Report on the IARIW-SAIM Special Conference on Measuring the Informal Sector in Developing Countries, Godavari Village Resort, Kathmandu, Nepal. September 23-26, 2009

Our co-organisers, the South Asia Institute of Management (SAIM), held a press conference the day before the conference which was attended by Andrea Brandolini, myself, Bishnu Pant and other senior staff of SAIM. That gave the conference some good publicity in Nepal's large English language press.

Because the Maoist opposition sometimes throws stones at the Presidential convoy, the President of Nepal, the Right Honourable Dr Ram Baran Yadav opened the conference in the Yak and Yeti Hotel in downtown Kathmandu rather than at the conference site which was some distance from town. In Olympic style the President lit a flame - in an oil lamp filled with flower petals - to mark the opening of the Conference and this was followed by High Tea. Thus the conference got off to a graceful Nepalese start.

Good attendance in spite of the remoteness of the venue. Fifty non-Nepalese participants from about 30 countries. South Asia, Latin America, Europe and America were well represented. Only one participant from Africa although several papers from European participants focused on Africa. In addition there were about 30 Nepalese participants from SAIM, and the Nepalese statistical office.

The conference was held in Godavari Village Resort which is about 12 kilometres from Kathmandu town centre. Pleasant accommodation in a spectacular setting with early morning views of Everest and the Himalayas. There were no nearby distractions and this probably contributed to good attendance in all sessions.

The conference programme was organised into a keynote address, (Aureo de Paula , University of Pennsylvania) three plenary sessions and eight parallel sessions. There were three papers in most sessions which gave sufficient time for discussion. There were generally good floor discussions and several ran over time as a result.

The conference benefitted from good representation from India - particularly CSO staff including the Chief Statistician of India, Pronab Sen and senior colleagues Ramesh Kolli and A.C. Kulshreshtha. The Indians have their own IARIW (the first "I" standing for India) which was set up with encouragement from the Ruggles so most of the Indian participants were familiar with (our) IARIW procedures.

Staff from UNESCAP (Bangkok) and ADB (Manila) attended and made good contributions but ILO - responsible for measuring and monitoring the informal sector - dropped out at a late stage.

We should certainly have enough quality papers for a special edition of the RIW. Andrew has asked Francisco Ferreira and me to co-edit. All authors were asked to send in their final versions (PDF format) by end December for consideration. All papers will be subject to normal review procedures.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in Asia and the conference took place during a week-long religious festival (which involved ceremonial sacrifice of most of Nepal's goat population.) Despite this Bishnu Pant and his SAIM colleagues did a very good job on the logistics side. This emphasizes the importance of strong local support for these special conferences. We have been lucky to have had this for both the Beijing and Kathmandu special conferences.

In the original plans for this conference, Michael Ward had suggested a 2-day training session prior to the conference. In the event we did not proceed with this but Bishnu Pant has told us that our Nepalese partners would have appreciated training in national accounts and poverty measurement. To be considered for future conferences of this kind as a way of repaying our hosts for their work and expenses.

Finally, as Andrea noted in his opening address, the Conference took place during the first anniversary of Michael Ward's death. This conference was Mike's idea and I think he would have been more than pleased at the outcome.

Derek Blades, Chair, Program Committee
October 19, 2009