

Workshop in Selected Good Practices in the Organization and Management of Statistical Systems

Summary and Conclusions

Session 1: The role and functions of regional and local statistical offices; interactions with regional and local authorities

Presenter 1: Lao PDR

Presenter 2: Günter Kopsch (Germany)

The regional organization of statistical systems differs widely between countries and the way systems are organized depends very much on the political and administrative structures of a country. There is an urgent need for having well developed coordination procedures between the various statistical bodies on the central, the regional and the local level. In this coordination process the central office should be given a strong position to guarantee uniform results for the whole of the country. Duplication of work and the compilation and presentation of different figures for the same phenomena should be avoided.

Conflicts may arise between central, regional and local offices in the field of setting priorities. Regional and local offices are interested in getting reliable regional data for their users, especially their (regional and local) governments, which finance their budgets. However, that means larger sample sizes, which may not be in the interest of the central office. There has to be a mechanism in place to solve those conflicts.

It became obvious during the discussion that the need to have separate laws for all statistics performed in a country (like the German case) is a disadvantage for a system. Such a rule makes a system rather inflexible to react to changes in the economy and society.

Session 2: Priority setting in work programs of national statistical offices; the planning process, the criteria to be used and the role of the various stakeholders

Presenter 1: Philippines

Presenter 2: Willem de Vries (UNSD)

It was obvious that statistical work programs have to be user oriented. However, it is not always easy to accommodate all the user requirements and to strike the right balance between the ad hoc and long-term needs. While it is desirable to have some flexibility in meeting unexpected demands, there was also agreement that sometimes requests had better be denied, particularly as to involvement in opinion poll activities.

Objective criteria for priority setting in statistical work programs are not easy to develop and in practice changes in programs were usually rather marginal because of the necessity to maintain existing time series. For developing statistical systems, a policy

towards gradually building up a minimum, core set of statistics seems to be the best way to go.

Session 3: The role and position of the national statistical office in the overall government structure; differences between centralized and decentralized systems

Presenter 1: Myanmar

Presenter 2: Bill McLennan (Australia)

The meeting appreciated that, in general, there is no statistical system that is fully centralized or fully decentralized, except for some very countries where a centralized approach may be followed. Rather, statistical systems are placed along a spectrum where some tend towards being centralized while others tend towards being decentralized. The need for integrity seems to pull statistical systems towards centralization while the requirement to be policy relevant seems to push towards decentralization. The meeting also acknowledged that all statistical systems should aim to produce an integrated set of statistics for user purposes.

The countries explained their own situations and provided reasons why they followed their particular models. It was clear that statistical systems in the various countries were in different stages of development, and, indeed, some had moved from one end of the spectrum to the other, possibly a number of times. There was agreement that the social and political environment in each country was the strong determining factor behind, where each country's statistical system fitted in the spectrum of possibilities.

Spirited discussion took place about where the center of a statistical system should be placed in the government structure. There was a consensus that it should be "where the action is" and where it had the best chance of maintaining strong funding each year. The precise location would vary from country to country.

The meeting noted that it was difficult to be precise about how a decentralized system could be best coordinated. The existence of a strong coordinating committee and close involvement with Ministers was favored.

A brief discussion ensued about what statistical items should be included in the center. The recommendations in the UNSD handbook on statistical organisations were referred to. These suggest that cross cutting matters, such as national accounts, household surveys, price statistics and population censuses amongst other fields should be included.

UNSD would consider to prepare a compendium of the organizational structures followed by all the statistical agencies of the world.

Session 4: Response problems in household and business surveys; improving response and minimizing the reporting burden

Presenter 1: Thailand

Presenter 2: John Cornish (NZ)

Countries in the region reported increasing challenges to achieving and maintaining high response rates. Common problems being experienced include keeping frames and samples up to date, obtaining access to selected households in apartments with security systems, making contact with households in major cities and growing unwillingness of businesses and households to participate in surveys.

Despite the challenges, statistical agencies have been adopting practices proven to be successful in other countries and are achieving relatively high response rates. Collection costs, however, are increasing as a result. Specific mention was made of the effectiveness of managing relationships with large businesses to keep information about these firms on the frame up to date. One needs to work with them to help reduce their reporting burden. Other methods are: Making contact with selected households and businesses prior to collection to explain what will be required of them and to establish arrangements for data collection, as well as matching interviewers with the cultural background of respondents.

Incentives for encouraging participation were discussed, and it was as a rule agreed that incentives were not effective. Many countries, however, reported the success of using small rewards such as calendars or diaries to thank respondents for their time provided in particularly burdensome surveys, such as those on household income and expenditure. With clever design these rewards can also help to raise the profile of the statistical agency.

Problems with imputation were discussed, highlighting that while some form of imputation or estimation is necessary to handle missing data, it is far more preferable to keep the use of imputation to a minimum by working on obtaining high levels of response and good data.

In many countries taxation or business registration information is an important source for maintaining accurate frames. The discussion pointed to the value of making arrangements for obtaining access to such data in ways that maintain confidentiality. These arrangements can also help reduce reporting load, something that all agencies need to keep an eye on and need to be working to reduce over time.

Session 5: To what extent should national statistical offices be active in analysis; the role of analysis in improving statistical products and programs

Presenter 1: Indonesia

Presenter 2: Bill McLennan

While this was still controversial not long ago, it is now generally accepted that data analysis is a legitimate and indeed indispensable part of the work of statistical agencies.

It was noted that analysis serves two broad sets of purposes: improving statistics on the one hand and making statistical outputs more valuable to the users on the other hand.

As to the contribution of analysis to the improvement of statistical methodology some country experiences were discussed, including the analysis of non-sampling error, improvement of questionnaires, analyzing inconsistencies between data sets on the same phenomenon, and the role of analysis as a learning process for young staff.

On analysis as an instrument to make statistics more palatable for the users and to raise their public profile, it was noted that presenting meaningful interpretation of the data in the form of narrative comments had been successful in many instances. Also, thematic publication, e.g. about the environment or the social conditions of the people are usually well received. However, statisticians are not always good at that, so there is room for improvement. Resource constraints also hamper the analytical role of statistical offices. It was acknowledged that there are risks involved, particularly when statistical offices go too far in modeling and forecasting.