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Country Paper

Engagement of Users in the National Statistical System

Department of Census and Statistics: Sri Lanka

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Abstract

International conferences, summits and declarations of the 1990's, most notably the Millennium Development Goals, have underscored the central role that social statistics and indicators play in the planning, implementation as well as monitoring and assessment of socio-economic goals and targets. The increased interest and demand for social statistics and indicators necessitate an expansion of the dimensions of social statistics so that it captures and addresses emerging social issues in this fast changing world. The creation of a dynamic social statistics system that produces and disseminates accurate, reliable and policy-relevant data on time and on regular intervals requires new technical and operational mechanisms. These include new conceptual frameworks, definitions as well as improved methods of data collection and dissemination. Institutionalizing user-producer dialogue in national systems of social statistics will play an integral role towards achieving this goal. This paper discusses briefly about National Statistical System of Sri Lanka and what could be done to increase the user engagement in the national Statistical System.

1. Introduction

Statistics and indicators have become inextricable components in the development process. Now there is an increased interest in role of statistics and indicators in planning, implementing, monitoring and assessing development policies. The increased interest in social statistics and indicators is largely due to that a wide range of statistics and indicators are required for policy planning and decision making and also those are used as tools for monitoring and assessing their outcome. These statistics are generally sourced from national statistical systems.

The statistical system in Sri Lanka is a mixed system but more closer to a centralized system, with the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) having co-ordinatory and technical supervisory authority over the statistical branch offices in Ministries, Departments and Provincial, District and Divisional administration. The co-ordination of statistical activities by the DCS is performed through the establishment of statistical standards, coding and classification schemes and provision of trained statistical cadres required by the branch offices and provincial / district offices.

The recruitment, training and deployment of statistical staff to branch offices and provincial and district offices by the DCS, has also helped to have more effective co-ordination and control on statistical policy matters and maintenance of statistical standards. The legal authority vested in the DCS under the Census and Statistics Ordinances has enabled the DCS to successfully undertake most of the statistical activities in a coordinated manner.

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The challenge to the DCS in this fast changing world is to develop the framework, tools and mechanisms for addressing emerging social concerns and providing policy-relevant data to the data users. As in many other countries, the government is one of the major data users in Sri Lanka. Other data users include nongovernmental organizations, private enterprises, funding agencies media researchers, University students, school children etc. User – producer collaborations, facilitates taking into account the new information requirements of different social groups in different geographical areas. Also it enables users to obtain information about resources, techniques and methods and the types of information that are generated by the data producers.

This paper discusses about ways and means of improving user engagement in user-producer relations in general in a Statistical System and specifically, issues and what actions Sri Lanka has taken to improve this engagement within the National Statistical System of Sri Lanka.

2. Some measures to improve user-producer relations

The objective of this paper is to explore some of the main strategic issues facing the National Statistical Office. More emphasis is placed on the ways and means of improving user engagements. These issues are considered under five areas. These areas are listed below:

- a. Improving co-ordination in National Statistical System
- b. Autonomy of National Statistical Offices
- c. Increase User Engagement
- d. Useful Administrative Data for Statistical Purposes and
- e. Role of National Statistical Offices in Analysis, including the provision of micro data.

As the theme given to Sri Lanka has been titled as “user engagement in Statistical Systems” this paper mainly focuses on this theme.

2.1: Improving co-ordination in National Statistical System

The mission of the Department is to collect, compile and disseminate relevant, reliable and up-to-date statistical information required to plan a better future for our country and people of Sri Lanka, to monitor the progress of development and other socio-economic activities and to measure the impact of various government policies on the economy of our country and living standard of the people. It is also charged with the function of providing trained professional staff to all government agencies undertaking various statistical activities. Some of the measures that have been taken to improve the coordination in national statistical system are elaborated below:

2.1.a: Legal framework

The national statistical system in Sri Lanka provides comprehensive statistics to policy makers and general public within a legal framework. Authority to obtain information is provided in the legislation while assuring confidentiality of data providers. Although this has enabled collecting information from the general public in household surveys, it does have enough provisions for encouraging public and private sector agencies to provide data to the DCS. As a remedial solution, it has been suggested to revise the Legal Framework.

2.1.b: Duplication of Statistical activities

It is believed that in Sri Lanka, the national statistical system is a well-developed one. It has resolved several issues through dialogues. There were a few cases where same indicators were compiled by several agencies. Duplication of efforts across institutions that routinely collect and disseminate data leads to waste of scarce resources and needs to be rationalized. The GDP is an example for an indicator that is compiled by more than one organization. GDP statistics are compiled both by the Department of Census and Statistics and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. After, a constructive dialogue, the DCS took over compilation of this indicator.

2.1.c: Use of data standards

Efforts have been made and continue to make, to ensure that data standards, methodologies used allows for international consistency and comparability of Sri Lanka's statistical system with that of other countries. Staff of the DCS need to be continuously trained on new methodologies, Data Dissemination standards etc. It is required to obtain technical assistance for training staff in this area.

2.1.d: Relations with users

Although, continuous dialog with the users is an important feature of any developed statistical system, it is not that common in Sri Lanka. This dialogue can be seen in most of the cases only at the time of conducting new rounds of surveys and censuses. Sri Lanka is to implement a World Bank funded project titled Statistical Capacity Building (STATCAP), and under this project it has been suggested to set up a National Data Committee. This committee will be well represented by the users and it is believed that continued dialogue with users will be possible through this committee.

Personnel development cannot be ignored in improving National Statistical system. The human resource of the data producing agencies should be trained to be able to creatively, professionally and effectively implement the tasks of the agency. Training on the user-producer relationship should be included into the training modules. The DCS is having a training division and it conducts various programs to enhance the statistical skills and capacity of the DCS staff. The training strategy and organization of personnel training should also be carried out by taking into account the orientation towards the user of the services supplied by the agency, efficiency, initiative and innovations, ability to make decisions and drive for skills improvement.

A concern with the legal framework of the statistical system is not having enough powers to collect information from public sector and private sector organizations. DCS is planning to revise the legal frame under the STATACP addressing such issues.

2.1.e: Improving Management of Quality in Statistics

By quality of statistics we mean: relevance (compatibility with the needs of users), accuracy of estimates, timeliness, clarity and accessibility, comparability (different countries) and compatibility (avoidance of contradictions in the results of different surveys). DCS has traditionally emphasized accuracy, a key aspect of quality. Most publications of the DCS show results of statistical surveys and included references to sampling and non-sampling errors, in order to enable users to apply the data properly.

It is important to assess the quality of information compiled by the data producing agencies. This has been a concern of the National Statistical Offices, which have worked to develop different quality-control strategies in an effort to earn the trust of users of the statistical information they produce. The DCS is in the process of obtaining ISO 9001 certification to ensure that all standard office procedures are followed and ready to serve users up to their expectations.

2.2: Autonomy of National Statistical Offices

Sri Lanka is an example, where Statistical System is enjoying autonomy. In the history of the DCS, there had not been any incidents of influencing the statistical system.

2.3: Increase User Engagement

User is an important player of a statistical system in any country. Users include students, public and private sector organizations, Non-governmental organizations, International organizations etc. Methods of increasing user engagement in improving national statistical systems are discussed below.

2.3.a: Raising awareness

DCS conducts various programmes such as lectures, exhibitions to make users aware about importance of statistics. However, current level of raising awareness of users is not satisfactory.

Lack of awareness on the vital role of statistics reduces the willingness of respondents to cooperate in data production process. As a preliminary step toward creating user-producer dialogue, awareness-raising campaigns should be launched to educate users and producers, as well as the general public, on the role and importance of statistics to good governance, public affairs management etc. Training opportunities should be given to the staff of the DCS on communication as it helps to improve this area.

2.3.b: Improving cooperation with Public Institutions

Public sector institutions play a dual role as data producers and data users. Also some public Institutions are key players in the National Statistical System. For National Statistical System to be properly structured it is essential that there should be a coordinated statistical system in which all available sources of information are

utilized, the cost-efficiency ratio is taken into account, and use is made of perfectly harmonized concepts and variables.

The achievement of this aim which requires a great effort of coordination, could be carried out with greater effectiveness and efficiency if the working rules for the agents involved in statistical activity were laid down in a precise manner in the statistical regulations.

Currently DCS has cooperation from many public sector institutions in statistical activities possibly due to the fact that statistical advisory services are provided to these by DCS. However, there are some organizations, specially, organizations maintaining administrative data are not cooperating satisfactorily. DCS came across this situation when it attempted to collect data to update the Millennium Development Goals database. This difficulty was overcome by setting up a Committee and holding regular meetings.

Public institutions engaged in statistical activities have to be more effectively coordinated by using modern technologies, expanding exchange in statistical information, preventing overlapping in data collection. In order to reduce the burden on the respondents with the preparation of the data for statistics, various registers and databases managed by public institutions have to be used on a larger scale. To achieve this, inter-institutional working groups have to be setup and composition and activities of these groups have to be continuously developed to make them capable of contributing more effectively to the improvement of the National Statistical System.

2.3c: Improving cooperation with Scientific Institutions

Scientific institutions use statistical information mainly for research purposes. These institutions include Universities, National Science Foundation, Institute of Policy Studies, Central Bank of Sri Lanka etc. Existing potential of these Institutions can be used to improve the National Statistical System. These institutions can get involved in informing the data producing agencies on the statistical information requirements of the scientific institutions and train officials of the data producing agencies.

The DCS already has collaborations with scientific institutions. But the cooperation of the Scientific Institutions should be further strengthened and expanded in such a way that both parties are benefited. DCS can supply information for scientific research, while scientific institutions can assist the DCS by proposing more important survey programmes and methodological directions, and contributing to issue of joint publications.

2.3.d: Improving cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations

The Non-governmental organizations use data relevant to their more focused activities. For example, NGO's working on construction of houses for tsunami affected families wanted to use housing data at lower level administrative units. The capacity of the non-governmental organizations to prepare and provide statistical information is limited. Therefore, they have to depend on the data producing

organizations. Non-Governmental organizations collect data in a limited way, in line with their nature of activity, use administrative documents and manage statistical information if required information could not be found in official statistics.

There are professional bodies such as Applied Statistics Association of Sri Lanka, established with the objective of further developing the subject and to promoting applications of the subject for the betterment of the country. There is a large number of NGO's operating in Sri Lanka. By improving the cooperation with such bodies and non-governmental organizations correct usage of statistics in NGO's can be improved. Because of capacity and methodological issues data collected by NGO's cannot be used in the same way as official statistics are used.

2.3.e: Improving Dissemination of Statistical Information

A well-arranged system of dissemination of statistical information will allow expanding the range of services and the circle of users and thereby to strengthen the image of data producing agencies.

The importance of statistics grows along with the development of information society. Statistical information is used on a larger scale in analyses, decision-making, preparation of various programmes, improvement of public information (mass media) and, international comparisons.

The DCS offers local and foreign users several product varieties in different media - information leaflets, publications, CDs, diskettes, web page, library, sales counter. Requests for information are accepted by email also. All statistical information given in the Department's website is accessible to all the users free of charge.

DCS has not conducted any user surveys. Generally, statistical information is prepared in order to satisfy the needs of all types of users to a maximum. The surveys of users have to be conducted to assess best ways that could be used to disseminate statistical information. The user groups should include business organizations, marketing and advertising agencies, finance institutions, science institutions, libraries, students, state institutions, municipalities, embassies, international organisations, media, the public at large.

By taking the findings of the survey into account and considering tools brought about by the development of information technologies, the new ways of data dissemination and service provision could be explored. All this encourages giving a new look at the prospects, objectives and tasks of the dissemination of statistical information.

DCS is planning to adopt following measures for data dissemination and thereby to acquire the confidence of users and consolidate the image of the institution as the sole source of official, professional and quality statistical information.

- Standardizing the contents of information and publications, graphic presentation to the user, setting up specific release time and the time for carrying out the surveys etc. The DCS has already published an Advance Data Release Calendar in the department's website. In this calendar scheduled dates

for releasing findings of the surveys, censuses and other special studies conducted by the department are published.

- Simplifying the mechanisms of information search by introducing a search key in the web. There is a search key given in the DCS website and it is being improved. DCS needs technical assistance to improve this area.
- Developing a unified output database for internal and external users and publishing it the website. Several interactive and user-friendly databases have been published in the DCS website. One such database is on the MDG indicators. For each district there is an interactive database published in the DCS website carrying development indicators. All these databases have been created using the DevInfo software package developed and distributed by the United Nations Children's fund. A Meta database that is being developed under the Asian Development Bank assistance is being prepared and it is to be published in the DCS website.
- Using the Geographic Information System (GIS) means for the publication of statistical data in the Internet and in the preparation of publications. Maps are now being widely used for data presentations. DCS uses thematic maps in presentations and publications to display spatial variation in statistical indicators.
- Enhancing the qualification of the personnel, working with the users. Officers working in the Data dissemination unit of the DCS are trained on the subject matter. They also need to be trained on the user focused data dissemination skills and methods.
- Modernizing the library, launching electronic library and bookshop of the publications on the Internet, linking them with the network of other library catalogues or institutions. DCS has prepared an electronic library catalog. This needs to be further improved and published in the relevant websites.
- Cooperate more closely with the specialized mass media and involved institutions, engage them in the formation of a more positive image of statistics, develop new products, services etc. The DCS is planning to setup a media unit in the Data dissemination unit. Currently, some selected publications are launched by presenting the first copies to a key figure of the government. For example, recently the MDG interactive database was added to the DCS website by the Hon. Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. These kinds of events are given the publicity by the media and it helps to form a more positive image of statistics.
- Creating a flexible pricing system and using effective sale methods. All statistical products of the DCS are sold at a minimal price. All the information published in the website can be accessed and down loaded free of charge. DCS website is hosted in a server belong to Sri Lanka Telecom. As such there is a limitation in the amount of statistical materials that could be published in the site.

- Quarterly press briefing is held to announce Labour Force and few other statistics. This is one of the very effective ways of disseminating data. Media gives wide publicity to these statistics. This should be extended to other statistics compiled by the department as well.
- DCS is planning to use ICT to further assist the users in their information requirements, by modernization of dissemination of statistical information. The DC is using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for its activities to a considerable extent. The main objective of using ICT is introduction of the new technologies, which would allow to improve the system of data collection, processing, preparation of statistical information, enhancement of its quality and different ways of its dissemination to users reduce expenses and time consumed. The website of the Department, entertaining information requests by e-mail, publishing statistical information in CD's etc are data dissemination methods for which ICT has already been used. In order to improve the ties between the users and statistical staff, all relevant e-mail addresses have been published in the DCS website. Another area for which, ICT has been used is Geographic Information Systems. DCS has already included database in its website, capable of drawing interactive thematic maps for development indicators.

2.4: Usefulness of Administrative Data

In Sri Lanka, administrative data is a very important source of data for number of indicators. For example, indicators such as birth rate, death rate, mid year population are prepared using the administrative data maintained by the Registrar General's Department. The Statistical unit of the Registrar General's Department is responsible for compilation of these indicators and this unit is staffed by the DCS. However, there is an issue on timeliness of the indicators compiled by the Department. There is a backlog to be cleared. Not having sufficient qualified staff may be the possible cause for this. As a remedial measure Statistics Unit has been reinforced by posting a few more officers of the Department particularly from the IT sector temporarily to this unit to expedite clearing the backlog.

2.5: Role of National Statistical Offices in Analysis, including the provision of Micro Data

DCS conducts several surveys and censuses regularly. Also it conducts ad hoc surveys, censuses and special studies. As such DCS is having lot of micro data on demographic and socio-economic conditions of the country. Reports carrying brief description of findings and statistical tables are released for most of these surveys, censuses and special studies. But unfortunately, hardly any in-depth research work is carried out using these micro data by the DCS staff. Research culture has to be developed within the Department. Analytical thinking and capacity and writing skills of the DCS staff need to be improved.

Department has been issuing micro data to other parties for research works. But the Department did not have a proper policy for this. Recently the DCS implemented a policy on releasing micro data and this policy has been published in the DCS website. Micro data release is carried out at two stages. At the beginning, 25 percent of the data file is released. For this applicant has to fill an application in triplicate. A copy of this application is available

in the DCS website. Together with the application a copy of the project proposal has to be submitted. At the second stage, 100 percent data file is released. At this stage a copy of interim report has to be submitted based on the analysis carried out using 25 percent of the data file. After completing research, a copy of the final report should be submitted to the DCS. A database is maintained on releasing micro data and no body is given micro data until all the stipulated conditions are fulfilled. Under no circumstance, identification data are released with micro data.

5: Statistical Capacity Building Project

The Head office of the DCS has 18 divisions, which are currently located in 6 locations within the City of Colombo. This fragmentation of locations makes coordination, meetings and communication challenging. Bringing all the DCS functions under one roof will greatly help streamline the process. With World Bank assistance, the DCS is planning to implement a project called STATCAP (Statistical Capacity Building Project). In this project provisions are there for capacity improvement and construction of a building to the DCS.

One important component of this project is establishment of a Data Committee. To reflect the statistical needs of the planners, policy makers, and other users of data, a National Data Committee (NDC) will be created. The membership of the NDC, which will be co-chaired by the Director Generals of the DCS and Department of National Planning, will be drawn from key ministries and agencies of the government such as plan implementation, labor, education, health, and so on, and the Central Bank. The NDC will also include members from the research community and representatives of the private sector, such as the Chambers of Commerce and Chambers of Industries. The NDC will play an important role in reflecting the statistical needs of the users as well as assessing the quality of statistical data produced by DCS as NDC will be an important forum to discuss all these matters.

5: Conclusion

Main users of data in Statistical Office of Sri Lanka are: citizens, students, mass media, Government and other public administration organizations, international organizations, business community, research and development organizations etc. The theme of this paper is improving user engagement in national statistical systems. In order to get users increasingly engaged in the statistical system, this paper proposed to carry out following.

- a. Defining a data dissemination policy
- b. Following and analyzing continuously the media and the user feedback
- c. Conducting user satisfaction survey for main groups of users and measuring the quality for satisfying user needs
- d. Defining the procedure for improving the statistical knowledge of users with easy methodological explanations for data, as well as special training for applications and interpretation of data produced with new methodology
- e. Introducing user-oriented approach among all employees in the DCS
- f. Improving the accessibility of statistical results by new technologies and organizational means
- g. Increasing the interest of users to participate in statistical activities

DCS is already carrying out some of the above activities. By carrying out these activities more effectively it should be possible to further improve the National Statistical System of Sri Lanka and possibly in any other country.
