

**THE STATISTICAL SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF SURINAME
MAIN PROBLEMS AND SOME PROSPECTS**

**By Iwan A. Sno
Director
General Bureau of Statistics**



**UNSD Seminar: “Evolution of National Statistical Systems”
United Nations, New York – 23 February 2007**

1- INTRODUCTION

Official Statistics about Suriname can be traced back to 1851 when the first Colonial Report (*Koloniaal Verslag 1849*) was produced and disseminated. However, Official Statistics in Suriname started in the early 1920s when a Section of the Ministry of Interior Affairs produced Trade Statistics and simple statistics based on registration. As Trade Statistics gained importance, the Section was ultimately transferred to the Ministry of Finance

In December 1946, the colonial Government took an important step and instated the General Bureau of Statistics (GBS), as of 1 January 1947. The Statistics Section of the Ministry of Finance was transferred to the newly created Bureau and the Bureau came directly under the Governor of the Colony Suriname. Besides producing some explicitly stated statistics such as Population Statistics, Economic Statistics, Social Statistics, Agricultural Statistics and Trade Statistics the GBS was also responsible for conducting Economic Analysis and producing and publishing Index Numbers as well as for producing the Colonial Report: “Verslag over Bestuur en Staat” (Report on Government and State).

It took the Colonial Government 7 years to realize that it needed to enact legislation to enable the GBS to function properly, and in 1954 the first Statistics Act, limited to provisions for the collection of proper Economic data was passed. This act was never amended and was replaced only in 2002 with a more modern and up to date, albeit not perfect act. Operating under a defective Statistics Act was a major part of the problems the GBS experienced.

The GBS may be well be the Suriname champion as regards ministerial transfers as it changed Ministries/Departments no less than eleven times, before it landed under the Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation in 1991. Although Order 4627 of the Governor of the Colony Suriname created the GBS as a Bureau and stipulated that it would be headed by a Director, in practice the GBS had the Status of a Government Department, until it was changed into a Foundation by the new Statistics Act of 2002. The transition from a Government Department to a Government Foundation was a process that was concluded in September 2004. It is worth mentioning that the first steps for this transition were taken in the mid 1980s when the GBS prepared for and hosted the first Users/Producers Seminar in June 1985.

The General Bureau of Statistics has to provide the Surinamese and International Community with sound statistics, which give an insight in the demographic, economic, social-cultural situation and development of the Republic of Suriname.

The GBS endorses and lives by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and tries to adhere to international standards and recommendations

2- THE STATISTICAL SYSTEM OF SURINAME

The Statistical System of Suriname can best be described as more decentralized than centralized and with the GBS appointed (in 2002) as Coordinator and “Enforcer” of Standards. This is easier said than done, but instead of devoting attention to that we shall give a short description of the main producers of official statistics.

The Statistical System of Suriname (SSS) comprises all units of government that produce official statistical data. Ultimately the SSS exists for providing a comprehensive, coherent, consistent, accurate and timely data coverage of the situation and development of Suriname.

The major players in the SSS can be summarized in the table below.

INSTITUTION / UNIT	RESPONSIBLE FOR (inter alia)
General Bureau of Statistics	National Accounts, Price Indices, Labour Market Indicators, Merchandise Trade Statistics, Traffic & Transport Statistics, Population & Housing Censuses, Establishment Censuses, Social-Cultural Statistics, Population Statistics & Projections
Civil Registration Office	Vital Statistics
Central Bank	Monetary Statistics, Balance of Payment, Trade in Services
Foundation for Tourism	Tourism Statistics
National Planning Office	Economic Projections, Annual and Multi-annual plans
Bureau for Public Health	Causes of Death Statistics and Epidemiological Data
Ministry of Health (Planning Unit)	Health Statistics
Ministry of Finance (various units)	Government Finance Statistics
Ministry of Education (Research & Planning Section)	Education Statistics (Enrolment, Schools, Teachers, Pupils, etc.)
Ministry of Labour (Statistics Section)	Wages, Occupational Injuries, Strikes and other indicators limited to establishments with a Collective Bargaining Agreement, Labour Exchange Statistics, Work Permits Statistics
Ministry of Agriculture (Statistics Section)	Agricultural Statistics
Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing	Social Statistics (Financial Support, Medical Support, Child Allowance, Old Age Pensions, etc.)
Ministry of Justice and Police (Police Force)	Crime Statistics, Traffic Accident Statistics, etc.
Government Debt Management Office	Government Debt Statistics

Most institutions have developed their own operating procedures and the legal mandate of the GBS to coordinate and harmonize (if not standardize) statistics is often challenged. Interestingly, there also seems to be a need for some legal coordination as the Supremacy of the Statistics Act is sometimes challenged by other Government or semi-public bodies.

There seems to be a gradual shift though. For instance, the Ministry of Defense wants to have its own statistics unit (mainly for internal purposes and to support the production of their annual report), and they came to the GBS for assistance with setting up said unit.

3- MAIN PROBLEMS OF THE STATISTICAL SYSTEM AND OF THE GBS AND SELECTED SOLUTIONS

The old Statistics act of 1954 seemed to have served its purpose reasonably well, approximately up to Independence of Suriname in 1975. Thereafter, particularly between 1980 and 2001, the Statistical System in general and the GBS in particular increasingly experienced a myriad of problems, which can be grouped under four headings which are not completely unrelated.

- 1- A statistical system that is highly fragmented and unstructured
- 2- An obsolete Statistics Act and Increasing Non response
- 3- General Social economic Climate.
- 4- Institutional Weakness

We shall shortly discuss each of these in turn.

Fragmented and unstructured Statistical System

For several reasons there was a great proliferation of so-called planning and statistical units in the line Ministries since the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the Surinamese economy is rather small and statistical activities were not coordinated at all, it is to be expected that a lot of time, manpower and money was wasted while chances of duplication of effort and even omission of important series (someone else is doing it already) increased substantially. Also because of this situation an undue respondent burden was placed upon data providers. A concomitant problem is that several institutions use their own definition for the same concept and also use different geographies to classify data. Some definitions are not in conformity with international recommendations, albeit sometimes this can only be rectified with legal provisions.

Obsolete Statistics Act and increasing non-response

As mentioned before, it seems that the Act did not do too bad a job, up to 1975. Thereafter it became clear that an act, limited to obtaining proper economic statistics and with fines that everybody was happy to pay if it meant avoiding being surveyed had to be changed. In the 1980s and 1990s the GBS was confronted with crippling non response, and increasingly could only provide statistical series with great delay. For instance GDP estimates were made available 18 months after the reference year. Although other data producers faced the same problem this situation ultimately led to more proliferation as official producers and users (Ministries, semi-public bodies etc.) thought they could no longer wait for the official institution and started to produce their own estimates of certain series. **This evidently led to confusion at times.**

General Social and Economic Climate

In the 1980s Suriname experienced: a military coup (February 1980), the so-called December Murders (December 1982) and a “Civil War” (mid 1980s) which was fought mainly in the Hinterland but impacted negatively on the whole country. Needless to say that in this period one of the highest emigration flows (second only to the outflow preceding Independence of 25 November 1975), was registered. The era: 1983-1987, was also an era of emergence of the black market in foreign currency and of repressed inflation, generally of a bust in economic activities. One has to be honest and admit that the situation was caused by internal and external (low prices for raw materials) shocks. The GBS, being a Government Department, lost a lot of trained staff both as a consequence of emigration and both because people left for jobs, sometimes formal, sometimes informal, but in any case a better paid job than working for the GBS. It should be mentioned though, that other government producers of Official Statistics experienced the same problems, and consequently the Official Statistical System nearly collapsed. It is no wonder that in 1985 the first Users and Producers seminar was organized, inter alia to rescue the system. Other goals were introducing “Integrated” Household surveys and improving collaboration among major SSS players.

Institutional Weakness

This will be discussed, mainly with reference to the GBS, but everything applies more or less to other government data producers.

The institutional weakness manifested itself in:

- a. Incapacity to attract or to retain trained staff because of low remunerations and lack of budgetary autonomy
- b. Overburdening of the remaining higher level staff with administrative responsibilities and with (micro) managing day-to-day activities that made attention to upgrading Procedures and Methodology almost impossible
- c. High staff turnover and low motivation and morale of the majority of the remaining staff
- d. A severe shortage of supplies and equipment, as well as obsolescence of equipment, which impacted negatively on data collection, data processing and thence on publication and dissemination. In turn this enforced a bad image of the GBS, as well as a low Administrative and Professional status.

If people are badly paid, work in an office with a shortage of supplies and equipment or with low quality equipment they will surely look for greener pastures. The GBS lost staff that migrated overseas, but also staff that stayed in Suriname but moved to the private sector, to the National Planning Office (with semi-official Government Authority Status) and Central Bank.

In the mid 1980s the producers of Official Statistics in Suriname tried to overhaul institutions and went to several stages of reorganizations. Everybody realized that reorganizations are not a panacea and in the mid 1990s it became clear that what was really needed was a concerted effort involving:

- Institutional strengthening of major producers of official statistics
- Continuous training of staff
- If necessary changing the status of selected major producers, particularly of the General Bureau of Statistics
- Legal provisions, inter alia to combat non-response
- Restructuring the complete Statistical System
- Fostering Strategic ties between major Users and Producers of Statistics

A short discussion of most of these activities is presented below.

Institutional Strengthening and Training

Multi-annual Plan Training of Statisticians

In the early 1970s the then director of Statistics requested assistance from two Dutch Official Statisticians. Together with the Director, these statisticians developed a plan to structurally train statisticians in Suriname. From 1973 to 1976 this training project was financed solely from the Government Budget and people were trained up to the level of “Elementary Statistician”. From October 1976 up to September 1980 the project was jointly funded from the Government Budget and from Dutch Development Aid and people were trained at the Elementary and Midlevel Statistics level. Even after the project life cycle the GBS continued the training and provided a Diploma, recognized by the Government, up to January 1986. In October 1983 the training for midlevel statistician was transferred to a Senior High School for Technical & Vocational Training and thus became part of the regular, formal education system. There was a transition period up to September 1985 and therefore the last GBS examinations were conducted in January 1986. This plan clearly has been very successful, and most of the present heads of statistical sections are graduates from that training plan.

Support from UNDP

In 1995/1996 the UNDP-project SUR/95/001 provided for Technical Cooperation between Developing Countries, involving mainly the GBS of Suriname and CSO of Trinidad & Tobago. That project also provided the GBS with some equipment and sponsored the training conducted by GBS of staff of line Ministries in Basic Statistics.

Support from IDB and from the Government of Suriname

From February 1997 up to June 2003 the IDB project: “Institutional Strengthening of the General Bureau of Statistics” (ATN/5124/SU) was executed. The most visible highlight of the project has been the Household Budget Survey and the introduction of a new Consumer Price Index from the beginning of 2001 onwards. The survey was conducted under very difficult social and economic circumstances but completed as planned.

The project helped the Bureau set up a permanently staffed Public Relations and Information Centre where more and more visitors call for statistical data.

The Trade Statistics section (TS) was re-organized and a computer programme developed for the processing of trade data and the production of trade statistics.

Improvements of the Enterprises Statistics Section (ES) were not achieved as anticipated, but some progress was made. The upgrading of the National Accounts Section (NA) got as far as possible with the unsatisfactory flow of data from the ES section to the NA section. A very important aspect is that all staff of the National Accounts Section, as well as selected staff from Scientific Research and Planning was trained in SNA-93.

The project helped the Bureau evolve from a bureau with a single room with a few stand-alone personal computers to an organization working with a powerful computer network with workstations in all sections.

Overall timeliness of GBS Statistics greatly improved (e.g. GDP estimates are now produced within 7 months after the reference year) and the PR Section also made the Bureau more visible in Society.

There was a set-back though, when because of arson in August 2003 the premises of the GBS were destroyed by fire and the Bureau could resume its regular activities only in February 2004. This situation also made the transition from a Government Department to a semi-public body, which had to be concluded in September 2003, unnecessary longer than planned. The transformation was therefore concluded in September 2004.

Legal Provisions, Changing the Status of the GBS and Fostering ties

In December 2002, a new Statistics Act was passed, which changed the status of the GBS from a Government Department to a semi-autonomous entity: Foundation GBS, with more Administrative and Budgetary Autonomy. The New GBS was explicitly charged with stimulating and coordinating all Statistical Activities in Suriname, particularly those of Government Institutions. The new Statistics act also revoked certain clauses of the Census Act, which had a dubious interpretation and caused a lot of problems. This Act also provides for a nine-member multipartite (Government, University, Planning Office,

Central Bank, Employers' Organizations, Employees' Organizations and Civil Society) Commission for Statistics which is in charge of the Statistical System in general and the GBS in particular.

Compared to the old act, this Statistics Act means a Quantum Leap, but it is certainly not a panacea and as at 2007 some necessary amendments have been identified.

As regards fostering ties, with and without support from donors and with and without sanctions from Ministerial level, the GBS has been coordinating (more or less) selected activities such as: MNSDS (Minimum National Social Data Set); CIMS: Child Indicators Monitoring System and SI-COMMITTEE (nowadays, after a 2002 CARICOM intervention, SIMDG = Social Indicators and Millennium Development Goals Committee). These activities bring together a multitude of Planning and Statistics Units of Ministries (Health, Home Office, Justice and Police, Education, etc), Semi-public bodies and Non government organizations, collaborating to generate sustainable and consistent series of Statistics. It is a fact that these activities are preferably carried out after being sanctioned by the relevant Minister, because otherwise people do not feel obliged to deliver.

4- SOME PROSPECTS FOR THE GBS AND THE SSS

Prospects for the SSS in general and the GBS in particular will depend on how well the following strategies and key points identified by the GBS, mostly in collaboration with other stakeholders will be taken care of. Some of these have to be dealt with from within and some are so-called environmental factors that may or may not be within the sphere of control of the GBS. They could be termed the ten commandments of SSS Survival.

- 1- Forge and/or foster strategic ties with national and international partners
- 2- Participate (faith)fully in the CARICOM Regional Statistics Program
- 3- Continuous institutional strengthening and investment in human capital
- 4- Strengthening the legal framework that underpins and supports the SSS, particularly as it relates to “incentives”, fines and summary judgments, but also regarding unrestricted access to information from all official (public, semi-public, etc.) units and regarding the Supremacy of the Statistics Act
- 5- Aggressively promote sound use of statistics for informed policy making
- 6- Keep staff morale high and minimize staff turnover
- 7- Strike a proper balance between demand and supply of statistics
- 8- Make publications user friendly and give popular but technically correct accounts of various statistical issues within its domain of competence
- 9- Strict adherence to the so-called RATACC (**R**elevance, **A**ccuracy, **T**imeliness, **A**ccessibility, **C**omparability, **C**oherence) quality attributes in all work
- 10- Promote healthy competitions between statistical units, both nationally and internationally.¹

CLOSING REMARKS

- Like other Statistical Systems, mainly of so-called developing countries, the SSS faced and is still facing some major problems. However through concerted efforts some problems have been withered already and it is our firm belief that the remaining obstacles will be overcome.
- Technical Cooperation within and between countries may well be the key to success for National Statistical Systems
- If we abide by the above-mentioned Ten Commandments, our chances of obtaining a sound, sustainable and well-performing Statistical System must be very high. This will be beneficial for governments and people, nationally, regionally and internationally.

¹ In this respect it is worth noting that in 2005 we have proposed to the Statistics Programme of CARICOM to start Ranking National Statistical Offices, based on performance indicators. This proposal was repeated and made to the 37th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission.