

22. MONITORING DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

Drafted by Statistics for Development Division, Secretariat of the Pacific Community

SUMMARY

A lack of accurate and timely data and information was the norm across the region at the start of the 15-year journey towards the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), the result of two inter-related structural impediments: (1) widespread absence of a culture of evidence-based decision-making and monitoring where policy development, programme design and the setting of priorities were not always required to be substantiated; and (2) chronically under-resourced national statistical systems across the Pacific, lacking the financial and human capacity to effectively undertake routine collections of basic statistics, and analyse and translate numbers into policy-relevant and meaningful information.

Much progress has been made across the Pacific, with statistics recognised as a key development policy priority in the Pacific Plan, and with the region experiencing a massive increase in the investment by countries and development partners in statistical collections; particularly for population censuses and thematic household surveys, which provide the basic numbers to develop most of the statistical indicators required to monitor policy performance and development progress. The development of the Ten Year Pacific Statistics Strategy 2011–2020 has provided countries with a clear path for improving statistical capacity and resulted in better strategic planning for statistics. SPC has established the web-based *National Minimum Development Indicator* database, making regular monitoring of development progress much easier, more transparent and effective.

Unlike the situation thirteen years ago, today the Pacific has substantially better coverage of all population-based MDG indicators pertaining to Goals 1 to 6, with coverage rates varying between 75 and 100 per cent. The compilation of economic statistics, including GDP, has also improved in terms of availability and quality.

With access to key development indicators and information no longer a constraint, timeliness of this information remains a huge challenge as “yesterday’s” statistics are of no real use for “today’s” tracking of development progress. Additionally, there are many new and emerging development issues for which no information is available; especially related to the environment. In order to maintain the current data compilation, greater national efforts are required to maintain the capacity and expertise of staff; ensure adequate financial and human resources are available for national statistical systems; and revamp, develop and sustain national administrative databases in key sectors. Additionally, long-term donor support is essential to ensure recent gains in statistical compilations are not lost. The commitment by governments and donors will not only ensure an ongoing flow of statistical information to more effectively and efficiently track progress across all three pillars of development, but also improve the quality of statistics with greater availability of, and access to real-time information.

KEY ISSUES

- **Limited capacity:** Most national statistical systems in the region have limited capacity to compile key economic, social and environment statistics on a regular basis, which are essential for monitoring policy performance and development progress, both in terms of providing statistical benchmarks as well as allow for the setting of realistic goals and targets. This limited capacity is due to a lack of sustainable human and financial resources not only in national statistical agencies, but is even more pronounced in statistical units of major government

departments, like health, education, and agriculture. Most national statistical offices are chronically under-resourced in terms of qualified staff and operational budgets, relying heavily on donor support to finance their larger, intermittent statistical collections like population censuses and household surveys. Compounding this situation for the most part of the past MDG decade, it is worth noting that up until the last 3-5 years, virtually no MDG investments were made in statistics, to assist in developing and maintaining regular collections and compilations of basic development statistics and indicators.

- **Lack of evidence-based decision-making and planning:** Good decision-making is based on concrete facts and thorough analyses. Many decision-makers still remain unaware of the need for or the use of statistics in policy making and planning. Historically, development plans and policy frameworks have not featured performance indicators, bench-marks or targets. Changing this culture to improve routine planning processes in governments requires the existence of a regular supply of quality and timely economic and social statistics.
- **Analysis:** In addition to lacking the financial and human capacity to effectively undertake routine collections of basic statistics, many countries also lack the capacity to analyse data and translate numbers into policy-relevant and meaningful information.
- **Infrastructure:** Many Pacific island countries lack high-quality administrative data sources, such as education and health databases, civil registration records and business registers. Additionally, the sharing and utilization of existing statistical infrastructure is often impeded by poor coordination across government ministries. Although a statistical law can improve coordination, even countries with a statistical law often struggle with coordination. Improving statistical infrastructure will require additional investment from governments and donors.

BACKGROUND

The global agreement of targets and indicators for the Millennium Development Goals represented a breakthrough in monitoring development progress. This agreement brought high-level attention to the importance of compiling statistics in order to monitor development. Five years after signing up to the Millennium Development Goals, Pacific Leaders reinforced the importance of statistical evidence guiding policy development and planning in the *Pacific Plan* in objective 12.4. Pacific Leaders recognized the current information gaps through highlighting the importance of developing a core set of statistics across sectors and building the capacity to compile those statistics. Leaders also called for a greater harmonisation of statistical concepts, systems and classifications, implicitly recognising the importance of having comparable statistics across the region.

At the global level, there has been an increase in the recognition of the importance of statistics. Most recently in the outcome statement of the Rio+20 outcome statement, *The Future we Want*.

History of commitment to statistics in the Pacific

In 2008-2009, PIFS and SPC commissioned a regional stock-take of statistical services by national statistical agencies entitled, *Strengthening Statistical Services through Regional Approaches: a Benchmark Study and Way Forward*, with the view of developing a way forward to strengthen statistics across the region. The review identified major data gaps in several sectors, highlighted deficiencies across different statistical systems, and amongst three options, proposed a greater focus on strengthening statistical services through Regional Approaches, which was endorsed FEMM and SPC's CRGA and Conference in October 2009.

To assist it in developing a long-term strategy to implement this option, SPC, with support from the Asian Development Bank, commissioned a further study to provide a clear pathway forward. The resulting report, *A Pacific Island Region Plan for the Implementation of Initiatives for Strengthening Statistical Services through Regional Approaches, 2010–2020*, also known as the *Ten-Year Pacific Statistics Strategy*, recommended a three-stage approach, highlighting the importance of setting priorities, such as addressing major data gaps and specific system deficiencies first up. The *Pacific Statistics Strategy Action Plan, Phase 1 (2011–2014)* outlined discrete objectives, outputs, purpose and partnerships between key regional statistical service providers at the time (SPC, PFTAC, UNFPA) to ensure data quality, timeliness and improved accessibility are addressed as a matter of priority. The Ten-Year Pacific Statistics Strategy, together with the Benchmarking Study and FEMM and SPC Conference endorsement of Option 2, resulted in the development of a comprehensive and fully costed four-year implementation plan supporting technical assistance and statistical capacity building by SPC. This plan also identified partnerships with other service providers such as PFTAC and UNFPA initially, and more recently also the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which helped in seeking and receiving a four-year funding commitment by AusAID to support implementation of Phase 1.

A major innovation under Phase 1 has been a greater focus on regional governance, with the establishment of a regional steering committee comprising of PIC government statisticians and key financial and technical partners, overseeing implementation of Phase 1 activities of all players. Apart from instilling a tangible sense of regional ownership of the strategy and associated inputs and outcomes, it also has helped improve coordination amongst partner agencies.

ADDRESSING THESE ISSUES – PROGRESS MADE

In terms of major tangible outcomes, **regular monitoring of development progress has become easier and more transparent**, since the development of the SPC MDG database in 2010, which has been incorporated and linked to the *National Minimum Development Indicator* (NMDI) database which the Statistics for Development Division has developed over the past couple of years, with public access available since November 2012 (www.spc.int/nmdi). This database was designed as a ‘one-stop info-shop’ to provide data users with easy access to official statistics and development indicators across key sectors. This is what Pacific Leaders asked for in the original Pacific Plan, and what governments and their development partners need to assess progress and the results and impacts of joint development efforts and investments. It also enables citizens to see the impact of government policy and actions on their own lives. The online NMDI database has 200+ indicators that aim to provide an accurate and comprehensive snapshot of the state of development, in specific sectors in each country.

While this is a major achievement, the website would be a mere empty shell, had Pacific Island countries in collaboration with their development partners not have made massive steps forward over the past 5–7 years, in terms of data collection.

At country level, there has been a noticeable uptake of comprehensive household surveys, such as Household Income and Expenditure (HIES) and Demographic Health Surveys (DHS). These have made significant gains in addressing key data gaps identified by the Regional Benchmarking study and Ten-Year Strategy. These data are required to develop key statistical indicators without which countries cannot track their own development progress, as for many indicators, these surveys are the only data source available. In some cases, there is simply no alternative, as without a regular HIES, countries cannot rebase their CPI (Consumer Price Index) or monitor the economic well-being of their populations as addressed by MDG Goal 1. Such surveys also represent a very costly substitute for deficiencies in administrative databases sitting behind health and education management information systems in many countries – scarce development funds could be more productively used

elsewhere. While most countries' national statistical agencies are able to at least partially fund a basic population and housing census every five or ten years, most household surveys are externally funded, often up to 80% of the total costs, which is unsustainable in the long run. Furthermore, these can divert funding from more urgent statistical development and management challenges, such as sustaining or developing national administrative databases, mainly in the social sectors, such as health and education. The latter, incidentally, is one of the strategic priority areas of Phase 1, with concerted efforts currently underway in vital statistics and education.

Unlike thirteen years ago, today we have substantially better coverage of all population-based MDG indicators, with coverage rates varying between 75 and 100 per cent. While this represents tangible progress in improving Pacific Island statistics, only 22 per cent of all indicators are 'current', which is defined as less than three years old – ranging from 69 per cent for MDG-4 (Child Mortality) and 18 per cent for MDG-1 (Poverty). This is not surprising, since the main data source behind most of these indicators are population censuses and household surveys, which countries only undertake every five to ten years.

Notwithstanding good sectoral coverage, statistics older than three years are of limited value for a regular monitoring of development progress, and for providing an accurate account of today's development situation. The **key challenge** for Pacific island national statistical systems and their development partners is to make concerted efforts to **revamp or develop national administrative databases in key sectors**, such as, but not restricted to civil registration and migration databases, and education and health information systems. These can provide real-time information, and cost a fraction of the very expensive five-yearly household surveys. In pursuing this challenge, SPC's Statistics for Development Division (SDD), in partnership with a consortium of partner agencies such as the University of Queensland HIS Knowledge Hub, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO and the Australian Bureau of Statistics has embarked on an ambitious 4-year programme to revitalise civil registration and vital statistics. In collaboration with AusAID, these agencies are working with SPC's member countries to improve education management information systems, health sector and health information systems, as well as agricultural and rural statistics which are the next targets, in the second half of Phase 1 of the Pacific Statistic Action Plan (2011–2014).