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“Strategies for Achieving Effective Data Communication”

Country Paper by TIMOR-LESTE

Introduction

The National Statistics Directorate (NSD) of Timor-Leste is the state department under the General-Directorate of Analysis and Research of the Ministry of Finance responsible for the co-ordination of the National Statistical System and for the collection, production, analysis and dissemination of official statistics on the demographic, social, environmental and economic domains. Presently the NSD has 18 permanent and 48 temporary staff.

The statistical activity is regulated by a Decree-Law, approved by the Council of Ministers, dated of 2003.

This Decree-Law should be revised in the near future to become a Law, approved by the National Parliament, in order to have a stronger legislation covering sensitive issues such as: i) the collection of individual data; ii) the strict respect of the statistical confidentiality of individual data by all statistical official (punishments for those disobeying the Law); iii) the access to statistical microdata for research purposes iv) the authority of the National Statistical office to require response to statistical surveys; v) the use of administrative records for statistical purposes.

The revision of the statistical legislation is a cornerstone regarding the establishment of a National Statistical System in Timor-Leste, to safeguard statistical independence and to strengthening the statistical co-ordination by the NSD and consequently to smooth effective data communication among all statistical stakeholders. This point will be further developed in this document.

The Statistical Work Plan for 2010-2019 has been approved early this year. This document identifies the main statistical operations to be held and the main sources of administrative data that might be used for statistical purposes. It serves as a guide for the dialogue with developing partners, to have a co-ordinated assistance focused on the development of the NSD capacity to produce statistics relevant for the Timorese economy and society.

Identification of sources of raw data

The statistical information produced by the NSD is obtained from:

- **Censuses and Sample surveys;**
- **Administrative records:** administrative data hold by the ministries originally collected for purposes other than statistics.

The collection of data through statistical operations such as censuses and sample surveys has been conducted in the last years mainly on the basis of external financial aid provided by international partners. Exception is the collection of prices for the Consumer Price Index, which is made monthly for Dili and quarterly for Timor-Leste, financed by the State budget.

The donor-driven approach led to the prominence of social and demographic surveys: since the independence of Timor-Leste, in 2002, the NSD has conducted the 1st Population and Housing Census, in 2004 (the preparation activities for the 2nd Census, scheduled for July 2010, are underway), is now implementing the 2nd Demographic and Health Survey and the 1st Employment Survey, has conducted, in 2007, the 2nd Timor-Leste Survey of Living Standards (the first was before independence, in 2001) and, in 2002, has carried out the Multiple Cluster Indicators Survey.

The implementation of these household surveys has created a good capacity within the NDS to undertake fieldwork operations and had allowed for a gradually increase of household respondents confidence as regards the NSD. Confidence is also built on the fact that the NSD strictly follows the statistical secrecy and explains this issue when interviewing households. Prior to these operations the field officers are submitted to training actions so that they are able to interview households and inform about the objectives of the survey, the obligation to report information to the NSD and the confidentiality of the individual data collected.

Two major weakness can however be pointed out to the fact that the surveys implemented so far have been more driven by international donors demands than by domestic demands: lack of attention to the development of economic statistics and burden on household respondents, as not always the surveys are duly co-ordinated, either as regards their implementation time and as regards the questions addressed in the questionnaires.

The Statistical Work Plan for 2010-2019 is a precious tool to drive the annual statistical activity according to priorities carefully identified (after consultation with a wide range of users) and applying a cost-effectiveness approach.

Priority is being given to the development of economic statistics and three major surveys shall be conducted in the next two-three years: the household income and expenditure survey; the business activity sample survey and the agriculture production sample survey.

Moreover, Timor-Leste will conduct the 2nd Housing and Population Census in 2010, and afterwards every ten years, along with international Census rounds.

Attention is being paid to the design of the questionnaires of all these surveys to avoid duplications and to avoid excessive burden on households.

The NSD is also gradually strengthening its role of co-ordinating agency of the statistical activities carried out in the country and is working closely with some line ministries on the implementation of fieldwork operations such as the Demographic and Health Survey and the Employment Survey. It is important, in this framework, that international partners supporting the surveys take into consideration the legal statistical structure existing in the country. This means that the NSD should be always contacted and involved in country surveys even if they are conducted to satisfy specific needs of the ministries and/or developing partners. This procedure would contribute to the consistency and efficiency of the statistical system.

Understanding the situation and conditions under which raw data are supplied and learning what can be done to improve those situations and conditions

The administrative data held by public administration are often scarce and not computerised which limits their use for statistical purposes. Most of the officials in the ministries are statistically illiterate. It happens quite often that the NSD must return to its administrative source to clarify and improve the data supplied.

To overcome this situation the Statistical Work Plan for 2010-2019 proposes the allocation of skilled statistical officials to line ministries as the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Trade and Education.

Besides the central office in Dili, the capital, the NSD has statistical officers in the other 12 districts of the country. They are responsible for the collection of administrative data in their respective districts and they are always involved in the national surveys. But it is urgent to enhance the IT communications facilities with the NSD in Dili to smooth the transmission of data.

This also applies in general to the line ministries in Dili where often the transmission of data to the NSD is still made on paper support. Even if officials have an electronic address often they do not use it because they are not familiar with and therefore it is urgent to promote the use of IT communications facilities and training the staff on their use.

Upgrading the Information Technology capacity of the NSD and of the line ministries is a priority in the next few years and includes the implementation of electronic data interchange (EDI) technology for administrative data.

Within this context it should be highlighted the good data flow from Customs, which base the production of monthly external trade statistics by the NSD.

The Ministries of Education and Health have also developed good quality information management systems on their respective fields of work and the NSD also makes use of those administrative data namely for the production of the annually publication “Timor-Leste in Figures”.

Government Finance Statistics are also compiled by the Ministry of Finance and sent each quarter to the NSD for dissemination in the quarterly statistical indicators bulletin.

Monetary and balance of payment statistics are compiled and disseminate by the Banking and Payments Authority of Timor-Leste. This Authority has already developed very good statistical skills and it is a good example of good communication with the NSD. It regularly provides timely and quality quarterly banking data to the NSD for dissemination in the Quarterly Statistical Indicators leaflet.

Timeliness and quality of the raw data

It comes from the above that there is in general a long path ahead in the improvement and reinforcement of the co-ordination in the collection and compilation of data by the different players (NSD, the line ministries and other public entities). For that purpose, the NSD still needs to strengthen its capacity to play the central role in the National Statistical System

(NSS). The NSS itself needs to be established by law and then put into practice, creating an independent statistical office with authority to compel response to statistical surveys, in the absolute respect of the privacy of data providers. It must also be created some kind of Statistical Advisory Body, grouping representative of the main producers and users of official statistics.

In spite of the situation described, the regular dissemination, since March 2009, of the above-mentioned Quarterly Statistical Indicators leaflet, has enabled a closer co-operation between the NSD and a set of public entities and ministries that have been providing quarterly economic data for the NSD’s publication.

If in the beginning it has been hard to get the data, and several visits and meetings with the ministries were needed to explain the purpose of the information requested, now it has become a routine and data flow from the ministries to the NSD without delay.

Well trained staff is essential to assist other governmental agencies understanding the need for timely and good quality statistical information. It is also crucial that the NSD develops its own capacity to provide timely, punctual and relevant statistics and that our respondents have the perception that the NSD carries out a serious and useful public service.

The commitment and involvement of all NSD staff in this common mission is still a challenge and requires the definition and implementation of a human resources development policy.

Identification of users and uses of statistical data

The lack of economic statistics undermines policy formulation and constraints the evaluation of the Government performance and the decision-making process by different stakeholders in the Timorese economy. Basic economic statistics in fields such as industry, tourism, agriculture and business in general are also essential to feed the compilation of national accounts.

The statistical annual work plan for 2010 foresees the implementation of the Business Activity Survey and also the Household Income and Expenditure survey. Both are essential to provide data for the compilation of National Accounts among other uses.

It should be pointed out that till now Timor-Leste does not have any system of compiling regular national accounts statistics. But efforts are being made to overcome this situation and besides the implementation of the mentioned surveys there is an on-going project to assist NSD staff in the compilation of national accounts.

Moreover, the NSD will carry out the 2nd Population and Housing Census which will provide updated demographic, social and even economic information and will also cover a set of indicators needed to monitor the implementation of the Millennium Developments Goals in Timor-Leste.

Although all these activities have support from external donors, the Government intends to raise the allocation of financing for the statistical activity in 2010, to complement external support and therefore enable the implementation of these operations. This approach reflects

the commitment of the Government in the improvement and strengthening of the official statistics and also its trust in the work of the NSD.

The on-going work on national accounts and the compilation and dissemination of the Quarterly Statistical Indicators, mentioned before, are reinforcing the co-operation links and the communications flows between the NSD and the administrative data sources.

Ensuring that statistical data are communicated to users smoothly and effectively and assisting users in their interpretation and application of statistical data

The NSD regards official statistics as a public good that should satisfy users’ needs.

Official statistics are available to all users on an impartial basis. Official statistics compiled by the NSD are disseminated on its website and also on traditional hard copy. All the publications may be consulted in the NSD library.

The calendar of NSD publication is available on the website. The NSD promotes a large dissemination of the hard copy publications and is seeking to promote the electronic dissemination to reduce costs.

The access to official statistics, whatever dissemination support is used, is up to now completely free of charge. This has been seen as a way to promote public awareness about official statistics in Timor-Leste. As the production and dissemination of statistics is increasing and more modern dissemination services are used (e.g. through the creation of dissemination data bases), the NSD might re-thought its dissemination policy and might start charging the traditional hard copies and also the provision of statistics under demand of users that are not published (and that often implies the occupation of the staff in preparing the data). In any case, as a principle, the access to official statistics should be free of charge, unless if further processing of the information is required to satisfy the user’s demand.

The use of mass media to disseminate key statistics should be promoted in the near future. The NSD is considering to make available press releases for instance on the Consumer Price Index. But for the time being all the contacts with the media must be authorized by the Minister’s Cabinet. The establishment of an independent national statistical office requires that the NSD builds and assures its own capacity to provide core statistics to serve the Government, the business community and the citizens in general.

Specific sessions about statistics might also be envisaged for target groups such as journalists and students. This would increase awareness about statistics and facilitate the use of official statistics by those groups.

The NSD always provides metadata about the statistics disseminated (either in the publications, on the website and also on Timor-Leste DevInfo, a national social and economic database system, based on the UN DevInfo). Although help-desks haven’t been created (this will come upon further development of NSD statistical production and dissemination), the staff is always available to provide information about NSD’s products and to assist users understandings official statistics. The NSD can also be easily contact through its general email address.

Enhancing the NSD visibility and image as an important strategy to gain the confidence of respondents and users

The production and dissemination of quality and timely statistics, on a regular and punctual manner, as it is the case of External Trade Statistics, Consumer Price Index and the Quarterly Statistical Indicators is enhancing the image of the NSD. The referred statistics are collected and compiled by the NSD officials who have already created their own capacity to do this work by themselves.

Besides this regular production, the NSD is engaged in important statistical operations supported by international donors, as mentioned before.

Gradually, there is a greater public awareness about the work of the NSD, which starts to be regarded as a credible institution with capacity to produce and disseminate valuable information for policy formulation and evidence-based decisions.

To enhance its visibility the NSD promotes a large dissemination of statistical products, which are mainly the traditional hard copy publications, both offering them to a large range of users and providers of information and placing them on the website. Preference is still given to the traditional paper publications as the electronic format is not widely used by Timorese users.

The NSD has also created and launched in 2009 a logotype which is being used in all NSD products (e.g., questionnaires, statistical publications, promotion surveys articles such as t-shirts, bags, caps, etc).

Moreover, the NSD is about to launch a publicity campaign about official statistics, to be broadcasted on TV and Radio. A slogan for statistics has been created for the purpose. The campaign focus on official statistics linked to the monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals in Timor-Leste but the NSD took the opportunity to have one spot focused only on the National Statistical Directorate. We expect this campaign increases awareness about official statistics, reaching all types of stakeholders all over the country.

A specific awareness campaign will also be launched for the Census 2010, taking account of the importance and dimension of this operation. To facilitate the recognition and promote the adherence and participation of all citizens in this operation a specific logotype and slogan were created for Census 2010.

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