

Regional cooperation and statistical capacity development: Successes, challenges and next steps

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Abstract. Regional Cooperation and Capacity Development was the sixth discussion platform topic of the Statistical Journal of the International Association of Official Statistics. Contributors shared many reflections on cooperation and capacity development including the third ‘c’ of coordination. Coordination, as one contributor remarked, “has been a holy grail but is a long way from being achieved”. United Nations (UN) Member States (countries) regularly call for improved coordination amongst the international capacity development community at annual meetings of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) and international organisations and professional associations are committed to coordination and cooperation ideals. This paper highlights potential routes to improved global cooperation by reviewing contributions to the discussion platform, sharing an example of effective coordination from a UN Regional Commission, and the key features of current coordination efforts by the International Statistical Institute (ISI) and the UN. The launch of the ISI’s Capability Building Committee’s 2022–2025 strategic plan provides an opportunity to review overall coordination efforts and promote inclusive capacity development efforts to ensure no one or no National Statistical System is left behind.

Keywords: Coordination, capacity development, cooperation, statistical societies

1. Introduction

The 2020 Asia-Pacific Statistics week, the fifth in a series organised by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) Statistics Division, was held virtually 15 to 18 June. The week focussed on progress made towards the statistical communities regional Collective Vision and Framework for Action and its goal to empower national statistical systems to meet urgent and evolving statistical needs [1]. It had some important lessons for the future of capacity development.

For the first time, the 2020 week aimed to identify authors of papers of strategic interest for submission

to the Statistical Journal of the International Association of Official Statistics (IAOS). The week brought together the Asia-Pacific statistical community to share knowledge and experiences, and importantly, to build skills at more junior levels.

Journal article writing was a priority skill identified in 2020 and was added to the week’s objectives. Selected authors were paired with members of the international statistical community, via networks between IAOS and ISI, who mentored and coached authors in preparing papers for submission to the Statistical Journal of the IAOS. For most of the authors, this was their first peer-reviewed journal article. Thirteen peer-reviewed articles appeared in the Statistical Journal in November 2020 accompanied by a guest editorial showcasing the week and contributions made by authors, organisers, and mentors [2].

Following publication of the Asia-Pacific Statistics Week papers, a Statistical Journal discussion platform

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was opened to discuss the effectiveness of regional cooperation and capacity development, with an emphasis on effectiveness in strengthening national statistical systems in Asia-Pacific.

Three overall statements designed to provoke a discussion and foster contributions were provided:

1. *Improving less developed statistical systems – do we apply the correct foundations and are we at risk of leaving some countries behind?*
2. *Are capacity development efforts more focused on transforming capacity development than transforming national statistical systems?*
3. *Does our approach risk leave countries and regions behind?*

The overall statements were followed by four discussion starters and thought pieces:

Discussion starter #1: Statistics capacity development suffers from a foundational problem: Most initiatives aim to produce statistics rather than developing organizational and system capacity.

Discussion starter #2: Is capacity development focussing on the new or retaining the old?

Discussion starter #3: Is the global statistical system truly inclusive? Or does it resemble a discussion club for statisticians from developed statistical systems, inviting others to observe from the gallery? Are we leaving some countries behind?

Discussion starter #4: Is capacity development truly inclusive?

2. Capacity development needs to be country-relevant and country-led

Statisticians from Africa, West Asia, and the United Kingdom contributed to the discussion.

The African contribution noted all levels of capacity development, be it for individuals, for an organisation, or for a statistical system, contribute to an enduring statistical capacity lift. He went on to hypothesize that capacity development has mirrored the evolution of statistical needs of developing countries. Where statistical systems were primarily focused on data collection, capacity development focussed on data collection. Where statistical systems evolved into leading as well as production-type activities, capacity development in areas such as modernising legislation followed. As statistical systems are evolving into the use of non-survey-based data sources, such as big data, capacity development has followed suit, for instance the big data initia-

tives of the UNSC and regional institutions such as UN ESCAP.

Capacity uplift must, however, be prioritised to countries' needs and should rely primarily on domestic funding with, in addition, the support from development partners for implementation. His message was for country-relevant and country-led capacity development.

3. Coordination and cooperation need to be enhanced

From the West Asia contributor, the focus was to enhance regional and global cooperation. She stressed the rapidly changing environment National Statistical Offices (NSOs) are facing, especially considering the information needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and suggested a re-evaluation of the whole [cooperation] strategy to consider all aspects of regional (and global) cooperation.

The UK contributor, a retired statistician, also commented on coordination. To quote, "coordination of donor's policies has been a holy grail but is a long way from being achieved".

Coordination between capacity development organs of the UN and other international bodies is central to two bodies – the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) [3] and Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN (CCS-UN) [4]. These two bodies report to the UNSC on coordination activities and efforts.

The UN's *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* has also brought many international organisations together. The Agenda promotes a common statistical capacity development framework. Cooperation and coordination goals are articulated in its monitoring and evaluation requirements, including 230+ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators disaggregated by age, sex and their disaggregation by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant to national contexts [5]. However, arguably, the Agenda and SDG indicators have brought enhanced focus on official statistics and new challenges without a proportionate increase in resources for capacity development. This would mean that enhanced cooperation is now even more a priority.

4. Capacity development needs to be inclusive

The West Asia contribution also said we need to make the most of capacity development to ensure ca-

capacity development programs are inclusive and with harder efforts to ensure leaving no one behind. The UK contributor also touched on inclusiveness, noting there was a tendency to privilege certain regions of the world.

One indicator of inclusiveness can be inferred from PARIS21's *Partner Report on Support to Statistics 2019*. According to PARIS21, between 2016 and 2017, official development assistance to data and statistics rose 11 per cent from USD 623 million to USD 689 million, largely driven by the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goal monitoring framework. Africa received the largest share of statistical support with 50 per cent in 2015–2017 whilst the share of commitments received by the Asia and Pacific region was 18 per cent, a much lower share than the 32 per cent received in 2011–2013. A further 13 per cent was committed to global projects and programmes that were not region-specific [6].

In 2021, PARIS21 reported support to statistics had been less concentrated on top recipient countries in recent years, representing a trend towards diversification. The top five recipients of support to data and statistics in 2017–19 received around 22% of total funding. At the same time, more than 65 countries received at least USD 1 million for data and statistics in 2019, up from 60 in 2018, an historic high. “While it is positive that funding to data is spread to more countries, it becomes more imperative for the community to adopt a mechanism to coordinate action and learn from each other’s success.” [7].

The ISI and its Associations have also reported on inclusiveness [8]. Men (Fig. 1) and developed nations (Fig. 2) predominate in ISI membership, with membership numbers, with membership numbers dropping disproportionately in developing countries in an economic downturn and/or where opportunities to meet physically are not available such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring effective knowledge transfer between male developed nation capacity builders and the wider global statistical system needs consideration if we are to be a truly inclusive profession and community, not least in prioritising capacity development in developing countries and supporting improvements in social equality more generally.

5. ISI Capacity Building Committee

Capacity building has been and continues to be one of the strategic priorities of the ISI.

Launched in 2013, the ISI Capacity Building Committee advises the ISI Executive Committee on the plan-

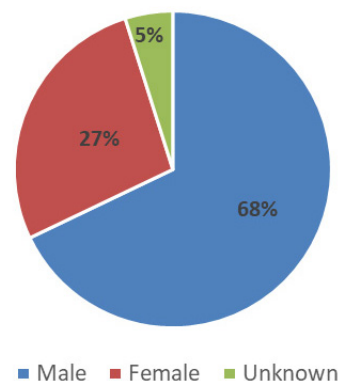


Fig. 1. ISI membership by gender, 2022.

ning, development, and implementation of appropriate initiatives, besides promoting them directly. The Committee has delivered a range of initiatives over the years, and these are documented on their webpage [9].

The Committee has a wide range of members, mostly coming from developing countries (10 out of 17 members) and with over 40% female (out of a total of 17), with extensive national, regional, and global experience and are well placed to lead inclusive statistical capability initiatives.

In their address to the 2022 IAOS Conference held in Krakow, Poland, April 2022, the Co-Chairs of the Committee¹ discussed building capacity in the ‘building back better’ era [8]. They recognized the rich history of supporting capacity building among individual and corporate members but also a need to re-assess member’s contributions to a changing and crowded capacity-building landscape in which many actors are competing for limited resources.

The Co-Chairs shared the ISI Executive’s agreed capacity building vision for 2022–25. This is to help statisticians and data scientists to be better able to respond to emerging global challenges, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerate the use of digitisation for sustainable development. The aim is to achieve this via activities that suit the ISI’s unique potential and to generate resources and new outcomes via:

- Fostering cross-disciplinary professional cooperation at global and regional levels.

¹The Committee is currently co-chaired by Mr. Matthew Shearing, an international statistical consultant and former member of the UK statistical system, and Mr. Oliver Chinganya, Statistics Division Director of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN ECA).

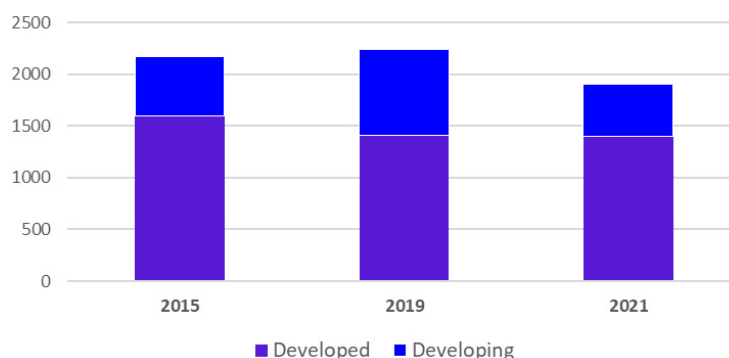


Fig. 2. ISI membership by type of country, 2015, 2019, 2021.

- Coordinating actions across ISI Associations/ disciplines and with global and regional stakeholders.
- Supporting statistical education and literacy initiatives.
- Conducting activities that reflect the priorities of ISI members, a creative and efficient use of resources including members and ISI Permanent Office staff, and the ISI's unique qualities.

The Co-Chairs continue to invite feedback on a proposed plan of activity to inspire volunteered support from ISI and Association members, find synergies with other capacity development strategies, optimise the chances of securing funding from a wide range of new and existing donors; and, ideally, to encourage or support more professionals to become members of the ISI and its Associations to optimise its capacity building 'capital', including via a greater diversity of membership. The proposed plan put forward seven priorities for 2022–23.

1. Members networking in regional settings for more locally driven and relevant capacity building.
2. Short courses and webinars well-aligned to capacity building priorities.
3. Use of the new World Bank Global Data Facility.
4. Support for the development of National Statistical Societies.
5. Mentoring and coaching – particularly transferring knowledge between more senior and more junior Statisticians.
6. Articulating and developing the benefits of ISI membership in respect of capacity building.
7. Supporting a successful ISI World Statistics Congress in 2023, particularly via inputs from the regions effectively excluded from physical attendance due to geography.

The contribution of ISI/IAOS members to the 2020 Asia-Pacific Statistics Week are an example of mentoring and coaching which, for over ten young statisticians from developing nations in Asia-Pacific, was a valuable entrée into the global statistical community offered by the ISI.

6. Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities

Established in September 2002, the CCSA [3] was established to coordinate the statistical sector. Its work is focussed on six main activities:

- Efficient functioning of the statistical system.
- Common standards and platforms.
- Development of methodologies.
- Inter-institutional support.
- Outreach.
- Advocacy for statistics.

The Committee comprises international and supranational organisations whose mandate include the provision of international official statistics, have a permanent embedded statistical service in their office, and have regular contact with countries. For example, the UN, OECD, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, Eurostat, and Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf ("GCC-Stat").

The Committee has extensive regional and international experience, with three of the leadership cohort²

²CCSA is currently co-chaired by Ms. Angela Me (UN Office on Drugs and Crime) and Ms. Haishan Fu (World Bank), supported by three vice-chairs: Dr. Mariana Kotzeva (Eurostat), Mr. Chinganya (UN ECA and also co-chair of the ISI Statistical Capability Building Committee) and Dr. Steve MacFeely (World Health Organization).

having direct regional experience as coordination leaders in Asia and the Pacific, Africa, and Europe.

The Committee report annually to the UNSC and, if necessary or desirable, the report is referred to the High-Level Committee on Programmes of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

In their latest report (December 2021), the Committee reported on several cooperation activities including reports and surveys [10].

The Committee leadership team have initiated an important initiative which could bring new impetus to the data revolution first coined by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The team's article, entitled "*Spotlight 8.1: The need for a new global consensus on data: A call to action*" in the World Bank's World Development Report 2021 highlights the possible need for a global data convention [11].

Although the statistical community already has a global statistical convention, the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, and the Conference of European Statisticians celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Fundamental Principles in 2022, the community are focussed on much more than statistics these days. The data revolution has spawned many data-led initiatives including data stewardship, data professions and the UNSC global working group on big data.

The possible need for a global data convention is a welcome contribution from the CCSA leadership team and its evolution and development is welcomed.

7. Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN

The CCS-UN system was formally established in 2014 by Member States (countries) via the UNSC who mandated the group to follow up on recommendations of a UNSC Friends of the Chair for improved coordination and report back to the Commission [4].

The Committee's work is focussed on 11 main activities and coordination, the group's mandate, is referenced in four:

1. "Establish a network of statistical programmes in the United Nations system to enhance cooperation and coordination when helping Member States (countries) to improve their statistical capacity".
2. "Discuss ways of coordinating activities at the national level through United Nations country teams and national programmes by sharing and promoting coherence and producing joint products".

3. "Promote the coordination of common capacity-building and technical assistance activities by undertaking common actions on specific topics, at the national, regional, and global levels, to meet more efficiently the demand for skilled statisticians and data analysts, for both Member States and international organizations".
4. "Promote coordinated data compilation and exchange to reduce the burden on reporting countries by promoting joint data collection activities and the sharing of statistics and facilitating the use of modern platforms and mechanisms to provide countries with the best solutions and access to databases."

Under its current leadership,³ the CCS-UN has developed a *System-wide Road Map for Innovating UN Data and Statistics* which was endorsed by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination Principals in May 2020 [12]. The Road Map is an ambitious collective effort by the UN system's chief statisticians to innovate UN data and statistical outputs in support of Member States and the international community.

The latest CCS-UN report describes progress with the Road Map in new data sources and new techniques. Attention is also being given to transform the data.un.org portal into a single point of reference for United Nations system data to strengthen the position of the United Nations system as a primary provider of global data and statistics [12].

8. Conclusions

Coordination of capacity development is a common thread of many conversations by Member States at the UNSC, members within the ISI and its Associations, the international capacity development community itself and contributors to the sixth discussion forum of the Statistical Journal of the IAOS. As one contributor put it, however, it is the holy grail which is a long way from being achieved.

A discussion contributor from Africa has provided some guidance on coordination – countries should have a say in whether coordination efforts are working or not. In practical terms, where countries see uncoordinated efforts among the international community, such as

³CCS-UN is currently co-chaired by Ms. Me, who is also Co-Chair of the CCSA, and Dr. MacFeely, a vice-chair of CCSA.

training programs or workshops on the same topic at a similar time but from different organisations, they should call it out. Where a donor is developing capacity in a country with no engagement with the NSO or a lack of systematic coordination with other donors, it should be called out. Where a donor is developing capacity in a topic that is not a country priority, they should be supported to say no despite the obvious temptation to accept income and other opportunities that it could bring.

The Asia-Pacific statistical community *Declaration on Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No-One Behind*, endorsed by member States of UN ESCAP at its 75th session in 2019, codified the African contributor's comment by calling on development partners:

- a) To provide coordinated technical, financial, technological, and capacity-building assistance to countries and to ensure countries have full access to data held by development partners in support of the implementation of the collective vision and framework for action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- b) To consult the national statistical office or national statistical system concerned before conducting any statistical study or survey.
- c) To continue to develop and strengthen international statistical standards and to provide technical support for their implementation [14].

A monitoring evaluation framework for implementation of the Declaration was agreed by member States in 2020 and the first report is due in August 2022.

The African contributor's comment is also reflected in PARIS21's 2021 report.

At the country level, we urgently need to adopt a system lens to statistical capacity development and support core data and statistical infrastructure. The COVID-19 crisis provides a timely opportunity to diversify sources of data production while accelerating and mainstreaming the modernisation of statistical processes, in a system-wide manner. However, leveraging digital methods and technologies at scale rests on increased support for interlinking infrastructure and enabling environment. Finally, catalytic financing coupled with targeted technical support can help spur further domestic investment, strengthening country ownership in the long run. To facilitate this, whole-of-government approaches to investing in statistical capacity as a core feature of modern governance can make public data systems more resilient [7].

As we approach the ten-year anniversary since the CCS-UN was mandated by countries to improve coordination, it may be timely to re-convene the 2014 UNSC Friends of the Chair group to assess how far coordination has been improved by the CCS-UN. A review could also consider developments since 2014 including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [5], the World Bank's Development Report 2021 [11] and what coordination efforts countries would like to see for the next decade.

The ISI Capacity Building Committee [8] could be a professional conduit for such a review. Their independence from the UN System or Governments in general and their voluntary membership of statisticians, both current and new, could be an alternative to convening countries through the UNSC. The Committee could be commissioned on behalf of the smaller more focussed UNSC Bureau to bring forward recommendations for consideration by Member States. Just as national statistical societies can play a critical role in independent support and feedback for national statistical systems, the ISI could play a more active role in supporting the development of the global statistical system, so it better develops its capacity development practices in an efficient (ie better coordinated) and inclusive way. This would also serve to ensure that the ISI could reflect on and better develop its own practices for optimising its contribution to capacity development.

The ISI Statistical Capacity Building Committee is seeking input into its 2022–2025 priorities. This paper has highlighted successful endeavours since the Committee was first established in 2013 and areas of proposed focus for 2022–25. The Committee welcomes your input on its plan for a focussed mentoring scheme, regional hubs focussed on supporting the least developed countries and more junior statisticians, and support for the development of statistical societies to support countries at the right stage of development of National Statistical Systems. Readers are invited to encourage and support others to join the ISI and its Associations to both gain from and contribute to the ISI's unique position in global capacity development, and specifically to contribute the development and implementation of its capacity development strategy.

One final comment. The UK discussion contributor reacted to the discussion starter asking whether capacity development focusses on the new or retains the old. He pointed out retirees have an enormous pool of knowledge and are not, as the question may have inferred, stuck in the past. However, he also pointed out retirees may work because they want to contribute, not

necessarily for income purposes, and their choice to work may lead to cherry-picking assignments which suit them rather than assignments of the highest priority. A timely reminder for the entire capacity development community to choose carefully when selecting capacity development partners to ensure no one, no country and no region is left behind.

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