

Federal Bureau of statistics and the draft bill

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The evidence generating institutional arrangements of a state qualify to be its fourth pillar, since evidence constitutes the basis of decisions in every state domain. Within this context, the draft bill to make the Federal Bureau of Statistics (FBS) an independent body, scheduled to be presented in the next parliamentary session assumes great importance. The bill uses grant of autonomy as an instrument to create a new agency—Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS)—by restructuring and reorganizing three existing data collection organizations. The rationale and design for this approach has been published in a paper titled “Challenges in data collection in a developing country: the Pakistan experiences as a way forward” in the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) and has been authored by a former Secretary of the Statistics Division.

Legislation in this area is of tremendous significance, which is why the context, connotations, limitations, implications and imperatives related to this bill must be understood.

Before a few points in relation to these aspects are discussed, it must be appreciated that official statistics are one source of data in a national information system. The overall purpose of this system is to generate and communicate evidence for planning, monitoring and reviews related to decision-making.

There are two constraints in relation to the use of evidence in relation to state policy and strategy in Pakistan. The first is paucity of usable evidence whereas the second impediment is the culture of decision-making based on convention, personal interests, anecdotal evidence, and/or political expediency. While the determinants of the second constraint are embedded in a complex interplay of governance and over-arching political factors, the first constraint can be overcome to a large extent by strengthening the institutional pillars of the national information system, of which a statistical agency is a part.

Based on information in the public domain, it is evident that the bill has some useful clauses. For example, merging FBS with the Agriculture Census Organization and Population Census Organization can help reduce recurrent costs and eliminate duplication. User's council mandated through the legislation can be an inclusive approach, whereas the focus on capacity building, career planning of professional staff, upgrading of skills, and the creation of a fund is, at the least, a needed recognition of the importance of these dimensions. However, the extent to which the current resource realities will enable progress in this direction remains to be seen.

In addition to what is being addressed through the bill, some other considerations also merit attention in relation to the new agency. The first point relates to the mandate of the PBS. There are many other state agencies other than the three that are being merged, which engage in data collection through instruments that are duplicative. There are other sources of information in the procurement, public expenditure tracking and e-governance channels within the state system that can provide useful evidence. Moreover there are other sources of valuable information within the data systems of the industry, businesses, private providers, social enterprises, distribution and retail networks, which largely remain untapped as sources of information. The new agency must be mandated and empowered for better data collection, collation and coordination so that consolidation of ad hoc and standalone data systems are enabled.

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The data-collection challenge

Governance

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The draft bill to make the Federal Bureau of Statistics (FBS) an independent body, scheduled to be presented in the next parliamentary session assumes great importance. The bill uses grant of autonomy as an instrument to create a new agency—Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS)—by restructuring and reorganizing three existing data collection organizations. The rationale and design for this approach has been published in a paper titled “Challenges in data collection in a developing country: the Pakistan experiences as a way forward” in the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) and has been authored by a former secretary of the statistics division.

Legislation in this area is of tremendous significance, which is why the context, connotations, limitations, implications and imperatives related to this bill must be understood. Before a few points in relation to these aspects are discussed, it must be appreciated that official statistics are one source of data in a national information system. The overall purpose of this system is to generate and communicate evidence for planning and monitoring the issues related to decision-making.

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Based on information in the public domain, it is evident that the bill has some useful clauses. For example, merging the FBS with the Agriculture Census Organization and Population Census Organization can help reduce recurrent costs and eliminate duplication. User's council mandated through the legislation can be an inclusive approach, whereas the focus on capacity building, career planning of professional staff, upgrading of skills, and the creation of a fund is, at the least, a needed recognition of the importance of these dimensions. However, the extent to which the current resource realities will enable progress in this direction remains to be seen.

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agency. The first point relates to the mandate of the PBS. There are many other state agencies other than the three that are being merged, which engage in data collection through instruments that are duplicative. There are other sources of information in the procurement, public expenditure tracking and e-governance channels within the state system that can provide useful evidence. Moreover there are other sources of valuable information within the data systems of the industry, businesses, private providers, social enterprises, distribution and retail networks, which largely remain untapped as sources of information. The new agency must be mandated and empowered for better data collection, collation and coordination so that consolidation of ad hoc and standalone data systems are enabled.

Secondly, the purpose of a statistical agency in a resource constrained country should not solely be to collect data but also to disseminate information, perform triangulation and interpret and analyse data, and ensure its timely entry to the right decision makers. The existing capacity constraints are reported with respect to all these desired roles, these gaps will be further widened as has been illustrated in the FBS paper. Therefore, appropriate competencies, skills, and capacities are a must to ensure quality in the data system. The capacity and quality constraints within the FBS also assume importance since the capacity of ministries and government departments in terms of data analysis is particularly weak and it does not seem desirable to invest in standalone programmes within their domains given the current resource constraints. Appropriate capacity is also needed to remove the existing information discrepancies within the state system. The shortcomings of the methodology adopted to document the state of Pakistan's economy is particularly illustrative in this regard. It is only through appropriate capacity that a transformational change can be brought to address the prevailing gap in the current information system.

The capacity imperative is also driven by the need to ensure compliance with international standards and maintain data quality to enable international comparisons in today's globalized world. Previously, investments were made in a training institute allied to the FBS, which can be used as an institutional entry point to step up capacity building of the FBS. Two of the bill's drafters do not have a particular interest in strengthening capacity and have committed resources for this purpose. Their role should be strategically harnessed for capacity strengthening within the FBS. However, it is a laudable effort to have a council of leaders, safeguards must be built against brain drain through appropriate incentive policies.

Thirdly, the role of technology must be brought to bear and should be fully leveraged in developing and maintaining a national information system. Pakistan's telecommunication network in general, and mobile telecommunication network in particular, has advanced significantly in the past decade and has a wide coverage, but is not being fully capitalized. Similarly, very few organizations have IT enabled systems for collecting data and the potential within innovative solutions, like modified versions of low-end mobile telephones and palmtops to collect data from the field remains untapped. The state agencies usually make operational investments in the IT infrastructure for collection, aggregation, and analysis of data and to enhance connectivity within data systems. Similarly, the use of free and open source software remains untapped. The new data agency must make the right linkages with the ministry of IT and other government agencies that have IT enabled systems to capitalize on the existing infrastructure so that information can be used for generating evidence in a timely manner. In a globalized world appropriate use of technology can also enable real time surveillance in many areas, for example, price surveillance for timely action. These are now becoming imperatives in a global village within which Pakistan must not want to be left out.

Lastly, the institutional design of the envisaged PBS from the point of view of its governance arrangement merits attention. The FBS is currently reporting to the government and there are many said stories of data tampering in the past. It does not seem to get into the ethics of statecraft dictates that any evidence generation agency should be free from the controls of those who can have a vested interest in tampering data and information. Therefore, an independent autonomous design is envisaged as a safeguard against influence. The bill structures autonomy in principle. However, past experiences of autonomous agencies show that grant of autonomy is often inconclusive in terms of administrative and financial controls and that the government often tends to keep leashes active, which enable it to exercise influence when needed. If this manner of autonomy is structured again, the whole purpose of the bill will be defeated. The new agency must also take a policy decision to place all the raw data files in the public domain. This can be one of the most important measures to ensure against influence.

With the right leadership and technical capacity, the needed transformation in the working of FBS can be enabled. However, beyond the bill and FBS, the state machinery must generate an enabling political and institutional commitment to base decisions on evidence and not on political expediency or accountability of the decision-making process.

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Secondly, the purpose of a statistical agency in a resource constrained country should not solely be to collate data but also to consolidate information, perform triangulations and interpret and analyze data, and ensure its timely relay to the right decision makers. Existing capacity constraints are important with respect to all these desired roles; these gaps will be further widened as has been illustrated in the IOAS paper. Appropriate competencies, skills, and capacity are a must to ensure quality in data systems. The capacity and quality constraints within the PBS also assume importance since the capacity of ministries and government departments in terms of data analysis is particularly weak and it does not seem plausible to invest in standalone programs within their domains given the current resource constraints. Appropriate capacity is also needed to remedy the existing information discrepancies within the state system. Shortcomings of the methodology adopted to document the size of Pakistan's economy is particularly illustrative in this regard. It is only through appropriate capacity that a transformational change can be brought to address prevailing gap in the current information systems.

The capacity imperative is also driven by the need to ensure compliance with international standards and maintain data quality to enable international comparisons in today's globalized world. Previously, investments were made in a training institute allied to the FBS, which can be used as an institutional entry point to step up capacity building efforts within the PBS. Two of the bilateral donors have a particular interest in strengthening capacity and have committed resources for this purpose. Their role should be strategically harnessed for capacity strengthening within the FBS. However, in tandem, safeguards must be built against brain drain through appropriate retention policies.

Thirdly, the role of the technology must be brought to bear and should be fully leveraged in developing and maintaining a national information system. Pakistan's telecommunication network, in particular, mobile telecommunication has enhanced significantly in the past decade and has wide coverage, but is not being fully capitalized. Similarly, very few organizations have IT enabled systems for collecting data and the potential within innovative solutions, like modified versions of low-end mobile telephones and palmtops to collect data from the field remains untapped. State agencies usually do to make optimal investments in IT infrastructure for collection, aggregation, and analysis of data and to enhance connectivity within data systems. Similarly use of Free and Open Source Software remains untapped. The new data agency must make the right linkages with the Ministry of IT and other government agencies that have IT enabled systems to capitalize on the existing infrastructure so that information can be used for generating evidence in a timely manner. In a globalized world appropriate use of technology can also enable real time surveillance in many areas, for example, price surveillance for procurements and disease surveillance for timely action. These are now becoming imperatives in a global village within which Pakistan must learn to survive.

Lastly, the institutional design of the envisaged PBS from the point of view of its governance arrangement merits attention. The FBS is currently under control of the government and there are many sad stories of data tampering, the details of which I do not want to get into. The ethos of statecraft dictates that any evidence generation agency should be free from the controls of those who can have a vested interest in maneuvering data and information. Therefore, an independent autonomous design is envisaged as a safeguard against influence. The bill structures autonomy in principle. However, past experiences of 'autonomous' agencies show that grant of autonomy is often incomplete in terms of administrative and financial controls and that the government often tends to keep loopholes active, which enable them to exercise influence when needed. If this manner of 'autonomy' is structured again, the whole purpose of the bill will be defeated. The new agency must also take a policy decision to place all the raw (meta) data files in the public domain. This can be one of the most important measures to guard against data tampering.

With attention to the right leadership and technical capacity, the needed transformation in the working of PBS can be enabled. However, beyond the bill and PBS, the state machinery must garner an unyielding political and institutional commitment to base decisions on evidence and institutionalize rational accountability of the decision-making process.

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