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CURRENT ISSUES IN TECHNICAL COOPERATION

Statistical training and education in the ESCWA countries

Experience has shown that the human element is always the most decisive factor in the success or failure of any statistical activity. Failure in the proper selection of adequately trained, or in providing adequate training to, personnel engaged in statistical field activity or research work can never be compensated by well-designed plans or abundance of funds. On the contrary, this failure will most certainly lead to waste of available funds and will frustrate any statistical plan no matter how well-designed. Well trained personnel, on the other hand, often may compensate for scarcity of funds or deficiency in equipment and may overcome unexpected obstacles arising during statistical operations.

When evaluating the results of statistical surveys, we have often come across cases in which figures are unreasonably anomalous. Our investigation has consistently indicated that failure to provide the interviewers with adequate training is the real reason behind this phenomenon. In other cases, delegation of the survey design to personnel lacking expertise and experience has led to bottlenecks or difficulties in certain stages of the survey process or to expending great efforts to achieve results that are inconsistent with the objectives of the survey. In large scale surveys, such as population censuses, we have also observed that the inadequate level of training given to a group of workers at a particular stage in the survey had a direct effect on the level of training of other groups to the extent of rendering their endeavours partially or totally abortive. The efforts of data processors may prove futile in the event of failure to obtain accurate data by data collectors.

The above are only a few examples to indicate the importance of adequate statistical training and the seriousness of the risk involved in its absence. For this reason, a good part of the technical assistance provided by ESCWA to its member States in the area of statistics is geared towards statistical training.

Statistical training and education in the ESCWA region is undertaken in the following forms:

(1) Formal statistical education: carried out by private or public colleges or universities and supervised by the ministry of education or of higher education. Graduates of these formal institutes are not necessary under any obligation to serve in official statistical organizations;

(2) Formal statistical training: carried out by specialized institutions some of which are national, such as the Statistics Training Center in Amman, Jordan; some are regional such as the Arab Statistical Institute in Baghdad, Iraq; and some are interregional such as the Cairo Demographic Center in Egypt. Training in these institutions is offered to individuals who are already employees of official statistical organizations or who are in the process of becoming active employees of such organizations;

(3) Informal statistical training: This type of training in the ESCWA region is carried out by regional or international organizations. It is offered through training workshops and seminars, it can be carried out on regional, subregional or local levels.

(4) In-house training: This type of training is offered through the services of resident experts, part-time consultants or advisory services;

(5) Study tours: This type of training is organized through bilateral arrangements between statistical organizations, often with United Nations support.

Most of the technical assistance provided by ESCWA in the area of statistical training is in the form of informal or in-house training. Eventhough these are two of the most effective forms of training, yet many difficulties have impeded the full realization of their benefits. Among these difficulties are the following.

(1) The limited member of statistical advisors available to ESCWA. This limits the number and duration of workshops or training sessions that may be offered as well as the number of areas that may be covered.

(2) Scarcity of financial resources to cover fellowship of participants or training missions of advisors;

(3) Training is not always given at the appropriate time

The preparation, submission and approval, if at all, of technical assistance projects is a time-consuming process. In addition, governments have their own routine procedure for the selection of candidates for training. The United Nations also has some impeding rules and procedures that may delay the execution of the training project. Consequently, the time lost before the training is actually started, in addition to the training period itself, may make a trainee finish his training at a time when he or she is no longer needed for the operation for which he was trained. This is especially true in the case of training for population censuses.

(4) The most suitable candidates are not always the ones nominated for training

In many countries, training missions are regarded as a personal reward for employees. This attitude makes it extremely difficult to select the most suitable candidate for training. Supervisors often have to give consideration to the equitable distribution of opportunities among their staff and their choice may even be subject to pressures of various kinds. On many occasions these factors result in the selection of persons lacking the appropriate qualifications, aptitude and ability.

(5) Lack of familiarity with the language of instruction

Lack of familiarity with a foreign language of instruction not only narrows the choices of suitable candidates but also reduces the possibility of their deriving maximum benefits from training in a foreign language.

(6) On completion of training a trainee is not always posted in the suitable position

This occurs very often, particularly when the trainee does not return to his or her post at the appropriate time.

(7) Transfer of trained staff to other ministries, departments or the private sector

At the present stage of socio-economic development in the countries of the ESCWA region, the likelihood of turnover of trained staff from official statistical organizations is very high. Thus, staff trained by statistical organizations are often tempted to move to more attractive positions that may not have any relation to their statistical training.

The above problems are not limited to informal statistical training but can also be found in other forms of training and education. Statistical courses given in universities and colleges, for instance, to students who are likely to become the major users of statistical information in the future, such as economics, business administration, sociology, education, psychology, medicine, ..ect. majors, hardly ever achieve the purpose for which they are intended. Their contents are mainly theoretical and they are offered in a manner that makes these future users of statistics hate the subject all together. This of course carries with it the seeds of ill-communication between users, statistics and statisticians.

Unfortunately, for some officials the problems have been viewed as impediments justifying the suspension or scaling-down of training. An example may be found, for instance, in the case of an official who is reluctant to allow one of his staff to take advantage of a training opportunity, such as a fellowship, for fear of the better chances the staff will have to move somewhere else after training. While understandable, such attitude among officials, including some United Nations Officials, should be discouraged and ammended. The problem of so called "brain-drain" and other problems facing statistical training are inevitable at certain stages of development. Until such time as these obstacles can be overcome, the only recommended course of action that can be taken in the developing countries, including the ESCWA

countries, is to try to minimize their effects by offering more training, broadening the training base and increasing the number of trainees to the point of full saturation.

The United Nations technical assistance program in statistical training can never exceed the actual need for training in the ESCWA region in all areas of statistics, particularly in the form of specialized training workshops both at the national and regional levels. So far, such workshops are offered on an ad hoc basis depending on the availability of funds. The need is quite pressing for more frequent workshops to be offered on a regularly planned basis aiming, not only at training, but also at exchange of information, knowledge and experience between countries of the region as well as with the rest of the world. They should also include specialized workshops or seminars specially designed for high level officials responsible for managing and organizing statistical programs. Areas that should be covered include agriculture statistics, national accounts, services statistics, labour statistics, environment statistics, vital statistics, population and demographic statistics, statistics on women, statistics on special groups and statistics on drugs. Special emphasis needs to be placed on data collection methods and operations including censuses and surveys. Obviously, training, especially in the present computer era, will be deficient if it did not include computer training, data processing training as well as training on data evaluation and analysis.