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SECRETARIAT OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY

REGIONAL MEETING OF HEADS OF PLANNING & HEADS OF STATISTICS (HOPS)
(Noumea, New Caledonia, 17-21 September 2007)

Future directions for evidence-based decision making in the Pacific

DATA UTILIZATION: UNFPA/SPC PROJECT EXPERIENCE
(Document presented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community)

PURPOSE

1. This paper provides a summary of the UNFPA/SPC Project on integrating gender and population issues into population and development policies and plans in Pacific Island countries (project countries) by the Statistics and Demography Programme during the period 2005 to 2007.
2. The paper presents the background, purpose and objectives of project activities - the number of workshops conducted, topics/subject areas covered, multi-sector participation and project related reports. The paper underlines activities and strategies that make this approach successful; highlighting key issues we feel continue to hinder a more wide-spread and effective utilization of population data and information in the Pacific region with regard to policy development, planning, monitoring of development progress and impact assessments. The paper ends with 3 points for discussions/consideration by the meeting.

BACKGROUND

3. A move toward “evidence-based policy making” requires that data and other information be accurate, relevant, available and readily accessible, and that planners and others who advise decision-makers utilize such information in conducting their analyses. Recognizing this, the inaugural Regional Heads of Planning and Heads of Statistics meeting held in Noumea, New Caledonia, 4 – 7 April 2005, was convened under the theme of “*Creating a culture of evidence-based policy making*”, bringing together Heads of Planning and Heads of Statistics to foster a dialogue and discussion between primary data collectors and data users, with a view to developing a better understanding of their respective needs, and to explore opportunities for increased collaboration.. Opening remarks made by representatives of the three cosponsors (SPC, UNFPA, UNDP) emphasized the importance of:
 - statistical data for monitoring development programs and achieving development goals; and
 - the need to ensure that information based on census and survey data is based on sound analysis, is both relevant and useful, and thus able to contribute to developing a culture in which evidence-based policy making is the norm.

4. The meeting noted a growing recognition across the region of the need to increase the degree to which policy making and planning in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) are supported by, and based on accurate and reliable demographic, economic and social data and information. This recognition and associated actions have been more pronounced in some countries than in others. This is due, in part, to different governance structures and ways of conducting government business. It is also, at least partially, due to varying degrees of pressure placed on countries in the Pacific to account for development progress, such as reflected in reported achievements in meeting various international commitments (e.g. Millennium Development Goals, and human rights treaties and conventions) that many PICs have ratified or endorsed.
5. A key issue emerging from this meeting was the observation that in most PICTs, senior decision makers and planners don't fully understand¹ the importance of having up-to-date and good quality data and information across all sectors. This lack of appreciation leads to insufficient resource allocation, which in turn results in inadequate data collection and underutilization of data and information.
6. Data access was identified as one of the largest problems across the region, as was the fact that data, to be useful and more effectively utilized, need to be translated into information. The meeting also heard that more concerted education/training efforts of users need to be undertaken, to assist users in extracting meaning from numbers, and that information dissemination strategies are more effective when users are involved in formulating them. The meeting further highlighted that training National Statistics Office (NSO) staff and planners in data utilisation and policy analysis is a long-term process, as is the process of linking data collection and analysis to policy development and planning:
 - Potential data users need the requisite skills to use data and information, and more effort needs to be put into training current and potential data users.
 - Planners need to be more specific about identifying their own data and information needs, including data gaps and deficiencies.
 - New approaches to disseminating data are needed, such as *PopGIS* and *PRISM*, which also include solutions for users without computer access.
 - There is a need for effective quality control systems, and for regular dialogues between users and producers of data and information.

¹ **Specific participant comments:**

... suggested that there was a need for statisticians in the region to understand how statistics are and can be used, in order to improve the data they provide. They said that SPC workshops in the past have been very helpful in this regard, and suggested that holding sub-regional workshops would be very helpful. They suggested a training of trainers course.

.... noted the traditional roles of statisticians and planners, and observed that in fact these needed to be merged to some degree: statisticians need to be planners, and planners to be statisticians.

PREVIOUS REFERENCE

7. It ought to be emphasized that these observations are not new, but are issues that are reoccurring and restated at almost all development oriented global, regional and national meetings; some of the recent meetings are listed here:
 - Regional Seminar on Population and Development (held in 2001);
 - Regional Workshop on the Millennium Development Goals held in March 2003;
 - 13th Regional Meeting of Heads of Statistics in September 2003;
 - Forum Economic Ministers Meeting of 2004;
 - Regional Census Planning Meeting, Nadi, Fiji (March 2006)
 - Regional Meeting on MDG-Based planning, and the development of a pro-poor policy and budgeting framework, 2-6 October 2006, Nadi, Fiji
 - 2006 population policy review consultations with stakeholders in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea

UNFPA/SPC PROJECT

8. To address the issues described above, SPC and UNFPA embarked on a collaborative project from 2005 onwards, with a focus on *Integrating population, gender, and development issues into national and sectoral policies, programmes, and strategies – an activity* executed by the SPC Statistics and Demography Programme. The overall goal is to ensure that countries have the capacity to effectively address the interactions between population dynamics, sustainable social and economic development and poverty, including the impact of HIV/AIDS. To realise this goal, the project aimed at improving national and regional capacity to integrate population, gender and development issues into national, sectoral development policies, programmes, strategies and action plans, in line with the ICPD Plan of Action, the MDG framework, Beijing Plan of Action, Pacific Plan of Action, as well as existing national development frameworks.
9. A range of sub-regional and national training workshops at sub-regional and national levels, Noumea-based work-attachments, in-country collaborations on population policy reviews and the production of population and development related IEC and advocacy materials, provided many tangible contributions to the desired increase in national capacity. The overriding aim of these activities focused on extracting, explaining, and interpreting the policy significance of population patterns and trends (as evident from census and survey data) at both the national and sub-national level.

SUCCESSFUL PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

10. *Regional Meetings* – Support for Regional Meeting of Heads of Planning and Statistics, 2005 and 2007 (see earlier reference to meeting outcomes in Paragraphs 3-6).

11. *Sub-regional workshops on principles of integrating gender and population issues into policy reviews, formulation, and development, as well as planning the implementation of such policies.* The first workshop was conducted in Guam. The workshop was considered successful because the participants enhanced their capacity to formulate and develop population policy based on best practice, that are relevant and appropriate for their countries. At the end of the workshop, all participating countries² had requested technical assistance from UNFPA and SPC to support their current population and development efforts.
12. *National workshops on application of PopGIS to policy formulation.* These workshops promote and increase evidence based decision making by applying GIS based population information to policy and planning processes. Tangible outputs of these workshops were targeted as providing input for “advocacy on population and development to parliamentarians in the Pacific” in particular, and assist with population and development advocacy in general, as well as providing input into policy planning. It was also expected that policy makers/planners/statisticians trained under this activity would provide technical support³ to the UNFPA Pacific Parliamentary Advocacy on Population and Development (PPAPD) Project activities in their respective countries. This workshop series was conducted in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, FSM, RMI, and Kiribati.
13. *National Policy Dialogue Workshops – policy dialogue on recent census results.* These national workshops assist countries in analysing, presenting, and explaining recent census and survey results and their policy implications to users – policy-makers, planners, as well as interested members of community based organizations and the public. Workshops were conducted in Tuvalu and Kiribati.
14. *Workshop on integration of population issues into sectoral plans.* This workshop was initially targeted at countries electing to incorporate population and gender issues as part of their sectoral plans and policies. However, with most project countries opting to undertake comprehensive reviews of their respective draft population policies, with the view of developing more comprehensive population policies, these workshops were no longer required in this format, with activities subsumed under policy review and formulation workshops (see #15).
15. *Workshop on national population policy review and formulation.* Technical support is provided to countries in the process of preparing, or contemplating preparing, national population policies or plans, providing the approach taken is consistent with ICPD principles and goals. The workshop stresses the importance of policy dialogue in forging a national consensus on population issues, and supports countries seeking to create the institutional preconditions for national population policy formulation. National level review workshops and policy consultations have been held in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, with draft policy proposals currently under considerations by these governments, with a similar exercise planned for the Marshall Islands in late 2007.

² TA requested by RMI, FSM, Palau, Nauru, Kiribati, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands.

³ This national level technical support was not provided because there were no national level activities under the PPAPD Project in the countries where this workshop was executed.

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED AS HINDERING A MORE EFFECTIVE UTILIZATION OF POPULATION DATA AND INFORMATION

16. There are a number of important lessons learnt during the project execution, which, if not addressed, will undermine the gains achieved during the past 3 years. The importance of ongoing collaboration with PIC planning and statistical agencies cannot be stressed enough, since the relative recency of such efforts and high staff turnover (already mentioned in other working papers) are not conducive to the sustainability of “early wins”. Early successes in some of our member countries are already losing impact, with trained personnel no longer in key positions. This highlights the recognised long-term nature of such an initiative (see paragraph 6) and the need for continuous follow-up training, until a “critical mass” of national capacity is achieved.
17. These experiences confirm some of the important issues that emanated from the 2005 Regional Meeting of the Heads of Planning and Statistics, particularly where reference has been made to planners and statisticians needing specific skills to complement each other’s work (see paragraphs 4 and 5).
18. Some of the key constraints are as follows:
 - Relevant population and development indicators/information not readily available in many sectors.
Note: This should not be mistaken, incidentally, with the required data and statistics being unavailable; but rather that key indicators have not been extracted;
 - Workshop sessions on producing policy relevant indicators, presenting such information in thematic maps, and discussing policy issues were a new experience for many participants.
Note: most participants experienced considerable difficulties in establishing links between key (development) policy issues of national or sectoral relevance, and specific census and survey questions containing relevant information. Establishing such linkages and the ability to interpret and extract the policy meaning/significance of numbers, has proved a continuous challenge to many project activities, underlining the importance of increased our training/HR efforts in this area.
 - Users’ lack of understanding of population and development information at all levels, of where such information is available and accessible, and of how to most effectively utilize this information.
Note: there remains a continuous need to increase the level of understanding of users of population data and information, through collaborative work and attachments working on real-life applications, rather than primarily through training workshops. It is also imperative to develop and disseminate advocacy packages, in collaboration with, primarily national media, to target different user groups or audiences, to increase knowledge and understanding of population and development issues.
 - Ongoing emphasis on evidence-based policy development (“linking numbers to setting policy priorities, targets, and develop commensurate strategies”), and ensuring systems are in place and adhered to.
Note: it is important that data and development indicators are made available at lower levels of administrative geography, such as provincial and electoral levels, to highlight the immediate political relevance of development data and information.

- o Emphasis needs to be placed on existing national and sectoral policies/strategies/programmes/projects, define and develop minimum indicator list; link indicators and proxy indicators to existing data sources (example of this work is the MDG Indicator list with relevant proxies);
- o Use identified data sources (censuses/surveys/administrative records), and compile/mine/extract development indicators and proxies, and provide relevant interpretation and disseminate to users with appropriate training provided;
- o in the process, identify data/information gaps that could be used as the basis for new data collection;
- o increase support for skills development in data analysis and application into decision-support for both producers and users of statistics.

DISCUSSION POINTS

19. The meeting is invited to:

- a) **Support** the ongoing work by SDP in this sector, to strengthen the capacity of national planners and statisticians to undertake population and development related data analysis and interpretation, and ensure a more effective application of such work to policy development and planning across sectors;
 - b) **Consider** the importance of developing, and agreeing to a minimum list of development indicators and proxies per sector; and
 - c) **Encourage** donor/development partners to support UNFPA/SPC's initiatives to sustain and intensify the momentum of a more effective utilization of population data and information in the Pacific region, regards policy development, planning, and the monitoring of development progress and impact, to achieve more evidence-based decision-making in the Pacific.
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