

Opening address

Mr Peter Ellis

Director, Statistics for Development Division, Pacific Community (SPC)

Good morning all

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all this morning to the ***Regional Workshop on International Merchandise Trade Statistics on compilation, analysis, dissemination, indicators and uses*** organized jointly by the Pacific Community, the United Nations, the PACER Plus, and the Oceania Customs Organisation.

International trade is important to the Pacific region, and indeed is a defining part of our economies and our peoples. As might be expected from a region with such a strong seafaring culture, the evidence suggests regular inter-island trade has been part of the way of life as long as there have been Pacific Islanders. In many Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) today, the value of international trade exceeds the value of national gross domestic product.

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- Imports provide Pacific people with access to food and other products which they cannot produce for themselves, this is especially true for the low-lying coral atolls.
 - Exports provide opportunities for employment and act as drivers of economic growth, which is essential to meet the ambitious goals of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.
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The compilation, analysis, dissemination and use of accurate, detailed and timely trade data in economic management is vitally important. But this is not just to inform decisions about trade, but also for situations when trade data may be one of the only indicators available on other issues, such as health and nutrition.

This 6-day workshop is the second conducted by SPC. The first was held in November 2012 and since then a lot of change has happened in the merchandise trade space. Most notably for our purposes perhaps, there has been a move towards digital transformation and the digital economy accelerated by the impacts and consequences of the COVID pandemic. Emerging trade trends occur in the context of much wider economic change ranging from evolving production of the food we eat through to the impact of international geopolitics on the availability of shipping. Merchandise trade statistics themselves are changing, and now are often produced using new technologies.

Attending this workshop are trade statisticians, customs officials and planners from the Pacific Island Countries and territories. We have resource persons from the University of Wollongong, PACER Plus, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Stats NZ, the United Nations Statistics Division, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Oceania Customs Organisation, the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the Pacific Community's Land Resources Division, Public Health Division and the Statistics for Development Division. We will also have a guest speaker from Bhikhabhai and Company Limited to talk on e-commerce.

You are all key people involved with International Merchandise Trade Statistics in the Pacific region, be that as data users, providers, compilers or technical partners.

International merchandise trade statistics has many other users as well with different data needs. The compilation of International Merchandise Trade Statistics should therefore, as far as possible, meet the different needs of everyone. But the key challenge for statistical offices in the region is how to effectively meet those varying needs of such a wide range of users.

Many National Statistics Offices in the region are very small – the median number of staff is about 14 - yet they are required to produce a large variety of statistical outputs on topics such as population, unemployment, poverty, consumer prices, gross domestic product and the balance of payments etc – a few monthly, some quarterly, a few annually and many even less frequently. Amongst these requirements are the SDGs, the 17 interlinked global goals and 131 Pacific priority indicators that are the focus of all the Pacific island countries and territories for peace and prosperity.

All of these estimates come from a survey, census, or an administrative data source (such as customs, education or tax systems) that might produce the raw data that can be transformed into valuable insight. For each statistic published there needs to have been painstaking processing, analysis and validation. Statistics provide the chart, the headlights and radar of our navigation through the right choices for policy and programs. But they aren't easy, and they aren't cheap.

All the Pacific NSOs also face the challenge to react to the latest developments in statistics, such as statistical compilations based on the latest United Nations Manuals or adopting the latest World Customs Organisations HS classification.

Larger offices in the region may be better resourced but face challenges such as high staff turnover; and they are still tiny compared to the organisations in larger and richer countries, which have evolved to meet the rising expectations of decision-makers and fulfill the ever-increasing standards and requirements of the international statistical system.

Working in close cooperation with other development partners, SPC is very pleased to continue to assist the regional NSOs through technical assistance and training and regional coordination events such as this workshop.

One of the key strategic components of the new Strategic Framework for Pacific Statistics is to encourage governments to make greater use of administrative data for statistical collections, such as sourcing data from Customs administrative records for the compilation of international merchandise trade statistics.

Administrative records are far more effective in supporting production of international merchandise trade statistics because they are regularly collected and do not require additional financial assistance to obtain them.

Another key strategic component is for Pacific Island Countries to make greater use of common tools for statistical collections, for example the Pacific standards such as the 2022 Pacific Harmonised Commodity Description and Coding System and the Pacific International Merchandise Trade Statistics Compilation Guide.

Since May 2011, the SDD has been providing technical assistance in international trade statistics to SPC members. Our assistance aims to build capacity to sustain statistical operations and strengthen compilation of statistics through the use of best practice and technology. We do this by way of on-job training, workshops, attachments and cooperation between PICTs. In a few cases SPC also provides capacity supplementation and substitution.

The Statistics for Development Program also produces standards and classifications and compiles manuals based on international recommended guidelines with a Pacific focus.

This workshop provides you the opportunity to hear, to share and to learn from each other's views and experiences. It's also an opportunity to get an update on the upcoming United Nations International Merchandise Trade Statistics Manual 2025. I have no doubt that the next days will be stimulating. You should see good discussions on things that matter to all of you, such as:

- The demand for external trade statistics so that within the limited resources available, the national statistical offices are better placed to plan and produce them
- Administrative data on external trade collected by Customs and how Customs can help trade statisticians meet user needs
- Challenges faced by the Pacific Island Countries National Statistical Organisations in compiling external trade statistics and how and what technical assistance they need the SDD and other development partners to provide
- Recommended best practice to be used for the compilation of International Merchandise Trade Statistics so that the Statistics the national statistical

offices produce are reliable and timely and can be regionally and internationally compared.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour and a privilege to formally open the Regional Workshop on International Merchandise Trade Statistics and I wish you all a pleasant stay in Nadi.