



Everyone is afraid of data

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There needs to be robust infrastructure for official statistics so that governments do not suppress inconvenient truths

- Over the past two weeks, headlines have focused on declining employment between 2011-12 and 2016-17; loss of jobs under the National Democratic Alliance government, particularly post-demonetisation; and the government's refusal to release a report using the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) documenting this decline, leading to resignations of two members of the National Statistical Commission.

Five trends

- Let us step back from this episode and recall similar controversies over official data in the past.
- First, suppression of results seems to be a problem common to all political parties.
- Second, the fear of having statistical reports misquoted is legitimate.
- We live in a world where appetite for news is incessant and the news cycle is very short.
- Statistics that don't always lend themselves to rapid unpacking into sound bites and headlines are easily misinterpreted.
- Third, it is impossible to bottle up the genie once data are collected and reports prepared.
- In a world dominated by WikiLeaks, suppressing reports seem to create an even bigger problem, since it allows individuals with exclusive access to act as the interpreters for others.
- Fourth, sometimes leaked results create speculation that is far worse than full disclosure would warrant.

The employment picture

- Fifth, statistics often deal with complicated reality and require thoughtful analysis instead of the bare bones reporting contained in

typical government reports.

- If lower engagement of women with family-based activities such as farming, rearing livestock or engaging in petty businesses drives the decline in employment, we may need to look at declining farm sizes and increasing mechanisation as the drivers of this decline.
- One can blame the government for not creating more salaried jobs for women pushed out of farming and related activities, but it would be hard to blame it for eliminating jobs.
- So how do we get out of this vicious cycle where fear of misinterpretation leads to suppression of data, which in turn fuels speculation and suspicion and ultimately results in our inability to design and evaluate good policies?
- The only solution is to recognise that we need more openness about data coupled with deeper analysis, allowing us to draw informed and balanced conclusions.
- The onus for this squarely lies with the government.
- Simply placing basic reports in the public domain is not sufficient, particularly in a news cycle where many journalists are in a hurry to file their stories and cherry-pick results to create headlines.

Spread the net wider

- Understaffed and underfunded statistical services cannot possibly have sufficient domain expertise to undertake substantively informed analyses in all the areas for which statistical data are required.
- A better way of building a robust data infrastructure may be to ensure that each major data collection activity is augmented by an analytical component led by domain experts, recruited from diverse sources, including academia.

