

# First African thematic conferences on “Managing a statistical organization in times of change”: Conference report

South Africa, 7-9 October 2019

## Purpose and background

The first regional thematic conference in Africa on *Managing a statistical organisation in times of change* was jointly organised by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and hosted by Statistics South Africa. The conference brought together over 50 participants representing Chief Statisticians and senior managers from 21 National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in Africa. The aim of the conference can be described in two parts:

- To further understand and prioritise the needs of statistical organisations, especially in light of the **Cape Town Global Action Plan (CTGAP)** for Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>.
- Allow the collection of additional information on the practices and challenges that will contribute to an extended knowledge base related to the new Handbook of Statistical Organisation (hereafter the *Handbook*)<sup>2</sup>.

The conference was structured into 4 strategic sessions related to: strengthening of the National Statistical System (NSS) in terms of its institutional and organisational arrangements; ensuring quality in what is produced by the NSS; enabling the NSS to take advantage of the ongoing digital and technological revolution; and the effective mobilisation of the NSO’s staff and infrastructure to facilitate this. These sessions are linked to the chapters of the forthcoming *Handbook*. During the conference, participants had the opportunity through two breakout sessions to discuss in smaller groups and then prepare and present back to the conference their challenges in these areas, their success stories and comment on what topics are missing from the *Handbook*. In this way, the conference was invaluable in identifying the key developmental issues for official statistics in the 2030 Agenda and SDG era and will ensure the *Handbook* provides relevant and sufficiently detailed advice that is, where possible illustrated by a variety of good practice examples.

The conference was opened by Mr. Risenga Maluleke, the Statistician General of Statistics South Africa, followed by short introductions by Mr. Oumar Sarr of the UNECA and Mr. Rees Mpofu of the African Development Bank (AfDB). Mr. Gabriel Gamez then provided a short presentation on the process for the updating the *Handbook*<sup>3</sup>.

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1 See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/hlg/cape-town-global-action-plan/> and E/CN.3/2017/3 and E/CN.3/2018/4.

2 See E/CN.3/2018/5.

3 The 1954 edition was followed by the 1980 (2nd edition) and most recent publication in 2003 (3rd edition).

## Theme 1 - Strengthening the institutional and organisational frameworks of national statistical systems

The session for the first theme was chaired by Ms. Laura Ahtime, the Chief Executive Officer of the National Bureau of Statistics in Seychelles. Presentations were made in this session by representatives from UNSD, UNECA, Botswana, Ghana and Malawi. The UNSD presentation covered information on chapters III – V of the *Handbook* dealing with guidance on the basis of official statistics, the national statistical office and the national statistical system and related them to current changes in the data ecosystem such as the emergence of the African Charter of Statistics (ACS), SDGs and extension of data sources. The UNECA presentation followed with a history of regional initiatives such as statistical frameworks (MAPS, RRSF, SHASA), systems/ fora and actions focused on training in skills and leadership taken by the regional commission.

Botswana presented on the revision of their statistical legislation in 2009 and the resulting organisation of their statistical system and its coordination by the NSO. More recently in 2015 this has led to the implementation of the first National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) with 15 sectors. Challenges mentioned were in human capacity constraints, lack of appreciation of the importance of statistics by other parts of Government and therefore limited funding to implement plans. Ghana presented on recent updates to legal code including the establishment of district statistics departments in 2016; and a pending law on quality certification, expansion of data sources used in official statistics and greater NSO coordination of the NSS. The activities planned under second NSDS with 17 sectors and was in the process of aligning various development plans, assessing its capacity to produce the SDGs and strengthening its operations and outreach generally through a data roadmap. This included the exploration of new sources in terms of administrative and Big Data. The final presentation in this session was from Malawi which focused on the beginning of the NSS in 2006 which was formalised with the update of statistical legislation in 2013. The new legislation has promoted the role of the chief statistician and the NSO, put in place coordination, steering and technical committee to ensure the NSS is better coordinated and established statistical units in many parts of Government. There is still further work to ensure statistical units are prevalence across Government and fully staffed with qualified individuals. Further instruments of coordination are also planned through the third strategic plan to be launched this year such as a Code of Practice, Data Quality Assurance Framework, data auditing team, compendium of concepts and methods and improved electronic collection methods (CAPI).

Following the presentations, the chair led a Q&A with the presenters for this session. Question and comments were received from the following countries; Rwanda, Mauritius, Lesotho, Gambia, South Sudan, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. These questions and comments covered such areas as how different data and sources should be covered by official statistics legislation; responsibilities of the NSO staff versus NSS staff in the production and certification of official statistics; the ratification of the ACS and the access and level of training available to NSO staff.

Two break-out groups discussed a series of questions related this session later in the day. The questions covered the main incentives for strengthening the institutional and organisational frameworks of the NSS; the challenges and deterrents in improving these institutional and organisational frameworks; relevant success stories, new initiatives or best practices under this theme; the kind of support is missing from bilateral and multilateral partners; and anything important not covered in the *Handbook* chapters linked to this theme nor discussed in this session.

There was consensus that updated legal frameworks provided the foundation for the NSS and that putting plans into action like the NSDS further bound the NSS together to take coordinated action. The challenges to these processes are a lack of resources and capacity of NSSs, lack of interest by wider Government or lack of status of NSOs to put plans into action and competition or non-cooperation among data producers. Some examples of success stories were collected from Botswana, Gambia, Ghana, Rwanda and Somalia during the discussions. The lack of donor coordination was cited as an issue with bilateral and multilateral partners. Finally, more guidance was needed under this theme for those countries in conflict or post-conflict situations and workings of their statistical infrastructure, the funding of the NSO and a recognised title/ designation for the top statistician in the country's Government.

## Theme 2 - Securing quality of statistical information and improving data coherence through statistical analysis and analytical frameworks

The session for the second theme was chaired by Ms. Nthabise Makhatha, a Deputy Director General within Statistics South Africa. Presentations were made in this session by representatives from UNSD, SADC, Angola, Egypt and Nigeria. The UNSD presentation went through the section and subsections of chapters VI – IX of the *Handbook* dealing with users and their needs, quality management and analysis and analytical frameworks. The SADC presentation followed with a background on the regional organisation and responsibilities of the statistics unit. Among its members it is planning to launch protocols on statistics to harmonise the compilation and dissemination of official statistics in the region. This legal document will be aligned to other regional frameworks such as the ACS and RSDS/ NSDS being implemented by its members.

Angola presented on the expectations of users of statistics within the country; and how the use of quality management tools and analytical frameworks helped respond to these expectations. Egypt presented on the preparations for their 2017 Housing and Population Census. Nigeria presented on conducting their 2019 Living Standards Survey. Following the presentations, the chair led a Q&A with the presenters for this session. Question and comments were received from the following countries; Botswana, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. These questions and comments covered such areas as need of plain language to assist with user's statistical literacy, regional cooperation on major statistical endeavours (i.e. Census), special services and controlled environment to assist researchers make full use of statistics collected, better guidance on external data sources and whether the NSO should take on producing official statistics with private sector data or leave this to the private sector, and whether to prioritise different types of user.

Two break-out groups discussed a series of questions related this session later in the day. The questions covered the mechanisms in place to secure the quality and coherence of official statistics and indicators; how the main user groups are consulted and engaged in the initiatives for securing the quality of official statistics; relevant success stories, new initiatives or best practices under this theme; additional support from bilateral and multilateral partners could support efforts for securing the quality of official statistics and anything important not covered in the *Handbook* chapters linked to this theme nor discussed in this session.

Both groups agreed that Data Quality Assurance Frameworks were one key element to secure the quality and coherence of official statistics and indicators. On other elements the groups gave a range of answers from the demand side, like alignment of statistical programmes to national development plans and other agendas (SDGs, Agenda 2063), use of user satisfaction questionnaires and general

consultation and workshops with users; and on the supply side, adherence to confidentiality to improve trust, improvements to dissemination, existence of a compendium of terms and human resource policy. Both groups provided a variety of different ways and contexts in which they consult and engage main user groups in their initiatives for securing the quality of official statistics. Some examples of success stories were collected from Ethiopia, Ghana, Mauritius, Nigeria, South Africa, South Sudan and Zambia during the discussions. Beyond the more general expectations of additional support from bilateral and multilateral partners, the groups highlighted more sharing of digital collection assets and more focus on assistance with improving economic statistics in particular with the re-basing national accounts and establishment of business registers. Better ownership of the technology provided was also mentioned, including being able to sustainably maintain these solutions. Finally, more guidance was needed under this theme to clarify the relationship between the statistical board and council, the balance between confidentiality and open data policies, the membership of the NSS and the use of branding.

### Theme 3 - Supporting the transformation of statistical production processes from the data collection to dissemination in the context of the digital and technological revolution

The session for the third theme was chaired by Mr. Ivan Murenzi, a Deputy Director General of the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. Presentations were made in this session by representatives from UNSD, UNECA, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa. The UNSD presentation went through the section and subsections of chapters VIII, X-XI and XIII-XIV of the *Handbook* dealing with a wider variety of areas related to the digital and technological revolution such as data sources, collection, processing, dissemination, user communications, common statistical infrastructure, data, information and knowledge management and information technology management. The UNECA presentation followed on the integration of geospatial and statistical information within the region; the incentives and motivations for the integration like the SDG framework, Census, etc., the introduction of the African Statistical Spatial Framework and the further work to be done.

Mauritius presented on opportunities provided from making official statistics out of the Government's administrative data and ways to make all statistics more accessible through an open data policy. The challenges mentioned were improving the information technology infrastructure and adapting to new business process models. Namibia presented on the process for establishing their spatial data infrastructure; from legal framework to strategy and action plan and its application to many domains and sources (i.e. Census). South Africa presented on their approach to collection, dissemination and outreach. From the switch to digital collection methods to creating an integrated communications and marketing strategy. This was demonstrated with some examples of topical data stories (i.e. on "chocolate") and its distribution through traditional print media, social media and video and soundbites complemented by different means to tell the story through infographics, animation and concise messaging. Following the presentations, the chair led a Q&A with the presenters for this session. Question and comments were received from the following countries; Botswana, Lesotho, Liberia, Nigeria and Rwanda. Most questions were to clarify details of the presentations such as the resources involved or the process to pass legislation.

Two break-out groups discussed a series of questions related this session on the third day. The questions covered the benefit of a broader integration of administrative data, Big Data and geospatial information in the production of official statistics and indicators; the main issues in using these 3

categories of data sources; the extent that innovative technologies have been deployed in the production processes starting at data collection to the dissemination of official statistics; relevant success stories, new initiatives or best practices under this theme; additional support needed to better grasp the digital revolution in the production of statistics and indicators; and anything important not covered in the *Handbook* chapters linked to this theme nor discussed in this session.

Both groups saw the value of using the 3 categories of data sources but were clear on the challenges such as the quality of administrative data, the lack of any use of Big Data, capacity to fully use geo-spatial information and general issue with accessing or integrating any of these sources. In terms of innovative technologies, both groups mentioned use of Computer Assisted Personal-or-Telephone Interviewing (CAPI/CATI) in surveys and censuses as well as general information technology in electronic (rather than paper) dissemination and processing. One group mentioned satellite imagery. Some examples of success stories were collected from Liberia, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria and Rwanda. Additional support was requested on general capacity development (i.e. peer learning), infrastructure set-up, maintenance and disposal (i.e. obtaining licence, protection against cybercrime) and methodological guidance (i.e. data science). Finally, more guidance was needed what should be contained within NSO websites, how to harmonise statistics and use of e-Government initiatives to support better statistics from administrative sources.

## Theme 4 - Mobilizing and securing adequate resources and infrastructure, and promoting regional and global cooperation for the development of national statistical capacity

The session for the fourth and final theme was chaired by Mr. Nyakassi Sanyang, the Statistician-General of the Gambia Bureau of Statistics. Presentations were made in this session by representatives from UNSD, AfDB, Ethiopia and South Africa. The UNSD presentation went through the section and subsections of chapter XII of the *Handbook* dealing with human resources as well as recent international activities and collaborations (i.e. chapter XVI) including UNSD specific SDG and Big Data capacity development events and initiatives. The AfDB followed with a presentation on their own international activities and collaborations including the African Information Highway, use of CAPI, International Comparison Programme and Harmonized Consumer Price Index. Ethiopia presented on the major sources of funds to their statistical programme and the benefits and gaps of such support. South Africa presented on their legislative background, use of an integrated indicator framework and coordination structures. Following the presentations, the chair led a Q&A with the presenters for this session. Question and comments were received from the following countries; Botswana, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Sudan. Most questions were to clarify details of the presentations such as the resources involved like the cost of Statistics South Africa's newly build headquarters where the conference was held.

Two break-out groups discussed a series of questions related this session on the third day. The questions covered which resources given to official statistics are the most critical for securing and further developing statistical capacity that is fit for purpose; relevant success stories, new initiatives or best practices under this theme; whether bilateral and multilateral partners could contribute to the mobilization of adequate resources for official statistics without significantly increasing their respective technical assistance budgets; recent success stories, new initiatives or best practices related to the protection of core data and critical statistical infrastructure against natural disasters; and anything important not covered in the *Handbook* chapters linked to this theme nor discussed in this session.

Both groups responded that physical and human resources were critical for securing and further developing statistical capacity that is fit for purpose. Physical resources included fieldwork transportation, buildings, training school and general information and media technology. Human resources included technical specialists in roles such as poverty analysis, sampling, geospatial, software, programmer/ system analyst. Some examples of success stories were collected from Botswana, Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mauritius/ Namibia (for disaster protection), Nigeria, South Africa and Zambia. Additional assistance that would not significantly increase technical assistance budgets suggested were more use of e-learning, back assistance clearly with results, priority to national over international consultants, better advocacy, communication and coordination of the potential statistics component, often seen as evaluation & monitoring, in any large development cooperation programme (i.e. on health, education etc.). Finally, more guidance was needed under this theme to promote UNECA's work on statistical development indicators.