

Data Vacuum - Covid-19 Impact

What is the issue?

- Covid-19 led condition is causing the postponing of Census operations and undertaking of key official primary surveys.
- The resultant data vacuum could hamper efficient policy-making at a time when it is most needed.

What happened with the 2009-10 survey?

- In 2009-10, the National Sample Survey Office (now National Statistical Office or NSO) conducted a large sample survey of Household Consumer Expenditure (HCE).
- This survey, usually carried out once in 5 years, was repeated in 2011-12.
- The reason was that 2009-10 saw India suffer both a severe drought and the after-effects of the global financial crisis.
- 2011-12 was a “normal” year like 1999-2000 and 2004-05, “free” from any major economic downturn.

What is significant with 2011-12?

- 2011-12 yielded the HCE survey data used for estimating poverty lines and ratios.
- Significantly, besides this, it also produced a surplus of information from other sources such as -
 - i. the 2011 Census
 - ii. the NSSO’s Employment and Unemployment Survey (EUS)
 - iii. the Rural Development Ministry’s Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC)
- Policymakers and researchers were thus spoilt for choice with regard to official data availability in that period.

What is the present scenario?

- In contrast to the above, at present times, there is a virtual data vacuum.
- The NSO did carry out a HCE survey for 2017-18.
- But the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation did not release its results citing “data quality issues”.
- Instead, it proposed conducting back-to-back HCE surveys in 2020-21 and

2021-22 “after incorporating all data quality refinements”.

- The 2020-21 survey is supposed to start from July 2020.
- Apparently, this looks unlikely given the novel coronavirus-induced situation.
- It is a massive exercise due to the size of the sample (101,651 households in 2011-12) and also the questionnaire.
- The questionnaire, notably, covers the consumption of around 300 food and non-food items.
- The field investigators go to remote areas and spend roughly 2 hours with each household, doing which is risky at COVID-19 times.

What else is uncertain?

- **Census** - The Census collects individual-level demographic as well as socio-cultural, occupational, education and migration-related information.
- This is scheduled to be conducted in February-March 2021.
- **Houselisting** - Prior to the Census, the first Houselisting & Housing phase was to take place during April-September 2020.
- This looks at the amenities and assets possessed by households along with the condition of homes (construction material, number of rooms, etc).
- The houselisting operation is crucial for carving out specific areas that are allotted to each of the 30 lakh-odd field functionaries tasked with collection of Census information.
- There were uncertainties over the launch of this phase even before the Covid-19 lockdown.
- This was especially because it was clubbed with the updation of the National Population Register opposed by many non-BJP ruled states.
- With Covid-19, there is a remote chance of the Houselisting & Housing phase taking off immediately.
- **SECC** - The same goes for the SECC, whose individual/household-level data, unlike that of the regular Census, is not confidential.
- The Narendra Modi government has used the SECC-2011 database for identifying beneficiaries under -
 - i. Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana (rural housing)
 - ii. Ujjwala (LPG connection)
 - iii. Saubhagya (household electrification)
 - iv. Ayushman Bharat (health insurance) and other welfare schemes
- But the SECC-21, too, cannot be undertaken without the demarcation of enumeration blocks as part of the Census Houselisting operation.

What are the challenges now?

- The few relatively recent sources of primary survey data available at present include -

- i. the Agriculture Census 2015-16
 - ii. the NABARD All-India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey 2016-17
 - iii. the NSO's 2017-18 reports on social consumption (health and education) and access to drinking water and sanitation
- But these do not answer some basic questions such as:
 - i. Has poverty in India fallen and by how much since 2011-12?
 - ii. Is consumption of protein-rich foods and vegetables growing at the same rate as in the previous decade?
 - iii. Do official production estimates for milk or horticultural crops square up with HCE data on household consumption?
 - So, given the COVID-19 induced conditions, the survey data for enabling informed policymaking is highly inadequate.
 - The economic crisis, particularly post lockdown, only further complicates matters.
 - Post lockdown, many migrant workers have gone back to their villages.
 - So, the upcoming Census could give a distorted picture with regard to migrants.
 - Notably, their share in India's population rose from 29.9% to 37.6% between 2001 and 2011.
 - With neither 2020-21 nor 2021-22 set to be "normal years", any official survey may throw up distorted results, such as a dramatic drop in HCE.

What is the way ahead?

- Finding normal years has become increasingly difficult.
- E.g. in 2016-17, there was demonetisation, in 2017-18, it was GST, 2018-19 and 2019-20 were apparently normal, but 2020 again is faced with lockdown.
- So, it is advisable that the government continuously do surveys without waiting for normal years.

Source: Indian Express