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Committee on Statistics

First session
4-6 February 2009
Bangkok

Statistics development in the Pacific

Corrigendum

The dates of the session *should read* as above.

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Committee on Statistics

First session
15-17 December 2008
Bangkok

Statistics development in the Pacific[1]

Introduction

1. The 22 island countries and territories making up the Pacific island region represent an enormous diversity in physical geography and culture, languages and social-political organization, size and resources endowment. Spread over an area of thirty million square kilometers of the Pacific Ocean, and stretching from the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas in the north-west Pacific Ocean to Pitcairn in the south-east, lie some 7,500 islands of which only around 500 are inhabited, providing home to 9.5 million people. Ranging in population size from 6.5 million people in Papua New Guinea to a resident population of 66 people (sixty-six, this is not a typo) on Pitcairn Island, 12 island countries and territories have populations of less than 100,000 people, of which 8 are smaller than 50,000.

2. Notwithstanding such small population sizes, the political reality is that we are dealing with 15 independent countries and 7 territories, all of which rely on a statistical service to facilitate effective and efficient government and governance. it is useful to keep such diversities and demographic basics, like population size, in mind when discussing the main achievements in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) statistical developments in recent years, and the current challenges to statistical developments they face.

[1] This document was contributed by Mr. Gerald Haberkorn, Manager, Statistics and Demography Programme, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, New Caledonia. It has been reproduced without formal editing. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

Main achievements in PICT statistical developments in recent years

3. Notwithstanding stable or declining budgets, high rates of staff turnover or shrinking staff numbers, low political recognition, at times bordering outright indifference, it is quite remarkable what statistical achievements and developments have taken place in recent years across the region.

Statistical collections

4. The Pacific region was the only sub-region in the world which achieved a 100% census coverage in the 2000 round of censuses, notwithstanding the serious financial constraints experienced by census takers worldwide at the time due to a shifting population policy and funding climate in the post ICPD years, which meant many countries, particularly in Africa, did not manage to conduct a census at all. Regarding the 2010 round of censuses, which kicked off in the Pacific region in 2005 with censuses in Kiribati and Palau, followed by a further 6 censuses in 2006 and 3 in 2007 and 2008, the region is on track to maintain its 100% coverage, and do so while featuring many improvements. Fiji was the first country utilizing automated data capture and making extensive use of GPS technology – with both technologies tested for the first time last month in Vanuatu's pilot census, and about to be tested in the Solomon Islands pilot census next April; Vanuatu and the Solomon islands are currently making extensive use of satellite imagery and aerial photography to refine its census cartography, with an improved capture of dwellings expected to translate into a more accurate/complete population coverage. And all countries which have completed their census reports have undertaken concerted efforts to more actively disseminate their census data, through data user workshops and seminars, through policy dialogues, and an extensive and varied publication programme, comprising of traditional census reports, demographic and population profiles, population fact sheets for policy makers, population and development atlases, GIS and web-based applications.

5. Most countries also had a quite active household survey programme, largely to meet a growing demand for statistical evidence to support development progress monitoring – addressing both national and international data and information needs. Since 2004,

- 12 PICTs conducted a Household Income and Expenditure Survey, 3 have been completed in 2008 or are currently in the field, with a further 13 planned over the coming 4 years; and
- 5 countries undertook a Demographic and Health Survey in 2006-2007, which apart from PNG, was the first time such comprehensive and quite complex household surveys were undertaken in the region, with a further 6 such surveys planned over the coming 4 years.

Planning and management of statistical development and operations

6. A second major achievement in recent years has been a growing commitment by some national statistical agencies to improve both corporate and project planning, as well as the

management of statistical operations. Some countries have recently developed a mix of statistical master plans, long-term statistical strategies or multi-year work programmes, and the assistance of the national statistical agencies of Australia and New Zealand, and both countries' development agencies AusAID and NZAid are gratefully acknowledged in this context. A mix of approaches was adopted, some country-initiated and managed, some agency-initiated and managed, and some of a trilateral nature such as the recent ABS-AusAID-SPC initiative regards project and strategic planning. Although too early to tell regarding the recent strategic development initiatives, the joint ABS-AusAID-SPC project planning and management training activities proved very successful: preceding actual statistical collections (4 DHS, 2 HIES) and with the formal training focused on developing a comprehensive survey plan, tangible benefits were immediately visible: accurate plans and budgets, surveys completed on time (and in 5/6 countries well within budget), excellent coverage and data quality achieved (in 5/6 countries), and according to the head of one NSO "a level of enthusiasm and work dedication not seen in years", which he attributed to an increased sense of ownership gained by active participation in survey planning and assuming key activity management functions and responsibilities.

More concerted efforts in data dissemination

7. Unlike the situation as recent as 5 years ago in most countries, where NSO activities stopped with the production and release of a set of statistical tables or report, with little concern shown whether or not these outputs actually managed to address data and information requirements of specific users, and with this process of "dissemination" often self-destructing through the levy of excessive fees (in the name of cost receiver), a huge change has taken place in recent years. Most heads of NSOs these days, see themselves more as custodians than owners of data, as information managers, and as suppliers/ providers of a valuable commodity – data and information, with all NSOs in the region having developed national websites to increase data access, and all producing a greater variety of statistical outputs than the standard set of summary tables and reports: these range from policy dialogues and data user workshops, to a more frequent use of the media, the production of statistical pocket summaries and population atlases, and access to spatially-referenced data on CD-rom based national geographical information systems.

Current challenges to statistical developments faced by PICTs

Views from national statistical agencies

8. To provide as comprehensive a picture as possible, I contacted all of the region's 21 statistical agencies (66 person Pitcairn does not have one) with a simple request to tell me, what they see as their top three challenges and problems. The reply of 19 heads of NSOs are summarized in Table 1 below, with agency/institutional capacity issues and a perceived lack of political recognition and financial support topping the list.

Table 1: Key challenges experienced by Pacific NSOs

Key Challenges experienced by Pacific NSOs	*1st Choice*	*2nd Choice*	*3rd Choice*
1. Capacity Issues	10	9	7
1.1 Staffing *(insufficient numbers; lack of skills; high staff turn-over; low commitment to work*	6	7	3
1.2 Capacity to deliver (quality/timeliness)	4	2	4
2. Political Support	6	4	5
2.1 Budget constraints	4	3	2
2.2 Lack of general support	2	1	3
3. NSO Institutional constraints *(lack of/datedness of)*	3	5	5
3.1 Statistical Plans (Master Plan)	3	2	3
3.2 Adequate Legislation		3	
Total Countries	19	18	15

9. The reference to capacity issues and lack of recognition and support as key current challenges to statistical developments in the region is not surprising, when one considers such basics as staff numbers, with half of the region's NSOs having less than a dozen statistical officers to undertake a comprehensive set of statistical activities on an ongoing basis (Table 2). Add to this the fact that most NSO staff are statistical clerks with formal education not exceeding completed high school, and that most young graduates after some years get promoted out to national planning agencies, treasury departments or central/reserve banks offering higher salaries and greater social/political recognition, exacerbates the situation.

Table 2: NSO staff numbers, 2008

Country	*Staff*	*Country*	*Staff*	*Country*	*Staff*
American Samoa	6 (7)	Marshall Islands	7 (7)	Samoa	49 (27)
Cook Islands	11 (10)	Nauru	3 (3)	Solomon Islands	25 (22)
FSM	20 (19)	New Caledonia	40 (41)	Tokelau	1 (1)
Fiji	52 (80)	Niue	2 (3)	Tonga	29 (25)
French Polynesia	29 (n.a.)	Northern Marianas	6 (6)	Tuvalu	5 (5)
Guam	20 (16)	Palau	4 (5)	Vanuatu	18 (14)
Kiribati	12 (8)	PNG	91 (140)	Wallis and Futuna	9 (8)

Views from providers of statistical development support

10. To complete the picture, I extended this brief assessment of key challenges to statistical developments faced by NSOs, and sought the views of programme colleagues, as well as colleagues from regional and international technical agencies we regularly work with across a broad of statistical applications: demographers and development economists, economic and survey statisticians, colleagues primarily engaged in statistical training, database specialists, programmers and GIS specialists. While most share the views expressed by our Pacific island NSO colleagues regarding institutional and technical capacity issues and budgetary constraints, the lack of master plans or long-term statistical development strategies in most NSOs, and the low political/public/social recognition accorded to NSOs in many countries, a complementary picture emerges that draws from colleagues often extensive experience, in both developed and developing country statistical environments.

Low national demand for statistics

11. A common view emerged of a prevailing low demand for statistics by PICT governments and administrations, which most observers attribute to a widespread lack of a culture of evidence-based decision making: with statistical information not in regular demand as a matter of principle for policy development and planning, there are little incentives and pressure to deliver quality outputs, and do so regularly and on time. As expressed by a long-term observers having worked at national, regional and now in an international capacity, “the lack of demand by PIC governments for policy and strategic analyses across sectors is not conducive to creating and sustaining a demand for domestic statistics”.

12. Some observers also noted the active disinterest by some Governments for the collection and publication of certain statistics, particularly those relating to adverse national social and economic conditions, publication of which could be seen as a matter of embarrassment. Although statistical acts and legislation provide for independence of the office of statistician, few occupants of these positions would publish data and statistics that could be seen as politically damaging. Having said this, recent developments in some countries show there is hope with examples of top-level Government acknowledgement of DHS and Family Health survey findings revealing quite disturbing findings.

Statistical leadership and failure to anticipate/create demands

13. Many observers note that while most NSOs usually strive to do their best in light of overall resource constraints, it was felt that not all heads of NSOs display pro-active leadership, engage their governments in serious policy dialogue, actively seek out data users to enquire about their specific information needs and demands, and thus help create and sustain a demand for their services and products. While this is certainly not peculiar to the Pacific region, small offices and having access to only a limited number of skilled and experienced colleagues, puts enormous pressures on PIC

government statisticians to act as managers, statistical mentors, public relation and communication specialists, and being savvy in the intricacies of national and international politics of development.

Lot of interest in statistical development – less enthusiasm for sustaining achievements

14. Several observers recounted examples of having introduced specific statistical systems or databases, only to find later on they have never been updated, as agreed upon. While this is also a matter of ongoing monitoring, it illustrates a widely held belief that after one-on-one training sessions or regional technical workshops, implementation will happen and become sustainable. This is of particular concern regarding administrative data bases, most developed statistical systems take for granted: civil registration, population registers, education and health information management systems. The absence of such functioning systems across most countries means costly, and as one observer noted "quite unnecessary surveys", with more time and resources subsequently allocated to survey implementation which inhibits/delays redevelopment and maintenance of more sustainable administrative databases.

Concluding remarks

15. Following this short summary assessment on current challenges to statistical developments faced by PICTs as seen by heads of Pacific island NSOs and statistical specialists-advisers working across a broad range of thematic substance matter areas, I like to conclude this brief presentation with some personal observations, as manager of SPC's Statistics and Demography programme (SDP). While my own top three priorities do not add a substantially new perspective, I like to phrase them in such a way, that they might stimulate some discussion.

Limited capacity of small NSOs

16. Having been stressed by heads of NSOs as well as regional and international statistical practitioners and advisors as one of the top stumbling blocks to advance statistical developments in the region, addressing this issue effectively requires more ingenuity than asking for more resources, more and better trained staff for what are largely small offices in small countries. While most Pacific NSOs are in a position to compile key economic and socio-demographic statistics and plan and implement many statistical collections, most lack the subject matter expertise in economics and demographic analysis, for example, to ensure data collected and information presented are of sound quality; and with most offices over-run with ever-growing and competing demands from different sources, this can lead to operational short-cuts compromising data quality, and lead to new statistical activities starting without previous ones being (fully) analyzed or reported, which impacts on timeliness.

17. While statistical capacity building represents a key SDP strategic objective, which also applies to fellow regional and international agencies operating in the region, I believe we have to become more realistic of what can be meaningfully and sustainably achieved. Making a general macro-economic statistician, a demographic analyst, a survey statistician or an epidemiologist out of someone with only basic high school education, is not a realistic HR option; neither is expecting demographers with post-graduate qualifications to remain in place after completion of a census or DHS, with the next one not around for another 5 – 10 years, and more lucrative career options becoming available in the meantime in other government agencies.

18. A one-size-fits-all approach to capacity building has not delivered sustainable results, and is unlikely to do so in the future. A multi-pronged approach advocated in Statistics2020, SPC's medium-term statistical development strategy, favoring capacity-building in larger offices, where there is capacity to build and retain, and capacity-supplementation elsewhere, could well lead to more tangible outcomes. This is not meant to disempower small island NSOs, but merely to provide more targeted capacity strengthening which would avoid, what a former colleague once called, "sustaining a sense of collective hopelessness".

Lack of political recognition

19. This encompasses a broad range of issues mentioned previously, such as the lack of a culture of evidence-based decision-making in most PICTs. Without domestic demands for statistical evidence representing a matter of routine government business, governments will not appreciate the critical contribution NSOs make to facilitating and sustaining good governance structures and processes. Low political recognition is an obvious corollary, associated with low funding, low staff morale, high turnover, limited statistical outputs and capacity – and thus, following a vicious cycle, maintaining the status quo.

What can be done by NSOs and the international statistical community?

20. Score some much needed wins and produce statistical outputs users want (even if they don't know this), which also means packaging them in ways users find appealing, easy to use and digest. Development planners, policy analysts and policy-makers aren't statisticians and most can make little sense out of dense statistical table – chances are, they will not touch them. A set of dot points highlighting key issues and drawing out immediate policy implications, a set of simple bar charts stressing alternative policy scenarios/outcomes, a line chart showing trends, or a map pinpointing geographic priority areas is what they might find more useful; experience shows that once provided with statistical information in such more user-friendly and user-relevant formats, users are more likely to wait for, want and use such information.

Coordination

21. While no gathering like this meeting would be complete without a reference to “better coordination”, I see a lack of coordination of statistical activities both within countries as well as between agencies, as the single biggest challenge to creating and sustaining viable national statistical systems.

22. Statistical master plans, NSDS, long-term work programmes – whatever approach countries opt for to bring more coherence and structure to their activities, become meaningless and are at best reduced to an expression of political correctness, when external pressure is put on an NSO to, for example, pursue a survey at a time other major statistical collections are in process; or when expensive and complex statistical collections are being undertaken only when external funding is available – not when such data and information is required, such as for the preparation of national or sectoral development strategy; and when last but not least , agencies squabble over coordination.

23. What can be done to walk the talk of inter-agency coordination by the international statistical community? I am afraid, that after a professional lifetime spent at the production and user end of official statistics at national, regional and international levels, I do not have a proven solution for inter-agency coordination. It is the classic “easy in theory, a bit tougher in practice” conundrum, as all agencies are accountable to different stakeholders, boards and headquarters. And where agency headquarters are located outside the region, these institutions may not always be fully aware of already existing coordinating mechanisms or mandates in the region, which can lead to congestion and confusion.

24. Having said this, the Pacific Plan, the Pacific Island region’s overarching development policy framework signed on by heads of Government of all island countries, as well as by the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand, does offer some hope and guidance, in providing a structure for concerted, consolidated and coordinated efforts in the area of statistical development – one of the Plan’s key strategic development objectives. Featuring a powerful set of key stakeholders, regional heads of government, should make for unambiguous implementation and accountability. With the Secretariat of the Pacific Community entrusted with the coordination of regional statistical development efforts under this Plan, agency congestion could become more manageable. And with most if not all technical agencies operating in the Pacific region committed to be guided in their work by the Pacific Plan, there should be less room for confusion – all of which could augur well for better coordinated statistical development delivery in the future.

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