

UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT ACCOUNT PROJECT

Strengthening Statistical Capacity in Support of Progress towards the
Internationally Agreed Development Goals in Countries of South Asia

WORKSHOP ON THE ORGANIZATION OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEMS
AND USER PRODUCER RELATIONS, COLOMBO, SRI LANKA, 21- 24 JULY 2008

Second Event

Consultation Session: Statistical Capacity Building in South Asia

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The consultation session was held in the afternoon of Monday 21 July 2008 in Colombo, Sri Lanka as a pre-event of the Workshop on the Organization of the National Statistical Systems (NSSs) and User Producers Relations for Countries in South Asia. The meeting was attended by the Chief Statisticians and Senior Government Statisticians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, representatives of the regional agencies namely Asian Development Bank (Chellam Palanyandi) and UNESCAP (Pietro Gennari), UNSD staff (Stefan Schweinfest and Youlia Antonova) and resource persons (namely Dennis Trewin, John Cornish and Bishnu Pant).

The objective of the United Nations Development Account Project is to strengthen the capacity of national statistical systems in the SAARC region so as to enable them meet their increasing statistical needs for national development planning and monitoring of the internationally agreed development goals. It also to assist in promoting the inter-regional cooperation among the countries of the region in the field of statistics and to establish a platform for communication and data exchange among the countries.

The meeting discussed in details the following topics:

- Role of development partners in supporting statistical capacity building in South Asia
- Resources and funding of statistical capacity building: country experiences
- Optimizing and coordinating international resources towards the statistical development in South Asia

These topics were considered on the basis of a background document entitled “Organization of National Statistical Systems in South Asian Countries: An Overview”, that was circulated to participants before the start of the meeting, presentations made by the representatives of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia

and Pacific (UNESCAP), UNSD and Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) of Sri Lanka representing the participating countries.

State of national statistical systems : issues and problems

The representatives of NSOs provided a brief overview of their statistical systems. The meeting noted that most of South Asian countries had fairly long experiences of collecting and compiling socio-economic data. The national statistical offices had been established as early as in fifties or early sixties. The Statistics Departments of the universities in these countries had been producing a large number of statistical graduates necessary for the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics. There also existed a number of statistical training institutes especially in India that conducted short and medium training in different areas of statistics. In spite of such long tradition the national statistical systems of the South Asian countries had fallen behind other Asian countries, primarily because of the less priority accorded by the countries for improving statistical systems and chronic underfunding of statistical activities.

The meeting noted that the South Asian NSOs had centralized statistical system, except that in India and Pakistan where decentralized statistical systems had been adopted to suit the federal systems of the governments. The levels of statistical development were highly heterogeneous. There were a number of factors that affected the pace of statistical development in these countries. These would include the leadership and management of the national statistical system, organization of statistical system, non-existence of a feasible long-term statistical development program, very low share in the national budget and domestic demand for the outputs of the statistical system. The meeting noted that most national statistical systems were unable to cope with the demands for the provision of relevant, reliable and timely statistics for policy making, development planning and program/project evaluation. Most countries could not afford to modernize their statistical systems due to low level of infrastructure and limited financial resources. They were also unable to fully implement international standards such as SNA 1993 on a timely manner.

Given the limited budget available for data collection, the NSOs could not afford to collect all kinds of data that were needed by policy makers. Thus most of these NSOs had been caught in a vicious circle where inadequate resources constrain output and undermine quality of statistics, and in turn, the poor quality of statistics produced lower demand and hence provision of fewer resources for statistical agencies. There was an urgent need to support the statistical systems not only to strengthen their capacities but also to make them relevant for the policy makers and society at large. Since statistics were very important role in the development of countries, there was a need to convince the politicians and senior government officials on the need to invest more resources for the statistical development. The meeting urged UNSD to initiate advocacy campaign as part of the project activities to convince the politicians and senior government officials for allocating more resources for the improvement of national statistical system in the countries of the region.

The meeting noted that the NSOs of the region were obsessed with collecting traditional type of statistics. There was a need for them to be more proactive to understand the changing data needs especially from the private sector if they had to remain useful and relevant in the future. The statistical agencies were also required to pay more attention towards strengthening their analytical capability. The participants felt that there was a need for statistical agencies to

also employ economists, and econometricians for undertaking and the analytical works. The meeting further noted that the NSOs of the region were very weak in marketing their statistical products, and hence were required to pay more attention to strengthen their capacity in this area by improving and upgrading their statistical websites on a more regular basis and utilizing the services of the media experts in marketing their statistical products.

In discussing the specific topics to be covered by the UNSD project, the meeting noted that the second meeting of the SAARC Heads of Statistical Agencies (SAARC Stat) held in Dhaka, Bangladesh early this year had identified some priority statistics areas for each country of the region. The participants agreed that there was no point in reinventing the wheel and hence the activities identified by SAARC Stat such as the enhancement of national statistical websites and publication of SAARC Statistics Year Book should be supported by the present UN Development project.

Donor assistance and coordination

The representatives of UNSD, UNESCAP and ADB shared their experiences in providing technical assistance for improving the statistical systems of South Asian countries. The meeting noted that the countries of the region had received substantial assistance from the international agencies for upgrading their statistical systems in recent years. These assistance were successful in creating a pool of skilled manpower, contributed to expand data coverage, and improve their statistical system to a large extent. However it was noted that these technical assistance were provided on a piecemeal manner and were not based on critical review of statistical systems, and hence were not in a position to make a desirable impact on the national statistical system of the countries of the region. Therefore the meeting suggested that before committing any assistance it was necessary for donors to first examine the existing statistical system, identify areas where assistance were really needed on a priority basis, and provide assistance on a more long term basis. A view was expressed that if any country had already prepared a master plan in statistics, that should be used as a basis by donors to extend statistical capacity building technical assistance to that country.

The participants were of the view that the donor agencies seemed to compete each other to provide technical assistance due to lack of appropriate coordination mechanism among themselves. It was noted that since the resources available for statistical development were limited there was a need for the donors to coordinate their assistance in a more effective manner. In this regard there was suggestion that perhaps the United Nations Statistics Division would be in a better position to coordinate donor assistance at the international level. It was also mentioned that there was a tendency especially among the specialized international agencies to provide assistance directly to the line ministries without coordinating with the national statistical agencies. It has obviously caused some duplication in the collection and compilation of statistics. Hence there was need for all donors to keep the NSOs on loop of any assistance that were provided to improve the sectoral statistics in the countries, as the NSOs were in most cases responsible in coordinating the data collection within the countries.

The meeting generally felt that the international assistance for strengthening statistical capacity of the countries of the region had declined over the years. For instance, the international agencies such as UNDP, UNFPA, FAO, etc. had actively supported the conduct of population, housing and agriculture censuses in 1980s and 1990s, but such assistance were

not available during the last round of censuses. Besides, the phasing out of the large technical assistance such as the National Household Survey Program (NHSCP) by UNSD and the Living Standard Measurement Surveys by the World Bank which played important role in strengthening the statistical capability of developing countries had been discontinued and were yet to be replaced by similar survey programs. This had given the impression that the volume of assistance provided by multilateral agencies had in fact declined very sharply in recent years, and hence were likely to have a negative impact on the development of statistics in the region.

The participants noted that types of assistance needed varied from countries to countries. Where as in the past the technical assistance for improving the traditional statistics such as the compilation of national accounts, population statistics, etc mattered most, the needs and priorities of NSOs in recent years had moved to subjects like data management and analysis, management of statistical offices, GIS, ICT statistics including the development websites and statistical portals. Hence there was a need for donors to focus their technical assistance in these areas rather than to continue concentrating on traditional types of statistics. The meeting also was of the view that the technical assistance funded by donors could best be implemented with the assistance of national consultants. In this regard, the participants generally welcomed the intention of UN Development Account project to promote inter-regional cooperation among countries of the region, which was a step forward in the right direction.

Some participants emphasized on the need to focus the technical assistance for meeting the long term training needs of the countries. It was suggested that donors should examine possibility of providing assistance to strengthening the Statistics Departments of the Universities so as to make them capable of producing statistical graduates specializing on official statistics who will be able to fill the increasing gaps for the trained manpower in NSOs. In this regard it was also suggested that the UNSD project should consider supporting the study tours in countries of the region where the statistical systems were more developed as mandated by the SAARC Stat.

The meeting noted that there was a considerable interest among the donors to provide assistance for improving statistical systems of South Asian countries. But such assistance was preferred to be provided through sub-regional organizations such as SAARC rather than dealing with individual countries. Since the SAARC Secretariat did not have a statistical unit in handling statistical capacity building technical assistance, the meeting strongly felt that there was a need to establish such a unit in the SAARC Secretariat. The meeting noted that the UN project could be used as a vehicle for exploring the possibility of establishing such a unit in the SAARC secretariat within the project period.