RESENHA

JERVEN, Morten. *Poor numbers. How we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it.* Ithaca, United States/London: Cornell University Press, 2013. 176p.

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Morten Jerven's conclusion to the question "how good are Africa's national account estimates?" is that numbers are poor. Throughout his book, the author shows that poor numbers are a combination of insufficient technical accuracy as well as arbitrariness of and guesswork behind the quantification process, greatly due to the lack of data. Thus, the importance of this book is clear. Policies to achieve certain goals, for example the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, rely on statistical data to allocate resources. Given that numbers are poor, what we know about economic development in sub-Saharan Africa is deficient. Judgements are made on an erroneous basis and governments are unable to make informed decisions. No development aims can be reached on these grounds. Lastly, from a historical perspective, interpretations of the growth process in African countries are misleading due to these poor numbers.

The author defines his work as a study of the production and use of African economic development statistics. He focuses his analysis on the estimates of the gross domestic product (GDP) since it is the key indicator used to rank and rate the wealth and progress of countries. Moreover, given that these estimates draw upon information collected by different subdivisions of the statistical offices, they are a pivotal example of how statistical systems work. His work is centred on detailed information of Anglophone Africa.

Among his main findings, he shows that patterns of statistical capacity follow the broader trajectory of African economies. Data, throughout history, has been based on educated guesses, competing

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and debatable assumptions. Jerven highlights and exemplifies three features of data gathering in Africa in the twentieth century. First, there is discontinuity between colonial and postcolonial data collection. For example, colonial accounts rarely registered agricultural and industrial production, and focused, for example, on imports, exports, tax collection, education and health facilities. Second, due to the lack of reliable data of the agricultural sector, competing methods and assumptions were used. The final estimates are a matter of discretion of statistical offices. Third, the change from the developmental state (1960s and 1970s) to the liberalised state (of the 1990s) shifted and reduced the outlook of the state. Access to data and political priorities changed and thus statistical offices had to make adjustments in their assumptions, generating an effect on the statistical capacity of states. Lastly, Jerven suggests that new baseline estimates are needed for all African countries, which are based on local conditions and not only on international standardisation. A new structure of funding for statistical offices is needed to meet this.

Jerven recognises that the problem of the politics and accuracy of numbers is not circumscribed to Africa. He acknowledges that it is regarding this continent where less studies have analysed the role, power and quality of numbers. His work is guided by Porter's (1995) definition of the validity of numbers as power. Jerven clearly stresses the links between a state's ability to collect information and taxes, and categorises these activities as essential parts of "public politics", central to the actions of the state (following Tilly, 2004). Moreover, the author bases his analysis of the current situation of statistical offices in sub-Saharan Africa in Merry's (2011) description of how the production and usage of indicators may have a knowledge effect and a governance effect.

The book is structured as follows. In chapter one, after describing the notion of national accounts, the author provides a general picture of the basic methods used by the statistical agencies of the Anglophone countries of sub-Saharan Africa to estimate these numbers. Jerven also enumerates the central data providers and the different stakeholders involved. He shows that national income statistics are a result of pragmatic decisions at the statistical offices that are subject to the availability of data, financial resources, and political instructions. In this chapter, the author puts together an interesting table that compares different data sets of GDP estimates, showing how these African economies rank in each of them. There are large disparities in how each of the countries are positioned in the those lists. As a result, he demonstrates how little we actually know about growth and income in Africa.

The second chapter is closely linked to the first, and focuses on the analysis of data as products and not as facts. Jerven displays the primary sources and methods used at different times and places in sub-Saharan Africa to estimate national accounts in order to grasp the size of the estimate errors found in the previous chapter. The author shows how the changes in priorities and power of these countries reflect on the production of national statistical data. Through specific examples, he demonstrates how different development policy inclinations in different countries affected the way economic activities were accounted for. Different approaches to national account estimates, as well as changing needs and demands for them, existed in the colonial period, relative to the independent and developmental years and the lost decades of 1980 and 1990. That is, the role of the state and the statistics it produced changed with the power of the African states: the statistical capacity of African states expanded substantially during the late colonial and early postcolonial era, and was weakened during the 1970s. Statistical offices were neglected during the 1980s and 1990s, the decades of structural adjustment. Consequently, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank designed reforms without knowing the real situation of these economies.

Once Jerven described the problems behind national statistical accounts, in chapter three he demonstrates, with the help of case studies, how and why data quality matters. The cases he chooses show how different sets of data or different versions of the same estimates are in direct conflict with each other. The datasets support opposite scholarly interpretations and thus the policy implications are contradictory. The examples emphasise the need to approach these matters from a political economy perspective and not solely focus on the technical aspects of statistical production.

The fourth chapter focuses on the current state of affairs at statistical offices across sub-Saharan Africa. It is based mainly on interviews carried out by the author in different statistical offices in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Malawi between 2007 and 2010. It gives insights to development scholars and policymakers in order for them to be better data users. Jerven suggests that new estimates are needed in most African countries, based on local applicability and not only on theoretical or political preference. His policy recommendation is not solely more funds towards data collection, but also a strengthening of the legitimacy of statistical offices.

The Appendix is of vital importance for future research. It compiles and compares the GDP data for 35 sub-Saharan African countries of two different sources: the World Development Indicators and each country's official national statistical office.

The book is clearly a result of many years of meticulous and thorough research. This can be seen in the endless country examples referenced as well as in the different data sets managed. Jerven's analysis follows an interdisciplinary approach, as he combines knowledge from development economics, statistics, political science, history. It is an excellent summary of all those years of research as well as an outstanding combination of those different disciplinary frameworks.

The evidence in this book further undermines the current tendency in development economics towards large studies with cross-country regressions. Poor numbers result in nonsense or misleading findings that render an inaccurate economic history of postcolonial Africa. Thus, Jerven emphasises the importance that quantitative analysis is based in careful criticism of the sources and supplemented by qualitative investigation. The blame should be shared between the non-transparent ways datasets are made and the uncritical way data is consumed.

Given the complexity of the issues it enlightens, this book is not only of interest to African scholars. It sheds light on several issues regarding statistics and economic development as well as politics and the accuracy of numbers and it is a contribution to the debate on the use of numbers in social sciences. For those of us researching with extreme detail at the statistical apparatuses of the countries of the Americas, especially of the Southern Cone, this book is a breath of fresh air. It is concrete evidence that we are lucky because our object of study could be much more complex and obscure. Nevertheless, his book reminds us to look as closely as possible at the statistics production process, its context and its history, as well as at final outcome, which are the numbers in themselves. Jerven's book can be used as a starting point of comparison between the two regions.

Other dimensions and categories can be introduced in the analysis which would bring a more thorough understanding of the existence of poor numbers in Africa. Bringing other authors to the study (Desrosières, 1998; Prévost and Beaud, 2012, just to name a few) could shed even more light on how the statistical capacity of African countries has changed and how it can be improved.

This book is a great summary of the statistical issues of Africa, past and present, focused on national account estimates. It opens the door to and generates a need for subsequent, more detailed research on country, as well as indicator, specificities. This further research can perhaps focus on the political role of statistical agencies.

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