
21 Cultural statistics

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Indicators for the World Culture Report

Following the recommendation of the World Commission on Culture and Development in its report entitled 'Our Cultural Diversity', the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published two *World Culture Reports*, in 1998 and 2000.

Culture or culture-related indicators were presented for 150 countries with a population of one million or more, as well as for ten regional groupings. Nearly 200 data items were included and this chapter reviews this experience of collecting, compiling, analysing and presenting these indicators and discusses some of the implications and concerns that became apparent as the work was carried out.

The indicators for the first Report had to be drawn from material that was readily available. This clearly limited the depth and scope of the analysis, as many important cultural concerns are not adequately reflected through existing statistics and consequently were not included in the Report.

The culture indicators do not pretend to measure world culture, which is tremendously complex and multifaceted. Rather, the Report presents those aspects of world culture that were readily measurable. One of the aims of the project, however, was to start a process of broadening those measurable and reported aspects of world culture so that subsequent Reports would be able to present a more complete picture.

Many cultural concerns were omitted simply because too few countries could provide comparable reliable data. Other cultural elements were omitted because no satisfactory means of expressing them in tabular form had yet been developed. The more important cultural omissions make a formidable list. They include cultural freedom; cultural discrimination; rights of and support to minority cultures; freedom of linguistic expression; freedom to travel; leading religions, religious attendance and freedom of worship; cultural tolerance; ethnicity; official languages, spoken languages and dialects; cultural education; cultural participation; the most-visited sites and popular festivals; cultural prizes; art galleries; music performances; professional arts and crafts; cultural industries and cultural labour force; artists, writers and musicians; the condition of the artist; intellectual property and copyright; taxes and tax allowances on cultural goods and services;

cultural export controls; cost of paperback books and similar basic instruments of cultural diffusion compared to average income; public and private expenditure on culture and cultural heritage; parks, gardens and nature reserves; heritage institutions; professional and non-professional sports and games; cable TV and videos; magazines and comic books; leisure time use; and traditions and practices regarding food and drink.

The indicator tables of the 1998 Report were organized in seven thematic groups: cultural activities; cultural practices and heritage; cultural trade and communication; cultural trends; ratification of conventions; translations; and cultural context. This last category covers the broad contextual, social and economic conditions which impinge on or materially affect cultural development and diversity.

Multiculturalism

In addressing the question of which quantitative aspects of culture to emphasize and how to present them without showing a bias towards any single cultural pattern, one issue immediately arose. The production, consumption and exchange of cultural goods that can be priced in the market is the area that is richest in indicators. Furthermore, the richer a country, the more cultural goods it usually produces and consumes. Not only do rich countries have more data, but they 'score' higher in the area of producing and consuming cultural goods through market mechanisms.

We thus sought to balance the inevitable bias towards the rich countries arising from their cultural production and consumption. While market indicators reflect an important and measurable part of world culture, the challenge was to broaden the scope of the indicators to include the multicultural features that exist in all countries, that can be provided by all countries, and that can be presented in the indicator tables.

Many of these multicultural features fall within the thematic group on cultural practices and heritage, including official and major spoken languages, leading religions, national public holidays, heritage sites, and the most-visited sites and popular festivals. In this connection, a short questionnaire was sent to each country on three of these missing areas: official and spoken languages; leading religions; and most-visited sites and popular festivals. In the case of languages and religions pre-filled questionnaires were provided and governments were asked to amend them as appropriate. The response was excellent, with over 100 countries replying, and the results can be seen in the *2000 World Culture Report*.

Whenever possible, the multicultural nature of the world was emphasized. This included movements among peoples to study abroad, to tour abroad, to telephone abroad, and so on. In all these movements, the names of the destination countries were listed when available so that the pattern

of cultural flows could immediately be discerned. The thematic group on translations was multicultural by definition, particularly concerning translations by original language. This section lists and quantifies 90 of the over 220 languages currently being translated.

Coverage and reliability

Many of the available indicators had an inadequate coverage and were somewhat outdated. The indicators in the Report are based on data obtained from nearly 20 international and professional sources. Indicators developed from such a large number of sources will obviously have a wide range of data availability, particularly in the case of a first global report of this nature. As many as one-third of the nearly 200 data items in the indicator tables were not readily available in some comparable form for at least half the countries. It was sometimes necessary to go back to the 1980s to arrive at a respectable number of countries for some indicators.

Among the indicators that are missing for so many countries are some very important ones: number of copies of books produced; registered public library users; number of books in public libraries; cultural radio and television programmes; recorded music; performing arts; cultural trade; archives; museum personnel; the trend data on book titles, cinema attendance; foreign visitors; translations and books in foreign languages; and the major countries of origin of foreign students. This illustrates the crippling lack of basic indicators of culture among countries. As might be expected, this lack is greatest in the poorest countries. The result is a strong cultural bias towards the rich countries which produce and consume cultural goods.

In addition to availability, coverage and source, the issue of reliability raises important concerns. Cultural indicators like the number of radios and televisions per inhabitant are reliable and fairly comprehensive, as are many of the indicators found in the tables on cultural context. These indicators, however, reflect the wealth of a country as much as, if not more than, its culture. Other cultural indicators, like the indicators on cultural trade, are also reliable, but they unfortunately have limited coverage and also very much reflect the wealth of a country. On the other hand, cultural indicators like cultural radio and television programmes provide only limited coverage and are not necessarily comparable among countries. In the case of cultural indicators like spoken languages, ensuring the quality of the definition is difficult, although the coverage is complete and the indicator is independent of wealth.

The wealth bias of cultural statistics

The available cultural statistics clearly underrepresent or even completely exclude many of the cultural activities of poor nations and of poor people

in rich nations. Unlike the statistics of other social areas like education, population and health (but not disease), cultural statistics are not inclusive. On the contrary, they are patently exclusive, focusing primarily on the production and consumption of cultural goods, that can be priced in the market. If countries do not produce marketable cultural goods, they are discounted. If people do not consume marketable cultural goods, they are equally discounted. Because 'culture' as it is statistically defined is limited primarily to market activities and not life activities, people and countries that do not participate in the market are not considered 'cultured' from the point of view of the statistics that are currently available. In fact, cultural statistics is as much a process of discounting as one of counting.

This was borne out when we came to discuss the feasibility of constructing a composite Cultural Development Index by which countries could be ranked. There was a strong wish to develop such an index, but a very powerful argument against trying to design such an index was that the relative importance of indicators on cultural consumption and production would inevitably create a 'rich country cultural development index'. The richer the country, the more cultured it would appear, with a few inevitable exceptions. A second, more important, argument against a single cultural development index was that culture is multifaceted and that cultural diversity should be nurtured. A monolithic single cultural development index would represent the antithesis of that view.

The decisive final argument against having a single cultural development index was made when the international group of culture specialists advising the Paris-based United Nations agency concerned with culture was informed that any index based on cultural consumption and production indicators would show the United States as the most cultured country in the world!

The problem does not reflect a choice between 'high' culture and 'popular' culture. There is nothing intrinsically high-culture about a television, a radio, a cinema, a newspaper or a compact disc. With most cultural indicators of this type, the statistical unit is the material means of communication, not the cultural content of what is communicated. In theory the various communication instruments are neutral with regard to high culture and popular culture. Even when they are clearly not neutral, statistical data are usually presented independent of their biases. Interestingly, some high-culture activities like theatre, opera, ballet and classical music concerts are often poorly quantified for international purposes, perhaps because they are very much minority activities even in rich countries.

The cultural market bias works in a number of ways. Within countries, cultural activities that involve the market are more readily quantified because money is exchanged. Poorer people who cannot afford to participate in the market, however, will naturally pursue their cultural activities

through non-market cultural practices like festivals, rituals, musical events, storytelling and so on. Very few of these activities are readily quantified.

Among countries, the poorer countries have the weakest data collection systems and are more likely to treat the collection of cultural statistics as a low priority. This is very reasonable, considering the importance of other areas of statistics and the countries' very limited resources. It is precisely in these poorer countries, however, that the majority of people engage primarily in non-market cultural activities. This means that cultural statistics, as they are currently practised, exclude a minority of people in rich countries and the majority of people in poor countries.

The market place definition of culture

Another, more insidious, aspect of the close association of culture and consumption is the extent to which living in poverty deprives people and, in some cases, whole countries of many cultural activities and opportunities as commonly defined. Market place culture is by far the leading cultural brand, with a dominant share of the statistically defined culture market. It is also identified mainly with the rich countries.

If we look at the leading countries for each indicator, we find that Japan produces the televisions, Canada, Germany and France buy the televisions and Singapore trades the televisions. The United States produces the films, and New Zealand and Ireland buy the film tickets. Hong Kong and Norway buy newspapers, while Italy and Spain publish books. The United Kingdom, Australia and Korea buy radios; Austria and Belgium buy recorded music; Sweden and Denmark visit museums.

All these leading country examples are taken from the tables of the *World Culture Report 1998*. There are exceptions of course, like India in film production and cinema going, but market culture is essentially what rich countries practise. And the culture that is practised in rich countries is also practised by the rich people in the not-so-rich countries and the rich people in the poor countries. This results in the creation of a self-perpetuating, value-laden, exclusive definition of culture, which is the culture of the comparatively rich as expressed through the market place.

This is the culture that goes with increased wealth. This is the culture that provides the badge of success throughout our increasingly homogenized world. People want a little piece of that 'culture of the rich' to have in their own lives because it gives them at least the feeling of being rich. Inevitably, this market culture is increasingly seen as a modern, sophisticated, high-status culture, whereas the non-market traditional culture is seen as an old-fashioned, simplistic culture. This creates a self-perpetuating, value-laden definition of culture – the culture of the comparatively rich as expressed through the market place.

Being poor not only means not being able to participate very much in the market culture and being deprived of the many stimuli that this culture provides. It also means being considered and perhaps considering oneself as culturally inferior, as if it were an inherited characteristic. But the real reason that poor people are classified as culturally excluded or culturally inferior is that they are poor. Their poverty acts as a barrier to their development as human beings. However, let a few poor people win the lottery and go on a buying spree in the cultural market place and we will immediately include them in our statistics. By definition, they will no longer be culturally excluded, no longer be culturally of no account. This is an untenable and unconscionable situation, and it is imperative that cultural statistics be redesigned so as to count the poor as well as the rich.

See also:

Chapter 31: Globalization.