

Innovations in Official Statistics – Liberia’s Story
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Background

The Liberia institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) became an autonomous agency of Government by an Act of Government on July 22, 2004, and was subsequently signed into Law.

During 14 years of civil crisis beginning in 1989, Liberia lost all of her statistical databases, comprising of social, economic, demographic, population and Housing census data. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the only available data was from secondary sources provided by Humanitarian Organizations revealing tremendous changes in Liberian society. Among these changes were partial or complete destruction of villages/towns; massive displacement of people; breakdown in family, law and order; significant decrease in economic activity, increase in unemployment and rampant poverty among Liberians. In addition, the war led to the destruction of most of the country's physical infrastructure such as roads, offices, educational and health facilities, water supply, electricity and telecommunications systems. The war has also led to huge loss of skilled human resources (critical to the recovery process) most of whom sought refuge in other countries and are yet to return!

With the successful return to democratic governance in 2006 and the inception of an interim Poverty Reduction Strategy paper (iPRSP) in the same year, LISGIS was tasked with delivering on key statistical indicators to support the formulation of a full Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) for Liberia. Despite the myriad of constraints and challenges (financial and logistical), LISGIS with the support of Government and its development partners successfully conducted the Liberia Demographic & Health Survey (LDHS), a Core Welfare Questionnaire Indicators Survey (CWIQ) and a Participatory Poverty Assessment Survey all in 2007. The LDHS preceded the CWIQ but the preparation and field work for both were conducted in 2007. The preliminary report for the LDHS was published in 2007 whilst the CWIQ preliminary report was published on July 30, 2008! (The final LDHS report was also released late last year). As per directive of Government, baseline data for the formulation of the PRSP (otherwise referred to as “Lift Liberia UP Strategy”) was sourced from the results of these two surveys. Also in 2006, the Government requested the UNFPA for support to prepare a Road Map for undertaking a National Population and Housing Census to be conducted in March 2008. UNFPA kindly provide technical assistance to support the preparation of the Census project document which placed the estimated cost of the census at USD 5.6 Million. The Government to demonstrate its commitment to ensuring availability of up-to-date demographic and socio-economic data to strengthening its development planning processes signed the document with UNFPA in 2006. It is worth mentioning that census enumeration was successfully conducted from 21st – 30th March, 2008 and the preliminary results released on June 20, 2008!

This presentation is supposed to talk about innovations. However, because of the challenging circumstances LISGIS has been operating under since its inception, the achievements to date cannot be strictly called innovations in themselves, but rather good examples of how successes in official statistics compilation, dissemination and governance practices have been achieved in the capacity and resource-challenged country of Liberia.

Innovations in Official Statistics Governance

In September 2008, the Government launched a five-year National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) as a framework for a system-wide rehabilitation of statistics in Liberia. The strategy, currently under implementation, is a framework aimed at rebuilding statistical capacity and strengthening coordination across Government ministries and agencies responsible for collecting data. The over-arching objective is that by 2015 the national statistics system will be well-coordinated, harmonized and efficient with performance that is consistent with national, regional and international standards and responsive to the country's development agenda. It incorporates five long-term strategic objectives:

- Making statistics relevant to national and local development;
- Developing an efficient capacity building plan for the Liberia National Statistical System;
- Developing a coordinated, harmonized and effective National Statistical System;
- Ensuring the adoption and consistent use of relevant statistical methods and standards; and
- Developing and managing an efficient information sharing system.

With regards to strengthening of governance in statistical institutions, the strategy specifically recommends the following:

1. The current Statistics Act to be amended to strengthen the National Statistics Office (LISGIS) as the lead agency for compiling, coordinating, and disseminating statistical information. In particular, key changes to the Act should include:
 - a. Giving LISGIS a stronger coordination mandate;
 - b. Clarifying issues related to functions of LISGIS and other ministries and agencies, links between them, and the promotion of activities consistent with a national statistics system;
 - c. Reducing the size of the LISGIS Board of Directors from 21 to 9 members whilst ensuring more experienced and subject-matter specialist are included as members.
 - d. Renaming LISGIS with a simpler, clearer name.
 - e. The Director-General and the Deputy Director-Generals to be appointed for fixed terms of six years (renewable once) after signing a performance contract with Government.

2. LISGIS to be provided with statutory authority to
 - a. Validate official statistics;
 - b. Authorize data collection that is national in scope;
 - c. Mobilize resources to support the development of the national statistics system; and
 - d. Coordinate training in statistical techniques and analytical methods.

Innovations in data collection and management

LISGIS over the past three years successfully completed many significant nation-wide surveys (including the LDHS and CWIQ surveys) and the national population and housing census. The results from these exercises, as mentioned earlier, are contributing immensely to the increased availability of baseline data and statistics on key economic and social indicators in support to the articulation and implementation of the on-going PRS. All of these surveys encountered challenges and the surmounting of these challenges have contributed greatly to the enhancing of capacities for conducting data collection exercises.

Of all the data collection exercises conducted during the last three years by LISGIS, the national population and housing census proved to be the most challenging. Liberia last conducted a population census in 1984 and some key results from that exercise were still outstanding by the time the March 2008 one was being implemented. The 2008 population and housing census has been dubbed the “Miracle Census” by pundits because of the circumstances and environment in which it was conducted. Some few highlights of some key activities will help to bring this out: -

1. When the Census document was signed by Government in late 2006, there was only a commitment of 20% of the estimated cost of USD 5.6 Million, but with the insistence of Government, the project was started. This meant that implementation had to go on at the same time as resource mobilization drives. This has been and is still a very big challenge but so far we are on target. Funds and resources are trickling albeit slowly.
2. It is well known census cartographic undertakings to last beyond two years especially in countries emerging from destructive civil conflict like the case of Liberia. In Liberia with an approximate size of 37,482 square miles, were able to complete the listing of all households and demarcate Enumeration Areas (EAs) in a record time of 11 months. This was accomplished because of adequate training of mapping and operations support staff. Training areas included GPS and other GIS-related equipment usage, transport and communications equipment usage among others. Emphasis was also put on field logistics coordination especially using “Just-in-time” technique for the timely provision of requisite logistics to the census field teams.
3. The data collection instruments had still not been finalized two months to the field work! A number of workshops focusing on instrument validation were conducted in close succession with the participation of subject matter specialists as well as stakeholders to ensure its fast-tracked finalization and printing was requisitioned accordingly.

4. Data capture for the census which was started in July 2008 was completed this January. Two teams each comprising 50 Coders and 50 Data Entry Operators working on shifts were employed on short-term contracts to facilitate this stage of the project. Here again the estimated time from other censuses is put at between six to nine months. Liberia was able to do it in seven months because of extensive training of the data entry teams as well as the large number of contractors (200 in total) on hand for the task! I would state that here this shortened period (seven months) was achieved without compromising on data quality which was assured through intensive supervision.
5. Camera-ready templates for printing of requisite census tables are now available which means as soon as the electronic data edit/"cleaning" is complete, production of all tables would be completed within a day or two at the push of a button! The early involvement of subject-matter specialists during the finalization of the census instrument meant that we could use the occasion to also finalize the expected tables and their structure. These exercises yielded the desired templates which were forwarded to the Programming teams who used it in developing the requisite software applications to load the data when once it is considered "cleaned" and generate all the tables automatically. I am informed by my Technical team that Liberia is the pioneer in this area of census data processing. We are hopeful that this would be useful for other countries planning census undertakings to benefit from.
6. We believe that the conduct of the population and housing census has enhanced not only LISGIS' staff technical capacities but also built its administrative arm to manage and coordinate logistics for statistical activities. This has been achieved through participation in seminars and workshops but most significantly, through on-the-job training and mentoring from Technical Advisers who came in intermittently to support various stages of the exercise.

Innovations in data dissemination

The Liberia National Statistical System is still developing and hence is yet to have a robust data dissemination mechanism in place. As earlier indicated, the Government has just launched a five-year NSDS which has amongst its five core objectives the development and management of an efficient data sharing mechanism. Liberia is also participating in the General Data Dissemination Standards (GDSS) protocol with other countries. Key activity areas for LISGIS in data dissemination include the following:

- Launching of LiberiaInfo vs. 1 in late 2006 which is a customized version of DevInfo with assistance from Liberia's UN Country Team. With the increased availability of data in the country as well as the need to assure its enhanced access, LISGIS, in coordination with the other data producers in the national statistical system, are presently working on releasing an updated version of the product on CD-ROM in this quarter to be followed up by an on-line version in the third quarter.
- LISGIS has developed and launched a dedicated website to serve as a portal to statistics in Liberia. The website (www.lisgis.org) amongst other things of interest, features a statistical archives section that provides metadata on surveys conducted

in Liberia. The site is still a work-in-progress but I would encourage you to visit and have a look!

- Before the war, the Department of Statistics (then in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs) used to publish a yearly statistical bulletin but was stopped due to the fourteen years of civil conflict and also for lack of funds to print and disseminate. LISGIS is currently working in earnest on resuscitating this bulletin and have it as a hardcopy statistical dissemination tool.
- LISGIS also publishes the “Data Watch” which is a monthly bulletin showing activities undertaken by the organization and its partners furthering the public’s understanding of what is happening in Liberia related to statistics. This magazine also has a section on available economic and socio-demographic indicators.