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Global numbers matter. Numbers are central to most debates about globalization. At present, global statistics focus primarily on economic activity and the concerns of corporations and governments. These numbers provide the basis for debates about economic integration (Hirst and Thompson 1996; Weiss 1992; Held and McGrew 2002, 1999; *Foreign Policy*, various issues) but they are insufficient for explorations of global inequality and poverty and overlook many non-economic issues of concern to students of globalization.

Merchants were the first systematic collectors of numbers. Poovey (1998: 91) describes early data collection in England and its implications for merchants and states. The double entry book-keeping of merchants gained the attention of English monarchs who gradually became convinced that numbers could provide indices of national wealth and accurate records would justify policy.

In some ways, little has changed. Contemporary global statistics relate primarily to economic activity, they confer authority and prestige on those who control them, and they are used by states to justify policy.

The rise of international institutions and their global reports, has, however, given new prominence to national and global numbers. The most prominent producer of global statistics is perhaps the World Bank, but many agencies of the United Nations, from the Food and Agricultural Organization to the World Health Organization also produce regular collections of statistics. Increasingly, some non-government organizations, such as the World Resources Institute, also collate global statistics, and journals such as *Foreign Policy* produce indices of globalization.

The number of regular publications from global institutions, based primarily on data, rose throughout the 20th century, with a large expansion in the 1990s. Beginning in the 1920s, the League of Nations regularly produced ten global reports, mostly providing numbers on trade and finance, armaments and health. There was a steady increase in new global reports each decade from the 1940s (6) to the 1960s (8). Then, 12 new reports were started in the 1970s and 10 in the 1980s. Most dramatically, in the 1990s, 44 new reports

were started (UNDP 2004: 5). The great majority of these reports are published annually.

Main route for the production of global numbers

Most global numbers are collected by governments, then gathered and disseminated by global organizations, notably the World Bank, IMF and other UN agencies. The World Bank's annual *World Development Report* includes an appendix with a data set, called Selected World Development Indicators. This data set is widely used in debates about globalization and in national comparisons appearing in academic papers. A larger set of 800 indicators is sold on a CD ROM called *World Development Indicators*. Most of this data is recorded according to the UN's System of National Accounts (Carson and Honsa 1990) and collected by World Bank economic missions. Then these and further numbers, reported to other UN agencies, are tabulated and published by the Bank.

Other global datasets include those of the International Monetary Fund (financial, exchange rate, capital flow and trade data), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (investment flows and foreign aid), and the Penn World Tables (the largest dataset on income measures valued at comparable purchasing power).

Global numbers help shape our image of the world. In addition, they are shaped by the ideas and ideologies that people have about the globe, particularly those groups of people who set global agendas. The choice of which statistics are regularly collected and widely distributed reflects the material concerns of leading states, corporations, and institutions, and the ideas that they hold dear. States collect data on trade and incomes, for example, because they generate revenue. The best-developed statistics are those for external trade, because they are used to charge customs duties, long an important source of state revenue.

Gaps in global numbers

By contrast, the omissions in global data sets can tell us something about those issues to which the leading governments and corporations have paid little attention. Sometimes, these missing numbers relate to the issues and concerns of groups with little voice in government. At other times, the ruling ideas of the day may stifle the collection of uncomfortable numbers. There

are at least three general gaps in global numbers: women's work, peasant production, and facts awkward for the prevailing ideas of leading states.

Household work, also known as domestic or reproductive work, is poorly represented in national and global statistics. Women do a large proportion of this work, such as making meals, bringing up children, collecting water and firewood, and taking care of the needs of the family. This work is triply obscured: Women have less voice in government and corporate life than men; the work is frequently accorded low standing; and, being mostly non-monetized, the work is not readily counted.

In general, non-monetized work, particularly the subsistence production of small farmers around the globe, is poorly estimated. Any product that is not given monetary value and not brought to a market where it can be counted is difficult to measure. Though it is monetized, economic activity in the informal sector is also poorly measured for similar reasons. The informal sector refers to unregulated and sometimes illegal activity, varying from small scale production and trade in goods to larger scale criminal activities. Estimates of the scale of activity are, one might say, accuracy-challenged.

Then there is a range of global numbers that are awkward for leading states and corporations. States rarely, for example, collect numbers on inequality and poverty unless required to do so by popular and international concern. Statistics on poverty in the World Bank's World Development Indicators are, for example, available for only a few countries and for occasional years. Corporations routinely collect numbers that are required for the management of the enterprise but may be coy about releasing profit and wage information, as well as any data about toxic chemical releases. Increasingly social movements, most notably environmentalists, have generated support for regulations requiring corporations to gather and release statistics about the environmental consequences of their operation. The global collection and release of poverty, inequality, profit, wage and household work statistics have not yet been the object of global activism.

Debates changing global numbers

There have been at least two important debates about global data in the last few years. These debates, about the measurement of social progress, and changes in global inequality, have generated a global dialogue that may make underrepresented people, particularly the poor and women in the Global South, more visible in global statistics.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the United Nations Development Program started issuing the *Human Development Report*. This annual report sought to challenge the prevalent measure of national progress, a ranking of states by Gross National Product (GNP) per capita distributed in the annual World Development Reports of the World Bank. In place of GNP/capita, the UNDP's report suggested a new measure, the Human Development Indicator (HDI) combining three national measures: a GDP/capita measure (at purchasing power parity exchange rates), life expectancy and a measure of literacy. The HDI, informed by the work on outcome measures of social progress suggested by economist Amartya Sen (1999), has not supplanted the GNP/capita measure. But the initiative has created new space for thinking about social progress. Successive Human Development Reports have tried to sustain a debate about global measures of progress, most notably with thoughtful ideas about gender and inequality.

This is a debate focusing on which global numbers matter--economic numbers such as GNP/capita or measures of social outcomes, like life expectancy. The UNDP and Amartya Sen have drawn international attention to human outcomes, like life expectancy. An estimate of life expectancy is arguably a more direct and robust measure of social progress than an estimate of the level of each person's production of goods and services. What is at stake, in other words, is whether we give greater value to the flourishing of humans or to the production of goods.

At the beginning of the 21st century, a debate began involving the UNDP and the World Bank (Sutcliffe 2004 provides an overview, see also O'Rourke 2001) about how income inequality and poverty have been changing. From its early issues, the UNDP Human Development Report published estimates, with striking graphic representations, of global income distribution drawn from aggregate measures of economic activity. Research at the World Bank (Milanovic 1999, 2002) then provided new estimates based on more direct measures (including household surveys of consumption). These estimates, and the earlier UNDP numbers, suggested that global income distribution was becoming rapidly more unequal. The academic economist Xavier Sala-i-Martin then produced different estimates, suggesting that global income distribution was getting *less* unequal; the *Wall St Journal* and other prominent newspapers picked up his assessment. An editorial in *The Economist* (3/11/04) provided an outspoken defense of global income inequality on the grounds that 'the wealth of the wealthy is not part of the problem' of poverty, and put its considerable authority behind Sala-i-Martin.

A subsequent response from the World Bank's Martin Ravallion (2004 a) provided a critique of Sala-i-Martin's method and *The Economist's* assertions. Recent contributions to the debate about globalization and inequality include Ravallion (2004 b), and Robert Wade (2004). The choice of which statistics to trust and how to interpret them is one important focus of this debate.

Global numbers are of growing importance in an age of global integration. They represent measures of empirical reality, as well as providing legitimacy and prestige for the actions and concerns of states, corporations and potentially for specific social groups. Debates seeking to enlarge the scope and change the focus of global statistics, particularly in relation to poverty, inequality and poorly recorded work, may have an influence on policy and social movements. Indirectly, how people live and die, how long they live and how much satisfaction they get from their lives, may be influenced by the collection and portrayal of global statistics.

Related Topics: Economic Globalization; Justice; Poverty; Underground Economy; United Nations Organization; World Bank

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