

HOW DATA CAN BE INSTRUMENTAL IN DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE

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Good policy needs good statistics

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I. INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan is located at the crossroads of two continents – Europe and Asia. Such unique geopolitical location influences greatly the economics of the country. Kazakhstan has the common borders with the following countries: Russia, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest nation, is in the top ten of the world's largest countries – after Russia, Canada, China, the USA, Brazil, Australia, India, and Argentina.

State authority in the Republic of Kazakhstan is united and realized with the principle of its division into legislative, executive and legal branches, and their interrelation with the use of constraint and counterbalance system. The President owns wide authority, including the executive power. There are altogether 15 administrations producing official statistics in Kazakhstan on the state level. The leading agency in producing official statistics, the Agency of Statistics, consists of its Headquarters in Astana, 16 regional offices and the juridically independent Calculation Centre, total amount of staff-members reach approximately 5300 persons.

Within the last 10-15 years key steps in development have been:

1) The total revision of methodology and classifications, adoption of internationally approved standards in data development;

2) Development of the automated data processing - still within stove-pipe systems;

3) Introduction of sampling and price collection systems;

4) (Re) development of the registers.

Today the biggest development challenge is

5) The introduction of data warehouse approach and metadata development.

Statistics, regarding to the principle 1 of Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics promulgated by the United Nations Statistical Commission, provide an indispensable element in the information system of a society, serving the government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation.

There are two main issues that should be considered in explaining the overall framework of the theme of this presentation.

First, it is not obligatory to make special statistics for the development of democracy. Available statistical data can be used for the development of democracy from the point of view of population's development of thinking.

Second, it is necessary to consider traditions and mentality of local population. The perception of civil society is an important aspect of gauging a national situation. But on its own it cannot be an accurate means of comparing countries with one another, as different populations have differing expectations, national narratives and beliefs about their own governments, which will reflect the picture given of each country. The susceptibility of figures and a way of interpretation slightly depends on the country it occurs.

Since 1991 Kazakhstan has made major changes to its social programs and significant improvements to its economy through administrative, financial and economic reforms. People have learned self organization, so there is a number of Nongovernmental organizations, consumers' rights protection organizations, veterans' administration, industrial and/or professional unions and associations,

and others. These bodies actively protect their rights and address with requirements to employers and the government.

During this period the need for reliable data for decision making has been increasing in a line with the development of the society. More freedom in planning and development meant that all groups, especially state bodies and businesses required more statistics. As a result of the changes in demand, the national statistical office was pushed to produce more, with better speed and quality.

Official statistics became not only a managerial tool but a source of information for disputes and decision making. So it is better to consider the changes in the national statistical system not just as the changes in methods and statistical techniques but rather as the change of the role of statistics in a society.

II. ACHIEVED RESULTS

The National Statistical System has made significant progress in the past several years towards meeting the needs of a market based economy and is now considered the best developed national system in the Central Asian region.

The Strategic Master Plan (SMP) developed by a group of international consultants (World Bank assistance) in 2007-2008, contains important elements of an action plan on the development of the statistical services in Kazakhstan. It outlines major tasks for the development of the ARKS in the next few years in accordance with PARIS21 project recommendations.

To enhance the contacts with different user categories of statistical information and to build up stable relationship with user groups ARKS is in the process of developing a Marketing and Dissemination Strategy focusing on revision the content and design of statistical publications, use of internet and e-mail, promotion to media improved metadata and study user needs.

All data is distributed simultaneously on paper and on web-site. The data is widely used by all interested user groups: government, Parliament, political parties, society. It is clear that there is always a possibility to make different interpretation

of the same statistical data. And that makes sense: people do think and do influence.

After 7 years of consistent rapid economic growth, the rate of economic growth have slowed down, so in some sense, the year 2008 is very indicative considering the use of statistics for development of open society and the democracy.

The ARKS in Kazakhstan carries out a role of the independent producer and the keeper of the information. The ARKS with the same speed answers inquiries of:

- the Government that on a regular basis conducts the analysis of social and economic development of the country;
- the Administration of the President that estimates Government activity on the basis of statistical data;
- Deputies that analyzing statistical data, direct inquiries to the Government;
- Businesses that use statistical data for the analysis business tendencies in fields important for them.

In this context ARKS is fully in correspondence with principle 1 of the European statistics Code of Practice.

III. ISSUES AND TENDENCIES

The role of national statistical office as a development supporter becomes more evident. Statistics changes orientation from being only the government service to a public service. This change is followed by a rise of the obligations the statistics has since it is in charge of informing what has happened through comprehensive data for each user.

So main issues are

- Maintenance of an openness and credibility of statistical data. A statistics office should create possibilities for an equal use of the data by all users.

This does not only mean just giving access to data but also explaining the economic and social meaning of the indicators.

- Correct distribution. The dissemination of statistical data has an important role in the statistics activities. The dissemination of data should always be a field that tries to meet the changing demands of the users. It should urge new requests and also increase society's confidence toward statistics and create a possibility for inter communication. ARKS is developing a dissemination strategy that contains information on identification of user groups as a basis for identifying customer's need structures, outlining of the general strategic concepts and basic elements for the development of the dissemination activities of the ARKS, activity plan on the development of the Marketing and Dissemination Strategy.
- Training of users to correct use of data. There is no long term tradition for determining user requirements for statistics. Currently, up to 80% statistical data are used only by government agencies. With the development of civil society the demand for statistics by other users will increasingly grow.

The political changes the country is going through have an important impact on statistics and we are still overcoming opinions which have developed about statistics during the Soviet time. The general public still believes that the official statistics adorns a real life which they face daily. Usually this concerns the rate of inflation in the country. It is widely considered, that the statistical office purposely underestimates the rate of inflation because in shops they see the prices which grow, in their opinion, more quickly, than the official rate of inflation. Sometimes it pours out in sharp attacks against statistics in the press and against personnel of a statistical office thus becoming necessary to explain statistical methodology to the concrete user.

Statistics can be capable of meeting the demands of the greatest number of users. Few users are themselves in a position to validate directly the data released by statistical agencies. They are dependent on the producing agency to indicate the

quality of the published data as a basis for deciding whether it is fit for a particular use. If quality indicators are not available, users have to rely on the reputation of the agency directly. If they are available, the indicators themselves can be checked by users. In either event, credibility of the agency is essential if its products are to be trusted. The goal of a statistical agency must be to reach and maintain a state where the normal reaction of users, knowing that data originate from the statistical agency, is to assume that the data are trustworthy, objective, and as accurate as the agency says they are, and therefore fit for use.

That limits users so it is not enough developed dissemination system. Many detailed data are opened, but are published with the limited circulation. Now we are engaged in development of electronic site of ARKS and till next year we plan to make accessible a full database on a site.

This is the second year ARKS conducts mass training of users for these purposes. ARKS works in co-operation with the World Bank on establishment of Research-Training Center that will improve the qualifications of staff both in the ARKS and relevant ministries and agencies as well as the qualifications of other users of statistics at all levels, empowering them in the use of existing data.

IV. CONCLUSION

The role of statistics in a development of the open society, open-minded thinking and the democracy is evident. In Kazakhstan the process of full involvement of the general people in decision making processes has began 17 years ago. There are certain achievements in the development of the statistics for everyone's needs and, of course, there is still a lot to do.

Statistics has become a basic element in the decision-making process by most of the user groups. Due to the changes in a development of economy, society and political situation the year 2008 will be indicative: how data can be used for better decisions in challenging (not favorable) situations.

The process of transformation of statistics into knowledge and the knowledge into politics and development is intensifying. Therefore the role of the national statistical agency as an important player in a process of the development of democracy becomes more evident and important.

It is considered, the statistical office of Kazakhstan produces statistical data that creates an opportunity to analyze the situation to each person. For instance veterans' administration sometimes question the correctness of pension income calculations of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection which for this purpose use the last year's prices or deputies often doubt of calculation correctness of inflation rate. It is most indicative that each new government not content with inflation rate calculated by ARKS, spends effort on auditing the calculation methodology of CPI. To the honor of ARKS for 17 years of activity each time the correctness of the methodology and accuracy of calculation of statistics was approved.

The openness of statistics is proved by the availability and possibility to find data on every needed issue also for all international organizations.

Another major point should be stated is that recognition of development of a democratic society not only inside of the country, but also by the international community is the presidency of Kazakhstan in 2010 in OSCE. The consensus of the states-participants of OSCE is based on recognition of fidelity of internal policy of President Nursultan Nazarbaev who has provided interethnic and interreligion consent, political stability in the Kazakhstan society. From the very beginning Kazakhstan considered the application as means of the further strengthening of democratic and economic transformations. Decentralization of the government is gradually carried out; reforming judicial authority and the further development of institutes of a civil society continue.

From next year the Government plans to pass to result-based budgetary planning. Budgetary charges will be allocated to the ministries at performance of development indicators in this or that branch. In this connection, the role of statistics will continue to increase.