



Place and prospects of voluntary surveys in sub-Saharan Africa

NGUEMA MEYE Paul-Henri
AFRISTAT, Bamako, Mali – nguemameye@afriostat.org

Abstract

About the practice of mandatory and voluntary surveys, what is the situation in the African region? To describe it we have realized an opinion survey in sub-Saharan French speaking countries member states of the Sub-Saharan African Economic and Statistical Observatory (AFRISTAT). Actually, all the member states of AFRISTAT represent 41% of African countries. The results of this survey indicate that all countries have statistical laws that deal with statistical surveys. Compulsory surveys are practiced by all countries, while only 44% of them have experimented with the organization of a voluntary survey. The legal framework for voluntary investigations is poorly assured and the data derived therefrom are of little official character. The majority of countries ask the structure which need to conduct a collection operation to obtain a statistical visa from the Central Organ of the national statistical system. The principal reason of the introduction of the statistical visa is to ensure that official statistics are of good quality. 90% of public statistical services are obliged to obtain this visa when it was required for only 27% of private organizations which are wishing to carry out statistical surveys.

On a legal point of view, the current legislation deals with voluntary survey options in only a few countries, as only 13% of the statistical laws in force deal explicitly with the possibility of carrying out this type of collection operations. The practice of at least one voluntary survey outside of any regulation concern nearly 38% of national statistical offices (NSOs) and 44% of other statistical services. Considering all the AFRISTAT's member states it is only in Senegal where this category of investigation is carried out in full legality. Representatives of NSOs believe that the advantage of using voluntary surveys is that respondents' responses are more reliable, less costly, and shorter in duration. Although in practice mandatory surveys differ little from voluntary surveys in sub-Saharan Africa, they nevertheless need to be regulated. Moreover, the full benefit of the comparative advantages of voluntary surveys is limited by the low literacy and Internet access rates observed among African countries.

We note that countries are more interested in the following alternative methods of statistical production: exploitation of administrative sources and big data. And we think that it urge to update the legal framework in AFRISTAT's countries to introduce the voluntary survey's implications.

Keywords: official statistics, mandatory surveys, Reliability of responses, alternative methods of statistical production.

1. Introduction

In order to carry out fact-based analyses throughout this paper, we decided that it would be wise to choose only the Member States of the Sub-Saharan African Economic and Statistical Observatory (AFRISTAT). The arguments that have convinced us are: the honorable representativeness of the countries constituting AFRISTAT at the continental level, the good knowledge we have of these countries and the ease of access to information concerning them.

AFRISTAT is an international organization which role is to advise the National Statistics Offices (NSO) of its member states and to support their action in this field. It has regulatory powers in the field of harmonization of concepts, standards and statistical methods.



AFRISTAT is thus in line with the African concern for regional economic integration, which implies the homogeneity and comparability of Statistical information. This desire for harmonization and integration is implemented by AFRISTAT through operations supporting the collection, processing and dissemination of statistical information or economic analyses and syntheses according to the work program, which is defined by the Member States. The organization now has 22 member states, or 41% of African countries.

The problematic of surveys practiced in sub-Saharan Africa is well understood at the level of our institution since it affects our field of intervention. To indicate the place of the voluntary survey, we will show the way in which statistical surveys are legally framed and what types of surveys are carried out. Then, we will be using an opinion survey among the NSO to perceive their prospects in relation to the voluntary survey. We will also observe the most common areas of interest in the area to reassure us if the voluntary survey is part of it.

2. Situation of the legal framework for investigations

An examination of the legal frameworks governing statistical activity in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa shows that all have a statistical law in force. And in all cases the problematic of the surveys and census is dealt with in more or less detail. It is in the wake of this theme that the issues of "statistical secrecy" and "obligation to answer" are generally addressed.

Generally speaking, the Act is broad in scope with respect to the supervision of data collection operations. Nearly half of them (47%) need to take one or more regulatory text (s) (40% decree) and / or (13% order)) to complete the legal framework for any collection operation.

Within the above framework, there is a provision requiring any structure wishing to conduct a collection operation to obtain a statistical visa from the Central Organ of the national statistical system. Only 14% of the countries concerned do not require this statistical visa.

The primary reason for the introduction of the statistical visa is to ensure that official statistics are of good quality. The method used is to ensure upstream that the service, which initiates an investigation operation, intends to use an appropriate methodology on the one hand and that it has also planned to use the appropriate computer equipment and the processing of the data that will come from the collection.

The interest in the quality of official statistics at the time of the introduction of the statistical visa is confirmed by the fact that: whereas 90% of public statistical services are subject to it, only about 27% Obtaining this visa from private organizations wishing to carry out statistical surveys.

3. Characteristics of Surveys

In the AFRISTAT area, there is a great imbalance in the type of surveys carried out because the distinction between compulsory and voluntary surveys is clear. First, from a legal point of view, the current legislation deals with voluntary survey options in only a few countries, as only 13% of the statistical laws in force deal explicitly with the possibility of carrying out this type of collection operations. Second, from a practical point of view, at the level of the National Statistical Offices, only 38% of them had had experience in conducting a voluntary survey. This rate is revalued to 44% when looking at the other statistical services of the country (sectoral and private).

An in-depth examination of this situation highlights two realities:

1°) the practice of an activity outside of any regulation



Nearly 27% of NSOs and 32% of other statistical services have conducted at least one voluntary survey, whereas the legal framework of their respective countries does not address this issue. Without foreseeing the object of Surveys carried out in these cases, that is to say, is the data that has been derived from them used to produce official statistics or not? At the very least, it should be recognized that this posture is not comfortable.

2°) A legal framework ahead of practice

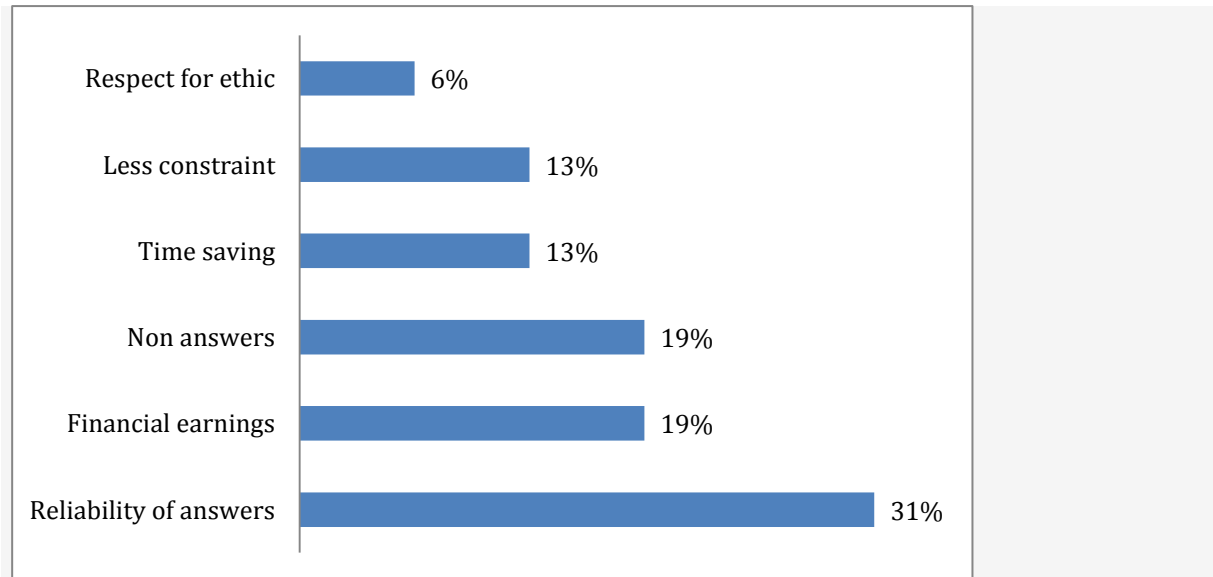
On the other hand, Benin has, since the adoption of its statistical law in 2000, envisaged the possibility of organizing voluntary investigations. It is a prospective vision that deserves to be noted, especially since the country does not mention the progress of such a survey since then.

4. Motivations and impediments to the use of the voluntary survey

In view of the above, it appears that the practice of the voluntary survey is not widely used in the AFRISTAT member states, as only 44% of the countries have experimented with it. Moreover, it is only in Senegal where this category of investigation is carried out in full legality. In other cases, this category of survey was carried out with a legal framework that does not mention it.

Following the survey applied to the NSOs of Member States to understand what might motivate them to use a voluntary survey, the following trends are noted:

Chart 1: Main benefits attributed to a voluntary survey



The NSOs that commented on the supposed benefits of conducting voluntary investigations highlighted the following main arguments:

- The free participation of the respondents in the collection operation is a source of improvement in the reliability of the answers;
- The financial earnings to be made;
- Minimization of non-response;
- Reduction of implementation time;
- Reduction of organizational constraints;
- Etc.



The preceding paragraph suggests that some of the advantages attributed to voluntary investigations are somewhat unfamiliar with the characteristics of these investigations. Two elements cited as benefits call to mind: minimizing non-response and organizational constraints that would be less. This leads us to believe that in reality there is a need to better define the voluntary survey to show its substantive differences with the mandatory survey.

For our part, we will add an element of context which may be important in the final decision of the choice of one type of investigation in relation to another. Within the countries of the AFRISTAT zone, it is tempting to assert that compulsory surveys are only a matter of name if one refers to the fact that it is extremely rare to find a case where a refusal of reply gave rise to verbalization for payment of a fine. There are two reasons for this: the unrealistic nature of the procedure and the willingness to reconcile the statistical services, which want not to obtain information under duress. For a long time the countries of the zone have paid particular attention to the communication component within which an awareness-raising campaign is carried out in order to get as many respondents as possible to the collection project and thus minimize the number of refusals to respond. After a first pass for data collection a second so-called recovery run is organized in order to catch up with the absentees and the refractors in the preceding step. Even for voluntary surveys, the recovery phase exists. On the other hand, we believe that, in view of a wider dissemination of voluntary surveys in sub-Saharan Africa, its utility would be increased tenfold if two structural factors were improved. This is the literacy rate of the population and the rate of Internet use. Thus, the best option would be to make the most of the collection option, which ensures the self-administering of the questions.

Chart 2: Literacy rate of 15 years and over (%) by area

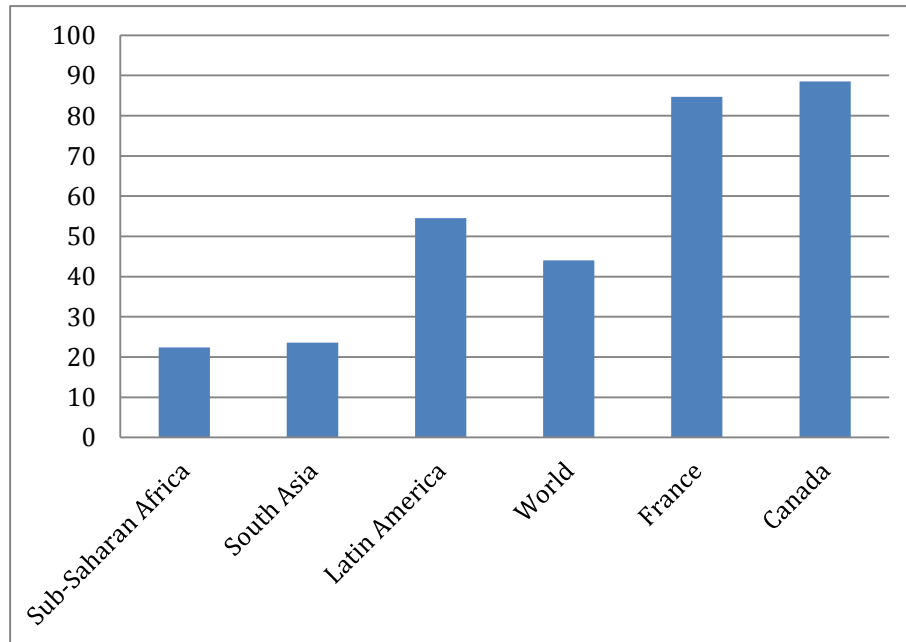
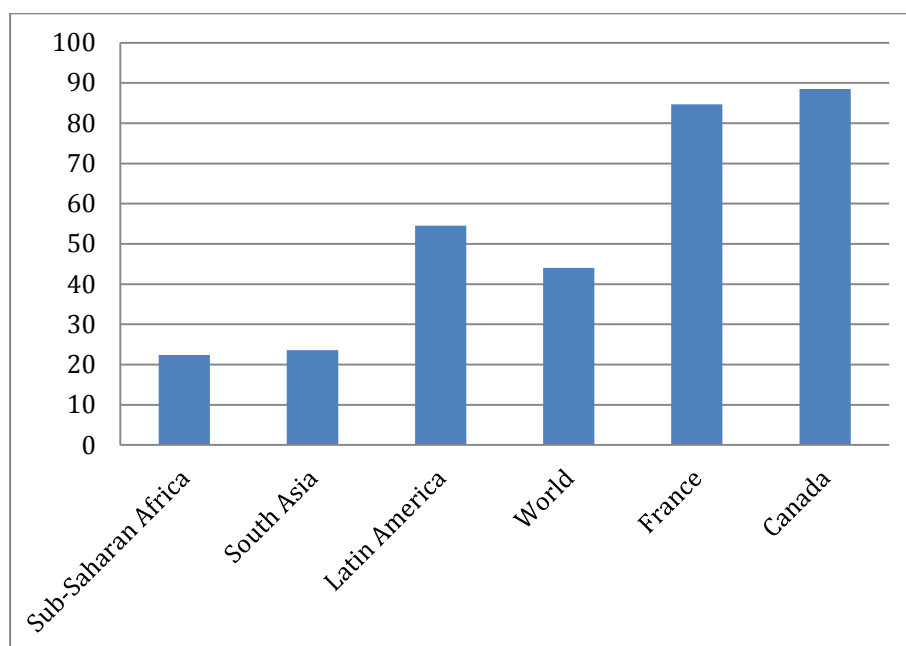


Chart 3: Number of Internet users (per 100 people) in 2015 and by zones



The two graphs above show quite well that sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing significant delays in both the literacy of its populations and their access to the Internet. In both cases, performance in sub-Saharan Africa is the lowest. Under such conditions, many of the facilities offered by technology can not be used to effect reforms that can generate gains (financial and time)

5. Alternative pathways mobilizing statistical producers in Africa

In the AFRISTAT area, particular attention is paid to the search for alternative ways of obtaining statistics at lower costs. Three tracks are particularly active and they are at different levels of achievement. They are: the exploitation of administrative sources, the big data and the reduction in the duration of data collection during the surveys.

Optimal exploitation of administrative sources: it is the most successful option since it is already used in countries and benefits from a favorable environment both at national and international level. In most African countries, statistical yearbooks are produced and administrative sources provide the bulk of the information found there. Nevertheless, in many cases, some experiments based on this approach have not been very successful due to the lack of basic statistical infrastructure and organizational problems. One of the most illustrative recent examples is the production of civil status statistics from civil registration registers in town halls and other local authorities. The achievements are meager despite a UN commitment to Africa for this cause over the past three years

The big data: the idea of their use leaves no one indifferent as it lets guess the enormous savings that can flow to have data. At the same time, for some it is a find that will not take shape before long. For this reason, the great uncertainties that remain in the legal framework that will be reserved for this issue, particularly on the dissemination of data. Despite these questions, two AFRISTAT member countries have begun experiments in exploiting big-data.



In both cases, it was research on mobile phone data. For the time being, it seems that the results are not yet conclusive.

The reduction in the duration of data collection during the surveys: it refers to the research carried out by the World Bank and will enter into their experimental phase in the coming weeks in a dozen AFRISTAT member states. These countries will carry out a consumer survey, during which the duration of data collection in households will be substantially shorter compared to previous surveys of the same type. At the end of this work, an assessment of the viability of this approach will be carried out before the countries decide whether to adopt it.

6: Conclusion

Previous developments indicate that the practice of voluntary surveys is weakly grounded in sub-Saharan African practices. The fact that the possibility of carrying out this category of survey does not appear in a majority of texts governing the statistical activity of these countries is, on the other hand, insufficient. Indeed, it is important to carry out any statistical operation in compliance with the regulations in force in the country. In case the texts are silent on one aspect, one is liable to prosecution of all kinds because of this failure. Therefore, we advocate raising awareness about the characteristics of the voluntary survey within the National Statistical System. At the same time, the weak use of sanctions in compulsory investigations must also be addressed. It is necessary to reflect on this problem because it is clear that the part reserved for sanctions in acts regulating the conduct of statistical surveys is out of phase with reality.

It is observed that for both the voluntary survey and the mandatory survey, there is a need to revisit statistical laws and inferior texts that deal with this issue. But a major reflection at the sub regional and regional level carried out beforehand of these texts grooming work would be welcome as several points of view would be confronted before a consensus emerges. Given the increased capacity to be mobilized to inform the many indicators required to monitor the degree of achievement of sustainable development goals, countries have to find cheaper ways of producing statistics. We naturally encourage the participation of all in the debate on the data revolution and the optimization of the use of administrative sources.

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