

Fostering African Countries' Statistical Development: Potential Role of the International Statistical Institute

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Abstract

In recent past, African countries have increasingly recognized the need for better statistics as a tool for evidence-based policy and decision making and for a better support to policy implementation, monitoring progress and evaluation of outcomes and impacts of development initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and the Poverty Reduction Strategies.

As a result of this increasing recognition of the importance of statistics, the demand for quality and timely statistics in Africa has seen unprecedented increase. This has challenged already weak and vulnerable National Statistical Systems and presented new opportunities for raising public awareness about statistics and harnessing national and international resources for developing statistical capacities. In response to the above challenges, stakeholders engaged in several initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacity of African countries in this regard.

This paper highlights ongoing statistical capacity building efforts in Africa as well as some potential areas where the International Statistical Institute can contribute to further accelerate the statistical development of African countries. These include the revamping of national and continental statistical associations, support to the statistical training initiatives as well as ongoing efforts in other emerging areas.

Keywords: Statistical development, statistical association, statistical training, mentoring

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1 Introduction

In recent past, African countries and development partners have increasingly recognized the need for better statistics as a tool for evidence-based policy and decision making and for a better support to policy implementation, monitoring progress and evaluation of outcomes and impacts of development initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSS).

As a result of this increasing recognition of the importance of statistics, the demand for quality and timely statistics in Africa has seen unprecedented increase. This increased demand is accompanied by a new culture championing rigorous monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. This has challenged already weak and vulnerable National Statistical Systems (NSSs) and presented new opportunities for raising public awareness about statistics and harnessing national and international resources for developing statistical capacities.

In response to the above challenges, stakeholders engaged in several initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacity of African countries in this regard. These included-and are not limited to - the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in the 1990s, the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity Building in Africa (RRSF), the African Charter on Statistics, and the Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa (SHaSA).

This paper highlights ongoing statistical capacity building efforts in Africa as well as some potential areas where the International Statistical Institute (ISI) can contribute to further accelerate the statistical development of African countries. It first gives a background on recent development in support of statistical capacity building activities in Africa. The following section presents potential areas of contribution to ongoing efforts by the ISI including the revamping of national and continental statistical associations, support to the statistical training efforts, and contribution in other emerging areas. The last section concludes the paper with some suggestions as a way forward.

2 Background on Statistical Development Efforts in Africa

The importance of statistics has been largely underscored in different statistical *fora* including those held under the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) auspices. In fact, it has been stressed, *inter alia*, that good statistics provide a basis for good decision making, help governments identify the best courses of action in addressing problems, are essential to manage the effective delivery of basic services, and are indispensable for accountability and transparency. They are also essential for providing a sound basis for the design, management, monitoring, and evaluation of national policy frameworks such as the PRSS and for monitoring the progress towards the MDGs.

On the other hand, there has been an unprecedented increase in demand for statistics in Africa to inform national development processes during the last decades. Monitoring systems for the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), MDGs, PRSS, sub-regional economic and monetary integration frameworks, and specific sectoral frameworks, have all created a culture championing rigorous monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and evidence-based policy making.

The key issues confronting statistical development in Africa include: inadequate political commitment to statistical development especially at the national level; limited coordination, collaboration, networking and information sharing among stakeholders; inadequate resources (financial, human and technical) for statistical production and use; inadequate infrastructure (physical and statistical) for statistical production; limited institutional capacity; poor data quality; inadequate data

management (archiving, analysis, and dissemination) systems; lack of long-term planning for statistical development; and inappropriate profiles of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in government hierarchy.

Taking cognizance of the above challenges and in response to concerns raised by stakeholders in the African Statistical System in various *fora* about the said challenges and weaknesses, a number of initiatives, frameworks and strategies have been developed during the last decades to improve statistics in support of African countries' development agendas. These include the revamping of the statistical functions within major continental organizations, namely the African Union Commission (AUC), the African Development Bank (AfDB), and UNECA; the African Charter on Statistics; the RRSF; the establishment of the African Statistical Coordination Committee (ASCC)¹; the establishment of the Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa)²; the Africa Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD)³; and the SHaSA. Since 2005, events on statistical development in Africa have been up-scaled, culminating in the continent hosting the 57th Session of the ISI in August 2009, in Durban, South Africa.

3 The International Statistical Institute and African Statistical Development

Since August 2009, the African region has launched a few additional statistical initiatives as a way of leaving a long lasting legacy after the hosting of the ISI in Sub-Saharan Africa for the first time. The ISIBalo Capacity Building Programme and its Young African Statisticians Programme are among these legacies. The launching of the latter initiatives notwithstanding, there is consensus among African stakeholders that the ISI can be engaged more actively in ongoing efforts that have proven to accelerate the pace of Africa's statistical development during the last decades. Presented below are some of the areas in which the ISI can make the difference in supporting Africa statistical renaissance.

3.1 Revamping Statistical Associations in Africa

It is widely recognized that National Statistical Associations (NSAs) can and do play an important role in fostering statistical development in countries across the world. NSAs can play a big role in supporting the development of official statistics and in nurturing and promoting the discipline of statistics in a country. They can help create greater awareness among data users and especially planners, policy makers and decision makers about the strategic importance of statistics in their work, particularly in evidence-based macro-economic management, policy and decision-making, and poverty measurement and monitoring. Moreover, they can influence the nurturing of the statistics profession through the

¹ Following the meeting of the representatives of the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the African Union Commission (AUC), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) held in Tunis, Tunisia, in September 2007 to discuss the coordination of statistical capacity building work in Africa, it was decided that an *African Statistical Coordination Committee* (ASCC) be established with the objective to lead the coordination of statistical activities in Africa. The ASSC works through Working Groups that report to the Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa).

² The Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa) is the subsidiary body of the ECA in charge of statistics. It is one of the seven technical committees established by ECA. Its terms of reference include advising on measures to improve statistical development of ECA member states. It was created in 2007 in replacement the Committee on Development Information (CODI).

³ The Africa Symposia on Statistical Development (ASSD) is a country-led initiative aimed at providing a forum where African countries discuss issues pertaining to their statistical development on a regionally coordinated basis. The Symposia are organized in African countries on a rotational basis. They consider a number of aspects relating to developing sustainable statistical systems, address the challenges of capacity building, and provide a platform for a comprehensive exchange of experiences and best practices among African countries. The first ASSD took place in Cape Town, South Africa in 2006. Since then six editions have taken place going from Kigali, Rwanda in 2007, Accra, Ghana in December 2007 (the 2008 edition), Luanda, Angola in 2009, Dakar, Senegal in 2010, and Cairo, Egypt in 2010.

promotion of the professional independence of NSOs, promotion of statistical standards and professional ethics, and stimulation and promotion of research in statistics and guarding against bad practices or abuse of statistics. NSAs can finally bring together public sector statisticians and academic statisticians from various fields to share statistical knowledge and practical experiences in statistical development in different fields of statistical application through conferences, seminars and workshops, statistical newsletters and journals, web sites, etc.

Despite the recognition of the potential roles and importance of NSAs, a number of African countries have not formed these associations and in many countries where they have been formed, they are dormant and hence ineffective. Several factors constitute hindrances to the activity of NSAs across Africa including lack of⁴: appreciation among the would-be members about the potency of NSAs in the development of national statistics; credible and influential corporate membership such as NSOs, central banks, government organizations, parastatal organizations, etc.; dynamic, dedicated, innovative, inspiring and consistent leadership; effective support from NSOs and national statistical training centres; attractive and engaging programmes and activities; effective regional and international networks – participation in regional and international events including conferences, workshops and programmes; regular information flow and exchange through, among others, Newsletters, Journals or websites; and a national regulatory framework for the statistics profession.

In its quest to reverse the observed trend in inactivity of NSAs, the ASCC is engaged to assist countries strengthen their NSAs or create them where they do not exist. In this connection, several steps have been taken including the identification of existing and dormant NSAs and their publication in the African Statistical Newsletter produced by the African Centre for Statistics (ACS). As of March 2011, 25 NSAs have been identified⁵. The associations met in November 2010 in Cairo, Egypt under the aegis of the ASCC to shape the way forward for the revamping of the African Statistical Association (AFSA) that existed in the 80s but went dormant until now. In fact, several attempts were made to revive the Association in response to several recommendations from the Advisory Board on Statistics in Africa (ABSA)⁶ and the Committee on Development Information (CODI)⁷.

The ISI as the premier association of world statisticians and one of the oldest professional associations in the world can play an important role in the revitalization of NSAs and the AFSA. It can play a key role in improving the visibility of NSAs. This can be done in helping the latter to attract more members through the organization of innovative and high profile activities and programmes where high-level government officials open their events such as workshops, conferences, and their involvement in major events organized by the NSO such as launch of surveys, censuses, and dissemination of results, celebrations of the African Statistics Day etc.

The ISI could also engage with NSOs to advocate for NSOs to include in their budget support for the NSAs. For example, Statistics South Africa has been doing this for the South African Statistical Association. NSOs and other corporate members could also offer to house the Association. In Ethiopia, the University has offered free accommodation to the Ethiopian Statistical Association. In Uganda, the Uganda Statistics Society has been given free offices at Statistics House, the home of the Uganda Bureau of Statistics.

⁴ See Concept note of the meeting of Heads of African National Statistical Associations held in Cairo, Egypt in November 2010.

⁵ See *the African Statistical Newsletter, Volume 5, Issue 1 of March 2011 for the list of National Associations*.

⁶ ABSA was established in 2002 to advise the UNECA secretariat on emerging issues relating to statistical development in Africa, as well as the direction and content of its work programme.

⁷ CODI was a subsidiary organ of UNECA until 2007 when it was replaced by the Statistical Commission for Africa (Stat-Com-Africa).

As NSAs need to have dynamic, dedicated, innovative, inspiring and consistent leadership if they are going to become effective and sustainable, the ISI could help with training in leadership and succession. As much as possible, future leadership should be identified, groomed and mentored. This would include recruitment issues, explaining advantages that accrue to membership of the Association.

The Associations should build effective sub regional, regional and international networks with other professional associations and with development partners that support statistical development in countries. The ISI could offer affiliate membership to African NSAs to allow them benefit from the network of international associations under its purview. Support in terms of publication of newsletters, journals and development of websites is also welcomed.

Finally, the ISI can help NSAs to develop national regulatory frameworks that, *inter alia*, require professional statisticians to register with the Association and for the Association to ensure that they follow professional ethics in their work or else they are penalized.

3.2 Support to Ongoing Statistical Training Efforts

One of the main challenges facing African countries in producing quality statistical information is inadequate human resources and up-to-date skills. As a response to the challenges posed to African countries in this particular area, stakeholders with special interest in the African continent launched several initiatives and engaged in various activities aimed at enhancing the capacity of African countries in this regard. These included and are not limited to - the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st century (PARIS21) Task Force on Statistical Training and Human Resources, the StatCom-Africa Working Group on Statistical Training and the ASCC Working Group on Statistical Training.

There was consensus among stakeholders that the observed multiplicity of groups and initiatives on statistical training was more likely to lead to an inefficient use of scarce resources and duplication of efforts in the pursuit of the reinforcement of capacities of African NSSs in this area. Therefore, under the RRSF, an African Group on Statistical Training (AGROST) was set up with the aim to coordinate statistical training activities and initiatives on the continent.

The main objective of the AGROST is to ensure the coordination of activities and initiatives in support of statistical training and human resources development in Africa. This coordination takes place at three different levels namely ongoing activities and initiatives, project planning, as well as alignment of Technical and Financial Partners' (TFP) support to statistical training in Africa. Specific objectives of the Group include centralizing information on initiatives and programmes in support of statistical training and ensure their monitoring and a permanent forum for the exchange of information and best practices on statistical training and human resources development in African NSSs. The scope of the work of the Group includes both initial training and continuous learning (On-the-job-training). The Group is made of representatives from regional statistical training centers (RSTCs), statistical training centers (STCs), universities, NSOs, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and TFPS. African institutions membership is based on both geographical and linguistic representation. Its modus operandi includes at least one face-to-face meeting every year preferably in the margins of existing yearly statistical *fora* on the continent in addition to electronic exchanges.

Since its official recognition by StatCom-Africa in 2010, AGROST activities included the following: the establishment of a mechanism of coordination and collaboration among members; the preparation of a compendium of African statistical training centers (Institutes and university departments) and programs by different levels of initial training; analysis of the training components

within existing National Strategies for the Development of Statistics in Africa (NSDSs) or NSDSs under development; broadening of the network of advanced statistical training institutes in Africa and fostering the exchange between the RSTCS and STCs in NSOs; the setting up and maintenance of a virtual portal for the exchange of information on statistical training; the preparation of capacity assessments and coordination strategies to address the identified gaps; and harmonization and standardization of qualifications offered by different STCs.

Building on the tremendous momentum created by, *inter alia*, the hosting of the 57th session of the ISI in sub-Saharan Africa, the ISI engaged into discussions with African stakeholders to explore ways of supporting ongoing statistical capacity building activities through training. In doing so the natural channel was the AGROST. Therefore, discussions took place in Cairo, Egypt in November 2010 during a meeting of the AGROST as well as in the margins of the UN Statistical Commission in March 2011.

Following the above exchanges, it was agreed that the collaboration and partnership between the ISI and Africa shall be built around the following principles: A focus on training of trainers rather than attempting to deal with education at large; focus on all statistical areas deemed necessary for advancing the statistical development of the continent with special emphasis on official statistics; the use of existing channels for capacity building rather than attempting to create new ones; the development of centers of excellence in a longer term; covering the entire continent; and ensuring that the planning, execution and evaluation of the said activities be monitored from within Africa.

During the discussions with African stakeholders, the ISI proposed to develop and conduct leadership workshops, among others activities. These leadership workshops cover among others the following topics: statistical principles, legislation, governance, statistical practices, dissemination, management of NSOs, small or new developing NSOs, independence of statistical offices, integration of agricultural data into the national systems, etc. The first workshop already took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in March 2011 covering African English speaking countries.

Another area of interest is the training of teachers. In fact, several assessments of statistical training commissioned by the AGROST have pointed out to this as a major area that hampered statistical capacity building on the continent. To optimally cooperate with existing initiatives, the ISI needed to apply for membership within AGROST and to take up its responsibilities there. This was agreed upon by AGROST members during the Maputo meeting in April 2011 and the ISI was welcomed as an observer until the official membership to be made during the forthcoming StatCom-Africa meeting in January 2012.

The ISI can also develop *short courses* in a variety of statistical disciplines relevant to Africa. This is in line with one of the major components of the AGROST's Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA) that has provision for the preparation and administration of short courses and modules in different areas of statistics. These courses will be offered in specific RSTCs and STCs to be defined by AGROST with a view to create centers of excellence in the future.

3.3 ISibalo Capacity Building Programme

As mentioned before, one of the legacy of the hosting of the ISI in sub-Saharan Africa is the ISibalo Capacity Building Programme and especially its Young Statisticians Sub-programme. The vision of ISibalo is to create a completely literate society in Africa by creating awareness about the role of statistics and advocating for statistical literacy through the mentoring of professionals and training of learners, educators and the general public in statistics. In order to meet this vision, the Programme's

objectives include: the development of the expertise of Africans in the core areas of the statistical production value chain; increasing the number of Africans participating in scientific research; creating opportunities for scientific research on matters of Africa's development; integrating all country-based statistical capacity building initiatives and programmes in Africa; and addressing African statistical capacity imbalances due to socio-political dispensations and legacies. This Programme is led by South Africa and benefit from the contribution of the African statistical fraternity.

One of the backbones of the ISlballo programme is the Young African Statisticians sub-programme. A Young African Statistician is defined as an individual who is young (in age, less than 35 years) and studying or has graduated with a statistics degree and is working or studying in a statistics related field. Through bi-annual ISlballo Young Statisticians Conferences (IYASCs), young statisticians in Africa are provided with a platform to prepare for meaningful and competent participation at international statistical *fora*. Young statisticians from Africa are given the opportunity to present papers covering a wide spectrum of pertinent topics during these bi-annual conferences. These conferences are made possible by the financial and technical support of statistical development partners in Africa such as the AfDB, UNECA, and the United Nations Population Funds (UNFPA) to mention but a few. While IYASCs have been the mainstay of the Young African Statisticians sub-programme, plans are afoot to help African countries develop and implement country-specific ISlballo Capacity Building Chapters.

As can be observed from the above description, there is certainly an important role to be played by the ISI in support of the ISlballo programme. In this regard, the ISI can sponsor partnerships between statisticians in developed countries and their African counterparts. The key idea is to help tertiary students in receiving substantial help from qualified professionals without being forced to leave the continent. In the past it too often occurred that bright African students would be given scholarships from prestigious foreign universities but did not return to Africa, hence contributing substantially to the brain-drain.

ISI shall also endeavor to forge mentoring initiatives between African Young statisticians and their counterparts from developed countries. Exposure of young African statisticians in international *fora* is one of the ways that can be used to support the ongoing initiative on the continent.

4 Conclusions and way forward

The last decade has seen unprecedented improvement in statistical capacity building activities on the continent under the aegis of the ASCC. Given the various areas covered by such activities, it is clear that the ISI can effectively play a role in a number of them including the revamping of NSAs for the reasons presented in this document. Moreover, the ISI can play a role in fostering the activities and programmes of the AGROST. This can take the form of involvement in the development of training modules to be used in training centres; leadership training for heads of NSOs; facilitate the networking of African training centres with those outside the continent; and harmonization and standardization of curricula.

In order to help NSAs build effective sub regional, regional and international networks with other professional associations and with development partners, the ISI can consider giving a status of affiliates. It can also support them providing to their members regular and free information flow and exchange among others by publishing newsletters, journals and develop websites.

The ISI is already engaged in a number of areas namely leadership training for English speaking African countries. This initiative should be extended to other areas and cover all countries across the continent.

The ISI could support the ISIBALO capacity building programme especially the Young Statisticians by facilitating their exposure to international gatherings including the ISI side events and sessions.

It is encouraging to see that the support to ongoing statistical development efforts by the ISI is in line with the AGROST work. With the ISI being a member of the AGROST, it is expected that it can tap into the partnership offered by this StatCom-Africa working group to mobilize the needed technical and financial resources to effectively support the African continent in statistical capacity building.

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