Agricultural statistics: a case apart?[1]

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ABSTRACT

For a long time it has been considered that knowledge is classification, but correct classification. And, in fact, classifications are a key basis for any statistical activity. But how are the different branches in this activity classified? In these branches agricultural statistics is certainly different. Yet very often it is even considered as a case of its own, beyond the specificities deriving from the special characteristics of its object - farming. The article addresses what its contours are, how they are developing and asks: in what sense are they or should they be considered a ⬚ separate ⬚ case, distinguished not by the differences of the object, its field of knowledge, but also by epistemological specificity (structure, methods and validity of that knowledge)?
The paper, therefore, discusses the place of official agricultural statistics; the presumed historic isolation of this sector's statistics; further demands on it; its specificities but also similarities with other sectoral socioeconomic statistics. Lastly, it addresses its interactions and (necessary) integration with other statistical domains.

Keywords: Agricultural statistics, Official statistics, Agriculture

1. Introduction

This paper could be subtitled "reflections on the integration of agricultural statistics in the statistical system", since it was this question that gave rise to the choice of topic. The question of integration has repeatedly been stressed in colloquies on agricultural statistics. The key topic of ICAS-V held in October 2010 in Kampala, Uganda, was the integration of agricultural statistics in the national statistics system. The two earlier congresses – Cancun-2004 and Beijing-2007 – also discussed this question. The Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics (WB, 2010), produced under the auspices of UNSC, strongly stresses the need for integration. In fact, its leading author, Fred Vogel, tirelessly fighting in favour of practices focusing on quality and excellence in agricultural statistics, raises the long-standing question (Vogel, 1995, 1999). In Global Strategy, integration relates mainly to institutional, methodological and practical issues. But the overall proposal calls on other facets.

At first glance it may seem that agricultural statistics lacks integration; that it was relegated to a separate corner, relegated or alien to the statistical edifice.

One interpretation, linked to its historic loss of participation with regard to the extent (and being the extent itself) of the advance of the economic development of nations, relegates it to a secondary plane. It is understood that the importance of farming for development has been neglected and underestimated, and has been given limited and separate treatment in the statistical systems (Belkindas & Eele, 2007).

On the other hand, agricultural statistics seems to be normally highlighted in the order of statistical topics, receiving its own special treatment in scope and structuring, which is usually attributed to specificities of the sector.

Its specificities also reflect on conducting and operating statistical surveys so that agriculture is accustomed to having a separate place in the structuring and organization of the statistical production process focusing on a sector and its topics. The international recommendations themselves are discussed and presented separately. [2]

But to what extent do its actual specificities justify the differences upheld? Proposals for the necessary enhancement of agricultural statistics with greater integration point to reducing these differences to a minimum and altering the frame of relative isolation?

We will analyse whether and wherein it is, can or must be regarded as a case apart or not, in different aspects, despite (and seeking to consider) the extreme variety of its characteristics and forms of occurrence between countries and taking risks of flawed information and the restrictions of one eccentric, if characterise as peripheral, viewpoint.

In addition to this introduction, these questions are addressed as a second topic that seeks to discuss the contours and situate the agricultural statistics within other statistics, one third presenting and commenting on highlighted characteristics of agricultural statistics, relevant to the appreciation of its presumably special character. Lastly, some final comments are given that look to relate the main findings to the question of integration.

2. Situating agricultural statistics

Which agricultural statistics?

In the context of this analysis, we have as reference agricultural statistics according to its contemporary programme, but considered on a comprehensive basis, including statistics on forestry, extractive agriculture, fishery and fish farming, as has been strongly emphasized in more recent documents, namely the Global Strategy (WB, 2010).

The agricultural statistics programme is marked by the astonishing renewal and increase in the statistical agenda observed in the post-war years, when western governments assumed the responsibility of administrating anti-cyclical policies, directing growth and guiding economic development. Yet it is also specifically denoted by its peculiar association with the food security policy agenda[3]. This is where its prestige lies with regard to an evident vital requirement (besides strategy), which is food availability, but also certain particularities as discussed below.

If we take the Global Strategy and Wye Group handbook, and the Programme for the World Census of Agriculture 2010, as current references, we will see that in the last few decades such emphasis has been qualified and is now emerging and consolidating on new issues relating to the environment, sustainability, gender, rural amenities, and so on. Now much more emphasis is given to items relating to territory management, micro-economic aspects, poverty and social topics, accompanying the changes and tendencies of the political agenda. This has been representing a spread of scope and some change in axis that, to a certain extent, points to attending the exhortation expressed by Offutt (2003) when going beyond the production-related statistical program in favour of an approach that helps understand the causal relations between the economic, environmental and social systems.

Agricultural statistics among other statistics

In the 20th century, statistics permeated almost all fields of knowledge (Salsburg, 2009). So we find references of "statistics" relating to a wide range of different thematic domains. Agricultural

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[2]   See United Nations, 2009, p.12.
[3]   Food and agricultural statistics in the context of a national information system (1987) and Norton (1988) are good references for the agricultural statistics programme that has been consolidated since then.

statistics is one of the many dozens of labels by which "statistics" is referenced for example, among the ISI sessions.

Firstly, it is possible to distinguish, among the different domains of statistics, those relating to statistical science and technique and many other thematic domains, where we can find agricultural statistics.

In order to narrow our focus, we could also restrict ourselves to the sphere of official statistics. We would, then, be designating "official agricultural statistics" as merely "agricultural statistics".

In the Classification of Statistical Activities provided by the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD, 2006), we find the item "agricultural statistics" separate from "Forestry and fishery statistics" among 17 categories of the group of "Economic statistics". The classification includes 35 categories, also considering the groups "Demographic and social statistics" and "Natural resources and environment statistics" in addition to "Activities not classified by field". (see appendix).

In the UNECE Classification of Statistical Activities (2009), in turn, we find only one item relating to all agriculture, forestry and fishery statistics. It includes agricultural monetary statistics (agricultural economic accounts), agricultural structures (farm structure), trade in agricultural products, agricultural labour input, crop and animal production, agricultural commodities, agro-industry statistics (including food production and safety), organic farming and organic food, government expenditure for agriculture, fishing and forestry, products source and use tables, forest and forest product statistics, forest resource assessment and forest fire, trade in forest products, fisheries.

Agriculture, forestry, fisheries appear as "Sectoral statistics" alongside other specific branches of industry and services, within the large domain "Economic statistics". In this approach, activities of industrial and service companies appear in "Business statistics" and the "Economic accounts" item excludes agricultural economic accounts. Note that forecasting is not included in the descriptions.

In order to examine agricultural statistics and especially to assess their possible special condition, it will be essential to define their "peers". In this sense, it helps to define the kind of statistics that is a species. We understand that it is best to understand them as "sectoral statistics". And within them, agricultural statistics would figure among the statistics of the primary sector, its kind directly above, if we were to take as reference the classic meaning of the Fisher-Clark model, which has at its side the kinds of those relating to the industrial and service sectors. However, to consider agricultural statistics only as "economic statistics" seems to be too restrictive in relation to the aspects that are to be embraced.

3. Is agricultural statistics a case of its own?

First of all, it is apparently useful to distinguish in an epistemological discussion on agricultural statistics two orders of questions: on one hand, what concerns its specificities in the field of statistics; and, on the other, what concerns the specificity of all statistical knowledge of reality, whether in agriculture or in any other field.

With regard to this second question, for example, the fact that agricultural statistics do not exhaust all knowledge of the farming reality does not place it as a separate domain of knowledge from the sector, a "case of its own", in the knowledge about farming. Very much to the contrary, statistical knowledge fits perfectly in the mode in which knowledge of farming reality is structured; and in fact, as a key element of discovery, demonstration and validation of statements regarding this reality.

This general structuring of knowledge about farming must not be confused with the structuring of related statistical knowledge; and elements belonging to it that extrapolate statistics must not be considered in the question on the specificity of agricultural statistics in the general field of statistical knowledge.

On the other hand, if statistical knowledge is integrated with the knowledge of farming reality, this is due to the fact that when characterizing this reality, there are fundamental premises that fit the statistical treatment. Characteristics such as measurability of the elements to be known, and so on, are premises common to all statistical knowledge of reality. What remains to be seen is whether agriculture lends statistics specific characteristics of its object that require a special place in structuring general statistical knowledge.

The general structuring of statistical knowledge evidently comprises various sub-fields and their intertwinings. Like all this knowledge rests on the mathematical basis of formalizing statistical methods adhering to equally formalized objects. Formalization of the objects considers only the basic characteristics that make them conform to the principles that, like measurability, make them prone to statistical treatment. Beyond these characteristics anything that can differentiate the object of agricultural statistics, for example, from that of the industrial sector is irrelevant.

Thus, only the existence of such basic characteristics of the object of agricultural statistics, which were structuring it and not shared by other sectors, could from the epistemological viewpoint permit specific treatment of the sector as a whole, with the corresponding problems of integration of its results in those of other sectors' statistical work. Beyond these characteristics, all "special" treatment of agricultural statistics must be credited to historic and institutional factors alien to the foundations of structuring statistical knowledge of reality.

So let us examine some aspects of interest.

Structuring by product and physical measures

Agricultural statistics favours the structuring of data by product, while the data of service and industry products are presented according to activity. In fact, unlike the other sectors, most of the sectoral farming policies are accompanied and structured according to the product. And the result is that the very classification of the agricultural activity is defined mainly by the product. This occurs regardless of the fact that it is perfectly possible to follow the same direction as that of industry and services, although the inverse cannot be similar, considering the huge diversity of products found in other sectors, although only a few industrial commodities are highlighted and are treated similarly to farm produce.

Associated with the above, main agricultural statistics are informed in physical quantities, while occurring mainly through indices and monetary-based values in other sectors. And traditionally, agriculture is not considered in the recommendations relating to the IIP – Index numbers of industrial production.[4] Such characteristic, however, is not exclusive to agricultural statistics; it is shared by statistics of other segments of activity, such as occurs, for example, with those relating to the energy sector.

It is possible that such a different approach can be associated with the disproportionate participation that the relatively small number of main products have in the total production of the sector, or even to the aforementioned relation of agriculture with food security.

It is possible that there is some historic origin in such indication, but it does not seem to be a mere idiosyncrasy. Would indices per segment of activity have similar relevance? Possibly not, but it seems that this has led to important insufficiencies.

The major relevance of information by product permitted (or led to) predominantly establishing alternatives for producing agricultural statistics, regardless of the investigation of production units. Such methods can be quite efficient in their proposals but their prevalence results in very restricted information for analytical purposes and formulating policies, far from those obtained for the same kind of sectors.

Forecast

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[4] See United Nations, 2008.

Possibly, the harvest forecast information is the agriculture "statistics" most in demand. In fact, it can be said that uncertainty regarding agriculture harvest was at the heart of the matter since time immemorial. And somehow the conjunctural statistics have substituted the oracles. And this not only occurs in the case of the noble public objectives relating to food security or the supply of agro-industrial chains. Forecast is the type of information most required for the entire economic activity, since in today's world of financed wealth it is also the question of positioning and repositioning each investor's asset portfolio. In other words, this is where agriculture accompanies the other producer segments.

The conjunctural indicators published by official institutions usually express variations in the short-term economic activity, for example: fluctuations in employment level; sales volume; foreign trade; prices, and so on, checked weekly, monthly or quarterly. Yet, *nota bene*, with regard to "checked" events, checked in the sense of having already actually been done and observed. But in the case of agriculture, there is another distinct and more important and peculiar difference: the main conjunctural agriculture indicators are predicted data.

One reason normally given for this differential treatment concerns the intrinsic nature of the production process in agriculture, which in the majority of the cases, has a long production time in terms of months, so that currently crucial decisions not revocable at reasonable costs are taken on a generalized basis, far in advance of its results.

It is quite clear that almost all economic and social indicators of any importance are object of forecast models, very often consisting of more than one scenario in the sphere of public and private planning. Yet, nevertheless, such estimates are presented among the "official statistics". Population projections are a very common object of statistics institutes but not so many predict the harvest, even though it is extremely important for public authorities to do so. In the case of IBGE, for example, both forecasts are an exception and, in fact, questions are raised about the relevance of predicting harvest in its program of work.[5].

In any case, it calls attention that the perhaps main "agricultural statistics" are not actually statistics but rather forecasts and projections, thereby in this aspect causing agricultural statistics to clearly be a case of its own.

Coverage and permeability

The fact that agriculture has long been an absolutely dominant activity, and is still and has been valid until very recently for many nations, peoples and regions, has left quite a strong mark on the notion of agriculture. Moreover, agriculture was "the way of life" par excellence and today it is still regarded among other views as "a way of life", besides being an economic activity[6]. In fact, agriculture as an inherent activity inseparable from domestic life (agriculture labor) and the commercial agriculture (agriculture work) as employment or social-professional activity coexist and are both important. The continuing importance of agriculture as labor is one of the elements that give a peculiar character to agricultural statistics. This is partly translated also in the relevance that was commonly called a family farm or the major importance of the household sector in the agriculture activity. This structural characteristic caused many topics more related to social statistics to be considered among agricultural statistics and also to bring the agriculture surveys closer to households.

Also, agricultural statistics, coherent with the extensive and dependent character of natural resources in the agriculture activity, have always involved environmental aspects relating to

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[5]   In several countries, production estimates are the task of the statistics institute and forecasts the task of the Ministry of Agriculture. However, it should be mentioned that institutes that provide complete and advanced programmes actually publish data of economic modeling, covering various indicators. This is the case, for example, of Statistics Denmark.

[6]   About a flexible view of agriculture see Offutt (2002)

occupation of territory and rural development. And, as mentioned earlier, the demand and attention to topics in these sectors have been increasing.

Attention in this item is called to the natural coverage and permeability of agricultural statistics in a wide variety of topics, which is not found in other sectoral statistics.

This characteristic gives it a special exceptional status, intermediary to the large thematic fields. And it should be stressed that such a status reiterates its specificity and reflects in the techniques, methods and procedures adopted in its production.

Business agriculture

It is assumed that there are many countries for which business agriculture is of lesser importance. On the other hand, for many others it weights heavily. In many cases, namely Brazil and other Latin American countries, this refers in fact to remote origins of land occupation in large-scale private explorations. Moreover, the structuring and continuing spread of agroindustrial chains over the decades has fortified professional administration and business agriculture. And in any case, it can even be said that for the economy and supply in global terms business agriculture is decisive.

Considering this, attention is also called to the fact that agriculture hardly figures (or not at all) in the recommendations and colloquies organised around what are normally called business surveys.

Perhaps this can be partly explained by the persisting romantic and "stereotypical view of agriculture, of a diversified operation of a certain size, worked by a farm family, feeding themselves and their fellow citizens with the fruits of their hard labor" (Offutt 2003 p. 42), since it meets the objectives of economic benefits in access to public funds, yet is not justifiable. Business agriculture activities, fundamentally similar to the other business activities, should also figure as such.

Methods and validation

In agricultural statistics production, we find processes that are valid and combine techniques and sources as wide as censuses, administrative data, sample surveys, area and list frame, calibration, small area estimation, auxiliary variables, GIS and remote sensing, etc., as in FAO (2005), FAO (1996), World Bank (2010), Benedetti et all (2010), and so on. The farm holding, household and parcel of land are considered as relevant units of investigation. The following are used: agribusiness like data source; combined operation alternatives with population censuses and household surveys, in addition to frames based on different alternatives: population census enumeration areas, household registers from the population census, agriculture census enumeration areas, registers of farms from the agriculture census, business registrations or tax collections and other administrative sources, area sample frames, multiple frames.

It is also possible to mention the use of specific techniques as agrometereological models, measurements on photos and satellite images, field measurements with or without GPS, crop cutting surveys, laboratory measurements, etc. In practice we also find recourse to indirect estimates, specialized know-how, subjective surveys, direct observation, opinion polls, and so on. In FAO (1987) there is mention of compiling data from official and also officious channels "which should not be omitted as legitimate sources of information" (p. 37). *Global strategy* mentions expert judgment and windshield surveys, but specifically in relation to assessment of crop conditions (World Bank, 2010, p.26). However, the use of expedients heavily based on subjective information is the source for many agricultural statistics [7]. Lastly, also worth mentioning is the extensive use of boards for analysis and definition and approval of official data in agriculture.

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[7]   See, e.g., Levantamento..., Documento... (2005) and, especially, CSA (2009) p.20. where is recorded a very interesting case of an agreement and reconciliation between the subjective data from the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture (MOARD) and the data obtained by probabilistic sampling surveys conducted by its Institute of Statistics (CSA), after decades of divergent estimates.

The multiplicity and extreme variability of techniques, survey procedures and investigation and validation methods and criteria that mark agricultural statistics are noticeable. Amongst other factors, this differentiation is rooted in the various kinds of information that it embraces, in the occurrence (and relevance) of a wide range of informants (large corporations to small illiterate farmers) and also the availability of media and information that we find in each country. Some of these factors may be present in relation to other sectors but, worth considering, no similar range of recommendations, possibilities and practices is found in the process of producing their statistics.

Some of the characteristics and multiplicity seems to be specific for applying the statistical knowledge of agriculture, although it is considered possible and desirable to achieve greater standardization and around the more traditional practices of statistics in general and official statistics in particular.

4. Final considerations

It must be admitted that agricultural statistics is a special case. This conclusion informs especially the particular way of structuring a large part of its main statistics and the diversity of methods and techniques that it uses. Some of these are explanatory factors of this condition, the multiplicity of types of information that has been included in its programme and the distinctive profile from the units comprising the sector.

It must also be considered that many of its specific features have a parallel or are present in the statistical practices relating to other segments of activity, or are more highlighted with regard to the intensity of occurrence of related phenomena. In other words, in general they are not exclusive peculiarities but also stand out because they appear together.

It is also apparent that agricultural statistics are quite accustomed to integration, keeping various thematic and operational interfaces. It could be said that (greater) integration is required first by the actual statistics system and not specifically by agricultural statistics.

Integration from a technical viewpoint is particularly important when investigating mutual aspects of different sectors, when care must be taken to standardise concepts; investigating related matters or linked activities when it is necessary to establish mechanisms that assure coherence of the statistics produced, and when there is a coincidence or overlap of the target population and investigation units, when coordination of registers, samples, surveys and working procedures must be observed in order to optimise the use of resources, and to avoid burdening respondents. In such cases, however, the task transcends the administration and enhancement specific to agricultural statistics and implies a higher coordination of the statistical system.

Another question refers to the known specificities in the execution of statistical surveys focusing on the agriculture sector and topics. Some characteristics and multiplicity of procedures adopted seem to belong to the application of statistical knowledge of agriculture. On the other hand, it is clearly possible and desirable to achieve further standardisation and around the more consecrated practices in general and official statistics in particular. And this agenda is essential for enhancing agricultural statistics.

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ANNEX

Classification of Statistical Activities - UNSD
Updated on 15 June, 2006

Classification of Statistical Activities – UNECE*
(CSA REV. 1 - October 2009)

030 General statistics

031 Demographic and social statistics
1. Demographic statistics
2. Population statistics
   i. Population censuses
   ii. Statistics on population groups of special interest
3. Housing statistics
   i. Housing censuses
   ii. Other housing statistics
4. Labour statistics
5. Education and training statistics
6. Culture statistics including mass communication
7. Statistics of household income and expenditure and their distribution
8. Social security statistics
9. Health statistics
10. Gender statistics
11. Other social, demographic and related statistics

032 Economic statistics
1. National accounts
2. Agriculture statistics
3. Forestry and fishery statistics
4. Industrial statistics
5. Energy statistics
6. Distributive trade statistics
7. International trade statistics
   i. Trade in goods
   ii. Trade in services
8. Transport statistics
9. Communication statistics
10. Tourism statistics
11. Statistics of services not included elsewhere
12. Money, finance and insurance statistics
13. Fiscal statistics
14. Balance of payments statistics
15. Prices statistics
16. Statistics of science, technology and patents
17. Other economic statistics

033 Natural resources and environment statistics
1. Natural resources and environment statistics
2. Natural resources and environment accounting
3. Meteorology statistics

034 Activities not classified by field
1. Organization and operation of statistical services
2. Technical infrastructure and other cross-cutting issues
3. Dissemination and support for secretariat activities
4. Other activities not classified by field

Source: UNDS (2006) Classification of Statistical Activities. Available at: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statact/acc-class.htm. Access: May 2011.

Domain 1: Demographic and social statistics
1.1 Population and migration
1.2 Labour
1.3 Education
1.4 Health
1.5 Income and consumption
1.6 Social protection
1.7 Human settlements and housing
1.8 Justice and crime
1.9 Culture
1.10 Political and other community activities
1.11 Time use

Domain 2: Economic statistics
2.1 Macroeconomic statistics
2.2 Economic accounts
2.3 Business statistics
2.4 Sectoral statistics
2.4.1 Agriculture, forestry, fisheries
2.4.2 Energy
2.4.3 Mining, manufacturing, construction
2.4.4 Transport
2.4.5 Tourism
2.4.6 Banking, insurance, financial statistics
2.5 Government finance, fiscal and public sector statistics
2.6 International trade and balance of payments
2.7 Prices
2.8 Labour cost
2.9 Science, technology and innovation

Domain 3: Environment and multi-domain statistics
3.1 Environment
3.2 Regional and small area statistics
3.3 Multi-domain statistics and indicators
3.3.1 Living conditions, poverty and cross-cutting social issues
3.3.2 Gender and special population groups
3.3.3 Information society
3.3.4 Globalisation
3.3.5 Indicators related to the Millennium Development Goals
3.3.6 Sustainable development
3.3.7 Entrepreneurship
3.4 Yearbooks and similar compendia

Domain 4: Methodology of data collection, processing, dissemination and analysis

Domain 5 - Strategic and managerial issues of official statistics

Source: UNECE (2009) Classification of Statistical Activities: CSA REV. 1 - October 2009. Available at: http://www1.unece.org/stat/platform/ download/attachments/58492889/Classification+of+statistical+activities.pdf ?version=1 Access: May 2011.

* Items of domains 4 and 5 not included.