

Summary of discussion on evolution of National Statistical Systems

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The discussion throughout the day was wide-ranging. This summary concentrates on the main themes that emerged during the day including those identified by the two formal discussants – Ben Kiregyera (Uganda Bureau of Statistics) and Hallgrimur Snorrason (Statistics Iceland) – in their concluding comments.

It was agreed that there had been an incredible evolution of statistics over the last 60 years, perhaps even a revolution. And that this evolution must continue if National Statistical Offices were to be regarded as meeting the needs of their clients.

The main themes that arose during the day were the autonomy of National Statistical Offices, National Statistical Systems, the increasing importance of administrative data in National Statistical Systems, data access and co-ordination across the Global Statistical System. Each of these is discussed in turn in the following paragraphs.

(a) Autonomy of National Statistical Offices

A major theme that was discussed throughout the day was the autonomy of National Statistical Offices. The autonomy of some offices (i.e. independence of Government) had increased in some countries whereas the opposite had occurred in other countries. The general feeling was that autonomy from Government was desirable although it also carried important accountabilities and responsibilities. It was suggested that it would be useful to have some documentation of these accountabilities and responsibilities as a point of reference as well as the arguments as to why it is beneficial for Governments for National Statistical Offices to have autonomy. Furthermore, what does it mean for a National Statistical Office to be autonomous and are they prepared to take on this role? It was emphasized that autonomy has to be exercised with care. Many offices were having difficulty convincing their political masters that this was the case. It was a topic that might warrant a Seminar in its own right some time in the future.

There was a relationship between statistics, government and politics which National Statistical Offices had to manage carefully, even in those systems where there is a large degree of autonomy. After all governments are usually the main funders of statistical offices and the most important clients.

There was another aspect to autonomy, or lack of autonomy, that was also mentioned. International agencies and supra-national agencies such as Eurostat were having an increasing influence on what statistical data that countries collect. To that extent there is a loss of autonomy. On the other hand there are clear benefits from having comparable statistics.

(b) National Statistical Systems

Another strong theme was the growing importance of considering a National Statistical System that includes all the providers of official statistics, not just the National Statistical Office. Data may come from different sources, or even from different providers within the National Statistical System, but if they were about related concepts or the same domain they should be able to be related in a meaningful way. Technology is enabling analysts to more easily bring together data from different sources but the underlying data sets still have to be sufficiently robust to enable these comparisons to happen in a sensible way. In practice very few countries, if any, have a fully coherent statistical system. Co-ordination problems exist and even in those countries where co-ordination powers have been provided to the National Statistical Office in legislation, for example, there may be difficulties putting them into effect.

While it may not be realistic to aim for a perfectly cohesive system, steps in this direction should still be valuable. National Statistical Offices are well placed to provide this leadership but they need to have a legislative or other mandate to be able to exert this authority effectively. Nevertheless it was thought useful to share experiences, particularly where there had been successes on having a more cohesive system.

The governance arrangements for official statistics are very important to garner trust in the system. By nature they will vary across countries depending on their political systems and other circumstances. Advisory Boards or Councils are often an important component of the governance arrangements. They can assist with providing appropriate guidance to statistical offices on a range of matters including important elements such as protecting autonomy. If their coverage is the whole National Statistical System rather than just the National Statistical Office they can help provide cohesion across the National Statistical System. It was suggested that it would be useful to have a description of the various types of governance arrangements in place, with analysis of their advantages and disadvantages, so that countries might be able to determine the arrangement which works best for them.

Many statistical systems are going through reform of their statistical systems and we had presentations from several countries undertaking such reforms. Autonomy is one of the areas frequently addressed in these reforms. Another is greater co-ordination across the National Statistical System to improve coherence. But it was pointed out that it is not just the legislative framework which is important. The way you interact with governments and others is just as important, particularly on autonomy issues. Autonomy is precarious. It can be easily eroded by errors of judgement.

(c) Increasing importance of administrative data

Another theme was the use of administrative data for statistical purposes. Several countries utilize administrative registers extensively as that is a very efficient way of obtaining source data which has the added advantage of not burdening respondents. It was recognised that administrative data could be used more extensively in the future, even in the less developed statistical systems. And, in both developed and developing systems, administrative data had the potential to provide 'deeper' statistics (e.g. regional data) and data with longitudinal links. But there were a number of problems or challenges that need to be addressed.

- (i) In many developing countries, core administrative systems for statistical purposes such as births and deaths registrations are not in a state of good repair.

- (ii) Access was often difficult even though the confidentiality of the data would be protected by statistics legislation. Some countries pointed out that they had legal access to administrative data for statistical purposes which had assisted them to obtain better access.
- (iii) There were methodological and practical challenges with the handling of very large data sets containing imperfect data.
- (iv) It is likely that administrative data will increasingly be used in combination with survey data – this introduces new methodological challenges.
- (v) In some countries there are privacy issues that have to be managed.

One particular application of increasing interest was the linking of administrative and survey data at the individual person or organisation level. On the one hand this provided a very rich data set for statistical purposes but it also increased concerns about privacy. But these tensions had to be confronted if the full potential of administrative data was to be realised. The public should be aware of what is being proposed and convinced of the benefits and that the privacy risks are minimal.

It was suggested by one discussant that increasing reliance of administrative data might increase the gap between developed and developing statistical systems. This is a risk but it need not eventuate if a reasonable amount of the future effort was devoted to addressing the particular issues developing countries had to address in using administrative systems for statistical purposes.

Information management is an increasingly important skill for National Statistical Offices. This applies not just to statistical data but also to meta data. It is an area where they have, or should have, a comparative advantage. This is an asset National Statistical Offices should be able to offer in discussions of statistical use of administrative data. It is very pertinent to their leadership role in National Statistical Systems. Do we use our information management skills enough to assist the custodians of the administrative data?

Statistical analysis is another important statistical skill for National Statistical Offices. It is important for a number of reasons, not least to be able to present data in a way that is more meaningful for users. These skills are also required for reconciling inconsistent data from different data sources. Developing countries in particular asked for programs that would enable them to strengthen their analytical skills.

Finally, it was emphasised that there might be cultural differences that either allowed or disallowed the use of administrative records; the use of registers might be quite accepted in some countries with longitudinal surveys being mistrusted while the opposite holds true for other countries.

(d) Data access

It is increasingly being recognised that official statistics are not just for Governments. It is in the interest of countries as a whole that the private and civil sectors also have good access to official statistics. This is for a variety of reasons. It may be to assist with planning and with other decisions need to be made. If good decisions are made, economic efficiency will be improved. Statistics may also be used to judge progress in different fields of endeavor. Without facts people will rely on anecdotes or advocacy. Good factual information is a far better alternative. As Pali Lehohla stated “the advent of democracy has made it imperative that citizens should know”.

One question raised was whether improved access to statistics had an impact on response rates. There were mixed views about whether this would have much of an impact but it would certainly not have a negative impact on response rates. It was also noted that those countries where official statistics were prominent tended to have higher response rates.

Recognising the wider use of statistics, both national and international agencies were urged to open up access to their data particularly by panellist Hans Rosling. Dissemination does not necessarily mean

good access. There is other value that could be added by the National Statistical Office directly or by working with other information providers. A lot of the potential of official statistics was not being realised because of pricing and other barriers (e.g. concern that users might misuse the data). And technology now enabled data to be accessed in so many different ways. Statistical data could also be summarised and presented in innovative ways that made official statistics more understandable by many more people. Hans Rosling was able to demonstrate some of the available techniques. He also pointed out that an increasing number of presentation tools are now becoming available.

Of course these techniques are only effective if the underlying data sets were useful. This depended on good source data and this was a challenge. For censuses and surveys, obtaining good response rates was becoming more difficult. A question we might ask ourselves is do we ask too much or ask questions that are too detailed or too difficult to answer? And the administrative data sets were not always maintained to a satisfactory level. Integration of different data sets was also another element of usefulness.

Transparency of statistical methods is important to the users of statistics. The internet makes it much easier than it was before to provide information on concepts, methods and data sources. But it has to be done in a way that is compliant with the way statistical data is presented.

(e) Co-ordination across the Global Statistical System.

Throughout the day there was frequent comment about the need for improved co-ordination across the Global Statistical System. We have a system of global statistics but not a Global Statistical System. On the one hand co-ordination refers to the activities across the different organisations participating in the Global Statistical System (including regional organisations). On the other hand, it also refers to the co-ordination of donor organisations and providers of technical assistance within countries. Hermann Habermann in his comments emphasised that everyone is in support of co-ordination but few want to be co-ordinated. He suggested that harmonisation is a more realistic objective. But there was a strong consensus that co-ordination needed to be further improved despite the steps that had been taken in recent years.

A specific problem mentioned by several countries, and with strong feeling, was the inconsistency between national and international estimates, particularly on population statistics. The reasons for the differences were not always known and, even if known, not always clearly explained. This tended to undermine the credibility of national statistics. There may need to be differences because of conceptual reasons, for example, but they need to be explained.

What can be done to improve co-ordination? Although a number of suggestions were made it is a topic that needs more detailed discussion among the various types of stakeholders – donors, providers of technical assistance and the countries receiving assistance. One common theme was the importance of Statistical Master Plans for co-ordination within countries. They provide a base around which discussions on statistical development can take place. They also will help countries identify how they can best extract benefits from statistical activities (e.g. sample surveys) mainly being conducted for the benefit of the organisation funding the activity.

Statistical Master Plans should have a strategic element to them. They should not just be about what work is done and when. They should also be about the statistical infrastructure and how it should be developed and maintained. They should also be about ensuring there are adequate human resource skills and so forth. If Statistical Master Plans contain these strategic elements then they are a very important tool for managing risk and uncertainties.

Co-ordination was also important for internationally comparable statistics and there was growing interest in and use of internationally comparable data. They are useful for assessing the effectiveness of national policy.

Another question that was raised but not fully answered was whether UNSC should be strengthened. But there did seem to be a widespread view among countries that UNSC should exercise its authority of co-ordination, play a leading role in the setting of standards, and approve all international statistical standards, even those that also required the approval of another body.

(f) Concluding remarks

Another important message that was raised by Pali Lehohla, and reinforced by others, was the importance of “doing” and not just “thinking”. As a collective group official statisticians are good at discussing and analysing issues but this is of little benefit unless some action arises from these efforts. Clearly actions have been taken in the past because of the way that national systems have evolved but that bias to action needs to continue if our statistical systems are to remain relevant.

There is another aspect to action. Statistical offices must work closely with their key users, particularly the policy agencies, and those involved closely with financial markets, to ensure their statistics are relevant, easily accessible, understood and are being used.

Last, but not least, a major conclusion of the discussions was that we have been fortunate that we can each draw on the experiences of other National Statistical Offices. There is a willingness to share knowledge and many mechanisms for doing so. It is one of the reasons statistical development has been strong in so many countries. National Statistical Offices are felt to be sometimes quite conservative in their approach. While that may be true in some instances which may be a sign of carefulness, they have shown a great penchant for adopting and applying new technologies and for being innovative in their methods. The evolution has been substantial over the last 60 years and it needs to continue if National Statistical Offices are to play a prominent part in the efficient governance of their countries. And, given the speed of change in our societies, the evolution may need to intensify. It should be adaptive. It is not possible to predict the future with complete accuracy but strategic planning will help ensure adaptive change occurs in an orderly rather than a disorderly way.