Challenges for National Statistical Offices collecting and providing data requested by international agencies - "One size does not fit all"

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1. Introduction

There are always challenges for a national statistical system to respond to new or one-off demands. Usually these demands come from government agencies within a country and can reflect changing priorities and emerging needs. In other situations they can reflect priorities within a sector for which funding has been obtained. Statistical offices need to be responsive to such demands if they are to remain relevant to their major clients. The same challenges are faced when these demands come from international agencies. There is an additional challenge, however, relating to possible conflict between national and international priorities, as well as issues arising from lack of consultation and input from statistical offices into the survey methodology expected to be applied.

The challenges which arise from demands from international agencies are generally greater for statistical offices in the smaller less developed countries such as those in the Pacific region. Certainly the impact of responding to the demands can be much greater. Part A of this paper will discuss the challenges and impacts on the small island countries of the Pacific, this being a region where Statistics New Zealand has some experience. Part B will then discuss some issues that can be faced by all countries in responding to international requirements. The paper finishes with suggestions for improving the situation.

2. Part A - The Challenges Faced By Small Statistical Offices In Responding To International Demands

There are basically two levels of demand for statistical information placed on all statistical offices. One is for the production of a suite of statistics required for the ongoing measurement of the economic and social position of a country. The work is able to be prioritised, planned, infrastructure put into place and staff capability developed and maintained on an ongoing basis - not without problems of course but generally manageable. The certainty from planning and budgeting enables a statistical office to establish the infrastructure and capability needed to produce the statistics to the required quality. Demand is always greater than supply, and hence prioritisation through consultation with the key users of the statistics is important.

In the Pacific some NSOs are funded sufficiently to be able to produce at least a minimum core set of statistics on an ongoing basis. Others are too small, too poorly funded or have other management challenges that constrain their capacity to produce what would generally be considered a minimum set.

The other demand placed on statistical offices is for additional unplanned data to be collected and produced. Generally the level of ad hoc demand is relatively small compared with the ongoing
work and many statistical offices establish systems and processes for being able to respond to such requests without much disruption to the planned ongoing work. But when a statistical office is struggling to develop and maintain an ongoing core program of statistics, the challenges in responding to additional requests can be so great as to adversely impact on the core program and distort overall national priorities for statistical information. Often these demands come from international organisations, with recent examples being ESCAP’s Human Resources Index, UN Millennium Indicators, poverty surveys, measures of agriculture subsistence, and measures of education attainment.

There are, of course, many benefits from responding to ad hoc demands. As well as providing new statistics and being responsive to clients, the experience for staff and the organisation from having to develop and implement new methods and the establishment of infrastructure can help to upgrade the overall capability of an office. Unfortunately these benefits can come at the cost of disruption to the ongoing program of statistical work, even when extra funds are provided. The resources required to develop and run a new data collection include staff with managerial and technical ability and local knowledge of the social and cultural environment and the administrative system - the very staff needed to maintain ongoing collections. While statistical offices in the larger, more developed countries can generally manage this conflict, in the Pacific region, however, the choice can often be to meet the ad hoc demand by not producing core statistics.

For example, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), ongoing funding is insufficient to maintain a program of core statistics, to the extent that some critical economic statistics have suffered in the last few years because staff were diverted to the population census. With pressure from international agencies to hold a large-scale poverty survey and a health survey, this situation will be exacerbated. It is likely that the current situation of the CPI being based on weights from 1976 expenditure patterns and complete merchandise trade statistics not being available will continue. Another example is in Niue where there are gaps in the CPI time series as a consequence of staff being focussed on carrying out a survey of housing.

3. Part B - International Comparability Vs National Requirements

Although the benefits of taking part in collaborative cross-national data collection and research can be attractive, the individual needs and interests of participating countries are rarely accommodated within generic research objectives when these are predetermined by an overseas research team. Limited funding for social research may make it difficult for smaller countries to fully commit to standardised questionnaires without some adaptations to meet the more immediate concerns and unique data requirements presented within their domestic context. For example, it is highly likely that local researchers will want to compare and integrate research data with other information sources collected nationally. However, international frameworks and classifications may be incompatible with those in use domestically, or lack sufficient detail. The non-equivalence of terms and concepts such as employment, households and family are key examples (Hantrias & Letablier, 1996).

Similarly, some important international/global interests may have little immediate relevance for policy makers and researchers within individual countries. Because international surveys offer little scope for adaptation if researchers are to preserve the "equivalence" of data generated from each country, the relationship becomes a difficult one, as trade-offs need to be made between national priorities and international requirements. Although deviations from prescribed practices may compromise effective cross-national comparisons, such compromises may be inevitable if individual nations are to make the best use of limited research funds.

Unfortunately, cross-national comparisons will continue to have only limited utility within a national context due to the methodological problems inherent in international research (see, for example, Jowell, 1998). For example, research questions formulated in one national context will not always have equal relevance or application in another. This problem of ethnocentric bias is perhaps most apparent when questionnaires, developed overseas, need to be translated into local
indigenous languages. Translators often find that questions contain concepts and terms in the source language that have no equivalent in local languages (Behling & Law, 2000). Even in cases where no translation is required, idiosyncratic use of language between countries can mean that changes to the international script will be necessary to make questions understandable in a local context. These changes may, however, be harder for the international research group to understand.

The standards of practice stipulated by the international research team can also present a challenge for national statistical agencies due to fundamental differences in survey conventions, organisational structures and administrative practices. For example, the legal and ethical environment in each country can impose different rules and obligations that may be in direct conflict with the research protocol developed internationally. To illustrate, Statistics New Zealand (SNZ) is bound by the Statistics Act of 1975 and respondents are legally obliged to participate in SNZ surveys. In recognition of this, SNZ does extensive testing and consultation to ensure that the demands it makes on respondents are appropriate for a compulsory survey and are not likely to undermine long term cooperation from respondents. National agencies must meet rigorous quality standards before they receive ministerial approval for their surveys. In contrast, most social research is bound by principles of informed consent and voluntary participation, and it is often necessary to obtain approval from ethics committees before a survey can proceed.

Without national input into questionnaire and methodological development, international researchers may also fail to consider other important influences likely to impact on the research quality. Consultation with national statistical agencies in the early stages of development can alert researchers to these issues and avoid potential problems. For example, tensions can arise in agreeing upon questionnaire length, when researchers have only a single opportunity to collect information and are consequently reluctant to cut back on content. Statistical agencies, however, need to be mindful of respondent burden because they continue to rely on respondent cooperation and goodwill for future survey projects. Although national agencies may also have the best resources to obtain adequate response rates nationally, local populations may be less willing to provide answers to questions about sensitive topics (such as illegal activity) when the survey is undertaken by a government agency.

4. **Part C - The Way Ahead**

On the demands side there is a need for international organisations to recognise the different capabilities of statistical offices and that "one size does not fit all" with the design and approach to international surveys. Recent United Nations Statistical Commission meetings have discussed the importance of developing capability first in statistical offices before they can effectively participate in international initiatives. International organisations also need to gain an understanding of where their project fits with the ongoing work program and priorities of a NSO. This will keep to a minimum the impact on local and regional collection plans already in place. They also need to work with the statistical offices during the concept development stage so that the NSOs can have input into methodology, content and timing which can meet both local and international needs. Clear objectives should be set, rather than an 'all or nothing' methodology being specified. The objectives should allow flexibility in the way they are met, which will allow a survey to be developed to meet both the international and national requirements. Levels of detail for reporting statistics specified for obtaining international comparability should be what is achievable in most countries. This is being recognised for example with the revision to ISIC, where it will be recommended that an 'optimal level of implementation should be prescribed so as to ensure international comparability of statistics using ISIC'. This level will be set at the two-digit level, allowing for country variations below that level. Otherwise countries end up producing information which they do not require for their own use.

A recent ADB initiative is an example of an international initiative proceeding with active involvement of the countries and likely to meet important national as well as international needs.
This is a study to develop methods that would allow countries to produce reliable quarterly gross domestic product (GDP) estimates of agriculture and fishing production.

The strategy adopted for this initiative first involves a study of the situation and capability in five target countries. The objective of the first phase is to produce a draft "best practice" manual suitable for general use by Pacific developing member countries as well as producing specific recommendations for each of the five countries examined. The draft manual and country reports are then to be discussed and ratified at an ADB Regional Economic Technical Assistance workshop following the completion of the study. The knowledge and skills gained by NSO staff involved will increase the chances of a successful implementation in those countries.

Implementing quarterly GDP estimates for agriculture and fishing will still be a challenge for NSOs that only produce annual GDP estimates. Also, the priority of such measures nationally will need to be considered seriously. Having a methodology that has been developed within the region, and for the region, will however provide for a greater chance of success and longer-term sustainability.

Better co-ordination between International Agencies will also reduce the extent of demand and establish better timing for new information to be produced by NSOs. Such co-ordination is required even within an international organisation, as illustrated by the situation in 2002 when three overlapping social surveys (Poverty, Health, and Household Expenditure and Income surveys) were mooted by the one agency.

The NSOs can also take more control over their destiny, and in doing so achieve greater benefits for themselves and their country as well as contribute to international developments. Early involvement and subsequent planning is the key to improvement. Most international developments do not just come 'out of the blue', and are the outcome of debate, discussion and often resolutions in international forums. Often the problem is lack of communication within a country amongst agencies about the developments, something that is not confined to the developing countries.

Even the smallest National Statistical Office can develop a strategic plan covering the outputs and possible developments over two to five years ahead. In the Pacific, the IMF's Pacific Financial Technical Assistance Centre (PFTAC) is providing assistance with strategic planning of statistical output. Besides the outputs these plans identify local resources and the outside technical assistance that will be required. The involvement of an outside agency provides some guarantee that the core data identified in the plan will be maintained.

REFERENCES

RESUME
Le système national des statistiques doit faire face aux problèmes de réponse à des requêtes nouvelles ou exceptionnelles. Les bureaux des Statistiques ont besoin d’être en mesure de répondre à de telles demandes afin de pouvoir rester pertinents vis-à-vis de leurs principaux clients. Quand de telles demandes proviennent d’agences internationales, il y a un problème supplémentaire en ce qui concerne le conflit possible entre les priorités nationales et internationales, ainsi que les problèmes posés par le manque de consultation et de contribution à la méthodologie des enquêtes qui devrait être appliquée par les bureaux des Statistiques. La partie A de ce document examine les problèmes et l’impact sur les petites nations insulaires du Pacifique. La partie B examine certains points auxquels tous les pays peuvent être amenés à faire face en répondant aux exigences internationales. Le document termine avec des suggestions pour améliorer la situation.