

EDS389 Ruling the world by numbers: knowledge and politics in international development

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The use of numbers, performance indicators and benchmarks have grown exponentially over the last two decades, particularly in the field of international politics and development. Indicators are now firmly established as a distinct mode of global governance. The process of numbering involves translating complex phenomena into numerical values. The procedure converts what might otherwise be highly contentious normative agendas into numbers that appear technocratic and objective. The politics of numbers has implications for global governance, and particularly so for making norms, rules and regulations in the fields of International Environment and Development Studies. This course provides a critical examination of the implications of ruling the world as if it counts.

Lectures and Seminar Topics

06.02.2017	1. Ruling the world by numbers: introduction
13.02.2017	2. States and statistics: Why do states count?
20.02.2017	3. Auditing the world: The IMF
27.02.2017	4. Counting the poor: The World Bank
06.03.2017	5. A world that counts: from millennium development goals (MDGs) to sustainable development goals (SDGs)
13.03.2017	6. Poor Numbers? Statistical capacity in low income countries
20.03.2017	7. Governance matters: democracy by numbers
27.03.2017	8. Correlates of war: Studying war and peace by numbers
03.04.2017	9. Evidence based policy : Knowledge and governance requirements
11.04.2017	Easter BREAK
18.04.2017	Easter BREAK
25.04.2017	10. Contesting poor numbers: qualitative and quantitative research.
08.05.2017	11. Conclusion

All lectures and seminars take place in U224 from 1200 to 1500 on Mondays.

Evaluation

Two Term paper (each 10 pages) counts 30% and 30% and final written exam counts 40% of final grade. Exam and term papers must be written in English

Preliminary version – subject to change

Required Readings:

Jerven, M., 2013 *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It*. Cornell University Press, Cornell.

Cooley, A. & Snyder, J., 2015. *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance*. Cambridge University Press: New York.

Porter, T.M., 1995. *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

For further recommended readings, see these two blogposts on my website:

<http://mortenjerven.com/a-reading-list-for-the-data-revolution/>

<http://mortenjerven.com/power-of-indicators-an-emerging-literature/>

1. Ruling the world by numbers: introduction

We are increasingly relying on numbers to make decisions and numbers are more influential in determining what is deemed objective knowledge in the social sciences. Meanwhile, we do know that not all that counts can be counted. Thus in this course we seek to evaluate the potentials and the perils of ruling the world 'as if' it counts. We start by going through some preliminaries about numbers, data, indicators and statistics. What is the role of statistics, how are they used and abused, and why do we trust certain numbers and others not.

Readings

Porter, Trust in Numbers, Chapter 1 and 2.

Cooley and Snyder, Ranking the World. Chapter 1 and 2.

Jerven, Poor Numbers, Introduction and Chapter 1

Jerven, Development by Numbers, <http://www.nyudri.org/research-index/2016/developmentbynumbers>

Seminar Questions:

- 1) Why are numbers so powerful?
- 2) Which numbers do you trust and which do you not trust?
- 3) When do we use numbers to make decisions and when do we not use numbers?

2. States and Statistics: Why do states count ?

Statistics means of the state, and the word validity has the same root as power. Thus, when we speak 'valid statistics' we are talking about the ability of states to project an image of itself, and its power to appear as a legitimate source of information. In this lecture we talk about how and why states collect statistics, and we also provide a perspective on variation in time and space on how states have been counting and registering people.

Readings

Beckendridge and Szreter, Registration and Recognition, Introduction.

Tooze, Statistics and the German State, Introduction.

Desrosieres, The Politics of Large Numbers, Introduction and Chapter 1.

J. Scott, Seeing Like A State, Chapter 1.

Seminar Questions:

- 1) Why do states count?

- 2) Are 'being counted' primarily a way that groups and issues are given a voice, or is a process in which states exert power to define and make the world legible?
- 3) Will better statistics mean better political decisions?

3. Auditing the World: The IMF

Since 1945 the IMF has been tasked with monitoring the world economy and its constituent parts, the national economies. The quality of the IMF economic and the advice depends on the quality of the information and intelligence that IMF has been collecting through economic surveillance. To assess debt levels, growth rates and inflation trends the IMF depends on high quality economic statistics. Therefore the IMF has played a central role in standardization of economic statistics as well as collecting and dissemination of statistics.

Readings

Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, Expertise and Power at the IMF, chapter 3 in *Rules for the World*, Chapter 3 pp. 45-73.

Jerven, Statistics at the IMF, <http://www.ieo-imf.org/ieo/files/completedevaluations/BP6 - Data and Statistics at the IMF%E2%80%94Quality Assurances for Low-Income Countries.PDF>

Richard Harper, The Social Organization of the IMFs Work: An examination of international auditing in *Auditing Cultures* Chapter 1, pp 25-50.

Ward, M 2004. Quantifying the world: UN ideas and statistics. Indiana University Press: Bloomington.

Andrew Kerner, Morten Jerven and Alison Beatty, [Does It Pay To Be Poor? Testing for systematically underreported GNI estimates](#), Review of International Organizations, 2016.

Seminar Questions:

- 1) What does 'official statistics' mean? Who has the final say in determining the rate of growth in a country?
- 2) Does countries have a bias in reporting 'good' or 'bad' countries? What is the bias of the international organisations like the IMF?
- 3) How does organizations like the IMF ensure that we trust the numbers that they disseminate?

4. Counting the Poor: The World Bank

Improving the livelihoods of the world's poor presupposes agreements on what constitutes 'the poor' and on how to measure poverty. Discussions on poverty and poverty reduction are prevalent both in public discourse and within academia. Yet, these debates take on a variety of different forms depending on the underlying conceptualization of poverty. This lecture reviews the broader debate on poverty reduction and discusses the assumptions and implications of changing conceptualizations, emphasizing the role of the World Bank in understanding and combating poverty.

Readings:

Jerven, Development by Numbers, <http://www.nyudri.org/research-index/2016/developmentbynumbers>

Reddy, Sanjay G. and Thomas Pogge (2010): "How Not to Count the Poor". In: Sudhir Anand, Paul Segal and Joseph E. Stiglitz (eds.): Debates on the Measurement of Global Poverty. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Available here.](#)

Serajuddin, U., Uematsu, H., Wieser, C., Yoshida, N., & Dabalen, A.L., 2015. '[Data deprivation: another deprivation to end](#)', World Bank Policy Research Working Paper no. WPS 7252

Freistein, Katja (2016): "Effects of Indicator Use: A Comparison of Poverty Measuring Instruments at the World Bank" in: Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 366-381

Kiely, Ray (2004): "The world bank and 'global poverty reduction': Good policies or bad data?". In: Journal of Contemporary Asia, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 3-20

Mkandawire, Thandika (2010): "How the New Poverty Agenda Neglected Social and Employment Policies in Africa". In: Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 37-55

Robert Chambers (1997) Whose Reality Counts?: Putting the First Last. (ungated access to chapter 1 and 2 [here](#))

Seminar Questions:

- 1) Are cross-country poverty measurements possible?
- 2) How can we frame poverty in order to capture vulnerable groups in different contexts?
- 3) How does conceptualization shape poverty reduction efforts?

5. A world that counts: From millennium development goals (MDGs) to sustainable development goals (SDGs)

With the Millennium Development Goals and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals, indicator-based development strategies have come to dominate international development. To give an overview of the role of indicators in development assistance, the lecture will present the justification of such development performance targets, its consequences for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers, before reviewing some of the critical literature on indicator based development governance.

Readings:

Jerven in the Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/dec/17/data-revolution-limitations-in-images>

Jerven, Poor Numbers, chapter 4, pp. 83-108

Jerven, [How Much Will a Data Revolution in Development Cost?](#) Development Policy Forum, 2016.

Easterly, William (2009): "How the Millennium Development Goals are Unfair to Africa". In: World Development, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 26-35. [Ungated version](#).

Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko, Alicia Ely Yamin and Joshua Greenstein (2014): "The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of Millennium Development Goal Targets for Human Development and Human Rights". In: Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, vol. 15, no. 2-3, pp. 105-117

[Readings freely available here](#).

Jolly, R. (2010) [The MDGs in Historical Perspective](#). IDS Bulletin 41(1): 48-50

Seminar Questions:

- 1) Are there alternative tools of governance to performance targets and indicators in international development
- 2) Whose interests and worldviews are reflected in the MDGs/SDGs?
- 3) What are the likely unintended consequences from quantifying broad development goals into narrow indicators?

6. Poor Numbers? Statistical capacity in low income countries

What are the determinants of statistical capacity? How can statistical capacity be improved? It is certain that there is a large variation in statistical capacity, and it is equally certain that the development community is demanding more and more statistics to monitor development indicators.

Readings:

Jerven, [How Much Will a Data Revolution in Development Cost?](#) Development Policy Forum, 2016.

Jerven, Poor Numbers, chapter 4, pp. 83-108

Jerven, [Measuring African Development: Past and Present](#), Canadian Journal of Development Studies, Volume 35 2014 - Issue 1, pp 1-8.

Jerven, Development by Numbers, <http://www.nyudri.org/research-index/2016/developmentbynumbers>

World Bank, Statistical Capacity Indicator.

<http://datatopics.worldbank.org/statisticalcapacity/>

Krätke, F. and Byiers, B. (2014) [The Political Economy of Official Statistics: Implications for the Data Revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa](#). ECDPM Discussion paper No 5 2014.

Justin Sandefur and Amanda Glassman, [The Political Economy of Bad Data: Evidence from African Survey and Administrative Statistics](#), The Journal of Development Studies 51 (2), 116-132

Seminar Questions:

- 1) What are the determinants of statistical capacity?
- 2) How can statistical capacity be improved?
- 3) Do states have an inherent interest in 'better' statistics?

7. Governance Matters: Democracy by numbers

Indicators have been held to render society and individuals governable, as well as to facilitate democratization and transparency. In this lecture presents debates on whether indicators in particular and technocracy in general are a force for good or a tool for domination, in addition the present relationship between popular and expert influence on policy-making shall be discussed.

Readings:

Cooley and Snyder, chapter 2, pp. 39-59

Porter, chapters 5 and 7, pp. 112-150 and 178-193

Li, Tania Murray (2011): *Rendering Society Technical: Government Through Community and the Ethnographic Turn at the World Bank in Indonesia*. In: David Mosse (ed.): *Adventures in Aidland: The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*. Oxford: Berhahn

Espeland, Wendy and Mitchell Stevens (2008): "A Sociology of Quantification". In: *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 401-436

Malito, Debora V. and Gaby Umbach (2015): *Governance by Indicators: Opportunities for democracy?* Paper presented for the ECPR joint session of workshops 2015, Warsaw workshop number 3: *Can Democratic Innovations Improve the Quality of Democracy?*

Merry, Sally Engle (2011): "Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance: with CA comment by John M. Conley". In: *Current Anthropology*, vol. 52, no. S3, pp. 83-95

Broome, Andre and Quirk, Joel, [The politics of numbers: the normative agendas of global benchmarking](#), Review of International Studies, Volume 41 - Issue 5.

Seminar Questions:

- 1) How can governance be measured?
- 2) Why do governance measures differ? Should all countries in the world be measured by the same standard?
- 3) Is the measurement of governance a progressive force for change or does it maintain status quo?

8. Correlates of War: Studying war and peace by numbers

Measurement of war, peace and conflict plays a role in several important areas. Within social scientific research quantitative studies on the drivers of conflict and peace have been very prevalent the last two decades. In addition, presenting numbers on conflict casualties play an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy-making. This lecture will present the available data on war and peace, its methodological and empirical foundations, as well as a review on critical debates on the use and political role of conflict data.

Readings:

Gersovitz, Mark and Norma Kriger (2013): "What is a Civil War? A Critical Review of its Definition and (Econometric) Consequences". In: World Bank Research Observer, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 259-290

William Easterly, [Review of the work of Paul Collier](#), Boston Review.

Cris Cramer, Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries, Chapter 1. (alternatively see, [Homo Economicus Goes to War; Methodological Individualism, Rational Choice and the Political Economy of War](#))

Mark Buchanan, [Violent warfare is on the wane, right?](#)

David Keen, [Greed and grievance in civil war](#), International Affairs, 2012.

Seminar Questions:

- 1) What is a war and what is peace? What is a civil war, and what is just a conflict?
- 2) Do you believe in the 'long peace' thesis? Should we trust the recent trend showing a fall in battle deaths?
- 3) In what ways does quantification in the study of war and peace advance our knowledge, and in what ways is the study of conflict distorted by the use of numbers.

9. Evidence Based Policy: Knowledge and governance requirements

Grounding decision-making in research based knowledge of social reality is held to be central in contemporary governance. While few argue for a disentanglement of evidence and policy, the de-politization of policy making have consequences for democratic governance. This lecture presents the debate on evidence-based policy-making, discusses its technical-procedural aspects, and critiques the separation of evidence-based and value-grounded policy-making.

Readings:

Cooley and Snyder, chapter (1 and) 7, pp. (1-38 and) 178-193

Porter, chapters 5, 8 and 9, pp. 89-113 and 193-232

Grundmann, Reiner (2009): "The role of expertise in governance processes". In: Forest Policy and Economics, vol. 11, no. 5-6, pp. 398-403

Hammersley, Martyn (2005): "Is the evidence-based practice movement doing more good than harm? Reflections on Iain Chalmers' case for research-based policy making and practice". In: Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 85-100

Scott, Christopher (2005): Measuring Up to the Measurement Problem: The Role of Statistics in Evidence-Based Policymaking. PARIS21

<<http://www.paris21.org/sites/default/files/1509.pdf>> [Retrieved: 17.10.2016]

Stiglitz, Joseph E. (1999): "Knowledge as a Global Public Good" In: Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg and Marc Stern (eds.): Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Jerven, [The Political Economy of Agricultural Statistics and Input Subsidies: Evidence from India, Nigeria and Malawi](#), Journal of Agrarian Change, 14, 1, pp. 129–145, 2014.

Seminar Questions:

- 1) To what extent should policy-making be value-free?
- 2) What should be the role of experts and evidence if decisions should be grounded in ethical reflections?
- 3) If evidence is embedded in the political economy, how can we be sure that we have 'evidence based policy' and not the opposite, 'policy based evidence'?

10. Contesting poor numbers: qualitative and quantitative research.

The skills of qualitative scholars are needed to assess and assert the usefulness of numbers. Numerical expressions of social, economic, and political phenomena are all, to various degrees, social, economic and political phenomena themselves.

seldom do these numbers provide the untainted, objective observation through which societies can be gauged, analyzed, and evaluated in the manner that much statistical analysis seems to presume. The qualitative skills of historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and other scholars are much needed in tracing where these observations were made, what conditions affected their collection, and what influential factors prevailed when decisions were made regarding what was counted and how the counting process took place. This, then, is a call for qualitative researchers to pay more attention to numbers instead of dismissing them entirely. Histories of development are written with these numbers; decisions are made because of these numbers. Scholars who already are critical of how numbers are used in both scholarship and policy should use their critical skills to further engage with the numbers. Numbers should and will continue to be important for the study and practice of development. Decisions about what to measure, who to count, and by whose authority the final number is selected do matter. I hope this course leaves us better equipped to take on the task of taking part in these decisions, because poor numbers are too important to be dismissed as just that.

Readings

John Harriss, The Case for Cross-Disciplinary Approaches in International Development, *World Development*, Volume 30, Issue 3, March 2002, pp 487–496

Special issue on '[Knowledge production in fragile states](#)' edited Desal Devai and Rebecca Tabscott.

Morten Jerven, Poor Numbers, Conclusion.

- 1) Is it correct that 'not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that counts can be counted'? If so, what are governance and knowledge implications?
- 2) If ruling by numbers and indicators is only a mode of governance, what are alternative modes of governance?
- 3) There is often a distinction made between 'soft' and 'hard' sciences, and the extent of quantification and quantitative techniques in the discipline often determine where on the scale between soft and hard the scholarly work is placed. Is this distinction helpful?