

A level playing field? Revising per capita GDP estimates in Sub Saharan Africa: from Structural Adjustment to SNA 2008.

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Abstract

The relativity of African income estimates was recently affirmed when Ghana announced an upward revision of the GDP estimate of 60.3 percent in November 2010. Similar upward revisions are to be expected once resources for rebasing are made available in other countries. In Ghana the upward revision fulfilled the long standing target of reaching middle income status overnight. The revisions arise not only from rebasing but also from methodological and conceptual changes as well as from improvements in data coverage and data sources.

These revisions raise questions regarding the meaningfulness of comparisons of GDP levels in Sub-Saharan Africa, and leaves recent growth estimates shrouded in uncertainty. This paper takes starting point in the recent revision in Ghana, and discusses the likelihood of similar revisions in other countries based on information collected on visits to the statistical offices in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi and Zambia. The paper emphasises the challenges for 'data users' in light of these revisions. The central premises for data users are that the data are comparable across time and space. While revisions are important steps towards getting an accurate measure of GDP level for the individual country, it makes it difficult for other users to utilize the data for comparisons of changes in production and income.

The second section of the paper gives a historical perspective on the challenges faced by statistical offices since Structural Adjustment, and offers a consideration of the GDP level and growth evidence data users are left with. It is argued that the lack of a transparent revision of baseline estimates across Sub Saharan Africa following Structural Adjustment has left scholars and policymakers with malleable 'facts' on economic performance. The challenge of providing reliable and valid data for development has not been satisfactorily met. Rather than strengthening the institutional capacity to measure development, the recent Millennium Development Goal agenda could be argued to have been detrimental for national accounts statistics, because it has put pressure on statistical offices to prepare reports on social statistics related to the MDGs.