

Pali Lehohla Statistician General South Africa

## The Statistician-General in the twenty first century

Paper presented in Ramallah, Palestine to commemorate the 20th  
Anniversary of Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics

23-September-2013

I have been invited to discuss the topic on the role of, depending on the nomenclature in countries, the statistician-general, or the chief statistician or the president or the chairperson of official statistics office or authority in the 21st Century.

I was appointed on the 23 of November 2000. I am South Africa's first Statistician-General, and for that matter the first black to head the statistics office since its establishment by parliament on the 7th of July 1914. Next year in 2014, the statistics office shall be a hundred years, eighty of these years will be under apartheid and twenty will be statistical practice under democracy.

I am pleased that Ms Ola Awad, IAOS President Elect for 2015-2017, is in charge since 2011 to present, after Dr Luay Shabeneh who was president of the office from 2005-2010 following on Dr Hasan Abu Libdeh who headed the office from 1993 to 2005. Dr Libdeh was scheduled to be at the UNSC in 2006 March where the case of Palestine was scheduled to be discussed, but he was denied visa to enter the United States and no one could table the matter. Nonetheless the Statistics Bureau of Palestine is in good hands and its succession is working well since it was established. Succession is what I

[23-September-2013]

## Pali Lehohla Statistician General South Africa

am thinking about now as I am at that number of years that Dr Libdeh was when he handed over and I can see it in action from your side. You now have a new building, it is something that only begins to be a reality in South Africa when we turn the sod in September and we will occupy our building in three years time. You are now celebrating twenty years, it is something I shall do next year. So there is a lot of learning I have to do. So thank you for inviting me Ms Awad to share in your luminous success. As I saw the wall and the high fence, security with guns I thought of home, South Africa, twenty years ago, I could relate the existence of this to limits to freedom in this part of the world. Having secured freedom back home in South Africa we however have a different form of threat to freedom. It is crime and violent crime in part emanating from the triple challenge of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

Post 2015 agenda will have to do with sustainable development and global peace including desire for more equitable societies, less wars, less terror and terrorism and instability across the world. Measurement of these types of phenomena would be desirable in the future for a world that lives in harmony. A world that Martin Luther King said he had seen, a world that Mandela fought for, a world we pray that the leadership in the middle east can move towards and achieve.

After spending four years in office, in 2004, I identified five key areas that demand or seizes the faculty of any statistician-general. First focus consists of the content area and in the main the statistical work and its production.

## Pali Lehohla Statistician General South Africa

Second focus area is ability to manage and lead technology as an indivisible component of statistics. Third focus is the brain and appetite logistics and resolving gridlocks of connected yet parallel runs of the system. Fourth is management and having the auditor general assessment providing a good health bill to the organisation and finally being astute politically. Out of the analysis of these five areas of focus emerge the true nature and character of the statistics product. It is the most public of goods and most amenable to the world of technological networks. In fact H G Wells was very correct in saying that statistical thinking will one day be as necessary to humanity as is the ability to read and write. So the head of statistics is an exposed person.

I will choose to use the title statistician-general as this is what the person responsible for statistics in South Africa is known as. I would have preferred the title of president because of the ambiguity and the collateral benefits it would trickle to the head of statistics on occasions when communing with political power. This is not a matter to take lightly as I will illustrate. A former statistician-general of a certain republic, was supposed to join other statisticians-general in August 2009 at the prestigious 57th Session of the International Statistics Institute in Durban, South Africa when we sadly learnt that he was no longer going to be with us. At the same time we happily learnt that there is life after statistics. He became the first statistician general I ever knew of to be a prime minister. He became a prime minister of a certain republic. He became a political head of a country without a political party on the 8th May 2009. The story of this former chairman of statistics is an

## Pali Lehohla Statistician General South Africa

illustrious one and worth telling as it possibly provides a platform of what privileges and insights statisticians have about society. He started his career in statistics office in 1982 and was promoted to a director in the statistics office in 1985 and later was promoted to the position of deputy chairperson of that statistics office. He supervised a transition from a collapsed federation and supervised a new statistics office of a new republic. As deputy chair of the statistics office he oversaw the first free elections in his country and supervised all subsequent elections of representative bodies in the republic. A decade later in 2000, he was dismissed from his position as deputy Chair and took a job in a private sector before IMF sent him to East Timor in 2001 on a UN mission to establish a new statistics office there. By March 2002 he joined academia and became head of research facilities at the Economics University's faculty of Informatics and Statistics. In 2003 he was asked to be the chairperson of the Statistics office after a gap of three years from that office. After serving for seven years as chairperson of the statistics office Jan Fisher was appointed care taker prime minister on the 8th of May 2009 of the Czech Republic after a motion of vote of no confidence was passed on the government of Mirek Topolanek. He ran the caretaker government for 13 months and arranged a democratic election that ended his term in June 2010. Upon handing over government in June 2010, he was selected as a Vice President of the European Bank for International Reconstruction in September 2010 where he has a four year term ending in 2014. By the way, Jan Fisher declared his interest to go into politics and was a runner for presidency in the 2013 elections but lost in the first round.

## Pali Lehohla Statistician General South Africa

I have found the story of Jan Fisher very fascinating in that it captures some of the twists and turns in life of a statistician or what society expects from them.

Another fascinating story in the world of statistics is that of Canada. The statistics office of Canada is ranked amongst the best and I have worked with StatCan and over ten years benefited immensely from a retired Jacob Ryten whose depth and width both of subject matter and political savvy in matters statistics is beyond reproach. But in recent times Canada has not dressed itself in glory and its statistician general Dr Munir Shaik resigned on the basis of this professional indignity. Canada decided to change the method of conducting its five yearly census which consists of two forms, one long the other short, both historically mandatory. Canada in its recent census of the population decided to have the long form answered voluntarily. Its former statistician general, and long serving Dr Ivan Fellegi, (he served for over four decades having started his career in the sixties and being at the helm for 23 years and retiring in 2008) wrote to Prime Minister, His Excellency Harper, protesting that his government is violating the fundamental principles of official statistics. So professionally disturbed and disappointed by this conduct and practice of his country Fellegi wrote as follows and *Jan Fisher would have been in such a discussion as he was part of the Soviet Union then.*

*"Some twenty years ago I was attending the Conference of the European Statisticians. The Soviet block had just recently collapsed and we were all*

*ceased by the urgent need to help the so-called "transition countries" to adapt to the standards and values of developed democratic countries. Someone had the brainwave of committing to paper codification of long held basic values that we all shared. I remember my reactions at the time: first of all, Canada certainly does not need them. More generally I thought that, whatever the country, it is too bad if one has to spell out black on white basic truths. However, I understood that the "transition countries" did not as yet have the time to develop the broadly shared values that in developed countries have already served as the underpinnings of official statistics for decades. So I went along with the idea and actually played a role in drafting the text. The result, after its adoption by the United Nations, came to be known as the Fundamental Principles of Official statistics. Little did I guess that twenty years later I will be referring to them as something to which Canada has to re-dedicate itself."*<sup>1</sup>

Armine Yalnizyan argued that "Without this information, (on the long form) we cannot make informed decisions about where to plan the next extension of public transit, or where to target different types of health resources... the knowledge it offers forms the backbone of our society, an information society that needs and wants to know about itself." Responding to this concern Fellegi said "If you can't trust the evidence, you would be stupid to make decisions based on the evidence...Trust is utterly fundamental"

---

<sup>1</sup> Ivan Fellegi on Census 2011 of Canada where the fundamental principles were flaunted

Argentine poses a different perspective in relation to official statistics. In 2010, Graciela Bevacqua, who was responsible for running Indec's CPI, told a Senate hearing that Moreno, the minister responsible for Statistics, had pressured her to doctor inflation data so it would appear innocuously low. Mrs. Bevacqua said that she was "persecuted and pressured everyday to change the numbers" and accused Mr. Moreno of bullying her and other Indec staffers. Other Indec employees have told similar stories. As of 13 September this year, Minister Moreno is said to be facing criminal charges that carry a sentence of two years in jail if found guilty for abusing his authority and levying fines of up to half a million pesos for publishing independent data. It is early days but this sends a signal of a turning tide against political interference in the production of statistics in Argentine.

In Greece the Hellenic statistician-general Georgios is embattled with his authorities and more lately with his ex board members who petitioned the ISI in a letter sent to the 59th session of the Statistics Congress. They allege that the ISI is in cahoots with ELSTAT and IMF and would like to see Georgios brought to book for producing inflated debt to GDP ratio thus causing the Greek intolerable suffering. EUROSTAT and ISI have stood by Mr Georgios. However he continues to be under threat of court and possible jail sentence.

South Africa has remained in the news with its Census of 2011 and in particular the fact that the statistician-general is alleged to have caused the arrest of one of his member of staff for theft of documents following charges

of dereliction of duty to two of its staff members in methodology. South Africa generally experiences high under count. The officials who were responsible for the PES were negligent and were accordingly taken through disciplinary hearing. One of the staff members was due for retirement and any finding in the disciplinary process would have not made an impact. The one who remained was found guilty by an independent chairperson and was accordingly dismissed. The media has had a field day on the matter and placed the organisation under interesting pressure.

There was a statistically significant difference between the preliminary population estimates of the 2011 Post Enumeration Survey as presented in August and one published in October 2012. The difference arose because in the August result the PES methodology was not executed exhaustively, thus generating a total population with significant inherent biases at the level of sub-groups.

The second significant difference was at the level of provinces arising out of both clerical omissions and methodological errors in the computation of the PES. The final results of the PES showed that the undercount in Census 2011 was 14.6% instead of the 18.3% presented earlier to the Statistician-General in July 2012.

The statistics office is the most public of offices in countries and they enjoy no protection in as far as they are intellectual and idea products. Why is it that statistics enjoys no protection? By its nature as a key to knowledge, statistics cannot be protected, they are free to be accessed and as such free to be

criticized. The statistician-general is the most public personality in any country and remains by profession the most exposed. As a public good necessary to be accessed by everyone, everywhere and simultaneously, statistics of a nation are therefore products consumed globally and the statistician-general is part of that global meal. Unlike other category of products, activities and outputs both physical and virtual such as water, politics and manufactured goods are goods for domestic consumption. Elections and politics have a very strong domestic market and consumers and the terms of discourse in politics have markets of clearly defined contenders. On the other hand statistics is information whose audience is both local and global and ideas float and critique can come from any quarter.

The media is another important constituency in statistical production. They can make or break the statistics office.

Both at home and abroad I have had to manage the media by answering very difficult questions and more recently I have had to deal with questions relating to the a sequel of events emanating from Professor Jerven's book on "Poor numbers: How we are misled by African Development Statistics and What to do about it." We have, as Africans, been very critical of Prof Jerven's book and more recently the 18 of September he was not able to present at the ECA in Addis because we objected not to his findings but we questioned the robustness of his methods and research. Whilst Africa does have problems and challenges in official statistics, they are not of the nature and extent that the work of Prof Jerven articulates. Prof Jerven has not acquainted himself

with the strategies, programmes of action, statistical projects and results that are emerging out of Africa. The lack of research into these range of more recent activities that span a decade or more are not referenced in Prof Jerven's research. Thus it renders his findings sterile.

Not only is work of international academia overseeing statistical work in countries but the UN agencies as well always generate information that is very worrisome since they do not use data produced locally. In 2011 I submitted a response to the UNDP Human Development Report objecting

**Statement made by Mr. Pali Lehohla, Statistician-General, Statistics South Africa on agenda item 3(j) "Statistics of human development"**

I have never felt the urge and the urgency for the implementation of the United Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics as I feel it today. These principles have served us well in the past and indeed they will serve us even better today and in the future, and their institutionalised implementation will even serve us better. I am convinced that the UNDP report and the controversy it has raised presents us with a distinct concrete opportunity for moving ahead with speed on an institutionalised process of the implementation of the fundamental principles.

The UNDP may be independent and yes we accept such as their status, but such a status of independence must correspond and be governed by principle 2 of the UN fundamental principles of official statistics and unfortunately this is where their tenet for independence is weakest. Given this

fatal failure the UNDP report then fails the test of principle 9 and 10. In this regard we are justified to read the riot act as enshrined in principle 4 which relates to comments against wrong use of statistics and or their interpretation.

The fact that the UNDP raised in the past its position of independence, brings centre stage the question of the responsibility of the UNSC as well as the role of UNSD in the UN family in relation to the coordination of statistics, including its status in the hierarchy. Needless to mention that when we petitioned the Secretary General on GIVAS which is now succeeded by Global Pulse, similar issues of the responsibility of the UNSC, and the role and hierarchical form of the UNSD in the UN family architecture becomes critical and requires addressing. We need to address this matter comprehensively.

The release of the UNDP report shortly after the Secretary General released the MDG report created conditions for excitement, particularly in relation to the contradictory figures that emerged subsequently. This made for public dismay at the UN circus and a comedy of errors in the UN family of numbers. In country, some heads of statistics were summoned to explain this circus.

This august body established in 1947 has served us well in enhancing world peace. It cannot be reduced to a spectre of ridicule and be regarded as a circus play field. It has to be protected. The blood rush to the head by the UNDP to release the report and particularly shortly after the MDG report despite the cautions given by the UNSC on data quality matters and consultations leaves several questions unanswered and these questions will

remain unanswered if we fall short on our historic mission of implementing the fundamental principles of official statistics. Mr Chair, I have never felt the urge and the urgency for the implementation of the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics as I feel it at this very moment.

## **Conclusion**

A 21st century statistician-general is one like Jan Fisher, who at the time of crisis could deliver his country as a technocrat who could be a Prime Minister. He illustrated beyond doubt that he had political skills. A 21st statistician-general is one like Fellegi who would come back and question the political integrity of his government on technical merit. A 21st century statistician-general should be like Georgios of Greece who stood his ground even against his former board members and protected the integrity of measurement. In South Africa in the 21st century we have taken on the local intellectuals and moved abroad to drive a pan African agenda through the integrity of statistics and continue to challenge methods including at the UN level. We know we are not perfect and we start by critiquing ourselves. In Palestine by asking the difficult questions including assessment of the impact of the wall on citizens is part and parcel of measuring social concerns. In the twenty years of your existence at CBS, you provide us a theatre for measuring against odds and showing that you can do better thereby providing us insights into detente and peaceful coexistence. Given the space you have extended the possibilities of measurement and thus

providing your community and the world at large important lessons that should inform the 21st Century Statistician General.

### **On institutional reforms on the statistics system of evidence**

Given that the system of evidence of official statistics remains very vulnerable compared to the judicial and the supreme audits systems of evidence, but as equally risky, we call on the Commission to initiate urgent work on the institutional arrangements for official statistics at all levels, nationally and globally, with the view of according it the same institutional conditions as are accorded the judiciary and supreme audits.

### **On the appointment and removal of Chief Statistician**

We call on the Commission to urgently look into the terms and conditions for the appointment and removal of the Chief Statistician with the view of elevating such to similar considerations as accorded heads of other systems of evidence such as the judiciary and supreme audits.

### **On history and learning**

Welcome the High Level Seminars and trust that they can serve as environments in which we can learn and share experiences of what represents and causes failure and what are the conditions for success in

## Pali Lehohla Statistician General South Africa

implementing the Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics. Indeed the case of South Africa and Canada and many others as on Boskin Commission in the United States remain fundamental to keeping us aware of what goes wrong and how it gets fixed no matter how painful.

"Official statistics provide an indispensable element of the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information".

---