

STATISTICAL CAPACITY BUILDING/ TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

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by

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Theme: **Statistics and Policy Making in Small Economies: Developing Effective
Statistical Systems**

This paper begins with a quote from Agenda 21's definition (Chapter 37, UNCED, 1992.

***So what is 'capacity-building'? Why has the focus shifted towards
building capacity of cities and urban areas to handle its environments?
What constitutes 'capacity-building'? Some definitions and descriptions***

"Specifically, capacity building encompasses the country's human, scientific, technological, organizational, institutional and resource capabilities. A fundamental goal of capacity building is to enhance the ability to evaluate and address the crucial questions related to policy choices and modes of implementation among development options, based on an understanding of environment potentials and limits and of needs perceived by the people of the country concerned".

Capacity Building - Agenda 21's definition (Chapter 37, UNCED, 1992

The topic for discussion is quite apt as even in the Caribbean, statistical capacity building / technical assistance is understood to be the act of creating circumstances that prepare persons to work better. The major drawback to this paradigm is that it is being done without reference to a view of a national statistical system.

This paper looks at capacity building in general, and statistical capacity building in particular, much in the same way that the Agenda 21 definition approaches it.

This paper understands that statistical capacity building / technical assistance refers to the creation of a sustainable capability to perform statistical tasks that lead to the production of relevant, timely and high-quality statistical outputs. As the quote at the beginning of this paper states, capacity building in statistics encompasses the country's human, scientific, technological, organizational, institutional and resource capabilities. Investment in statistical capacity in statistics is an investment in human capital whose sustainability should be planned for. The building of statistical capacity does not begin and end in the Central Statistical Office. It encompasses every agency that produces

national statistics or any official statistics that can be used to shed light on contemporary issues.

There are four aspects that require attention. The **first** is the design of the statistical capacity to be built. The **second** aspect is the decision to request or absorb technical assistance for the installation of such a capacity. The **third** consideration is that of the effectiveness of the statistical systems to be developed for the purpose of, inter alia, informing policy making. The **fourth** aspect that requires attention is the assurance of sustainability by adjusting the education system to produce citizens with a high degree of numeracy and exposure to statistics and the scientific method.

The design of the statistical capacity to be built

The capacity to be built must be designed with specificity to the country and to the purpose for which it is being built. It is too easy to be led into the belief that capacity can be effectively built by sending a number of persons overseas on a course that has been designed to train persons from several countries in the same classroom. This modality of delivering mass training is reminiscent of the industrial revolution where mass production replaced the craft industry with adverse effects from the point of view of fit. For example, in the garment industry the decision is made to mass produce a given garment in accordance with the anthropometrics as observed in a given community in a given country. The fit is not applicable to all persons in all places. This modality of production is distinct from the approach of the craftsman who produced custom-built products whose fit was impeccable.

To return to the consideration of mass production of statistical capacity, this modality of assistance would not be the most efficient. In, for example, an Eastern Caribbean context, it would bring together persons of different backgrounds and orientations and expose them to training, some of which will never be used back home if there is no fit between the training and the local circumstances pertaining to the production and use of statistics. This is not to say that a basic level of preparation would not be recommended for all recipients of training as part of the creation of a statistical capacity. In addition to the general training module, a desirable fit will be achieved through training that is country-specific as well as statistical measure-specific. This means that the organizers of the assistance to create a national statistical capacity should be aware of the country's characteristics and economic/social configuration. This will guide the decision to train persons in different areas of statistics so that they are directly productive after the receipt of the technical assistance. An intimate familiarity with the structure of the economy and society will indicate the numbers of economic statisticians, national accounts statisticians and international trade statisticians as opposed to social statisticians that should be produced on a sustainable basis.

The decision to request or absorb technical assistance

The realization of the need for capacity building should come only after an appraisal of the need for data to inform the development planning process. The creation of posts to be filled by bodies is only one step in the creation of a statistical capability. In the case where for the first time statistical series are to be produced, there is need for training in the construction and evaluation of the series to be inaugurated. The preferred modality would be to train the (qualified) officer(s) by way of attachment to a statistical centre of excellence where the trainee will learn at first hand how the statistics are prepared and evaluated from the ground up. Depending on the series, the modality of assistance may be through South-South cooperation or through the North-South training relationship. Bearing in mind the objective of building capacity, a question to be addressed would be how many people should be trained in a given subject matter. Investment in the training of one person is not strategically wise since life is so uncertain. A number of “what ifs” arise, for example, what if the sole recipient of the training were to die suddenly? Or, more probably, what if the recipient of the training obtains another job before repaying the organization with a number of years of service? The strategy for capacity building should take into account the possibility of leakage from the stream of trained personnel and plan for redundancy to fill the breach left by those who would have left the organization.

The effectiveness of the statistical systems to be developed for the purpose of, inter alia, informing policy making

Capacity building in statistics must take into account the policy directives as established by Government and the leaders of industry. This will determine the data set that would be sought for providing answers and metrics on the level and direction of economic and social development. A national statistical system which still eludes many of our countries should be the unit of interest in the development of a statistical capacity. All statistical tasks cannot be accomplished in the Statistical Office and therefore care must be taken to ensure that the statistical capability does not reside only in the Central Statistical Office. Much has been written about the need to de-centralize the production of statistics albeit with strong coordination at the centre of the system. The effectiveness of the statistical system can be tested only if the planning mechanism can make meaningful use of the data and information products that come out of the system. The need for close collaboration between the producers of statistics and the users that include Government, the Private Sector, the Research Community and Households has been signalled very often and with a sense of urgency over the last ten years. The choice to construct effective statistical systems depends on the view of the world of the governments of the region and on their political will to bring those systems into being. The creation of integrated data sets into relational databases will be a sign of the emergence of systems.

Adjusting the education system to produce citizens with a high degree of numeracy and exposure to statistics and the scientific method

Sustainability of the statistical capability would require a steady and predictable stream of trained personnel to be engaged in statistical activities. Sustainability requires that the supply market for such skills be assured. Such assurance should come from the education system that should adjust itself to recognize the need for including statistics and the scientific method in the school curriculum. A sound project proposal presented to the right organizations will almost certainly attract a positive response.

Thanks, but no thanks

Very often, a number of international organizations offer technical assistance to the same country, for example our Caribbean countries. The Statistical Offices are usually the recipients of the offers. In some cases the offer is made to another department that produces a statistical series of interest to the donor. The type of technical assistance being offered is usually tied to the agenda of the donor and may not primarily be offered in furtherance of a national plan for capacity building. This happens easily because there is no national plan for capacity building in statistics or perhaps in other fields of endeavour as well.

Capacity building should be designed to utilize in an optimum manner the resources available or those that can be called up in the interest of the nation, primarily. The decision of our countries to accept technical assistance should therefore be the result of scrutiny of the offers by a regulatory body that has the power to say “Thanks for the offer but this does not fit in with our plans for the development of our resources at the moment” and decline to take up the offer. Very often the technical assistance comes tied to the pursuit of a methodology that is at variance with that of the official statistics framework. Such a methodology could be indicative of a different philosophy that the national unit is being asked to develop in exchange for a few computers. The price for the dissipation of our national resources is too great to be compensated for by a few computers that may not reach the desks of those who need them to do serious statistical work.

Coordination of technical assistance is useful in that it reveals instances of duplication of offer in the case where organizations are not aware of the offers of (competing) agencies. The uncontrolled acceptance of duplicative aid will show up in the lack of capacity to absorb the aid and an inability to justify the effort of scarce national resources. Usually there is an office within the Government Sector that is responsible for coordinating technical assistance. The role of this Unit should be clearly defined and no technical assistance should come on stream without the approval of this Unit.

Value Chain considerations

The national statistical system (where it exists) has a value chain. Each of the component parts of the system has a part to play in the production of statistics. If, for example, there

is a bottleneck at the Printery of a Statistical Office (say), the prior work of the data collectors, the substantive staff at the office and the Publications and Information staff are frustrated as the product has not effectively been produced. Similar to the concept of effective demand, the effective production of statistics is accomplished only when the product is delivered to its publics. This means that it must come out of the printery and be delivered to the user community. It means that all modalities of data delivery must be accomplished before the product becomes valuable. The quality of each operation that is a part of the production chain must be maximized in order to ensure the production of an excellent deliverable.

The value chain consideration brings into focus the importance of every link in the value chain. The field operations in the statistical system are of major importance to the quality of the final output of statistics. This stage is crucial to the collection of quality data and should not feature less in the plans for capacity building. It is necessary to plan for continuous training of the field staff. It is also necessary, as it is for every stage of the statistical process, to ensure that there is adequate staffing to get the job done. Capacity cannot be successfully built if there are inadequate human resources. An overload of work schedules will lead either to poor quality of all work coming out of the affected unit or no work in some areas. If this were to happen, the entire operation of the statistical system would suffer. Capacity building in statistics should therefore be alive to the opportunities to train data collection personnel on a system-wide basis and not only in the statistical office.

Finally, how do we protect our investment in capacity building?

The foregoing arguments, though not expressly making the point, convey the opinion that statistics is a special and scarce field. The investment in capacity building is centered on people. That gives it two attributes.

The first attribute is that the quality of the investment is high, in that it is an investment in human capital. People are developed in the process of building the statistical capacities about which we speak. Like any investment in capital, there must be the maintenance consideration that protects the initial capital investment. The maintenance costs must be taken into account before the investment is made. Issues such as remuneration and career path for these specially trained personnel must be addressed.

The second attribute is the mobility of the persons in whom the investment is made. We should be concerned with preserving these trained resources within the area for which they were trained, allowing, of course, for eventual leakages from the system occasioned by persons who wish to advance their careers or change careers. One important consideration here is to protect the organizations in which these persons work from loss of trained personnel for a few dollars more as offered by a promotion to another Ministry within the Government sector where their skills and training do not come into play. Mobility between jobs in the wide public sector reflects the perception that all jobs are the same throughout the service. Nothing can be farther from the truth when that

statement is evaluated with the Statistical service in mind. One way of protecting against the wasteful transfer of statistics personnel with specialized training into value-subtracting jobs is to de-link the statistical service from the rest of the public service. This is in complete consonance with the requirement of the statistical service to be excellent and to be the nerve centre for decision-making at all levels. Within a new statistical system, ways can be devised to encourage statistical personnel to make a meaningful career of statistics without the loss of a little “acting” allowance that now lures them away from their major area of competence, seriously compromising the investment made in them for the improvement of national statistics.

Protection of the investment

The maintenance and scarce field recognition issues raised in this paper would lead those who plan capacity building to require of those that receive training to extend their new knowledge to others in the organization who can perform a “back-up” function in respect of the capacity renovation that had been entrusted to one person, mainly on account of training budget constraints. The trained person should therefore be required to train others locally.

Epilogue

There is reason to conclude from the Caribbean experience that capacity building in statistics has not been viewed holistically. It may well be that it is viewed as an occasional element of operating expenses whereas it should be designed with a strategic intent. The strategic view would determine:

- What training is required as a priority, given national needs,
- Who should be trained and from which organization,
- How many persons should be trained
- How the trained persons can be retained so that the country can benefit from the training that it facilitated.

The above suggestions amount to the preparation of a plan for capacity building in statistics. Ideally, this should be a national task. If in the short to medium term the national entity charged with the task of preparing such a plan is unable to produce it with excellence, the country may wish to turn to the regional or international community for assistance.

The above should lead to considerations of fundamental change to the conception and management of our statistical apparatus.