

Sample Surveys in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa conducted its first non-racial housing and population census in 1996. Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) currently conducts two major household sample surveys: the General Household Survey (GHS) and the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS). International support has played a key role in the development of statistical production in South Africa. StatsSA still faces challenges in terms of building and maintaining a robust statistical infrastructure.

Keywords: sample surveys, post-apartheid, Statistics South Africa, sampling frames, international support, CPI crisis

1 Introduction

Over the past fifty years, survey statistics in Africa have evolved significantly, driven by changing socio-economic and political dynamics on the continent. The earliest surveys in Africa were conducted by colonial administrations. The statistics so collected were not intended to inform policy outcomes for the betterment of the local population but to strengthen the colonial grip on agricultural production, trade, and the local population. The minority Apartheid state in South Africa was not any different from the British, French, or Portuguese colonial powers in the collection and compilation of statistics. My contribution covers the South African post-apartheid period. That said, I would nevertheless touch briefly on the history of sample surveys on post-colonial African during the last fifty years.

2 A brief overview of sample surveys in Africa

The first Sub-Saharan African country to obtain independence from Britain was Ghana in 1957. But it took another thirty years before the country ran its first sample household survey, the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS), in 1987. Although Ethiopia was never colonized the country conducted its first sample household survey, the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (ERHS), in 1980, which came two decades after the Ethiopian Housing and Population Census of 1960. In North Africa the earliest sample household surveys were conducted in Egypt and Morocco in 1958/59 and 1960, respectively. The first sample household survey conducted in the Southern African region was the Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS), which was carried out in Botswana in 1984. South Africa conducted its first sample household survey, the October Household Survey, in 1993.

The first business sample survey conducted on the African continent was the so-called Ghanaian Manufacturing Census in 1962. Since then, many African countries have conducted business sample surveys to collect data on the structure and performance of their economies.

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When compared to other continents, in terms of the conduct of household sample surveys, independent African countries do not fare badly. The USA, for example, conducted its first household sample survey in 1940. In Latin America, the first household sample survey was undertaken by Mexico in 1951. India, on the Asian Continent, conducted its first household sample survey in 1950/51, which was even earlier than the UK Family Expenditure Survey (FES) which took place in 1957.

3 Statistics South Africa – Constructing a modern statistical system in post-apartheid South Africa

On April 27, 1994, South Africans lined up in meandering queues patiently waiting to cast their vote for a parliament in “*which the colour of a man’s skin*” was immaterial. But what was the turnout? Nobody could tell because there was no comprehensive population register for the whole country. Neither was there a dwelling nor a business sampling frame. Post-apartheid South Africa was still facing the lack of these fundamental building blocks of a modern statistical system when I joined the Central Statistical Services (CSS) in 1997. The CSS, which later morphed into Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), had hitherto served only the white population. The CSS counterparts in the Bantustans, or homelands for blacks, were statistical agencies only in name.

On 9 October 1996, South Africa conducted its first non-racial housing and population census. It was estimated that 10.7% of the people had been missed in the count. This was the beginning of regular population censuses intended to be conducted every five years. Accordingly, the second housing census took place on 9 October 2001. The count was characterised by a relatively high undercount of the population, estimated at 16.7%. The quality of the census, judged by the undercount had deteriorated. This poor performance was blamed on the lack of resources at StatsSA, both human and financial. The next round of the population count was postponed to 2011, and to fill the gap, Stats SA conducted a large household sample survey, the Community Survey (CS 2007), in October 2007. The third census took place in October 2011. The sampling frame used was a collection of geographical units, called Enumeration Areas (EAS). Enumeration areas were created by dividing the country into small geographic areas. In the runoff to the count, South Africans were keen to have better results, but they were again disappointed when the undercount was in the two-digit range of 14.6%. The second large sample household survey (CS 2016) was conducted in October 2016. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the population census planned for 2020 was delayed and took place in February 2022. The results will be published this year, 2023. StatsSA currently conducts two major household sample surveys: the General Household Survey (GHS) and the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS).

4 The Business Registration Reform Project

When I started at Stats SA in 1997, as a director in the Economic Statistics department, the sampling frame for Economic Statistics was the Business Address Register (BAR). Through a careful analysis of business and economic surveys, we concluded that the BAR was inadequate and fell short of the main characteristics of a sampling frame: regular updating, comprehensive coverage, and proper classification of units by size and industry. These concerns led to important legislative changes. In 1999, Parliament amended and passed the Income Tax Act, giving Stats SA access to all tax categories (Income Tax, VAT, PAYE, and Customs) for statistical purposes only. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) was responsible for business registration through its agency, Companies and Intellectual Property Registration Office (CIPRO), now called the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC).

There was no single and authoritative view of the business landscape. An interdepartmental project team was set up and President Zuma in his state of the nation address to Parliament in 2007 announced the establishment of a Business Registration Reform Project as one of the goals of his administration in the coming years. This project was to be executed by five government departments:

SARS, the National Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department of Labour alongside Stats SA. The objectives of the project were:

- The establishment of a single registration authority for primary business registration.
- Review of the current legal definition of 'primary business registration' to include tax registration.
- Expansion of the type of business entities included in the legal definition of primary business registration.
- Compliance with all primary business registration requirements through a single transaction.
- The introduction of a mandatory unique business identifier for all legal and commercial transactions.
- Expanding the number and type of registration channels available for the purpose of primary business registration.
- Increased data and information sharing across government entities.

A legislative framework was proposed by an inter-department project team, which envisaged a law governing the registration of businesses in South Africa under a single government agency. But the project was abandoned in 2011 when departmental rivalries stood in the way.

5 International support in establishment of sampling frames

Important changes that occurred in the framework of statistical production perhaps would not have occurred had it not been for the material support from the international statistical community. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was the first international statistical agency on the scene. Senior ABS staff provided advisory support for extended periods to Stats SA statisticians and senior management. Statistics Sweden also played a key role in the transformation of statistical production environment by dispatching advisors to Stats SA. Together with Statistics New Zealand, Statistics Sweden seconded senior staff to help set up the current Business Sampling Frame which is now the omnibus sampling frame for the business surveys at Stats SA.

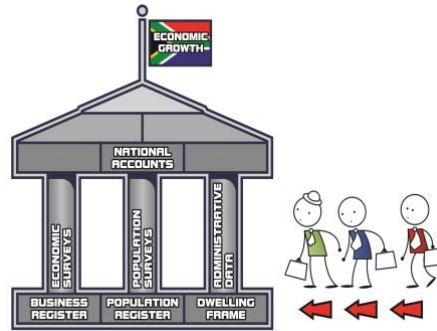
6 The CPI crisis

As StatsSA was feeling more and more confident in its role as the 'top statistical agency' in Africa, as the newly appointed head of the agency, the Statistician-General, Mr Pali Lehohla, claimed. Around 2002-03 a less well-known economic researcher at a small investment bank, Investec, was consistently casting doubts on the quality of the consumer price index (CPI). StatsSA fiercely denied the allegations of misstating the price index as baseless and mischievous. A small team of Stats SA methodologists carried out a detailed analysis of the CPI and came to the same conclusion that the CPI was indeed misstated. This was a huge setback in the trustworthiness of the national statistical collection.

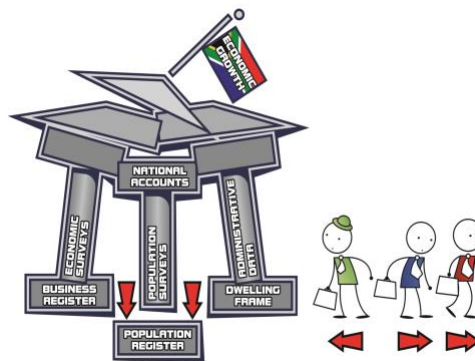
The CPI crisis led to a general distrust in the official statistics produced by the statistical office. Thereafter employment statistics came under strong criticism. A small firm of labour brokers even launched its own series called the Adcorp employment index, which for several years served as a parallel source for employment statistics in the private sector.

7 The role of the sampling frames as a foundation for production of quality statistics

The creation of a credible resilient statistical system is like building a house. The statistical office mandated to compile national statistical indicators becomes synonymous with the factfinder of the society. The statistical office is then the authoritative source of statistical indicators. It becomes the primary destination users seeking reliable and trustworthy statistics would turn to. Many countries do not have a population register but nevertheless successfully conduct household surveys based on robust statistical standards and classifications.



On the other hand, a weak statistical system is like a house with faulty foundations (sampling frames) and leaking roof (National Accounts). The resultant statistical indicators are not trusted by users, who turn to myriad other sources of information, some which might not stand rigorous scrutiny.



In the 1970s, most African countries focused on conducting large-scale national surveys to collect data on key economic and social indicators, such as income, employment, education, and health. However, data collection was often hampered by logistical challenges, including poor infrastructure, limited resources, and political instability.

8 The World Statistics Congress 2009

The 57th Session of the International Statistical Institute, as the World Statistics Congress was then known, was held in Durban, South Africa. It was unmistakable proof of a South African statistical system that had come of age. It was an historical event in other respects: it was the first in Africa and under the first female ISI President, Denise Lievesley. I was fortunate enough to serve as the Executive Secretary of the Organizing Committee. This event was not just an important moment for South Africa but also for the entire African statistical system.

9 Some challenges facing the statistical system.

The past fifty years years have indeed witnessed significant progress in the development of survey statistics in Africa. Many African countries have invested in building stronger statistical systems, including the development of national statistical plans, the establishment of statistical agencies, and the adoption of innovative technologies and methodologies for data collection and analysis.

However, there are several challenges still facing statistical agencies in Africa in terms of building and maintaining intellectual human capital. StatsSA has attracted skilled staff from across the continent, e.g., Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya. Additionally, it runs an internship programme which has attracted young graduates from South African universities, who undergo a one-year training programme at Stats SA. This programme has helped StatsSA grow its own crop to address skills shortages in the statistical system.