

X. FIELD ORGANIZATION

A. Interacting with respondents

426. Chapter X considers how an agency should be organized in order to deal efficiently with respondents to statistical inquiries.

427. One method is to invest in the creation and maintenance of a working field organization. By definition, a field organization interacts with respondents to communicate the agency's need for information; elicit relevant information in the correct form and at the appropriate time; maximize respondents' cooperativeness and goodwill; and adequately explain the consequences of refusal.

428. As far back as the Interregional Seminar on Statistical Organization, held in Ottawa and New York in 1952, participants representing statistical offices of all sizes in both developed and developing countries reached the conclusion that if any part of statistical operations would benefit from management according to function, rather than subject matter, it was the field organization. All participants shared a similar opinion regarding the census of population - the census itself cannot be managed without an effective national field organization, and once created, that organization can be put to use at low marginal cost in undertaking other surveys.

429. Nevertheless, two factors can alter this straightforward conclusion. Some countries have a geographically decentralized statistical system, not out of choice but out of constitutional imperative. If the role of the central statistical office is limited to assembling results compiled elsewhere, issuing coordinating guidelines and perhaps surveying its immediate surroundings, the issue of a national field organization does not apply.⁸⁵ However, if the individual states, provinces or cantons that make up the decentralized system conduct multiple surveys, some of which are carried out on a continuous basis, they will tend to have a field capability organized by function.

430. The reasons are straightforward. Economies of scale exist in recruiting, training interviewers, managing a large workforce, ensuring that embarrassing duplications are avoided, and preventing under-utilization of the workforce by drawing up permanent, long-term and short-term contracts. These arguments were recognized fifty years ago and continue to hold today.

⁸⁵ In several countries in South America, the scope of many statistics based on surveys is limited to the national capital, and so coordination is more or less assured through cooperative initiatives with the other levels of Government. The custom in some of these countries is that the manager for each survey handles its field force.

431. Suppose that the field organization is established on a permanent basis, in charge of the collection operations for all surveys (except those carried out through direct contact between subject experts and respondents). One of its chief assets is its location in different parts of the national territory. In a sense, the field organization acts as the local eyes and ears of the central office.⁸⁶ Many field organizations are therefore organized so as to strategically distribute resources throughout a nation, while maintaining a centrally located cell in charge of coordination and liaison. The responsibilities of the central cell are critical. It serves as the day-to-day link between the decentralized network and the management of the statistical agency; ensures that the different offices of the field organization work as a system rather than as a loose confederation; and serves as the point of contact for the project managers to convey their wishes, doubts, and complaints to local offices.

432. The field organization should be a key participant in a standing committee that settles differences of opinion on how to approach respondents. If the field organization believes that a recommended approach to a particular survey threatens respondents' goodwill, it should be able to express its concern to the agency's upper management. If the issue is to develop an approach to the census of population or any other major census, the field organization will take part in discussions at the highest level.

433. Of course, the existence of a field organization is predicated on the need to divide the statistical process into discrete segments, and in particular, to separate the collection of respondents' information from other stages such as editing, estimating or tabulating. As the use of the Internet, both in general and in statistical activities, becomes more widespread, the role of a special field organization will likely change in the face of technological progress.⁸⁷ However, current circumstances are such that these organizations are bound to continue with their traditional functions, at least over the next decade or two.

434. Large field organizations tend to be divided into two or three groups. One will be in charge of interviewing households, and its talents are best put to use in household surveys conducted on a continuous basis (e.g., the labour force survey). There will also be a group in charge of interviewing businesses, and its membership will range from those with formal or informal bookkeeping or accounting skills to those without a great deal of experience, who will be primarily responsible for the delivery and pickup of paperwork. A third group may be in charge of pricing consumer goods, and their knowledge will encompass a wide variety of products such as foodstuffs, clothing, medicine and entertainment.

435. The groups themselves may have a two-tiered composition. They may include a small group of permanent employees who provide leadership, organization and

⁸⁶ No matter how unified the organization, local offices will often perceive their first loyalty to be the local constituents (respondents) and lose sight of the fact that they must also serve the interests of a national agency or system.

⁸⁷ Much of this has already occurred with tabulation and in at least part of publication. The desktop computer and an array of accessories, along with electronic dissemination, have rendered a good deal of traditional printing paraphernalia obsolete, except for basic tasks (collating, binding, sorting and mailing).

continuity, and a larger group of employees contracted on a renewable, short-term basis. These short-term employees afford the field organization a great deal of flexibility in the face of fluctuations in workflow.

436. A field organization deals with several classes of respondents: households, enterprises, Governments, non-commercial institutions and at times foreign institutions. Each possesses unique attributes and may be sensitive, and even resistant, to different types of requests. In this section, we examine some of these issues and the methods that a statistical agency can deploy to maximize respondent participation.

1. Households

437. Above all, interactions between households and the statistical agency concern the census of population; surveys of household incomes and expenses; labour force surveys; and special surveys that supplement the latter two.⁸⁸ Successful field organization managers responsible for households should possess the following:

- A list of the respondents comprehensive in scope;⁸⁹
- Thorough knowledge of the ethnic and socio-economic characteristics of the population, so as to maximize cooperation and minimize the friction caused by invasions of privacy;
- A method of training interviewers that reflects the organization's accumulated knowledge of how to successfully approach the respondent community.

438. Interviewers should not be deployed until they have thoroughly understood the difference between coercion and cooperation. In addition, a few other matters require understanding. For example, households seldom keep usable records. The easiest questions are those based on knowledge of their status (e.g., demographic, participation in the workforce). The most difficult are those that require exact recollection or access to detailed records (e.g., when and at what cost was a particular household item purchased).

439. Households may react poorly to certain questions on the basis of their cultural and demographic characteristics. In some households, respondents may prefer to keep the nature of their expenses hidden, and certain expenses are considered to be morally wrong (e.g., alcohol and tobacco). Controversial topics such as abortion may elicit diverse, possibly even violent, reactions.

⁸⁸ Occasionally there are highly specialized large-scale surveys that require a dedicated organization to be handled correctly.

⁸⁹ These lists can be derived from the census of population, from other household surveys that are updated on a continuous basis or from a list enumerated by the field organization itself.

Box 14. Two communities

In one country, the population was almost evenly divided between the coast and the highlands. While there was no strife between the communities, they were still far from integrated and showed pronounced differences in their attitudes toward finances and family matters. Certain types of statistical inquiry were easiest if the interviewer belonged to the other community, since this was considered less intrusive than sharing answers with peers. For other types of questions, the opposite was true. Successful administration of surveys requires detailed knowledge of such attitudes.

440. The effectiveness of a field organization depends on the following:

- The depth of its knowledge of what works and what does not in household interviews;
- An interviewer training programme that foster respondent/interviewer relations;
- The capacity to support an interviewer who must contend with overwhelming resistance to parting with information.

441. These capabilities are more easily found in a functional organization than in an organization grouped by subject matter.

442. Whatever the legal basis for dealing with households (see chapter XII), the field organization will want to handle them gently. In some countries, legal and political measures are in place to protect respondents' privacy. Since statistics are generally not as high a priority for the Government as other, more pressing issues, when friction arises from the nature of household surveys the Government is more likely to side with the respondents, without taking the time to fully appreciate the loss of information and its consequences. The field organization should consider this possibility when dealing with households and make sure interviewers do not overstep their bounds.

2. Enterprises

443. Dealing with enterprises is quite different from dealing with households. Enterprises find it much easier to respond to questions on the basis of records than from memory or opinion. One obvious reason is that once the decision to part with information has been made, a junior officer can be authorized to provide record-based data; the same officer would not be authorized to express opinions on behalf of the firm or to provide facts from memory. In short, record-based responses are the most predictable and time-efficient from the point of view of business management.

444. Note that the distinction made above applies mostly to properly organized and constituted enterprises (generally medium-sized and large enterprises). Smaller and/or informal enterprises are best treated as households, and the emphasis on records is considerably less, since answers may not be based on a proper bookkeeping system. In addition, the latitude given to interviewers in the survey process is quite different in each case. Whereas interviewers, once they have received proper training, can be safely trusted

to follow the procedures to replace one household or small firm in the informal sector with another, the same is not true for larger firms. For this reason, one way of deploying the field force is to assign to the more experienced and more tactful interviewers the task of dealing with households as well as with other situations where tact and persuasion are of paramount importance. Less experienced interviewers could take on regular contacts with properly constituted enterprises. Whereas initial contact with an enterprise should be made at the highest level that the agency can afford, the follow-up should be left to someone whose functions are principally those of a messenger. In situations where the same matter can be handled by mail, telephone or e-mail, these are preferable. If e-mail (or fax) is chosen, the field organization should ensure that proper technical support is provided.

3. The consumer price index: a special case

445. Whether the workforce charged with collecting price information every month should be an integral part of the field organization or should be placed directly under the control of the CPI department is a matter of preference, efficiency and public relations. Clearly, the department responsible for the CPI will want to be certain that its instructions - particularly on quality and replacement rules - are followed scrupulously, and may fear that dividing the attention of the field organization may dilute the seriousness of those instructions. Moreover, the agency may also fear a loss of confidence in the CPI if the public has the impression that insufficiently trained personnel are collecting information on prices. As the CPI conforms to neither household nor enterprise interviewing protocols (the bulk of it is carried out by requesting access to public information displayed by retailers, or, in certain cases, in advertisements or catalogues), CPI interviewers require special training. These arguments favour placing the CPI field force directly under the CPI department, rather than within the field organization. However, in countries where size and geographic layout necessitate local administration, an independent CPI interview force would likely be inefficient. In such cases, it would be preferable to make use of the local field organizations, under the supervision of experienced CPI interviewers.

4. Government

446. The procedure for collecting information from the Government is different from that employed for households and enterprises:

- Government agencies may have field organizations of their own; therefore, a combined effort is required;
- With respect to disclosing information, the law that rules those agencies may oppose that of the statistical agency, requiring the resolution of a legal conflict;
- The collection of information may require government agencies to adhere to a coding standard developed by the statistical agency, even though the agency has no jurisdiction to enforce it.

447. The first situation is often the case with ministries of agriculture in countries where agriculture is dominant and where there is a tradition of intensive use of quantitative information in the ministry.⁹⁰ Rather than debate issues of control, the statistical agency should make use of the existing results and the existing workforce, and engage the ministry in more productive discussions, such as whether or not the collection should be modified (as may be required for an integrating framework such as the System of National Accounts).

448. The ministry of transport is another institution with a tradition of using quantitative information, in which the work of the ministry generates administrative records that can be used for statistical purposes at a sufficiently low marginal cost. Again, the wisest policy is to reach an agreement with the ministry so as to make the best possible use of the existing information. Sometimes the administrative information does not conform to international standards, but it usually is easier to make the necessary adjustments than to embark on an independent data-collection effort.

449. The main barriers in making use of data collected by other ministries (especially government agencies in charge of tax collection and the administration of social security) are legal and regulatory. Tax collectors tend to be as protective of individual records as statisticians. The very notion that sharing occurs could deeply offend taxpayers and tarnish the ministry's reputation, no matter how powerful its detection and collection capacity. Furthermore, if knowledge that the statistical agency receives information from other government agencies creates the perception (no matter how ill-founded) that it provides complementary information, the agency's reputation may be tarnished. Chapter XII, section A.4 attempts to show that in spite of these difficulties, one-way sharing of tax information is the most powerful method of substantially reducing statistical paperwork for enterprises.

450. Generally, it is advisable for the statistical agency to refrain from creating permanent arrangements in which other ministries collect the data, instead using existing resources and political pressure to reach a constructive and collaborative agreement. Perhaps the best way to proceed is to establish a tradition of informal inter-ministerial committees. It is possible that the agency will encounter much frustration along the way, as non-statisticians rarely perceive collaboration on data collection to be an urgent task. On the other hand, non-statisticians may be seduced by the prospect of taking credit for an important service rendered to respondents, especially when the respondent community is broad.

451. Lastly, there is the matter of enforcing a common standard in the collection of statistical data. This often arises in the context of specialized public finance compilations, particularly for the national accounts. Assuring that ministries use the same definition of current and capital expenditure at the micro-level is an arduous and at times thankless task, but one that cannot be avoided.

⁹⁰ In a number of countries, agricultural statistics were among the first statistics developed, and prior to the existence of a statistical office, the workforce required to collect them was headed by the ministry of agriculture.

5. The special case of provincial and local Government

452. In many instances, provincial or state Governments have highly developed statistical offices of their own. This is the case not only with federal countries such as Brazil or Germany, but also in non-federal countries such as Spain, where the autonomous regions have offices with the capacity to collect, compile and disseminate data of special interest to the public.

453. In these situations, it is important to prevent different field organizations from overlapping and exhausting respondents' goodwill. When legal devices are in place that allows information to be shared between statistical agencies, and when working arrangements are sufficiently intimate to support such devices, a balance can be achieved.

454. Dealing with other government institutions does not automatically involve the field organization. In principle, these matters are worked out between the heads of statistical agencies and their legal advisors, when possible. If different levels of Government are involved, the political heads responsible for intergovernmental affairs on both sides may be brought in. Of course, if the agreement results in a delegation of tasks to field organizations then they will play a role in data collection. In federal countries or in situations that involve local Government, cooperation will tend to be countrywide. In such cases, the field force operates nationally and has an agreement with the statistical agency as a whole, rather than a coordinated set of understandings with each subject-matter unit.

6. Non-profit institutions

455. Non-profit institutions are becoming more important in almost all countries of the world. In recognition of this, guidelines have been developed explaining how to account for the economic impact of such institutions.⁹¹ Most non-profit organizations and voluntary bodies that engage in any monetary transaction with the public have some rudimentary bookkeeping system, and the survey demands from them tend to be relatively limited. However, non-profit health and education institutions may require more attention from the field organization.

456. The cases of non-profit health and education institutions constitute a separate issue, largely because their relative size measured as a share of GDP and their social importance in the development of a country demand special consideration. Many countries have a tradition of specialized surveys of health and education. However, there is also a trend towards breaking away from the traditional surveys of these two services and, in addition to measuring material and human inputs,⁹² attempting to measure outcomes. One framework that has gained some acceptance shifts the emphasis onto longitudinal surveys ("films" rather than "photos"). However, the statistical complexity

⁹¹ *Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts*, Studies in Methods Series F, No. 91 (United Nations publication, forthcoming).

⁹² The pattern used to be to measure hospital beds and rates of occupancy as a health indicator and desks and rates of enrolment as an indicator of education. Neither indicator paid much attention to issues of quality and effectiveness.

of such efforts places them beyond the range of activities that administrative staff of non-profit hospitals, clinics, schools and universities can accomplish as a by-product of their regular activities. If a statistical system is still involved in specialized surveys of health and education, coordination between the providers of the registers and the data collectors is of parliament importance.

457. As a final comment on this matter, the specialized nature of these two fields - health and education - is such that in the majority of countries that compile regular statistics on them, the statistical or analytical units in charge of compilation are located in the responsible ministry itself. For small and even medium-sized statistical agencies that are still sorting out their mandate, it may be prudent to leave matters as they are rather than attempting full centralization with few chances of succeeding.

458. Offices that are better established may wish to experiment with the creation of dedicated institutes or statistical satellites. Such bodies come in a variety of forms: in addition to having their own chief executive officer, they can answer to a board made up of representatives of the education (or health) sector and of the statistical agency.

B. Interacting with a subject-matter organization

1. Perspectives

459. Each major organizational unit within a statistical office should possess a perspective broad enough to see how its actions may intersect with the rest of the office or, in a decentralized system, with the rest of the system. Such broad views are required for the most part, when agencies reach important crossroads, which fortunately does not happen too often. In everyday matters, the scope of interaction is usually limited to those with whom information is exchanged. Thus, the management of a field organization will bear in mind first and foremost its respondent policies (see chapter XII) and communication with that part of the agency in charge of processing currently collected data.

460. Invariably, a narrow perspective will produce tension. For example, when requesting detailed information on consumer expenditure, those responsible for economic statistics may consider minimizing errors in CPI weights as their overriding objective owing to the harm such errors are bound to cause. They will therefore wish to add all possible precautions to the relevant inquiry. This stance may be countered by those in charge of field operations, whose experience tells them that the shorter the interview, the more attentive the respondent.

461. The tension itself is a healthy manifestation of a commitment to quality that motivates both units. If neither unit expressed its point of view on avoiding pitfalls, tensions might escalate even further. However, given the possibility of conflict, an organizational device should be in place that forces agreement between the concerned parties without having to call upon senior officers. In the case of new initiatives, the mechanism should lie with the project management, and ultimately under the authority of

the project manager.⁹³ When the point of conflict is the result of an ongoing activity, its resolution requires the involvement of a standing committee. The reason for a standing, rather than an ad hoc, arrangement is that problems concerning the interaction between a field organization and subject-matter units are bound to arise with considerable frequency. The important thing is for differences of opinion to be channelled into cooperative dialogue that yields constructive and binding resolutions for all parties.

2. Censuses and surveys

462. The management of the field organization cannot treat censuses and surveys as if they were interchangeable. Censuses, particularly censuses of population and housing, require a major civilian mobilization and therefore should be considered as a national event, whereas surveys should not, owing to their scale, impact and potential for repetition (though such a thing should be avoided).

463. The census of population is vastly important to any field organization for several reasons. In many agencies, field organizations were in fact created in response to the needs of the census; accordingly, the census is their prime commitment. Second, the most visible part of any census is the collection of data, since it requires a brief period of intense activity on the part of all households.

464. In contributing to the preparation of a census, the field organization will usually call on its detailed knowledge of the country and assist in translating it into a data collection approach. It will also provide its knowledge of local conditions to identify and mobilize local leaders.

3. Managing interactions

465. Whatever the arrangements, a field organization, like any other function-based organization within a statistical office, must look after its connections within the rest of the office with great care. The points of tension arising from these interfaces, which must be watched, include the following:

- The challenge from the pressure of the subject-matter specialists, who are the farthest from respondents - analysts, national accountants and specialists in marketing and dissemination providing the outstanding examples;
- The ambiguities about the level of quality with which a survey should be conducted. The field organization must be mindful of coming to a sensible compromise between its standards of quality and the survey budget;
- The proper balance between those survey operations that can be effectively conducted in regional offices (in a decentralized mode) and those that must be conducted in a centralized environment, or else the standards of consistency

⁹³ This in no way precludes intervention by the management of the statistical agency or the field organization if they feel that the decision of the project manager affects the integrity of the agency programme.

cannot be applied with guarantees of success (surveys involving complicated coding, for example).

466. In addition, the field organization should be watchful of technological developments that may short-circuit it before its management has had a chance to retrain the staff. Contacting enterprises (and in a few years this may extend to households) via the Internet is undoubtedly going to bring the subject-matter expert into much closer contact with the respondent. Field organizations should find a niche in the new process where they can play a necessary and cost-effective role.

467. There are a number of infrastructural services that the chief statistician should make sure are available to the staff employed outside the central office, including:

- Access to statistical frames;
- Access to equal training opportunities;
- Access to experts in the central office in real time to make rulings on the application of standard concepts.

Conclusions

There is general agreement that the field organization can be effectively organized by function.

The effectiveness of a field organization depends on the following:

- The depth of its knowledge of what works and what does not in household interviews;
- An interviewer training programme that fosters respondent/interviewer relations;
- The capacity to support an interviewer who must contend with overwhelming resistance to parting with information.

If the field offices are dispersed throughout the country, then it is critical to have a central function responsible for liaison and coordination.