

Data collection problems in developing countries

[GuidesWeek](#) for week ending February 28th, 2009

I've never liked telling people my birthday, let alone my age. Acquaintances in Winchester warn me that denial of the passage of time is doomed to end badly. But I prefer to keep them guessing.

It's therefore a source of irritation to receive junk mail from insurance companies which highlights my age as a passport to unbeatable discounts. I naturally welcomed the recent House of Lords report that fingered the UK as the "world leader in surveillance". Too much personal data is falling into unregulated hands.

It's rather the opposite in many poor countries. Too little data prevents governments from doing their job. In Malawi, it's difficult to clamp down on child labour if the kids don't have a birth certificate and can lie about their age or, more likely, aren't quite sure what it is.

Some governments have adequate capacity for registering data but have reasons for not trying too hard. In Bhutan, years of shenanigans with population figures betray a reluctance to register the existence of the Nepali ethnic minority. Throughout Europe, Roma people fail to gain access to their social rights for lack of proper documents.



Boy helps sort maize in Malawi © [The UNESCO Courier](#)

Which is the greater psychological burden – the Orwellian fear of the surveillance state or the void of statelessness?

The absence of reliable data has been a millstone around the neck of the Millennium Development Goals. This is partly self-inflicted in that the targets are relative (halving poverty) rather than absolute (eliminating poverty). The World Bank has warned that a "significant number of countries do not have enough data to track changes in poverty."

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In the UK we have a millennium start on such matters. One of the most accurate inventories ever compiled of a country's population and assets was commissioned by William the Conqueror shortly after the first millennium in 1085.

The Domesday Book was originally known by a different name....

Liber Wintoniensis

... the Book of Winchester.

