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# Development Indicators at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 1980-1990: Statistical Visions in the Era of Structural Adjustment<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – The article reconstructs the discourse built by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) on socio-economic indicators in the first decade of structural adjustment. While in the early 1980s indicators were imagined as a statistical language that could translate and make operational the alternative ideas of the Lagos Plan of Action, over the course of the decade they were increasingly seen as tools to evaluate the human and social costs of the policies imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This evolution informs a reflection on the ‘governance of indicators’, problematizing the relationship between development visions and quantification, and the dynamics which prevented the ECA’s vision from shaping African statistics the way it was intended.

**Keywords:** United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, development, structural adjustment, indicators, governance, statistical capacity.

**Mots-clés:** Nations Unies Commission économique pour l’Afrique, développement, ajustement structurel, indicateurs, gouvernance, capacité statistique.

## 1. Introduction

On 20 April 1983, when the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) was celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, many African countries were facing an economic and political crisis. The hopes of economic and social progress that had animated the struggle for independence and the early years of postcolonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s seemed already to belong to a remote past, made more distant by a wave of military coups d’état, slowing growth and rising public debt. As a reaction against this dismal state of affairs, and as a necessary condition to obtain additional credit from international financial institutions, in the

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Simon Godard and Martine Mespoulet for inviting him to reflect on these themes, and for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. The author would also like to thank two anonymous referees, who contributed with their observations to improve the manuscript. All errors and inaccuracies remain my responsibility.

1980s and the 1990s most African states adopted so-called ‘structural adjustment policies’ (SAPs).<sup>2</sup> Promoted by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and in open contrast with the statist vision that had characterised development thinking up to that point, the SAPs emphasised free trade, privatization, the dismantling of public bureaucracy, and currency devaluation.<sup>3</sup> However, the vision behind the SAPs was not the only template for African development circulating in the 1980s. Indeed, with the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA hereafter),<sup>4</sup> the ECA and the Organisation of African Unity had produced a very different strategy that found the most significant cause of the poor performance of African economies in the worsening terms of trade and exogenous shocks, recommended a strategy of industrialisation and regional integration, and stressed that development was about promoting social change, rather than simply increasing the size of macroeconomic aggregates.

Indicators are a useful lens to explore the role of quantification within the 1980s debates on Africa’s present and future. By reconstructing the discourse built by the ECA around socio-economic indicators, the article offers two main contributions. The first pertains to a more nuanced historicization of the commission’s evolution at a time dominated by great anxiety over Africa’s political and economic prospects. Despite the significant interest in the statistical work of international organizations<sup>5</sup> – and the crucial role played by the United

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<sup>2</sup> The literature on the impact of the SAPs on African economies is immense, and cannot be summarized here. Useful starting points include T. Mkandawire and C.C. Soludo, 1998, the essays in B. Onimode, 1989, A. Adepoju, 1993 and T. Mkandawire and C.C. Soludo, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, 1981. The article follows the convention of calling ‘structural adjustment policies’ the combination of IMF stabilization programmes and WB adjustment programmes. To put it concisely, while the former aimed ‘to return to macroeconomic equilibrium in the short-term’, the latter sought to ‘promote more rapid sustainable economic growth in the long term’, N. van de Walle, 2001, p. 7. For a more extensive presentation of the theoretical models used by the two institutions, their functioning and complementary relationship in shaping the SAPs, see R. Lensink, 1996, especially chapters 4-6.

<sup>4</sup> Organization of African Unity, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see R. Cussó, 2012 on the League of Nations and M. Schmelzer, 2016 on the OECD.

Nations as a key centre for the dissemination of statistical templates,<sup>6</sup> its African regional commission remains relatively understudied. The literature has tended to focus on the ECA's attempt to advance the cause of African political and economic integration, or on its commitment to the articulation of a distinctive development strategy.<sup>7</sup> This tendency has created a disjuncture between the commission as a producer of blueprints and its statistical work. By documenting the ECA's attempt to translate the LPA into a statistical framework, the article is a step towards filling this gap. The reconstruction of this connection is based on the sources collected in the ECA Knowledge Repository. Although this online archive, comprising more than 18,000 documents, can illuminate many crucial issues in the ECA's evolution, it has remained largely underexplored by historians.<sup>8</sup> The ECA repository is composed of official published sources. In the context described here, this leads to two main shortcomings. Firstly, the ECA repository hides the internal debates, the negotiations, the tensions and the struggles that took place behind closed doors, and shaped the process by which the commission's vision of indicators came into being. Secondly, it tends to privilege a continental outlook on statistical matters, preventing a fine-grained understanding of the different national and local contexts in which ECA's templates were received.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the sources analysed can still raise interesting questions, and allow a reconstruction of the changing political meanings attached to indicators. While at the beginning of the 1980s ECA conceived of socio-economic indicators as tools that could translate the general framework of the LPA into numbers, statistical practices and policies, within a few years indicators came to be primarily seen as monitoring devices to quantify the human and social repercussions of adjustment policies. On the basis

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<sup>6</sup> M. Ward, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> I. V. Gruhn, 1979; A. Adedeji, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://repository.uneca.org/>

of these considerations, the article's second contribution consists of a more nuanced view of the indicators as 'technologies of governance' in neoliberal Africa.

## 2. Indicators and governance

Despite their pervasive presence (or maybe because of it), indicators are elusive statistical objects. Some are extremely simple, like the mid-upper arm circumference used as a proxy for malnutrition;<sup>9</sup> others – like the ones discussed here - presuppose the collection and aggregation of vast amounts of data by a wide range of institutional actors. Even though, as noted by the ECA, the line separating indicators from other forms of statistics can be blurred, what by definition distinguishes the former is that they are 'a measure pointing to or indicating a variable which is different from the one of which it is direct measure'.<sup>10</sup> Indicators have a long history, 'stretching back to the creation of modern nation states in the early nineteenth century, and practices of business management a few centuries earlier',<sup>11</sup> but it is only in recent decades that they have become influential political technologies. Within the long-run trajectory of the co-construction of politics and statistics, indicators have been perceived as the statistical language of forms of governance that are potentially 'global' in scope, and 'neoliberal' in nature.<sup>12</sup>

Both aspects are made possible by the features of indicators as knowledge-producing objects. By simplifying a complex reality, indicators are defined by their capacity to 'submerge local particularities and idiosyncrasies into universal categories, thus generating knowledge that is standardised and comparable across nations and regions'.<sup>13</sup> If this helps explain the centrality of indicators in the articulation of 'development discourse' and in the

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<sup>9</sup> For a fascinating history of the mid-upper-arm circumference tape, see J. Glasman, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1981b, p. 2. For a more comprehensive definition of indicators, see K.E. Davis, B. Kingsbury and S. E. Merry, 2012, p. 73-74.

<sup>11</sup> S. E. Merry, 2011, S83.

<sup>12</sup> For a long-run discussion of how the 'government by law' has been paralleled and replaced with the 'governance by numbers', see A. Supiot, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> S. E. Merry, 2011, S84.

work of international organizations, the new importance that indicators acquired since the 1980s ‘was part of a radical redefinition of the relations between democracy and market’.<sup>14</sup> As part of the toolkit of neoliberal governance, indicators have contributed to institutionalise an ‘audit culture’ that, in the name of decentralization, transparency and accountability, subtly introduces new forms of domination.<sup>15</sup> The proliferation of indicators in social life can also be conceived as a process through which forms of corporate governance have ‘colonised’ other domains, contributing to an erosion of the boundaries traditionally separating corporations, the state, and civil society.<sup>16</sup>

In the African context, discussions of neoliberal governance have had a different (but not entirely separate) origin, being inextricably tied to the adoption of SAPs in the 1980s. As put by Graham Harrison, structural adjustment is ‘neoliberalism codified’.<sup>17</sup> Many authors have emphasised that SAPs contributed to undermine the functioning and stability of African nation-states.<sup>18</sup> The emptiness resulting from the crisis of the ‘developmental states’<sup>19</sup> was filled by non-governmental organizations and international institutions,<sup>20</sup> which in turn instituted and consolidated new regimes of quantification. Yet, despite substantial methodological and narrative differences, much writing on the political implications of SAPs in Africa shares an understanding of governance that, while implicitly acknowledging the

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<sup>14</sup> R. Rottenburg and S.E. Merry, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> C. Shore, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> S.E. Merry, 2011, S90.

<sup>17</sup> G. Harrison, 2010, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> This literature is too vast to be even summarised here. Notable examples include J. Herbst 1989, J.F. Bayart, 1993; J.F. Bayart, S. Ellis and B. Hibou, 1997;

<sup>19</sup> T. Mkandawire, 2001; J. Ferguson, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> For a more nuanced discussion on the relationship between NGOs and governance, see G. Mann, 2015.

importance of quantification in shaping neoliberal discourse and practice, neglects the specific statistical forms that this acquired.<sup>21</sup>

Reconstructing the ECA's vision of indicators amounts to an operation of institutional and conceptual de-centring. Placing the ECA at the core of the analysis allows shifting the gaze from the relationship between the international financial institutions and African states, and rescuing a context in which the language of indicators was mobilised to imagine and operationalise an alternative to the neoliberal policies imposed by the WB and the IMF. From a conceptual viewpoint, understanding why this alternative did not materialise leads to a more nuanced view of the relationship between statistical imagination, indicators and governance. While much recent literature explores the 'governance *by* indicators',<sup>22</sup> the focus of this article is the 'governance *of* indicators'. These two expressions do not stand in mutual opposition; in practice they can denote complementary, and largely overlapping, processes. Nonetheless, they suggest a difference in emphasis. The expression 'governance by indicators' emphasises the striking capacity of indicators to reconfigure power relations and travel smoothly across political and epistemic domains. Studying the 'governance by indicators' typically means to identify, document and classify the different ways in which numbers manage to alter the distribution of resources, influence the behaviour of the monitored ('governed') subjects, or even actually 'perform' and bring into existence the phenomenon they claim to measure.

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<sup>21</sup> Relevant exceptions, placing the construction of numbers at the centre of the analysis of political dynamics include B. Samuel, 2011 and M. Jerven, 2013, but their focus is on macroeconomic statistics and national income accounts, rather than indicators. Conversely, although it does not deal primarily with structural adjustment or with the ECA, the recent historical and sociological literature on indicators contains many interesting African case studies. See, for example, several of the essays in R. Rottenburg, S.E. Merry, S.-J. Park and J. Mugler, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> See for example the essays in K. Davis, A. Fisher, B. Kingsbury, and S.E. Merry, 2012b.

In contrast, by using the expression ‘governance of indicators’ I intend to take a step back and focus on the processes by which an institutional actor inscribed the production of indicators within its ideological and political discourse. I am particularly interested in understanding how the statistical language of indicators informed the ECA’s construction of its identity and role. Secondly, talking about the ‘governance of indicators’ is more conducive to a focus on the power exerted by different actors *over* indicators. Rather than on the consequences of the production of specific numbers, my emphasis is on what discussions about the role of indicators tell us about the set of representations and power relations that connected different institutional actors. The case study presented here deals with an institutional subject that did not manage to reshape the world according to its statistical vision. Locating the ECA’s take on indicators at the intersection between debates on the means and ends of ‘development’, the political and administrative challenges faced by African statistical services and changing international dynamics, the article is a reminder that the power of indicators to act as effective tools of governance is not intrinsic to their statistical format, but rather the outcome of the alignment of contingent ideological, political and administrative conditions.

### **3. Translating development visions into indicators**

The construction and dissemination of economic and social statistics represented an important area of ECA’s work since its establishment in 1958. The commission’s early statistical work fell under three headings:

- (i) Promotion in Africa of statistical activities adequate to meet the requirements of economic and social planners for statistical data. [...]
- (ii) Formulation of statistical methods and standards appropriate to conditions prevalent in Africa.

- (iii) Servicing member countries by publishing statistical series covering the African region, presented in as comparable form as possible.<sup>23</sup>

Over the decades, these goals led to a series of training programmes, institutions and meetings aiming at developing statistical capacity in the continent. In the 1960s, the ECA was particularly active in the establishment of centres that could train African statistical personnel in different parts of the continent. The commission focused on industrial policy as the lynchpin of regional integration and structural economic transformation, and published some pioneer works on the economics of racial discrimination and on the role of women in economic development.<sup>24</sup> The 1970s were characterised by a crucial expansion of the commission's statistical programmes with the launching of the Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA) in 1978, the Africa regional component of the UN Household Survey Capability Programme (also in 1978), and a project of assistance specifically aimed at the construction of national income accounts in least developed and newly independent countries (1979). From the point of view of the UN and its specialised agencies (and other organizations like the International Labour Organization), the 1970s marked an explicit commitment to the production of social statistics in the form of indicators.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the decade, the view that Africa was a continent in a state of crisis that called for urgent coordinated action had become widespread. While in the *Revised Framework of Principles for the Implementation of the New Economic Order in Africa* the ECA emphasised the external causes of the crisis and identified in self-reliance the key to unlocking Africa's

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<sup>23</sup> ECA, 1961, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> ECA, 1963a; ECA 1963b; ECA 1967. For a discussion of the ECA's statistical work in the 1960s, and its relationship with Pan-Africanism, see G. Serra, 2015, chapter 5.

<sup>25</sup> On the evolution of debates about social statistics and the technical and political problems associated with them, see M. Ward, 2004, chapter 3.

potential,<sup>26</sup> the Bank governors of several African countries asked the WB to write a report on the state of the continent.<sup>27</sup>

This bifurcation was meant to have profound implications, as the 1980s began with the emergence of two very different documents as the possible templates for Africa's future: the ECA's *Lagos Plan of Action* (1980) and the World Bank's *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action* (1981), also known as the Berg Report. According to former ECA Executive Secretary (and the main mind behind the LPA) Adebayo Adedeji, this confrontation of development paradigms amounted to nothing less than a 'battle for the African mind'.<sup>28</sup> Both documents presented a diagnosis of the causes of Africa's deteriorating economic and social conditions, as well as a list of indications about what had to be done to rectify that lamentable state of affairs. Although the World Bank claimed that the Berg report and the LPA were complementary,<sup>29</sup> the two texts expressed very different and, to a large extent incompatible, visions.

The Berg report claimed to advance an 'agriculture-based and export-oriented strategy'<sup>30</sup> that could provide the foundation for future industrialisation. While acknowledging the impact of external shocks on African economies, it differed substantially from the LPA for its emphasis on internal policy-failure. The 'cure' that, according to the Bank, could have saved African economies from the crisis they were experiencing comprised currency devaluation and a significant reduction of state intervention in the economy. The emphasis was on 'getting the prices right', and on replacing the state with the market as the main allocative mechanism. In contrast with the Berg Report, the analysis of the African

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<sup>26</sup> ECA; UNESC, 1975.

<sup>27</sup> J.E. Nyang'oro, 1992, 13.

<sup>28</sup> A. Adedeji, 2004, p. 266. For an exhaustive discussion of Adedeji's contribution to development thinking, see S.K.B. Asante, 1991.

<sup>29</sup> World Bank, 1981, p. 1, 6.

<sup>30</sup> World Bank, 1981, 6.

crisis presented in the LPA was much more closely connected with the ‘structural weaknesses’ of African economies, impoverished by adverse external conjunctures. Rather than on markets as the main allocation mechanisms and on ‘comparative advantage’ as the principle to guide policy decisions, the LPA called for a more ambitious strategy that could, simultaneously, diversify African economies by making them less vulnerable to changes in the prices of primary products. The emphasis on the social aspects of the development process was much more clearly recognised, especially in relationship with the necessity to increase education, food production and security. Whereas the Berg Report suggested a strategy of export-oriented agriculture that tied the fate of African nations to the world markets, the Commission was keen to reinforce industrial policy, and to promote economic development within a framework of regional cooperation and integration. Significantly, and not surprisingly given the longer time-span covered by the LPA, much emphasis was also paid to science, technology and research as drivers of modernisation. The last chapter of the report contained also a brief discussion of the importance of strengthening African statistical machineries for economic and social planning.<sup>31</sup>

Despite this unglamorous entrance, over the course of the 1980s quantification became a crucial battleground in the confrontation between the ECA and the WB.<sup>32</sup> In 1989, for example, the Commission published a report on the WB’s and the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) optimistic appraisal of SAPs.<sup>33</sup> The ECA firmly stated that the ‘most striking feature of the World Bank Report is its one-dimensionality which pertains to underlying assumptions, to the statistical/methodological approach chosen as well as the analysis of the data’.<sup>34</sup> Although the ECA’s 1989 report focused on trade figures and

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<sup>31</sup> OAU, 1981, chapter XIII.

<sup>32</sup> T. W. Parfitt, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> World Bank, 1989.

<sup>34</sup> ECA, 1989, p. 4.

national income accounts, it would be simplistic to confine the commission's 'statistical war' against the Bank to the realm of economic statistics.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, by imagining new statistical frameworks based on indicators the ECA did not simply want to criticise the WB's use of data, but make operational the alternative principles and goals of the LPA. A document circulated in 1982 at the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers suggested that in order to translate into planning and policy the vision of the LPA, the necessary categories of indicators had to include population, human resources, modernisation, income and economic growth, self-reliance, African cooperation, health and welfare.<sup>36</sup> While there is nothing surprising, or specific to the LPA, in the mention of population, income and economic growth, the impact of the ECA's distinctive vision of development was particularly evident in the ambition to quantify concepts like 'self-reliance', 'modernisation' and 'African cooperation'.

**Modernisation:**

1. Share of agriculture in GDP
2. Share of manufacturing in GDP
3. Agricultural labour force as proportion of the total labour force
4. Proportion of wage earners in labour force
5. Share of government and public enterprises in GDP
6. Fertilizer use per unit of cultivated area
7. Proportion of commercial and industrial establishments using electricity
8. Non-marketed production as proportion of GDP
9. Motor vehicles per household
10. Telephones per household
11. Proportion of women in agricultural labour force
12. Proportion of women among civil servants
13. Proportion of girls in school enrolment

**Self-reliance:**

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<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Reginald Green claimed that the 'Bank- UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) statistical war is waged from both sides with highly selective and less than appropriate data', R.H. Green, 1993, 66.

<sup>36</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1981b, p. 13.

1. Proportion of capital of firms with assets over 10x dollars owned by nationals
2. Percentage of nationals among researchers, managers, professionals and teachers
3. Deficit in goods and services as a proportion of GDP
4. Foreign capital flows as a proportion of GDP
5. National savings as a proportion of capital formation
6. Cereal imports per head

**African co-operation:**

1. Intra-African trade as a proportion of total trade
2. Travellers to/from other African countries as a proportion of total travellers
3. African foreigners as proportion of total population
4. Value added in joint ventures as a proportion of total value added in the modern sector.<sup>37</sup>

The 1982 joint conference of African statisticians, planners and demographers led to the setting up of an expert consultation group that, on the basis of an appraisal of the experience of different African countries, as well as the work conducted by different international organisations, could prepare a list of socio-economic indicators for Africa. The resulting ‘proposed list of indicators for use by African planners’, presented in Addis Ababa in 1984, represented a dramatic expansion of the one drafted in 1982, including ten macro-categories and almost two hundred specific indicators:

**Basic needs**

1. Health, food, nutrition (26 indicators)
2. Education (13 indicators)
3. Housing and human settlements (10 indicators)
4. Social services (not yet defined)

**Employment, household expenditures, income and assets**

1. Labour force participation (5 indicators)
2. Household expenditures, income and assets (15 indicators)

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<sup>37</sup> UNESC; ECA, 1981b, Annex I, p.1-2.

### **Economic activity**

1. Institutional structure of production (6 indicators)
2. Macroeconomic structure (9 indicators)
3. Economic growth (2 indicators)
4. Economic stability (2 indicators)
5. Investment (1 indicator)
6. Productivity and elimination of wastage (5 indicators)

### **Participation in development**

1. Population participation in social and development activities (7 indicators)
2. Social stability (to include human rights concerns) (6 indicators)
3. Social cohesion and integration (to be defined, and to include equity)
4. Social integration and mobility (to be defined)

### **National autonomy**

1. Food security (5 indicators)
2. Endogenous technology (8 indicators)
3. Cultural development (13 indicators)
4. Economic and financial independence (20 indicators)

### **Collective self-reliance** (11 indicators)

### **Demographic structures and trends** (11 indicators)

### **Environment and land use** (5 indicators)

### **Information improvement** (5 indicators)

### **Special national concerns** (6 indicators).<sup>38</sup>

The 1984 list of indicators was different in scope and ambition from its predecessor. At the basis of this reconceptualization was the idea that even the notion of ‘social indicators’ was too narrow: instead, they had to be called ‘development indicators’, thus strengthening a vision that overcame the dichotomous, and somehow artificial, distinction between economic

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<sup>38</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1984, Appendix, ‘Proposed list of indicators for use by African planners’.

and social variables.<sup>39</sup> Of particular interest is the way in which the ECA translated into specific indicators the most ambitious aspects of the LPA. This was the case, for example, of the introduction of indicators about endogenous technology (with data on national scientists and qualified researchers, patents and innovations registered and used by local firms) and cultural development (mostly related to the circulation of newspapers, but also including an ambitious ‘perception indicator of the relevance of the contents of radio and TV programmes from the viewpoint of development’).

In the scholarly literature, the LPA has been subject to contrasting assessments. If, approvingly quoting Adedeji himself, one commentator hailed it as the ‘first continent-wide effort by Africans to forge a comprehensive, unified approach to their continent’s economic development’,<sup>40</sup> others have treated it as a ‘utopian’ document ‘lacking in practicable prescriptions’,<sup>41</sup> or dismissed it on the grounds that, while claiming to give voice to Africa’s authentic aspirations, it simply reflected the class bias of a political and technocratic elite imbued with a Eurocentric worldview.<sup>42</sup> Despite great diversity, all these positions treat the LPA as an ideological manifesto, rather than as a conceptual framework feeding into the process of imagining statistical tools that, under different circumstances, could have facilitated its operationalization and implementation.

The ways in which the principles and goals of the LPA were re-invented as statistical frameworks can be compared to a process of translation, made possible by the intermediate act of *naming* the indicators. This seemingly trivial task performs two distinct operations. Firstly, it asserts the existence of the phenomenon that the indicators purport to measure. Secondly, it claims that it can indeed be subjected to quantification.<sup>43</sup> The indicators’ names

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<sup>39</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1984, Appendix, ‘Proposed list of indicators for use by African planners’.

<sup>40</sup> F. N. Ikome, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> J. Ravenhill, 1986, 104.

<sup>42</sup> For further discussion and references to these positions see R.J. Cummings, 1992.

<sup>43</sup> K.E. Davis, B. Kingsbury and S. E. Merry, 2012a, 75-76.

embody the connection between the LPA as text, and the numbers that are the expected outcome of the prescribed acts of measurement and calculation. ECA's lists establish and make visible new relationships and hierarchies between the variables that are selected as the objects of measurement ('cereal imports', 'national savings'), the phenomena that they claim to measure ('basic needs', 'national autonomy', 'self-reliance'), and the overall ideological and political framework in which they originated.

This procedure appeals to the power of quantification to 'depoliticise'. Translating a vague or complex concept into a list of quantifiable elements detaches it from the ideological framework in which it originated, while simultaneously validating it by making it look as the outcome of 'objective' calculations.<sup>44</sup> Yet, as noted in a recent study on measuring development through indicators the UN, an expansion in scope combined with increased stretch, like the one that can be observed in the evolution of the ECA's indicators lists, could also mean that 'as the goals expand, the indicator numbers have an even more limited overall representing power not just for individual goals but also for development as an overall "good"'.<sup>45</sup> But the ECA did not aim at condensing its vision of development into a single measure; rather it identified in indicators a widely shared language that could contribute to legitimise the commission's role as spokesman of Africa's aspirations, and as the architect of a conceptual infrastructure that could reconfigure the relationship between development discourse and statistical practice on African soil.

#### **4. Monitoring, statistical capacity and fragmentation**

In order for the ECA to turn its envisaged indicators into effective technologies of governance, exercising the 'power to name' was not enough. To gain global acceptance and circulation, indicators require the support of influential political and institutional actors, and

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<sup>44</sup> T.M. Porter, 1995. The classic study of development discourse and depoliticization in the African context remains J. Ferguson, 1994.

<sup>45</sup> M.S. Morgan and M. Bach, forthcoming.

the capacity to take into account the needs, constraints, and changing identities of the relevant data producers and users.<sup>46</sup> In the case of the ambitious list of development indicators envisaged by the ECA, none of these conditions occurred. The LPA, authored by the ECA, was published by the Organization of African Unity to signal the widespread support of African heads of state. Although in 1982 the endorsement of the LPA by African nations -and the rejection of the Berg Report- was reiterated in a declaration of the ECA Conference of Ministers, by 1985 the OAU conceded that the LPA had not been translated into action, and that it had had no impact on national planning.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the oppositional dichotomy that characterised the relationship between the Berg Report and the LPA was eroded by an apparent convergence. If the catchphrase ‘adjustment with growth’ marked the WB and IMFs’ recognition of the dangers of import strangulation that followed the adoption of SAPs,<sup>48</sup> the WB increasingly acknowledged the unsustainability of African debt, and paid lip-service to the legitimacy of the OAU’s vision of regional integration.<sup>49</sup> The OAU, on the other hand, admitted the unsustainability of the policy regimes of the continent up to that point, and accepted (or claimed to accept) the SAPs as a painful necessity. Even though this was not a linear and cumulative process,<sup>50</sup> some scholars have also pointed out at a convergence between ECA and WB around a common platform that showed increasing concerns with the social costs of adjustment.<sup>51</sup>

This state of affairs did not imply the disappearance of ECA’s emphasis on indicators as part of its intellectual, statistical and political engagement with SAPs. Instead, it changed its main function. Rather than attempting to give credibility and statistical embodiment to an

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<sup>46</sup> K.E. Davis, B. Kingsbury and S. E. Merry, 2012a.

<sup>47</sup> OAU, 1985, 3. However, this was only part of the story. On the uneven reception and different interpretations of the LPA among African states, see T. M. Shaw, 1983.

<sup>48</sup> J. Ravenhill, 1988, 179.

<sup>49</sup> J. Ravenhill, 1993.

<sup>50</sup> The 1989 ‘statistical war’ discussed in the previous section is an important counterexample.

<sup>51</sup> J. Ravenhill, 1993.

alternative blueprint for development, the role of indicators became, more modestly, that of quantifying, and thus making visible, what the SAPs neglected:

‘the orthodox stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes not only ignore the human dimension, but also tend to worsen the well-being of large categories of the population, especially the poor and the vulnerable. Most seriously the implementation of these programmes has entailed significant reduction in the public expenditures on the social sectors, especially education, primary health care as well as water and sanitation, with dire consequences for the future of the African people and economies’.<sup>52</sup>

The 1988 Khartoum declaration, representing the commission’s position after almost a decade of SAPs, expressed the hope that the information (presumably including statistics) produced by ECA could be mobilised by African governments to improve their negotiating position vis-à-vis international financial institutions, and thus partly rectify the power imbalance that was at the core of SAPs.<sup>53</sup> Besides attempting to empower African governments, this strategy reflected an understanding of statistics as monitoring tools, hoping to influence the behaviour of the WB on the basis of numbers that quantified the outcome of its actions.<sup>54</sup> If ‘indicators are exercises in social power that interact with the status of the ranker in the broader international community’,<sup>55</sup> how did the power of indicators to potentially exercise pressure on the WB relate to the changing role of the ECA as a statistical provider?

The lists of indicators prepared by the ECA in the early 1980s had been replaced by an invitation, calling for international organizations to ‘intensify their efforts in the development and use of appropriate indicators for closely monitoring the human and social

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<sup>52</sup> ECA, 1989, p. 8. Another important critique of SAPs is found in the Abuja declaration, ECA, 1987.

<sup>53</sup> ECA, 1988, p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> J.G. Kelley and B.A. Simmons, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> J.G. Kelley and B. A. Simmons, 2015, p. 59.

dimensions of the adjustment process'.<sup>56</sup> The task of creating statistical evidence to assess the human and social implications of SAPs fell principally on institutions like the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, UNESCO and UNICEF. All these organizations shared with the ECA the view that SAPs were resulting in a 'decline in quality of and access to health services, resurgence of endemic and epidemic diseases',<sup>57</sup> and that the 'objective of monitoring human and social indicators in the adjustment process is therefore to protect vulnerable population groups, such as young children, from the negative impact of structural adjustment policies'.<sup>58</sup>

If ECA's vision of indicators as tools to quantify the human and social impact of SAPs echoed that of other institutions (and particularly UNICEF's call for an 'adjustment with a human face'),<sup>59</sup> the commission's emphasis on self-reliance and regional integration did not find a voice in the global statistical sphere.<sup>60</sup> What might appear as a partial success, actually implied the collapse of what made the ECA's statistical vision distinctive. By cutting the connection with the unified conceptual and political framework of the LPA, the indicators on the social and human costs of SAPs re-established the barrier separating the 'economic' from the 'social' that the ECA was committed to overcome. Furthermore, the resulting statistical picture of Africa as a fragile entity in need for help could potentially legitimise further external interventions,<sup>61</sup> and subverted the commission's vision of a continent that, by imagining development indicators, thought it could take control of its own destiny.

The possibility of turning ECA's statistical agenda into action was further complicated by the difficulties experienced by African national statistical services. The

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<sup>56</sup> ECA, 1988, p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> World Health Organization and World Food Programme, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> ECA; UNESC, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> G.A. Cornia, R. Jolly, and F. Stewart, 1987; 1988.

<sup>60</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the impact of SAPs on science and technology, see J.L. Enos, 1995.

<sup>61</sup> An interesting analogy is represented by the statistical representations of poverty and famine in the Sahel region in the 1970s discussed by V. Bonnacase, 2011, chapter 5.

commission, which envisaged for them a pivotal role in turning the LPA into development plans and policies,<sup>62</sup> claimed that ‘data requirements for development indicators would not entail any extra demand on statistical data collection programmes of African countries, except in areas of details and emphasis’.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, it was unavoidable that the ‘new emphasis of giving social dimension to development planning has profound implications for data requirements, as it demands new sets of data’.<sup>64</sup>

Yet, a ranking of priorities expressed by twenty-two African statistical offices suggests that the expansion of data collection on health, education, communication and environment, where the demands for new statistics was particularly marked, was not considered of critical importance.<sup>65</sup> The Commission noted a significant divergence between its priorities and those of policy-makers on the one hand, and those of statistical offices on the other hand. This was for example the case of agricultural statistics which – including data on food production and consumption – were seen by the ECA, as well as by many African heads of state, as the first priority, while it ranked only sixth in the preferences of the statistical services.<sup>66</sup> This ‘statistical conservatism’ and preservation of the status quo was largely the consequence of practical difficulties. A 1985 survey revealed that, for the twenty-two African statistical offices that participated, budget was the most common problem, followed by the ‘insufficient number of posts’ and the ‘difficulty in attracting qualified personnel’.<sup>67</sup> In the 1970s ‘the resources for statistical development have either not increased at all or the increases have been made only to offset inflation’.<sup>68</sup> With the shrinking of the public sector that followed the adoption of SAPs, the funding and staffing problems of

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<sup>62</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1985b, p. 5-6.

<sup>66</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1985b, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1985a, Tables 11 and 12, p. 19-20.

<sup>68</sup> UNESCO; ECA, 1981a, p. 2.

African statistical offices were exacerbated even further.<sup>69</sup> As put by Ben Kiregyera, state-sponsored ‘statistics was one of the victims’ of SAPs.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, national statistical services did not exhaust the range of actors potentially involved in the production of indicators. Indeed, the construction of socio-economic indicators is typically based on the aggregation of heterogeneous data collected by a wide range of sources and institutional actors. Looking back at the work done by UNICEF in the 1980s to monitor the impact of SAPs, Richard Jolly recollected how

The evidence was far from adequate. Few countries systematically collected data on the most important indicators of human welfare. [...] This said, the study noted a surprising availability of relevant data at the country level, once one moved beyond the confines of conventional indicators available in national or international statistical digests [...]. These other indicators were often most carefully collected and processed by health workers, school and housing administrators and research workers.<sup>71</sup>

The ECA was aware of the fact that a significant amount of data on which the construction of development indicators depended lay outside the standard operations of statistical offices, while there also existed large bodies of data that had been collected but had remained underutilised.<sup>72</sup> Partly, the authority of indicators (and of numbers more generally) stems from their capacity to hide the web of relationships linking the different subjects involved in their construction, stages of data production, and the ways in which concepts, procedures and methods are negotiated and contested at different stages of data collection and aggregation. Drawing on the work and insights of 1950s organization and information theorists, Wendy Espeland and Stevens Mitchell have characterised this process of ‘uncertainty absorption’ as follows:

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<sup>69</sup> M. Jerven, 2013.

<sup>70</sup> B. Kiregyera, 2015, p. 40.

<sup>71</sup> R. Jolly, 1991, 1810.

<sup>72</sup> ECA, 1981b, 8-9.

‘Raw’ information typically is collected and compiled by workers near the bottom of organizational hierarchies; but as it is manipulated, parsed and moved upward, it is transformed so as to make it accessible and amenable for those near the top, who make the big decisions. This “editing” removes assumptions, discretion and ambiguity. The premises behind the numbers disappear, with the consequence that decisions seem more obvious than they might otherwise have been. An often unintended effect of this phenomenon is numbers that appear more authoritative as they move up a chain of command. The authority of the information parallels the authority of its handlers in the hierarchy.<sup>73</sup>

Seen through this lens, in the 1980s ECA did not possess the administrative and institutional capacity to capitalise on the increasingly atomised landscape of data production on African economic and social life. Without coercive power to impose concepts, standards and procedures on African statistical offices, facing the ‘competition’ of other international organizations,<sup>74</sup> and inhabiting a world in which NGOs, rather than governments, increasingly collected information on social issues at the grassroots,<sup>75</sup> the ECA was not well equipped to deal with a scenario in which the ‘governance of numbers’ was characterised by extreme fragmentation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In 1989, the ECA reasserted the notion that the SAPs had not managed to mitigate Africa’s economic crisis, and further developed the ideas of the LPA in the *African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programs for Socio-Economic Recovery and*

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<sup>73</sup> W.N. Espeland and Mitchell L. Stevens, 2008, p. 421-422.

<sup>74</sup> One of the reasons that eventually led to the temporary closure of the ECA Statistics Division was precisely the fact that the World Bank developed its own database, B. Kiregyera, 2015, p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> Even without explicitly mentioning statistics, the Khartoum declaration also mentioned the increasingly important role of non-governmental organizations in ‘monitoring the implementation of international commitment’ and making the public aware of ‘the realities of the African countries and societies’ ECA; UNESCO, 1988b, p. 30. It is unfortunate that, although there is a considerable literature on the place of NGOs in African development and governance, their role as producers and users of statistics remains severely understudied.

*Transformation*.<sup>76</sup> With the approval of the *Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s*, the Commission reiterated both the crucial importance of statistics as a tool of African development, and the centrality of the ECA in promoting their expansion.<sup>77</sup> Yet, there is a certain irony in the fact the ‘governance of indicators’ described in this paper was followed by the rise of ‘governance indicators’. By turning issues like human rights, and accountability into numbers, the indicators that emerged in the 1990s under WB sponsorship expanded the realm of what could be an object of measurement and intervention and, by doing so, marked the further entrenchment of neoliberal governance.<sup>78</sup>

When compared with the significant impact of the WB governance indicators, or with other UN metrics like the Human Development Index (HDI), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG),<sup>79</sup> ECA’s 1980s lists might appear as little more than *trivia* in the history of quantification. Yet, even without shaping African statistics, planning and policies in the way their creators intended, the indicators listed by ECA do exactly what – etymologically - they are supposed to do: resembling the index finger, they point.<sup>80</sup>

Firstly, sharing the fate of the LPA, ECA’s lists of indicators point at an alternative future that failed to materialise, or at a counterfactual dimension in which industrialization, regional integration and developmental states are the building blocks of a prosperous and self-reliant Africa. While the contemporary state of African statistics is often debated in dichotomous terms, oscillating between narratives of ‘Africa’s statistical tragedy’ and

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<sup>76</sup> ECA, 1990a.

<sup>77</sup> ECA, 1990b.

<sup>78</sup> For a discussion of the transformation in the WB’s governance over ‘economies’ in the 1980s to ‘states and institutions’ in the 1990s, see G. Harrison, 2004.

<sup>79</sup> On the HDI, see E. Stanton, 2007, and K.E. Davis, B. Kingsbury and S. E. Merry, 95-99. On the HDI, MDG and SDG from the perspective of the UN, see M.S. Morgan and M. Bach, forthcoming.

<sup>80</sup> T. Porter, 2015, 34.

expressions of ‘Afro-statistical optimism’,<sup>81</sup> there is a consensus that the 1980s marked a low point. Morten Jerven observed that the 1980s were not simply Africa’s ‘lost decade’ from the point of view of economic growth: they were also characterised by a steady decline in the quantity and quality of economic statistics produced.<sup>82</sup> Yet, taking this view at face value can potentially lead us to ignore the ways in which statistical frameworks, regardless of their impact and degree of implementation, were imagined, and how their meanings evolved in light of changing political circumstances. Seen through the lens of the literature on the ‘governance by indicators’, the experience of ECA corroborates the insight that the power of indicators as tools of governance is not something embedded in their capacity to produce comparable numbers that transcend their context of inception. Rather, it requires the alignment of stringent political, economic, administrative and ideological conditions. Given that, as noted by Salle Engle Merry, the ‘vast majority of indicators search in vain for global interest and influence’,<sup>83</sup> there is certainly more scope for studying the political and administrative difficulties that prevent the implementation and circulation of statistical templates, rather than looking only at those indicators that transformed the world in profound ways. Moving from the governance of indicators to the governance of Africa under structural adjustment, the story recounted here can be read as an invitation to consider indicators not simply as expressions of the hegemonic power and neoliberal governance imposed by international financial institutions, but as a flexible platform that informed the ‘translation’ of alternative political visions, and as an intersection between the evolution of development discourse and the opportunities and constraints faced by African statistical machineries and institutions.

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<sup>81</sup> S. Devarajan, 2011; B. Kiegyere, 2015.

<sup>82</sup> M. Jerven, 2013, p. 45.

<sup>83</sup> S.E. Merry, 2016.

However, these are only preliminary considerations. Archival research, interviews and ethnographic studies are necessary to enhance our understanding of the political and statistical culture of the ECA, and to bring to life tensions and debates hidden by the opacity of the sources in the commission's repository. Only a fine-grained exploration of the experience of African planning and statistical machineries, and a deeper comparative perspective on the indicators designed by other UN agencies and international organizations can lead simultaneously to a more precise understanding of what was distinctive about ECA's approach, and a fuller appraisal of the political and social lives of quantification in neoliberal Africa.

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