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DIFFICULTIES WITH THE REFORM OF REGIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS (NOVOSIBIRSK OBLAST)

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Agrarian reform - the difficulties, the progress, the outlook, the immediate and remote consequences - cannot but be a matter of concern. In Novosibirsk oblast, with an economy based on agriculture, the difficulties are acute. Farming accounts for almost 25% of the goods and services produced. The oblast ranks third to eighth among Russia's 89 regions in output of grain, milk and meat. It has over three million hectares of arable land in production.

A large variety of types of farm and forms of ownership have been established and developed over a comparatively short period, given the variety of local conditions. There have been significant distributions and redistributions of land. Registration figures for the beginning of this year show 34 collective farms, 22 State farms, 23 farming cooperatives, 470 other farm commodity producers (partnerships, public and private corporations etc.), and 4,800 peasant (individual) farms. The non-State-owned sector predominates; it accounts for 89 to 98 per cent of the grain, potatoes, vegetables, meat and milk produced.

High fluidity and instability of economic relations and the forms they take have been characteristic of the transition to a market economy. The fall in volume of agricultural output is a cause for serious concern - and that at a time when commodity producers can operate freely and independently.

An objective assessment of the progress of reform in the countryside requires a close look at processes and phenomena. Information must of course be counted among the measures that enable the reform and development of agricultural production to be monitored. It must be open, accessible, and adequately reliable. It is like a feedback loop, lacking which reform may stall.

Statistics are not without importance in State decision-making on matters of agrarian policy.

Attitudes to statistics may range from high to low key, but the information existing already and now being created at statistical bodies is a valuable instrument in the hands of economic managers (allowing them to single out the characteristic features of a structure, a link, a phenomenon, a trend etc.). The statistical bodies are not, therefore, indifferent to how relations with the authorities on matters to do with economics develop.

The system of statistical indicators reflecting the agricultural situation has undergone some changes.

Production statistics have been trimmed somewhat. Though they are still entitled to exist, they are kept directly at agricultural entities.

As for qualitative parameters, this is an area where our present statistics need improving.

The problems of supplying the authorities with economic statistics must be addressed at various levels of the territorial and administrative structure. The viewpoints, the attitudes and the

requirements differ. Not everyone was thrilled with the shift from universal reporting to enterprise-based statistics. Some leaders unfortunately still feel a need for production figures over a cross-section of enterprises. But as people realize the need to adapt to the demands of the market economy, they gradually come to appreciate the positive changes in the work of statistical bodies.

Calculating summary, aggregate indicators on districts and municipalities using the methods recommended by the Goskomstat environmental and agricultural statistics department has become routine. Quarterly calculations covering the full range of farm commodity producers - output and sales of main types of produce, herd/flock sizes, areas sown to crops, balances of agricultural resources, etc. - are made at the oblast and district levels. Local government leaders no longer ask for indicators from a cross-section of individual ventures describing cattle productivity, fertilizer application, crops sown, produce put in storage, machinery repaired and so forth.

Naturally, the necessary steps have been taken to improve the quality of statistical observations on the life-supporting sectors of the economy. A system of indicators for monitoring the process of transition to a market economy is being introduced alongside the traditional accounting data. But attitudes to information are also changing among users. There is a growing demand not for disaggregated statistics but for integrated data combining a variety of kinds of information.

A selection of observation methods are needed to monitor the formation of market structures and mechanisms, the establishment of market relations, the primacy of any particular form of ownership, the introduction and development of multifarious kinds of venture and operating methods, employment problems among the rural population and stimulation of the work ethic, transfers of land and a whole range of other matters directly or indirectly related to the conduct of agrarian reform.

As the records of production and financial operations disappear from the annual reports of farming ventures, it becomes necessary to supplement the statistics with a range of indicators. Indicators such as production losses by element and item, labour intensity of output and so forth are of some academic and practical interest.

It is becoming increasingly necessary to keep track of socio-economic processes in the agro-industrial complex.

The answer is to strengthen district and municipal statistics and make extensive use of sample surveys.

It is not easy today, given the financial restrictions, to discuss the status of district and municipal statistics in information about the situation of agriculture. But the information being produced at oblast-level statistical committees has been reoriented more towards the vertical, towards federal-level requirements. In a related development, the significance of specially arranged sample surveys designed for specific purposes is increasing. In many cases these are becoming the only possible observation tool.

There are lots of redundant rules in Russian statistics. There is nothing novel about organizing surveys. Sample survey methods, however, are underdeveloped. Only one survey was conducted on instructions from the centre in 1997 - of the degree of entrepreneurship in farmers' intentions. The crucial question is when normal statistics can be relied on, and when special-purpose observations are essential.

A large number of new ventures, especially small-scale ones, have sprung up in farming, and their numbers and structure keep changing. Far from all of them are registered, while some are registered but non-operational. Given the difficulty of obtaining reports from peasant farms and the scale of the undertaking, proper statistics are not being kept on the progress of the peasant-farmer movement.

The individual sector has always played a significant role in farming. It is a difficult sector of the economy to keep track of, but accounts for 45% of agricultural output. Aggregate data on the population have been arrived at by relying on material from household budget surveys. The network put in place to cover the sector was insufficiently objective in reflecting output on private holdings and allotments. It was decided, rightly, to overhaul the network and make it representative.

The situation has been corrected by practical action with due regard for the comments made. Accountability for statistical information has been increased, and users' attitudes towards statistics are changing. But calculation methods remain oriented in the main towards the oblast, region and republic, and malfunction when we apply them to smaller administrative units such as districts.

Goskomstat therefore needs to offer tailor-made support for the development of district and municipal statistics from the point of view of methodological observation of the progress of events in agriculture during the transitional period.

What would I like to say in conclusion? A statistical information system suited to market requirements is taking shape and being honed amidst the country's unsettled economic situation. Unsatisfactory telecommunications facilities and shortages of modern computer and office equipment and skilled staff (especially at the district level and in individual businesses) make for considerable difficulties at work. Without question, there should be an electronic equivalent to the physical submission of information - using e-mail, faxes and information systems on diskette.

The preparation of statistical records should rest on sound methodological underpinnings and draw on accumulated international experience.

We have received and circulated proposals for the refinement and improvement of statistics from agricultural and academic bodies. My statement is an adequate reflection of their views.