



Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

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de l'**UNESCO**



Colloque international  
« **La Mesure du Développement** »  
Paris, 1<sup>er</sup>, 2 et 3 février 2012

International Conference  
“**Measuring development**”  
Paris, 1<sup>st</sup> to 3 February 2012

Coloquio internacional  
“**Medir el desarrollo**”  
París, 1, 2 y 3 de febrero 2012

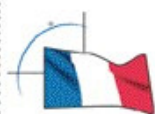
**Présentation**

**Presentation**

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Organisation  
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Commission  
nationale française  
pour l'UNESCO

**PARIS 8**  
UNIVERSITE  
VINCENNES - SAINT-DENIS

International Conference  
Paris, 1<sup>st</sup> to 3 February 2012

## **“Measuring development”**

**How science and politics work together**

The debate on measuring economic performance and social progress has concerned development specialists for decades. In the current climate, marked by the increase in inequalities in the countries of the North and by rapid change in certain countries of the South, the age-old question of measuring development has taken a new form. These changes lead us to review both statistical concepts and measuring tools. More often than not, these have been the subject of technical and intellectual exportation from the countries of the North, where they were designed and used, towards developing countries. Export in the opposite direction is far scarcer.

Henceforth, in studying the processes of development, researchers and experts have the choice of a range of quantitative tools which can renew the methods of measuring these processes. An abundance of information backed up by figures, which also concerns the qualitative aspects, is apparently increasingly accessible thanks to ICT. In reality, the specific terms of access to these data (confidentiality, fees) and the differentiated conditions between the North and the South (digital discrepancy) should be examined.

However, beyond this issue of access, the question of legitimacy of the broadly disseminated data and indicators is more important than ever. These data and indicators provided by the various producers of information are too often given an almost magical aura and are used without caution in social and political debate.

In many cases, we could point to an intellectual and scientific coup de force when the general public is overwhelmed by measurements. The abundance of these measurements often hides the absence of a strict definition of the object. The issue of the relevance of these different indicators used to measure and identify economic and social development is therefore raised. These indicators also increasingly serve to legitimise types of intervention and operating modes of aid and policies of development.

While the debates on the measurement of economic performance and social progress more often than not adopt a technical stance, this technicality must not mask the challenges linked to measurement. The orientation and content of these measurements are not neutral. Their political, ideological and social dimensions are essential. The universalism of the measuring methods, the comparability of data and the interrelation of analytical and statistical concepts must be examined with regard to the specificities of the countries and regions.

These considerations will be at the heart of the proposed dialogue and discussions focusing on a number of major questions.

### **Question 1) How are figures and indicators produced? (technical challenges)**

The debates relating to the measurement of economic performance and social progress more often than not have a technical focus. For a statistician, however, data could only be incorrect in the event of a recording or calculation error. A correct measurement complies with the definition of the method used to obtain it. Thus, the figures and indicators only hold true if the manner in which they are constructed and the hypotheses on which they are based are clearly explained and even simplified.

The conditions and means of collecting basic data should also be specified with a view to estimating their reliability, an issue which is particularly important in the countries of the South where statistical mechanisms are weak.

Certain figures today are produced using increasingly sophisticated tools which disconnect, or distance, the result from the initial observation as is the case with simulation data. These and other approaches give us reason to examine the distance between the real world and the world as represented by figures.

### **Question 2) Who produces these figures and indicators? (political challenges)**

Figures and indicators are the result of a social, historical, ideological and theoretical construct. They are produced by a number of operators whose respective positions and relations should be analysed. Prescribers, financiers and producers are not necessarily united and may have differing objectives.

The measurements produced may differ according to:

- the status (associations, firms, think tanks, administrations, international organisations, etc.) of the parties responsible for their production;
- the production site;
- the territorial and time scale according to which they are produced;
- the technicians who provide them, their training, their intellectual and political autonomy.

Is economic and social history written first and foremost by the winners? Who are they? Which processes are at work? Answering these questions contributes to explaining the state of data available in numerous developing countries or in the essential related spheres.

### **Question 3) Figures and scientific truth (epistemological and theoretical challenges)**

Measurement results from an attempt to objectivise reality and requires reality to be categorised. This raises the fundamental question of the nature of the reality that we want to measure, the scientific value of this measurement and the disparity which appears between the measurement and this reality.

When conceptual work is abandoned and replaced by instrumentalist logic whereby theory is simply a tool, the use of measurement finds its place in a reduced and simplistic scientific perspective. Hence, certain quantitative works referring to development institutions take no account of what is hoped to be achieved by performing a measurement: the chance to obtain access to data replaces the task of definition.

As a counterpoint to what measurement records, the omissions, neglected questions and simplifications arising from the choices governing the measurement itself begin to appear. These outstanding aspects may in turn open up other lines of investigation or discussion.

Another epistemological challenge is that of the influence of the observer on the results. A traditional question in the fields of anthropology, ethnology or sociology, this question is not common in development economics where the culture of figures and the introduction of new measurements nevertheless have a real effect on the validity of the results.

The role of figures in scientific rhetoric must not overstate their value as elements of proof. This critical distancing enables the practice of number worship to be called into question. Questioning the role of numbers and measurement has become primordial while at the same time the different social science disciplines dealing with the question of development have seen their production marked by an increasingly important role of measurement. This evolution is not without consequence on the symbolic hierarchy of scientific works and disciplines.

### **Question 4) Access to statistical information (dissemination challenges)**

Statistical information may appear to be a collective good. However, possession of such information confers power and is a potential source of gain for the owner. It is therefore often the case that only a part of this information is disseminated, and the inequalities of access may be considerable due to:

- its cost, if there is an associated fee;
- its accessibility (digital discrepancy);
- political control strategies;
- private appropriation.

## Question 5) Measurement as an instrument of power (power challenges)

How are these figures and indicators used in politics?

They are used in speeches, in defining and evaluating policies, in international comparisons and scientific works, in particular in defining models of decision-making aids. From an operational point of view, this is precisely the case: measuring interventions in the field of development either to validate the objectives of aid and development policies or to modify or purely and simply forget them.

Comparative indicators or performance indicators, developed for specific objects or contexts such as development project evaluation mechanisms, may be transformed into standards. As a result, they become a constraint requiring the compliance of the operators and the development policies.

In a context of increasing evaluations, the process of transforming figures and indicators into national or international standards would seem to be an essential political objective.

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**The papers proposed may have a technical content, examine the analysis of a specific indicator or contribute to considerations on the objectives of measuring development. They are prepared by authors from several different disciplines and examine different areas of action in the field of development.**

### Schedule

The call for papers is closed since the end of June 2011.

The texts of the papers selected must be received by the organising committee no later than **15<sup>th</sup> December 2011**

### Guidelines

The paper outlines, totalling fewer than 800 words, must contain the following elements (see attached file):

- name(s) and institution(s) of the author(s)
- positioning in relation to the call for contributions
- problem
- methodology(ies)
- main references

The texts of the papers must not exceed 8,000 words.

GEMDEV – Centre Malher – 9 rue Malher – 75181 Paris cedex 4 – France  
Tel + 33 (0)1 44 78 33 15 – Fax + 33 (0)1 44 78 33 88 – [gemdev@univ-paris1.fr](mailto:gemdev@univ-paris1.fr)  
[www.gemdev.org](http://www.gemdev.org)