

Managing Issues Addressing the Challenges of Using Administrative Data for Statistical Purposes¹

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I. Introduction

Afghanistan largely depends on administrative data. Our data collection was put to a halt during the Soviet invasion in 1979 until the fall of Taliban in 2001. This situation did not only result in total lack of data but reduced CSO capacity in every respect. Due to the continuing war in the country, CSO suffered financially and lost most of its experts and qualified staff. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, the only thing that CSO could do was to depend largely on international donors for surveys and rebuilding itself. This helped this organization to undertake household listing and pilot census in 2002 to 2005, and 2006, respectively. At the same time, CSO was capable of conducting small-scale Survey on Accessibility of Persons with Disability to Buildings with two or more Storey in Kabul City, monthly Price Survey in six selected cities in Afghanistan, National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Survey (2003, 2005, and 2007). The rest were collected from administrative records.

II. Main uses of administrative data

As CSO is just starting its statistical operations, administrative data is very important in Afghanistan where there is lack of updated information. Although some agencies, i.e., Ministry of Public Health and international organizations conducted some surveys such as the Afghanistan Health Survey, these are just ad hoc and are very limited in scope and coverage. Thus, the Government of Afghanistan has to rely ultimately on administrative data needed for the reconstruction efforts of the country.

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III. Main management issues related to the use of administrative data

A. Conformity of concepts and definitions with international standards

CSO, Afghanistan lags behind in terms of updated information when compared to its neighboring countries. However, it is very much aware of international standards and is active when it comes to compliance with those standards. Unlike other countries where they will have to adjust their old system, concepts, definition, and codes, CSO does not see it as a problem since we are just starting. For instance, for trade, we followed the UN trade codes since 2005; for industry, we use the International Standard Industry Codes since 2006; and for occupation we use International Standard Occupational Codes. With the help of statistical organizations of other countries, CSO is now starting to get more involved by participating in international gatherings to gain further exposure and knowledge in new statistical developments.

B. Incompleteness and inaccuracy of records

In any data collection, incomplete and inaccurate information is a serious problem. Administrative data in Afghanistan is not spared from this. CSO sends forms to be filled out by the ministries/agencies in the different provinces and sometimes the forms received are not completely answered or filled-out. This is the case when ministries/institutions do not maintain good records and that the information needed by CSO are not available or included in their system of records. For incompletely filled-out forms, CSO sends the forms back to the agencies which requires another time and hence, causes delay in the whole process of data generation.

Lack of data from surveys or other sources makes it impossible to check for the accuracy of the data. Checking is only done through review by the national ministries/agencies in Kabul offices. This kind of quality

check has a problem of its own. This is particularly true in cases where the data being collected has a bearing on the performance of the institution as there is a tendency of not reporting the actual values. For instance, on the number of children given with Vitamin A – since it reflects performance on the part of the health agency, there is a tendency of over-reporting it than the actual number of children given with the said vitamin.

C. Disaggregation of administrative data

Administrative data is disaggregated only at the provincial level. There are 34 provinces and 364 districts in Afghanistan. Limited population data is disaggregated by districts.

IV. Managing the quality of statistics derived from administrative data effectively and efficiently

A. Evaluation of the quality of statistics from administrative data

CSO sends forms to the different ministries/agencies in the provinces through CSO Provincial Offices. CSO Provincial staff check for completeness, consistency, and accuracy based on the past data collected from the same ministries/agencies. Then, send the filled out forms to CSO Central Office in Kabul. Central Office checks and consolidates the data. These are then sent to the concerned ministries' main office in Kabul for checking, comments, evaluation, and confirmation.

B. Cross checks available from survey data

As earlier mentioned, there were very limited surveys that have been conducted in the past. Most of these are population (health and education) surveys. Hence, administrative data could be checked only within this sector. Unfortunately, for the rest of the administrative-based data there is no survey data by which cross checking can be done.

V. Managing the relationship with the administrative departments collecting data used in compiling important indicators and other statistics

A. Training available for line ministry personnel

CSO meets with concerned ministries every year, or whenever the need arises to discuss the forms, new developments in data collection and some other issues. Training is also being conducted by CSO to concerned ministries on how to fill-out the forms and how to derive some indicators.

B. Whether trainings are well suited to ensure the quality of statistics generated

Trainings being provided to the agencies are focused on how to accomplish the forms and some completeness checks. However, training for in-depth analysis and checks are still needed not only by the agencies but CSO staff as well. This is one aspect of statistical operation where CSO needs technical assistance.

C. Formal agreements with the administrative departments

CSO has not made any formal agreement with administrative departments. Ministries/agencies are obliged to comply with the submission of filled-out forms based on Statistics Law which was re-enacted in 2006. Compliance and cooperation is sought whenever CSO collaborates with the agencies. For instance, in the preparation of the plan for the Survey on Participation of Women and Men in Decision Making, CSO calls on the concerned ministries such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission to participate in this undertaking. In the process, the importance and uses of timely and quality data that they are collecting are emphasized and made them comply with the requirements of CSO.

VI. Major obstacles/ weaknesses faced in Afghanistan on the use of administrative data for statistical purposes

A. Timeliness

The most typical problem faced in the generation of data based on administrative records is the late submission of filled out forms from the agencies. In some cases, in spite of frequent follow-ups made by CSO personnel, still some agencies could not submit the filled-out forms on time. This is one disadvantage of administrative-based data collection method over the interview method approach.

However, we believe that proper information campaign on the uses of data, holding of regular consultations/dialogues to know their problems in filling out the forms, and close collaboration with concerned agencies will somehow lessen the problem on timeliness.

B. Completeness

Another problem commonly faced by CSO is that some forms received are not completely filled-out. Thus, during the retrieval of forms from the agencies, CSO staff are asked to check first the filled-out forms for completeness before leaving the agencies. For incompletely filled-out forms, CSO returns the forms to the concerned agencies. But this process takes time and hence, affects the timely release of statistics. Again, this could be addressed by provision of training to concerned agencies.

C. Accuracy

As earlier pointed out, there are not much other sources of data by which accuracy could be checked. Surveys are very limited and checks are likewise limited to trends and patterns analyses based on the previously submitted data. If the trend or pattern deviates from the previous ones, these are verified with the concerned agencies. But given the fact that some of the information provided by agencies portrays their performance, one could not help but cast some doubts.

Conduct of surveys is one approach by which checking of data collected through administrative records could be done. Moreover, in the case of Afghanistan which we are now in the planning stage, some administrative data collection would be replaced by surveys, especially those concerning population such as health, and establishment data such as establishments' productions and revenues.

- D. Capacity of the staff to fill-out the forms, do some quality checks, and analyse the data

There are still a lot of capacity building to be done for the CSO staff as well as the staff of other agencies when it comes to statistical undertaking. First and foremost is the appreciation of the data being collected, its importance and uses. Once the staff appreciates the information he/she will know the importance of timely and quality data. Intensive trainings are needed in the area of quality checks for completeness, consistency, and accuracy; and how to analyse the data collected.

VII. Positive Notes

The situation here, if we look back and compare then to the current situation, there is a lot of improvement. There is still a threat of the old days, but the way things are going especially on the kind of awareness being introduced to the populace regarding the government's efforts in showing them that this government is working for them, it is indeed very encouraging as we see signs of cooperation and understanding among the people as we undertake government projects that require the people's participation. We are now in the process of pushing for the modernization of our statistical systems and programmes with support of the people and other countries. We look forward to minimizing the administrative-based data collection as we prepare to undertake the more reliable process of gathering data and information through census and surveys. Although in some sectors we may find it very useful in the absence of actual surveys and census, we are fully aware of the actual issues that go with the collection of administrative-based data, its

reliability and quality. And so we believe, we are at the moment, on the right track to fulfilling our goals of providing the world with a quality and dependable information about our people and the whole country as a whole.