



Statistics, PARIS21, and Development

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1. “I have to say that I was kind of stunned when I began looking at the numbers” said Bill Gates in a speech two years ago explaining what had caused him to start what has become one of the most hopeful development initiatives of recent times: the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, aimed at solving problems that cost the lives of more than four million children each year.

2. But the kind of numbers that any private business person would insist upon to run his or her operations are often not available to the leaders of developing countries – with enormous costs in terms of missed opportunities, crises unforeseen, mistaken investments, and festering inaction. The fault is not only with the statisticians who should be generating interesting numbers. It is also with politicians – and analysts – content to rely on ideology and stock answers that need no justification in the facts of the case. Serious investment in the production of statistics then seems superfluous.

3. Official statistical services remain very weak in most of the poorer developing countries, as well as in some that are much richer thanks to their natural resources. In many they deteriorated in the last two decades of the twentieth century as a result of government budgetary stringencies, declining financial discipline and deteriorating governance standards. Directors of statistics were obliged to seek foreign funding in whatever form available, even for work inconsistent with country priorities or largely duplicatory of other studies, or for equipment incompatible with their real needs. Aid agencies met their own urgent data needs by financing one-off surveys to their own specifications – by private companies or NGOs if the national statistical office was considered too weak or unreliable. The official services lost more of their trained staff, to work in other countries or other activities in the local economy.

Search for Solutions

4. In November 1999 the main international organizations concerned with development joined to convoke, for the first time, a senior expert meeting of statisticians and broader policymakers to discuss ways to overcome these problems. The urgency of the matter had been brought home by the difficulties in assessing progress on the quantified development targets that the international community had adopted during the 1990s. The meeting took place at OECD in Paris, attended by representatives of developing countries, transition economies and OECD member states.

5. The debate was very active and led to a large measure of consensus that the core of the solution lay in countries’ statisticians and policymakers combining to generate national Statistical Master Plans to whose fulfilment governments and foreign-aid donors would jointly commit themselves.

6. This relatively simple and straightforward concept was, at the same time, sufficiently novel and different from prevailing practice, that its foundations would need to be further developed and promoted if it was to come to life. Hence it was decided to create a small body within OECD for this purpose. Reflecting its task of encouraging dialogue and coordination for better information services in the twenty-first century, it was named PARIS21.

7. The effort gathered pace gradually, with initial financing supplied largely by the UK and office services provided by OECD. An inter-agency Task Team on Statistical Advocacy Products began work in 2000, and a regional workshop for statistician/policymaker delegations from each of the southern African countries and concerned donors took place in December. Switzerland and the World Bank added their financial backing. A regional workshop for eastern Africa was held in mid-2001 and further Task Teams got going. By the end of 2001, a Steering Committee with equal representation of international agencies, developing/transition countries, and OECD countries had been created, a full-time manager selected, and financial contributions provided by three more countries. All dimensions of activity expanded in 2002.

Review of Initial Experience

8. Comprehensive, independent evaluation of PARIS21 and its possible future was entrusted to a small team from Oxford Policy Management Ltd. in the Spring of 2003. They interviewed representative members of 12 country delegations to PARIS21 workshops, almost all past and present members of the Steering Committee and the Secretariat, and others from additional relevant groups – a total of nearly 140 people.

9. Among the participant interviews they had carried out, the evaluators attached most weight to those with participants in the first two regional workshops (2000-01), with sufficient time having elapsed for results, if any, to be visible; 7 country delegations were covered, more than a third of the total attendance. All interviewed, whether policymakers or statisticians, emphasized that relations developed with one another at the workshop had enabled statistical work to respond more effectively to policy requirements, notably for preparation and monitoring of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). In most cases this had in turn brought increases in the budgets provided to the statistical offices.

10. Surprisingly, in all seven countries – even in Burundi, facing great social tensions and shortage of resources – serious effort has been underway to implement the action plans prepared at or after the regional workshops. Donors have also taken new initiatives to help. As many as five of the countries have recently completed their first strategic plans for statistical development. Three of them started such planning exercises as a direct result of workshop discussions, and the other two considered that the workshops had helped them strengthen particular aspects of their plans.

11. In two of the countries that participated in its original regional workshop PARIS21 helped organize in 2002 national workshops with strong regional participation: one in South Africa on Development Indicators, and another in Malawi on Poverty Monitoring. These reached a much wider range of policymakers, and had major impact on the information systems that the countries introduced for better management of their development.

12. The various inter-agency Task Teams that operated in PARIS21's first two years achieved rates of progress largely dependent on the resources available to them. Path-breaking work was led by the IMF to compile, and test application of, a comprehensive set of Statistical Capacity Building Indicators. Major international conferences were organized on Population Census Management, and on Food and Agriculture Statistical Systems for Africa. They brought about increased consensus and moved the subjects forward to actions now under way.

13. PARIS21 has also devoted considerable effort to its information exchange role, running a major international meeting in Paris each year in October, continuously upgrading and expanding its web-site, and introducing in 2002 a newsletter published three times a year in five languages. The evaluators' enquiries indicated that these products are widely appreciated by government statisticians and aid agency staff concerned with statistics. They have given people useful knowledge of others' statistical activities, which has in turn stimulated new initiatives and better coordination.

What Difference is PARIS21 Making ?

14. PARIS21 has been operating in an era when many other influences, including those of the aid agencies, are spreading the philosophy of Results-Based Management to the developing countries. Moreover, African experience indicates that significant progress in statistical work has depended crucially on the presence of modern, future-oriented managers in the country's political leadership.

15. PARIS21 workshops have been unique in two important ways: the extent to which they have brought together policymakers and statisticians, and the space for free discussion that they were widely perceived to offer just because PARIS21 and OECD were "neutral" bodies, not directly engaged in aid management. Many interviewees referred to the workshops' role in catalysing new attitudes of policymakers towards statistics and statisticians and vice versa, and in helping them to establish their own national priorities for statistical development.

16. The evaluators concluded that the workshops had thus been a significant addition to other influences, a support to the changes pressed by reformist political leaders, and a preparation for gradual change in countries lacking such leadership. They had helped notably to create local ownership for statistical reform and strategic plans.

17. PARIS21 has also made two other distinctive contributions. It has stimulated mutual self-help among the African countries, thanks to contacts initiated at the regional workshops and advice provided to countries facing particular issues as to who in other countries had the most relevant experience. Even though the main burden of Task Team work fell on the lead agency, all Task Team Convenors were emphatic that this work would not have been done in the absence of PARIS21 demand and prioritisation. The PARIS21 label helped to attract higher-level participation in conferences.

Overall Progress

18. The logical framework adopted for the programme by the Interim Steering Committee in 2001 had established seven "Outputs" which were useful as directions in which PARIS21 should assist but ambitious insofar as none could have been expected to be accomplished by

PARIS21 on its own. No time schedule was indicated. Taking account of all activities undertaken to date (including the first workshops held in Asia and in Latin America in 2002), the evaluators offered their considered opinions of the extent to which PARIS21 was proving effective in promoting movement in the indicated directions.

19. They thought that broad results were on the way for three Outputs that they therefore entitled “Promising”: Increased Commitment to Statistics, User-Producer Dialogue, and National Statistical System Strategic Planning. They cited evidence to believe that broad results may result, but with less assuredness, for two Outputs that they christened “Moving”: Capacity to Produce/Use Statistics, and Improved Collaboration among Partners. They considered that there was not much to show yet, and therefore little reason on present trends to expect broad results, in the case of two Outputs which they therefore characterized as “Potential”: Partnership Principles Applied, and Effective Donor Collaboration.

Synthesis to Date

20. The evaluation concluded that the ideas put forward by the 1999 expert meeting still showed the best hope of overcoming the obstacles to sound statistical development and that PARIS21 was proving an effective instrument for their promotion. It had already been instrumental in bringing about changes on the ground in some countries, notably in Africa, and could in time have deeper and wider impact.

21. Broader political and social trends adding to the importance of good statistical work were also noted: ever-spreading concern to see measurable results from public expenditures, diffusion of the notion of democratic accountability, and the emergence of quite new degrees of cooperation among international aid institutions to agree on indicators for measuring development progress.

22. PARIS21 has made some inroads to help developing countries benefit from these trends, but momentum has to be sustained. Interest in numbers, and appreciation of what constitutes appropriate analysis of them in different circumstances, has to be spread much more widely, especially among managers of public expenditure programmes, such as in health and education. Statistical strategic plans have been prepared by some countries, but much further work is needed to institutionalise the planning processes and to move into sustained execution.

Priorities for Now

23. Much of the value of PARIS21 lies precisely in the fact that it is a body limited to dialogue, exchange of information, and asking questions, sometimes perhaps uncomfortable. It does not compete with any of the many bodies providing technical or capital assistance for statistical development. As a body limited to promoting coordination, it seeks rather to help all the many agencies substantively engaged in the area to increase their own and their combined effectiveness.

24. From this point of view, its value, like that of a telephone system, depends on the active adherence of all parties who may need to communicate with one another – in this case, all concerned with development of statistical capacities in developing countries. PARIS21 has already gained the support of an unprecedentedly large number of such people, due to strong initiatives by the international agencies and steady accretion of bilateral donors. More

active participation of other aid donors, especially those which are much involved in statistical work, and of additional policymakers from developing countries, would significantly add to its value to all.

25. The evaluators urged that aims of the ambitious nature of the “Outputs” defined in 2001 be retained for the forthcoming period. But they should be explicitly recognized as aims for the broad PARIS21 community, as opposed to what PARIS21, and its Secretariat, could do on their own. And, to help achieve better focus, they should be more limited in number.

26. The evaluators suggested that the statistical community consider prioritising, for their activity generally over the next few years, three of the Outputs identified in the 2001 PARIS21 Log-frame:

- Strengthened capacity to produce, analyse and use key statistical and other information amongst public sector, academic and civil society organizations.
- Comprehensive strategy covering information needed nationally (and internationally) to inform, implement and monitor policies.
- More effective donor collaboration, leading to more efficient use of official development assistance relating to generation and use of statistics.

The selection was designed to minimize overlaps, to incorporate instrumental objectives that are important but subsidiary to others (such as User-Producer Dialogue and Country Leadership that are essential especially to the first two mentioned above), and to enable generation of measurable indicators.

27. It would be highly desirable for the statistical community to seek agreement among themselves on target values for measurable indicators that would capture the progress that should realistically be feasible on these three objectives (The evaluators suggested some possible candidates). These target values could play a similar mobilizing and channelling role for the community’s work to what the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) are successfully doing at a much broader level. Indeed the community might even envisage for the coming years a systematic evaluation of the “international architecture” for assisting statistical development in the developing countries, and the relative roles and linkages of all bodies involved.

28. These steps would undoubtedly take time. But agreement now to move broadly in these directions and to prioritise, at the community level, the three Outputs described, would create a framework that would be to the benefit of all. And it would enable PARIS21 to draw up a better focused work program, supportive of community members’ own initiatives.

PARIS21 Action

29. PARIS21’s overall goal will remain the promotion of a culture of evidence-based policy making and implementation, and it will choose its specific activities in light of the contribution that they can make in this direction. It will continue to address all countries, for instance encouraging statistical laggards to participate in regional workshops to benefit from the stimulus afforded by countries progressing. But it will concentrate supplementary efforts, as in the past, on countries seriously trying to move forward. It will complement present

procedures for planning, and specification of objectives, of its individual activities with regular ex post evaluations, by its own staff, of the impacts that they have had.

30. One important priority for the near future, relevant to all its other work, is to assemble a report on the state of progress, country by country, in statistical capacities. The report will be based on contributions provided by the countries themselves, and by the aid agencies and institutions for countries where they are involved. A major initial effort along these lines will lay the foundation for production of a regular annual report, as envisaged at the 1999 expert meeting.

31. To support the community's actions in pursuing the suggested priority of Strengthening Capacity to Produce and Use Statistics, PARIS21 will

- continue its programme of regional workshops (now including follow-up workshops);
- increase workshops' focus on ways reliably to measure progress on the Key Development Indicators, benefiting from the Task Team work started last year;
- enhance service to high-level policymakers through focused presentations at meetings for broader purposes, and through the PARIS21 web-site;
- organize a regular annual coordination meeting among the leaders of training programmes focusing on use and analysis of statistics for development, and seek creation of a Task Team on measurement of quality in use of statistics for policy purposes.

32. In regard to the proposed community priority on Advancing National Statistical System Strategic Planning, PARIS21 will

- continue to promote, through its workshops, country-led preparation and improvement of such plans, dealing with both urgent priorities and longer-term capacity development;
- adjust the coverage and emphases of its workshops to the specific stage reached, in the region covered, in regard to strategic planning;
- seek sponsorship for a Task Team to establish costing benchmarks for major types of statistical product in developing country circumstances.

33. To assist the community in pursuit of the suggested priority on Achieving Effective Donor Collaboration at Country Level, PARIS21 will

- stand ready, when desired, to lend its name to, and help organize, a national workshop, for the country and interested donors, at the end of a country's Statistical Master Planning process (with workshop costs normally covered out of donor assistance for preparation of the SMP);
- assure more systematic advisory follow-up to countries participating in its regional workshops by seeking to share the responsibility a little more formally than hitherto with aid agencies' regional statistical advisers;
- undertake brief visits to countries seeking to implement action plans prepared at PARIS21 workshops, to review with statistical agencies and donor offices the state of progress and identify any needs for additional donor action;

- offer developing/transition countries a page on its web-site to summarize the aids they are presently receiving for statistical development and prioritised needs for further assistance.

Support Needed

34. In view of the successful development of the programme to date and the evaluation's findings regarding the impact that its various activities seem to be having, it is much to be hoped that PARIS21's existing donors will maintain the level of support provided over the last year.

35. Some additional funding will however be required to reduce existing overload on staff and enable new initiatives strongly recommended by the evaluation – notably, the short visits to individual countries to review progress in action plan implementation and donor coordination, the brief but very carefully prepared presentations needed for high-level policymakers, and more custom-made content for regional workshops, including on Development Indicators work in the particular countries participating.

36. It would be highly desirable, for the reasons connected with the basic rationale of the programme as discussed in paragraph 24, that the needed additional core funding be provided by those countries and agencies which are not yet contributing but are significantly engaged in supporting statistical work – notably, Canada, USA, Australia, some of the Nordic countries, and the three main Regional Development Banks (African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank).

37. Smaller foreign-aid donors are also of great importance to the programme. Several are already involved, but more need to join. PARIS21, with its main orientation to developing countries, has never been part of the regular OECD work programme and budget. It provides donors who are not directly involved in statistical work in developing countries a valuable opportunity to support this recognizedly critical dimension of the management of development and of development spending.