

What does dissolution of SCoS entail? | Explained

Why was the SCoS dissolved? What are the main roles of the new Steering Committee? How do the SCoS and the Steering Committee differ? How does the SCoS's dissolution impact statistical data quality? How will the new committee address the data gaps? What issues have arisen from the delay in the census?

Updated - September 12, 2024 10:42 pm IST

A. M. JIGEESH



The 2021 census was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and even after three years, the Centre has not provided a roadmap for the next census | Photo Credit: M.A. Sriram

The story so far:

The Union Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation has dissolved the 14-member Standing Committee on Statistics (SCoS) headed by eminent economist and former chief statistician of the country Pronab Sen. Geeta Singh Rathore, Director-General of the Ministry's National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), told the SCoS members that its works overlapped with that of the Steering Committee for National Sample Surveys, headed by Rajeeva Laxman Karandikar, former director of the Chennai Mathematical Institute and this was cited as the reason for dismantling the SCoS. Dr. Sen has said that the SCoS members had questioned the delay in conducting the census, as censuses have long been a crucial source of reliable data for policymakers. He also complained that the members were not given any specific reason for the committee's dissolution.

What were the key responsibilities of SCoS?

The SCoS advised the Centre on survey methodology, including sampling frames, sampling design, survey instruments, questions, etc. It also played a vital role in finalising the tabulation plan of surveys, reviewing the extant framework, and addressing the issues raised from time to time on the subjects, results, methodology, etc. related to all surveys. The Terms of Reference for the SCoS also included providing

guidance for conducting pilot surveys/pre-testing, exploring the availability of administrative statistics relating to surveys/statistics, providing guidance for studying or identifying data gaps, providing additional data requirements, and imparting technical guidance to the Central and State level agencies for conducting surveys.

What is the role of the new committee?

The Steering Committee, which replaces the SCoS, has 17 members and one non-member secretary. The Centre has retained at least four members from the SCoS in the Steering Committee other than officials such as Ms. Rathore. Sonalde Desai, Bishwanath Goldar, S. Chandrasekhar, and Mausumi Bose are the four experts who are retained. The tenure of the Steering Committee will be for two years. Its Terms of Reference are quite similar to that of SCoS, including reviewing subject results, methodology questionnaires, sampling frames, sampling design, concepts, definitions, survey instruments, etc. related to all National Sample Surveys. It will also advise the Ministry on survey methodology and finalise the tabulation plan of surveys.

The mandates of both the committees clash in a way, though the composition of the Steering Committee is different as it has more official members while the SCoS had several non-official members.

Why is there a pressure for a new census?

Serious academicians and policymakers have been demanding the Centre to conduct a census. The Opposition said that the lack of fresh data keeps crores of people away from schemes such as the National Food Security Act. The Opposition has also been questioning the numbers on employment and unemployment. On the periodic labour force surveys too, there were questions. Since the Census is conducted by the Union Home Ministry, the Ministry of Statistics has been telling the SCoS members in its meetings that it has no role in deciding the date of census. Statisticians and academics argue that the census can provide State and sub-district wise data on issues such as education and employment.

What are the flaws in administrative data?

While the Centre has been claiming that data provided by the EPFO, ESIC on its enrolments and Reserve Bank of India's KLEMS (K: Capital, L: Labour, E: Energy, M: Materials and S: Services) database gave a rosy picture about the employment scenario in the country. However, questions have been raised as administration data, especially on labour, is threshold-based. It is alleged that such data was airing the perspectives of policy architects or reflecting the government's intentions.

The chances of manipulating the administration data set were also high as government agencies generated that data and it is also argued that such data has limitations of analytical rigour.

On the other hand, survey-based data, including the census, has universal coverage without any thresholds, providing a wider and bigger platform. However, surveys such as PLFS could not provide State or district-level data, but the census will be able to provide even sub-district data. PLFS also allegedly had an urban bias.

How urgent is the next census?

The country's decennial census has been conducted every ten years since the 1870s, with the last census in 2011. The 2021 census was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and even after three years, the Centre has not provided a roadmap for the next census. Economists and policymakers argue that relying on 2011 census data for statistical surveys, even after 13 years, will negatively impact decision making. So they suggested that the way forward is to conduct the next census at the earliest.

Published - September 12, 2024 08:30 am IST