

INDIA'S STATISTICAL PERFORMANCE ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

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October 02, 2023 12:16 am | Updated 01:27 am IST

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“The World Bank compiles SPIs to assess the performance of national statistical systems across 174 countries” | Photo Credit: Reuters

The World Bank's compilation of Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI) ranks India 67 among 174 countries in 2019. Analysis reveals both shortcomings and a commendable performance in various aspects of SPI. The importance of SPI evaluation to enhance international competitiveness has been highlighted in this article with recommendations for strategic improvements in critical pillars. There is also a need for more robust representation to the World Bank to refine SPI.

As India celebrates its election to the United Nations Statistical Commission, India's own official statistical system has come under scrutiny within the country recently. Questions have been raised about the credibility of the statistics it produces and the competence of the official statisticians. Even acclaimed statistical methods devised to generate these statistics, which were subsequently adopted by other developing countries, now face questioning. What is even more surprising is the assertion that the results of statistical exercises, such as censuses and surveys, are claimed to be of poorer quality when compared to data from administrative sources, most of which suffer from uncertain coverage and conceptual shortcomings. In general, the statistical system is now facing a trial. In this context, looking at the international rankings of national statistical systems compiled by the World Bank can provide valuable insights.

The World Bank compiles SPIs to assess the performance of national statistical systems across 174 countries. The SPI is based on the assessment of five dimensions of performance, commonly referred to as the “five pillars” of a national statistical system, i.e., data use; data services; data products; data sources, and data infrastructure.

India's Score 2019 (SPI Overall Score: 70.4; Pillar 1 - Data use: 80.0; Pillar 2 - Data Services: 88.0; Pillar 3 - Data Products: 60.0; Pillar 4 - Data Sources: 68.9; Pillar 5 - Data Infrastructure: 55.0) and India's Rank 2019 (SPI Overall Score: 67; Pillar 1 - Data Use: 101; Pillar 2 - Data Services: 35; Pillar 3 - Data Products: 105; Pillar 4 - Data sources: 31; Pillar 5 - Data infrastructure: 73).

The latest available scores are from 2019. According to these scores, India's overall SPI score

stands at 70.4, placing it in the 67th rank (ranks are self-computed) among the 174 countries assessed. The pillar-wise scores show India's lower performance in the 'Data use' and 'Data products' pillars, with scores of 80 and 60, respectively, resulting in poor rankings of 101 (with an average rank of 116.5) and 105.

The score in the 'Data use' category depends on how different sectors of society, including the legislature, executive, civil society, academia, and international bodies, utilise the statistics produced by the system. The SPI assessment 2019 considered only data usage by international bodies. India performs well in measures assessing the comparability of estimates of child mortality, debt reporting, drinking water, and labour force participation. However, it loses 20 points due to the unavailability of comparable poverty estimates for the World Bank over the last 10 years (from 2017). This stems from a new comparability indicator introduced by the World Bank's PovcalNet for poverty estimation. It is important to note that India did produce poverty estimates within this period through the NSS Consumption Expenditure Survey.

The pillar 'Data Products' anchors the national statistical system's performance around the essential data required for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To improve upon this, India has already taken the right step by conducting a Multiple Indicator Survey and Comprehensive Annual Modular Survey in the NSS 78th round (2020-21) and 79th round (2022-23), respectively, for collection of data on SDGs.

Regarding 'Data infrastructure', India's score is 55, ranking 73 (with an average rank of 75.5). This pillar encompasses five sub-dimensions: 'Legislation and Governance', 'Standards and Methods', 'Skills', 'Partnership', and 'Finance' ('Skills' and 'Partnership' were not considered for SPI 2019). India's scores for 'Legislation and Governance' are high, given that the national statistical legislation aligns well with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Nonetheless, the overall score for 'Data infrastructure' is diminished due to moderate performance in 'Standards and methods' and poor performance in 'Finance'.

In 'Standards and Methods', India fares well in indicators assessing the adoption of System of National Accounts (SNA) 2008, COICOP (Classification of Individual Consumption According to Purpose), and the latest standards for the compilation of government finance statistics, monetary, and financial statistics.

However, the score in this dimension decreases due to the non-adoption of the latest standards for classifying employment status (such as International Classification of Status in Employment or ICSE-93 or North American Industry Classification System or NAICS 2012), the accounting basis for reporting central government financial data, and the non-utilisation of the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM). This is perplexing given that the process followed in NSS surveys closely mirrors and predates the adoption of the GSBPM. The 'Finance' category receives a low score since, according to the World Bank, India's national statistical plan lacks full funding. India excels in data services (score 88, rank 35) and data sources (score 68.9, rank 31), securing a place in the top quintile for these pillars. Under data sources, three indicators are evaluated (with the fourth indicator not considered in 2019): censuses and surveys, administrative data, and geospatial data. Among these indicators, censuses and surveys (score: 100/100 for censuses and 86.6/100 for surveys) contribute the most to India's ranking, followed by administrative data (score: 50/100), and finally, geospatial data (score: 38.9/100).

The relatively low score of administrative data is mainly due to non-fulfilment of criteria of at least 90% registration of births under the Civil Registration System (CRS). The World Bank has taken the estimate of coverage under CRS from the UN SDG monitoring database, which shows estimates of coverage as 89% for children under five and 87% for children under one. However,

these estimates are actually derived from the National Family Health Survey conducted between 2019 and 2021— a period significantly affected by lockdowns following COVID-19. Conversely, the publication of the Office of the Registrar General of India, “Vital Statistics of India”, cites the coverage of births under CRS for 2019 at approximately 93%, which is a much more reliable source than NFHS for estimation of coverage of CRS.

In the ‘Data services’ dimension, India gets full points for data releases and data services, yet avenues for improvement remain in terms of online accessibility. Enhancements in this area could be achieved by improving download options, providing more comprehensive metadata availability, and open terms for data usage. India’s commendable rank of 40 in the ‘Openness’ score from Open Data Inventory deserves recognition.

Clearly, the SPI for 2019, as compiled by the World Bank, underscores India’s superior performance in censuses and surveys in comparison to administrative data. A thorough examination of the SPI score is crucial to drive improvement and enhance international competitiveness. It is through identifying issues and establishing attainable goals that a substantial rise in rankings can be achieved. For instance, achieving a 20-point increase in each of the three pivotal pillars (‘Data products’, ‘Data use’, and ‘Data infrastructure’) would have positioned India at 34 in 2019. Moreover, proactive engagement with the World Bank to fortify the robustness of the SPI is warranted. Use of “Vital Statistics of India” in place of the NFHS for estimating the registration of births and deaths is one such case.

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