

REFORM AND FUTURE OF NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS**ORGANIZER AND RAPPORTEUR GLENN ROGERS (USA)**

The organizer's background paper structured the mini-symposium around the broad themes of new information technology, public and private roles and future priorities. Recent experiences and future visions in the United States, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa were discussed. Larry Sivers (USA) and Ross Vani (Canada) outlined current practices and plans in their countries. Ahmed Gueilli (Egypt) and Mohamed Omran (U.S. Agency for International Development), presented an Egyptian view and David Bigman (ISNAR) spoke on the needs of developing countries.

Discussion of the implications of new technology began with the theoretical proposition that, as the costs of information fall, it becomes difficult to put a 'price' on it, given weak enforcement of intellectual property rights and high fixed costs of preparation compared with low dissemination costs. Information must increasingly be customized for sale or for public co-financing with special interest groups. The value of information is rising for consumers, policy makers and producers, while government budgets have stagnated. Network effects, leading to demand-side economies of scale, are resulting in a more concentrated industrial structure and inequitable access to information among developed and developing countries. When combined with rapid change in information technology, and a tendency for technology 'lock-in', there is a need to accelerate sequential adoption of information technologies in developing countries.

The roles of local, national and multinational governments and private organizations were then highlighted. Statistical activities are centralized in one ministry in Canada. In the USA, state and federal partnerships are critical for implementation, co-financing (states provide 10 per cent of funding) and interaction with private sector associations. In both countries a formal advisory committee of data users provides advice on needs, respondents' ability to supply data, collection methods, content and form of reports, and publicity programmes to support the census. The Canadian committee includes members from Mexico and the USA. These committees are critically important in building consensus for private sector funding to complement public funding. The European Union administration is also pushing increased data collection and standardization by national governments, but this may squeeze out local priorities, given budget constraints. In Egypt, agricultural statistics work is a centralized activity under the Ministry of Agriculture. The Egyptian private sector is willing to pay to increase data collection, but this is not allowed under

current regulations. Participants suggested the Egyptian government increase data collection using either public or private funding. In lower-income developing countries the paucity of data available to governments is striking. NGOs partially fill the gap with limited but useful surveys, though unfortunately this independent work is rarely combined for broader or multiple uses. ISNAR is assembling important data to facilitate comparisons over time and between countries.

Public and private sector conflict over information quality may grow as the importance of refined information in public policy decisions and good governance increases. Examples include debates over major irrigation projects in the USA and Egypt, current information campaigns regarding globalization, and allocation of public expenditures affecting rural or agricultural areas. In numerous countries policy and investment decisions are increasingly based on data that are not publicly available, so the needed public debate between government, civil society and the private sector is poorly informed.

The discussion of future priorities concluded that faster processing and dissemination of publicly available material is needed to improve decision-making systems for current social needs in both developed and developing countries. Data validation after collection was identified as the key blockage to more timely release of public statistics. In 2001, Canada will use intelligent character recognition for data input and is testing Internet use. The USA has initiated a 'Project to Reengineer and Integrate Statistical Methods' by 2002. The EU project 'Monitoring Agriculture with Remote Sensing' has so far concluded that sufficient accuracy has yet to be attained. Egypt is improving seasonal crop forecasts and shortening processing time to improve timeliness. Canada and the USA now have a combined data release for cattle and feed statistics. A better institutional framework is needed to provide incentives for private sector dissemination of information, especially in developing countries.

Another priority is balance between farm and non-farm public data, given budget constraints and an increasing private role. Genetically modified crop area data began to be collected in the USA in 2000. In geographic or sectoral areas of rapid national growth and change, such as horticulture, environment and trade-related needs, the data are often totally missing in low income countries. There is a huge private demand for trade data, especially international trade data. In developed countries, several examples were given of public sector regulations leading to private data provision (food safety and pesticide use provide examples).

It would also be useful to achieve better combination in the use of census, remote sensing and small survey data collected independently by public and private organizations. The balance between speed, cost and relevance of information means that pressure for cheaper data collection efforts will increase. Independent data are critical for checking results. This is a problem in many lower-income countries where only one national agency is responsible for all surveys, some of which may misinform decades of research. A set of small independent datasets linked to a GIS (geographic information system) may be more efficient for decision makers to use than more census data, which could mainly be used to validate and extrapolate data from other sources. Many

countries are also trying to balance investment in survey and census data collection.