G. Betti will update us on recent international initiatives and latest thinkings in those fields, and advise us on how they can be of a guide in moving forward with our project, within our own context.

Likewise, discussions and feedback from users and participants to this workshop will be essential inputs for finalising the framework for measuring Quality of Life and determining the appropriate dimensions and indicators.

I understand the aim is to publish a first Statistical Report on Quality of Life on the basis of data obtained from the Living Conditions Survey, the 2017 Household Budget Survey and other sources.

The expectation is that those new and improved data would be used to guide evidence-based policy formulation and monitoring of their impact on well-being of residents.

So I wish you productive and fruitful dialogue.

I now declare the Workshop officially open

Thank you for your attention.