

SECRETARIAT OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY

REGIONAL MEETING OF HEADS OF PLANNING AND HEADS OF STATISTICS (HOPS)

(Noumea, New Caledonia, 17-21 September 2007)

Future directions for evidence-based decision making in the Pacific

LESSONS LEARNED FROM SDP ACTIVITIES, 2005 - 2007

(Document prepared by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community)

BACKGROUND

1. The working papers presented thus far, highlighted important achievements made across a broad range of statistical collections, about data analysis, dissemination and utilization, and about our training activities. They provided many discussion points and recommendations, including feedback on how we can build on specific achievements to date, and improve on the delivery of various programme activities.
2. This latter part of our meeting is aimed at charting the course of future statistical developments across the region, through lessons learned from recent experience, the input provided by participants of this meeting, and from the deliberations the earlier meeting held in March 2007.
3. Following suggestions by some of our stakeholders to facilitate deliberations in Session 7, the Secretariat has compiled a brief summary of what it regards as the major thematic issues and priority concerns that emerged from the various SDP programme review discussions. These can be summarized as follows:
 - Relevance of statistical collections – relevance of outputs
 - Relevance of external technical assistance and training – assessment of local needs
 - Improving the delivery of statistical outcomes – the importance of planning
 - Improving the delivery of statistical outcomes – the importance of Quality Control
 - Providing the basis for evidence-based decision making – ensure adequacy of resources
4. The Secretariat likes to stress that these views are based on our experience over the recent years. Compiled before the meeting, they obviously do not include comments and observations that country and agency stakeholders will express during the discussion of the various working papers.

MAJOR THEMATIC ISSUES AND PRIORITY CONCERNS

Relevance of statistical collections – relevance of outputs

5. Population censuses and household surveys provide key information for social and economic development policy and planning across the Pacific island region. Given the vast resources required to manage such large and complex statistical collections on a regular basis, it is imperative that Pacific island governments and administrations obtain tangible returns on quite substantial investments. Returns here are defined, as quality data and information that is relevant for the purpose for which they were collected in the first place.
6. To ensure these statistical collections meet the information requirements of policy makers, policy analysts and planners across the public sector, and also serve the private sector and civil society at large, it is essential that **census and survey data producer-user committees** meet on a regular basis, to review and advise on all matters affecting data collection and information management. For this to be successful, these committees need to be convened and chaired at the highest political level, preferably by a senior civil servant administratively independent in relation to the ministry responsible for statistics
7. For this process to function effectively and efficiently, several conditions need to be met:
 - i) There has to be strong political support for evidence-based decision-making, and a recognition that access to quality and timely statistics and transparency of information are part and parcel of best practice governance;
 - ii) Policy analysts and planners, as key users of official statistics, need to be aware of the exact nature of their data and information needs. Without articulating these needs clearly, and the immediate relevance of specific statistics and indicators to policy and planning applications, it is difficult for the producers of such data to compile information that is relevant and meaningful for them.
 - iii) Data producers and users need to be able to identify, first and foremost, domestic data and information requirements, to assist National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in planning their collections accordingly, rather than merely replicating previous census and survey designs, or merely implementing international ‘best-practice’ recommendations. While the latter is critical to ensure reliable data (emphasis on appropriate concepts and methods), it is an exercise in futility if ‘quality data’ are captured that have no tangible relevance for national policy development and planning needs.
8. From observations gathered from various presentations – particularly those on censuses, household surveys, and data utilization - it transpired that these above three conditions do not always enjoy the attention they deserve.
9. As evident from the presentations dealing on data dissemination and utilization, it also transpired that relevance does not merely affect data and information content, but also the way it is presented and disseminated. The best quality data is ultimately useless, if intended users are unable to access it, if they don’t understand it, or if it is presented in a format not relevant to their specific information needs.

Relevance of external technical assistance and training – assessment of local needs

10. Our current strategic plan's overall goal is *to facilitate and support evidence-based policy development and planning through quality and timely population and socio-economic data and information*. To guide our efforts in strengthening the capacity of national statistical systems (NSSs) and planning agencies to deliver data and information products commensurate with national demands, we provide a broad range of designated training opportunities and technical advisory services. These range from general statistical training and census data utilization workshops (WP 5-1; 3-1), to more specialised technical training regards data dissemination using PopGIS and PRISM (WP 3-2; 3-3), policy analysis (WP 4-1), population projections (WP 3-1) and project team management and planning (WP 5-3). Other training activities, such as Noumea-based SDP professional attachments, in-country technical collaboration entailing on-the-job training/transfer of skills, and long-term statistical development assistance to NSOs, as was highlighted in the recent Solomon Islands Statistical Development Project, complement the above mentioned activities.
11. The variety of approaches taken reflects national demands as well as absorptive capacities of NSOs to utilize a particular approach most affectively.
12. SDP strives to ensure training and capacity building address local needs and demands. Regular governance meetings, such as this HOPS, provide us with general guidance, and our annual TA and training needs assessments with our membership help us plan and deliver specific activities. This part of ensuring relevance to our membership, we believe, is working very well.
13. An area we believe we can all make further improvements is working more closely with you when it comes to fine-tuning training arrangements to ensure your training nominees' work responsibilities and professional background are relevant to the training provided. All working papers that addressed human resource developments emphasized this issue as a matter of great importance, to ensure:
 - maximum training benefits and impacts to participants and their employers;
 - optimum use (no wastage) of resource provided; and
 - minimum embarrassment to trainees realizing the training activity is inappropriate for them.
14. To progress this matter, we propose to provide our member PICTs with more specific outlines on participants' professional requirements, to assist in a more effective selection of participants.

Improving the delivery of statistical outcomes – the importance of planning

15. In order to better ensure success in future PICT projects, improved use of planning is encouraged. This is both at the strategic and operational levels.

16. At the strategic level of planning, before any statistical activity is undertaken, accepted best practice is to conduct an assessment of the PICTs' national data requirements. This formal written document, often referred to as a statistical master plan or a national statistical plan outlines the government's needs for statistics and information to meet its goals and objectives. The content of this document is determined through detailed and active consultation between a PICT NSO and the stakeholders who require statistics and information. The primary stakeholders are other government departments and agencies who should be canvassed to determine the policy issues for which they require data and priorities assigned. The statistical master plan should also include a comparative analysis of the current status of data available from the statistics office in relation to the needs identified.
17. Once the priority data needs are determined, projects are initiated leading to the development of a detailed operational plan. The first step in preparing a detailed operational plan is to prepare a set of planning assumptions specifying such factors as goals and objectives, uses of the data, project responsibilities and management structures, timing and an overview of costs. Based upon the information contained in the planning assumptions, a decision is made to proceed or not with the project, based upon the capacity and resources of the national statistics office to successfully undertake the project.
18. Once a decision has been made that both the data requirements are needed and the project is feasible, a detailed operational plan is prepared. This approval comes from the sponsor of the project (e.g. a Census of Population is often sponsored by the Cabinet of government). Using the planning assumptions, a detailed operational plan can be prepared which includes, in Gantt chart format, a list of all project phases or sub-projects and all the activities necessary to complete these activities, including start and end dates, durations, resources required, the organisational unit or person(s) responsible for completion of the project, and, any interdependencies. A detailed analysis of the resources required to complete the project can then be determined by costing the resources identified. It is only at this point that a knowledge based final decision can be made, based upon the plan, as to whether the project will be successful and should proceed.
19. To progress these matters, and assist NSOs and other statistical agencies in developing and maintaining planning and management skills, we propose to provide our member countries with access to project planning and management training prior to undertaking major statistical collections. Given the substantial costs of population or agricultural censuses, or large-scale surveys, we believe such technical assistance to be a very cost-effective investment.

Improving the delivery of statistical outcomes - the importance of Quality Control

20. In order to produce better quality data, greater attention needs to be paid to quality control procedures in all aspects of statistical projects in the PICTs. Only by producing better quality data can a statistics office be assured that the data will be accurate and useful.
21. To assist NSOs and other statistical agencies in their ongoing efforts to improve the quality of their products and services, quality control procedures can be implemented for all components of statistical activities. In the case of surveys and censuses, examples include: quality testing of questionnaires to identify potential problems before the actual enumeration begins; testing of recruits for enumerators to determine their ability to read maps, follow instructions and accurately deal with basic arithmetic; regular monitoring of field-work; re-interviewing a sample of households to ensure enumerator accuracy; strict clerical and automated coding and editing procedures to ensure completeness and accuracy of responses; double data entry of questionnaires; and a post enumeration survey of census enumerations.

Providing the base for evidence-based decision making – ensure adequacy of resources

22. Evidence-based decision-making represents the very foundation of effective policy development and planning, and is part and parcel of good governance. Adequate resources are essential to provide effective services and outputs, in terms of financing, planning and managing statistical collections, as well as ensuring effective data analysis, dissemination and utilization. With most PICTs having made considerable progress over the years in the allocation of financial resources, human resource constraints (in terms of both staff numbers and skills) continue to be a major challenge for many NSOs and planning offices.
 23. This is a particular challenge for small Pacific island statistics offices, which experience a high degree of staff turn-over, including regular “losses” of often the most trained and experienced NSO staff. They often move to positions with agencies perceived to have more prestige, that offer better pay and career advancement, or to the private sector or migrate overseas. This means, capacity building, including providing specialised technical assistance, will remain an ongoing process that cannot be terminated prematurely, simply because it has already been funded for many years.
 24. It also means, capacity building has to move beyond the traditional national or regional workshop based approach, and incorporate complementary activities. Where no national capacity exists to be built (in terms of both a critical mass of NSO staff, as well as staff with basic statistics training), or where local circumstances are such that existing capacities are difficult to retain, other human resource management strategies need to be developed.
 25. This could involve a greater emphasis on capacity supplementation by regional agencies like SPC, a greater utilization of regional capacity (such as deploying NSO staff from one country with specific expertise to another NSO lacking such expertise), the establishment of a regional capacity (particularly to assist small island states), and a more strategic three-way collaboration with national statistical agencies like Australia and New Zealand.
 26. To advance the cause of evidence-based decision making across the region, such innovative approaches of professional engagement ought to be given much greater recognition in deliberating future directions of regional statistical developments than it has been the case to date. The ultimate decision on a particular course of action ought to be determined by national needs and absorptive capacities, rather than by what specific technical agencies can provide.
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