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BRIEF

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*Politicisation of Statistics Policy Puzzle No. 3**

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Snapshot:

- Data and statistical information inform decision-making processes.
- They have the potential to advance business operations (within the private sector) and societies at large (within the public/governmental sector).
- Official national statistics play an important role in a democracy.
- Interaction between statistics and politics is inevitable and, under certain conditions, the latter exploits the former for its mandate.
- Controversial spinning or misuse of statistics for political purposes occurred in Tanzania where GDP growth figures were inflated from 2015 onward.

Systemic Foundations of The Puzzle

In the digital age, data have become one of the key assets for advancing both business operations and societies at large. Understanding, using, and communicating data and data insights are, however, no simple tasks. In other words, data can be misinterpreted and misused, which negatively affects decisions informed by them. Contemporary examples from the business sector underpin such claim. For instance, in 2010, Amazon and Apple reportedly eavesdropped on personal conversations of their users (Seneviratne 2019).

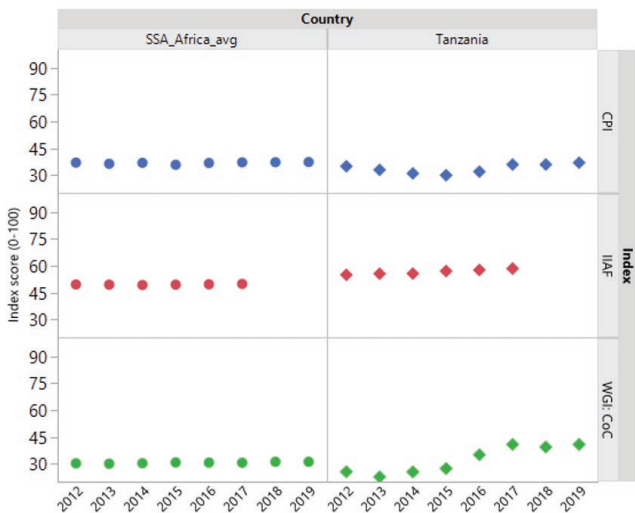
* The 'GlobalStat Policy Puzzle' Series is edited by Gaby Umbach and addresses an unusual data-related phenomenon – the puzzle – identified through data anomalies within a specific theme – the policy. It exemplifies the puzzle through a single case and highlights comparative elements where appropriate. The main goal of the analysis is to draw attention to a potential policy puzzle and to highlight why it should deserve analytical attention. The analysis serves as a pointer to further need for analysis. The main outcomes of the analysis are thus specific research recommendations on how to further unravel and examine the puzzle.



Unfortunately, the 'spinning' of data (Lugo-Ocando 2017) also occurs in the public and governmental sectors, which directly affects the pillars of (democratic) societies, including elections, government capacity, public policy and trust in public institutions.

Theoretically speaking, official national statistics are the vital outcome of impartial data collection by official statistical agencies and institutions within the governmental sector. According to the United Nations (United Nations 2014), “[o]fficial statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation”. As such authoritative sources, national statistics are the focus of this analysis.

Figure 1. Governance indicators for Tanzania



Note: *IIAF* – Ibrahim Index of African Governance; *CPI* – Corruption Perceptions Index; *WGI: CoC* – World Governance Indicators: Control of Corruption; *SSA* – Sub Saharan Africa.

Over the past decades, it has become evident that statistical information in tandem with evidence-informed policy-making are essential parts of good (public) governance. Thus, official national statistics play a particular role for the functioning of democratic societies. In this context, it is important to emphasise that the quality of statistical information depends *inter alia* on the political framework within which they are collected, produced and communicated (Radermacher 2019).

Due to this interlinkage, national statistics are in constant interaction with politics, and have become an integral part of political decision-making processes on, for instance, domestic macroeconomic policies. Moreover, as (economic) statistical indicators provide an insight into an economy’s health and performance, they potentially affect flows of foreign direct investment, which is especially important for developing (and low-income) countries.

Managing national statistics is a challenging task and, on a global level, there are significant differences in governments’ efforts and abilities to collect and publish statistical information (Boräng et al. 2018). Some of the challenges linked to the production and use of official statistics include measurement errors, quality and consistency of data and mistrust arising from the former (see Glenday and Greenwood 1935; Cohen 1938; Divale, Harris, and Williams 1978; Bos 2007).

In extreme instances, national statistics – and the research that underpins it – can be highly politicised, if not even 'weaponised' (Newkirk II 2018). However, for the purpose of this analysis, such 'weaponisation' is not understood in the literal sense of being “used by armed actors to do harm” (Koopman 2016: 530). Instead, the focus is on the politicisation of statistics and on disinformation, which plays out through flawed use of national statistics. Disinformation is an integral element of the so-called weaponisation of language (Pascale 2019) and may obstruct democratic practices and economic prosperity. This is the essence of this policy puzzle.

Distorting reality in order to consolidate (political) power is the main objective of disinformation (Pascale 2019). Such practice can be observed in Tanzania. We hence exemplify the policy puzzle by analysing the Tanzanian case. The analysis is timely, as the next presidential elections take place on 28 October 2020.

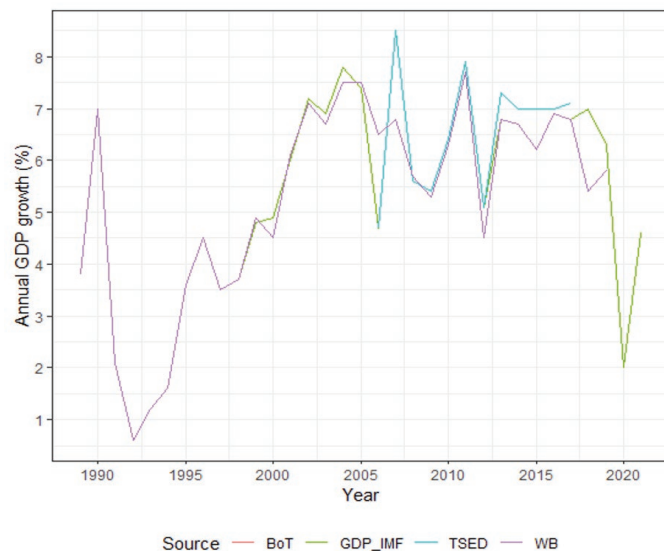
Illustration of The Puzzle: Tanzania

After gaining independence in 1961, Tanzania embraced a one-party political system until 1992 when the Chama Cha Mapinduzi party introduced a multi-party system (Ngasongwa 1992). The present political system of Tanzania closely resembles an imperfect liberal democracy (Cooksey and Kelsall 2011; see Gray 2015)



The current political climate in Tanzania is, to a large extent, shaped by President Magufuli who gained power in 2015. His rule is based on state-led economic prosperity with centralised decision-making; anti-corruption campaigns; and denying expression of political opposition, civil society and media (Eriksen 2018: 34). This notwithstanding, relevant governance indicators have remained constant, relatively low at the global scale, and close to the average for Sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of the control of corruption (CoC) index, which is somewhat higher than the average from 2015 onward (see Figure 1).

Figure 2. GDP growth in Tanzania



Note: *BoT* – Bank of Tanzania; *GDP_IMF* – International Monetary Fund; *TSED* – Tanzania Socio-Economic Database; *WB* – World Bank.

Economically, Tanzania has been performing relatively well. Foreign direct investment underpins high rates of GDP growth. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted Tanzania as one of the fastest growing economies worldwide in the 2010s (Cooksey and Kelsall 2011).

However, GDP growth statistics have become controversial and came under suspicion of being severely flawed. This seemed to align with President Magufuli's overall attempts to consolidate power by using disinformation strategies.

The controversy started in the period from 2015 onward. The Tanzanian government reported an economic growth of 6.8% in 2017 and of 7% in 2019. Moreover, the government predicts the growth of 5.5% in 2020 while

the IMF's calculations indicate a humble 1.9% growth (The Economist 2020; see Figure 2). However, the IMF and the World Bank (WB) argue that Tanzania's own figures are inflated because other trends (e.g. decreased tax revenue and public sector wages, shrunk lending to private sector and decreased foreign direct investment (5% of GDP in 2014 to 2% of GDP in 2017)) demonstrate that such growth is counter-intuitive (The Economist 2020a; Financial Times 2019).

Figure 2 shows GDP growth figures from different data sources – two Tanzanian and two international. Discrepancies occur around 2005 and around 2015. The latter period corresponds to Magufuli's presidential term. Expectedly, data from Tanzanian sources differ from the international ones.

Although measuring GDP is a complex exercise in which errors in terms of measurement and quality might occur (see Bos 2007; Radermacher 2019; Bardasi et al. 2011), the Tanzanian controversy instead has a strong political connotation. Two developments cater this claim.

First, President Magufuli blocked the release of the IMF report on the economy in 2019 (Financial Times 2019). Second, in 2018 the Tanzanian government passed an amendment to the national 2015 Statistics Act that severely sanctions (including jail time) the collection and dissemination of statistical information "which is intended to invalidate, distort or discredit official statistics" (The United Republic of Tanzania 2018; Reuters 2018). This was behind the incident in 2017 when Zitto Kabwe, opposition MP, was arrested based on the 2015 Statistics Act for questioning GDP numbers (The Economist 2020). However, the law was again amended in 2019 due to pressure from the IMF and WB. Statistical information from non-governmental sources are now subject to review by the National Statistics Bureau before publication (The Citizen 2019).

Against this backdrop, the Tanzanian case can be understood through the lens of the politicisation of knowledge. Tanzanian patronage-style bureaucracy that has been centralised under Mugafuli (Eriksen 2018) contributes to, and can induce, knowledge politicisation (Boräng et al. 2018). Moreover, Cooksey and Kelsall (2011) detect poor performance of the Tanzania Tax Authority partially due to corruption.



Similar controversy in terms of national statistics with political connotations occurred in Argentina. In 2007, the Argentinian government (by political appointments) took control of the Statistics Institute in order to curb inflation figures aiming at lower payments for foreign debt (Boräng et al. 2018).

However, the situation in Argentina differs from the situation in Tanzania in two relevant aspects. First, a portion of statisticians protested against the changes of staff within the Institute as well as against the manipulation of inflation data (Boräng et al. 2018). Second, the malpractice in statistics ended after the change in government (The Economist 2020a).

Main Take-Aways For Further Research

In sum, political interests have undermined the credibility and quality of statistical information in Tanzania. Such practices imperil further economic and, importantly, democratic development of a country.

Official national institutions producing and managing statistics must retain their independence and scientific objectivity in order to be credible, trustworthy and help underpin prosperity (Lehtonen 2019). Although statistics and politics are in constant interaction, objectives of one should not be pursued by the mandates of the other.

The above analysis suggests specific recommendations for further research on the above policy puzzle that can potentially be applied to the broader field of political economy comparative analyses of political regimes.

Recommendations For Further Analysis:

- Compliance practices of national governments with international statistical standards need to be analysed and addressed.
- Conditions under which international institutions that collect statistical data exert pressure (and conditionality) on national governments need to be assessed.
- Effects of mis-used and erroneous statistical information on international institutions' authority and credibility need to be analysed.
- Rationales for instrumentalising statistical information ought to be explored.
- The role of independent national statistical offices, as well as their contribution to the accountability and transparency of decision-making and to democracy at large, deserves in-depth analysis.



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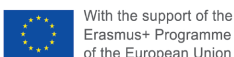
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