

Statistical Advocacy Tools Found Effective in a Developing Country

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I. Introduction

National Statistical Systems (NSS) whether centralized or decentralized, if they are to be relevant, must ensure that the statistics they produce are well understood, and as widely and properly used as possible by stakeholders, be it the government, the academics, the civil society or the general public. However, the promotion of the generation, dissemination and use of quality statistics is not an easy task even for developed economies, and definitely not in developing countries. Statistics produced in developing countries do not generally follow an integrated program of data generation and have limited accessibility, which sometimes lead to the misuse, misinterpretation, or under utilization of the data thereby yielding low returns on investments in statistics. Thus, there is an urgent need for the NSSs to put in greater efforts to advocate for the proper understanding and use of the statistics and indicators, enhance accessibility, promote the creation and sharing of statistical knowledge, and respond more effectively to increasing demand for quality and timely statistics.

This has been the challenge faced by the Philippine Statistical System (PSS) in the new millennium that put to test its strength and capability to adapt to the constantly evolving demands of data users and stakeholders. As the overall coordinator of the decentralized statistical system in the country, the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB) has been in the forefront in raising the awareness and appreciation of the public on the importance and the proper use of statistics.

Since its creation in 1987, the NSCB has established coordination mechanisms and statistical advocacy tools to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the PSS. Some of these tools have worked, while others have not been as effective.

This paper will share the Philippine experience on statistical advocacy tools and strategies found effective and relevant in the generation, promotion and use of quality statistics in a developing country like the Philippines.

II. NSCB's Role in the Decentralized Statistical System

As the highest policymaking and coordinating body on statistical matters in the Philippines, the NSCB has been in the forefront of statistical activities, taking a major role in the promotion and development of statistics in the country, as well as at the regional and global levels. It coordinates the process of data generation, dissemination, and utilization through various mechanisms aimed at promoting a more efficient and effective statistical system that provides reliable, relevant and accessible information to stakeholders of statistics in the country and in the global community. Under Executive Order No. 121, NSCB is mandated among others to: a) promote and maintain an efficient statistical system in government; b) formulate policies on all matters relating to government statistical operations; c) establish appropriate mechanisms for statistical coordination at the regional, provincial and city levels; d) approve the Philippine Statistical Development Program (PSDP); e) allocate the statistical responsibilities among government agencies by designating the statistics to be collected by them, including their periodicity and content; f) develop, prescribe and maintain appropriate framework for the improvement of statistical coordination; g) prescribe uniform standards and classification systems in government statistics (see [1]). To carry out these functions, the NSCB creates

subject-matter Inter-Agency Committees (IACs), Technical Committees (TCs) and Technical Working Groups (TWGs) as fora to address improvements in data production, dissemination, communication and utilization, b) evaluate methodologies and concepts of general purpose and sectoral statistics, and c) address improvements in various dimensions of data quality. Steering Committees and Local Organizing Committees are also created to provide overall direction and guidance in the preparation of the PSDP as well as in the conduct of various statistical advocacy activities of the PSS. (see [2])

III. Statistical Advocacy Tools and Mechanisms

Over the years, the NSCB has implemented a variety of mechanisms in the promotion and greater utilization of statistical information and services and foster generally accepted dissemination practices attuned to the needs of users and various stakeholders as follows:

3.1 Development of the Government Statistics Accessibility Program (GSAP)

The GSAP was developed by the NSCB in 1997, primarily aimed to bridge the gap between the users and producers of statistics. As such, it serves as the overall guiding framework in improving the accessibility of statistical information and services in the PSS (see [3]). Various mechanisms and strategies instituted by the NSCB and the PSS to implement the GSAP include among others: a) the development of systems, products and services that provide more and better access of users to statistics which include the establishment of one-stop shops for information, development of web and CD-ROM based interactive and multi-media forms of dissemination; and b) improvement of coordination on information dissemination thru formulation of policies and standards, foremost of which is the General Standards on Statistical Information and Dissemination (GSSID) as a primary guide in the dissemination of statistical information produced by the PSS (see [4]). It is a mechanism of the PSS to set appropriate and acceptable standards of accuracy, integrity, timeliness and accessibility of government statistics.

3.2 National Statistical Information Centers (NSIC) as One-Stop Shop of Statistical Information and Services

The NSIC is a one-stop public service arm established by the NSCB to make statistical information more accessible to a wider scale of clients, data users and the general public. For more than two decades now, the NSCB has steadfastly propagated the use of statistics available in the PSS and in organizing them into customer-oriented statistical products and services. The NSIC offers the following services: frontline/statistics inquiry; bookshop and subscription to publications and data; library services; technical services; and media services. (see [2]) The NSIC was established in cooperation with SIDA and Statistics Sweden.

Aside from the NSIC Central Office located in Makati City in the National Capital Region, local branches are also present in nine regions where there are NSCB Regional Units. At the provincial level, an arrangement has been institutionalized with local government units where they fund the operations and maintenance of their provincial NSIC branches while the NSCB provides the necessary technical support. Currently, there are four provincial branches operated by the provincial government. An additional provincial branch in the Visayas Islands was to be launched in May this year.

3.3 Conduct of the National Convention on Statistics

The National Convention on Statistics (NCS) is by far, considered the biggest and most successful statistical advocacy activity of the PSS. It was first conducted in 1978, spearheaded by the NSCB to: (a) provide a forum for exchanging ideas and experiences in the field of statistics and for discussing recent statistical developments and prevailing issues and problems of the PSS; and (b) elicit the cooperation and support of stakeholders towards a more responsive statistical system. The NCS is conducted periodically once every three years, as approved by the NSCB Executive Board in 2000. The 11th NCS held in October 2010 drew in 1,098 statisticians and professionals in allied fields from the government, private sector and the academe. The event coincides with the opening of the National Statistics Month (NSM) celebration in October and the holding of the Statistical Information

Management Exhibition (SIMEX), a commercial exhibition showcasing various exhibitor's information management products, facilities and services, consisting mostly of firms from the private sector.

The NCS features two plenary sessions tackling the most relevant and emerging topics in the country, as well as conduct of simultaneous scientific sessions of invited and contributed papers that dwell on various statistical topics. In the last NCS in 2010, 38 sessions were held for the presentation of at least 100 papers. The Convention also highlighted panel discussions on various topics. The NCS also features lecture and tutorial sessions sponsored by the Philippine Statistical Association, Inc., the country's professional organization on statistics in collaboration with the academe.

In 2007, a Student-Faculty Conference was added to the NCS, participated in by students and faculty of statistics, spearheaded by the country's institutes/schools of statistics. The NCS also features lecture and tutorial sessions sponsored by the Philippine Statistical Association, Inc., (PSA) the country's professional organization on statistics. (see [2])

3.4 Celebration of the National Statistics Month

In recognition of the pivotal and crucial role of statistics in policy formulation, planning and decision making in both the government and the private sectors, no less than then President Corazon Aquino signed Presidential Proclamation No. 647 in 1990, declaring the observance of National Statistics Month (NSM) in October of each year. The NSM was aimed as a step towards promoting, enhancing and instilling nation-wide awareness and appreciation of the importance and value that statistics provide the different sectors of the Philippine society, while at the same time insuring the support of the public at large in improving and enhancing the quality and standard of statistics in the country. (see [2])

The NSCB serves as the over-all coordinator to ensure the success of the various programs to be undertaken during the NSM. Various activities such as statistical fora, contests and exhibits, radio/TV interviews, hanging of streamers, and information and education campaign (IEC) are featured in the yearly NSM celebration. In the different regions and provinces, opening programs and motorcades are usually held to kick off the NSM celebration, with the Regional Statistical Coordination Committees (RSCCs), NSCB Regional Divisions and NSO Regional/Provincial Offices coordinating with and providing support to other agencies.

Since the initial celebration of the NSM in 1990, the event has progressively become a showcase of unity and cooperation among the members of the PSS and a forum for tackling issues and development affecting the country's statistical system. Each year, the celebration is focused on a theme developed along the concerns of a department or an agency, which also serves as host of the NSM opening ceremony. Since its proclamation, all major statistical agencies in the PSS, have served as host. Various departments and national government agencies in the country have hosted NSM celebrations.

The closing ceremony was hosted by the PSA until 2001, when the *Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas* (BSP) started hosting the event, which coincides with the BSP-Department of Education Oratorical Contest among fourth year high school students in the country.

To give recognition to outstanding participation in the NSM celebration, an NSM Awards System has been instituted by the NSCB since 2003, for best NSM activity by category, e.g. Best Statistical Forum, Best Statistical Exhibit, etc. It is also a means of providing incentive to participating individuals and agencies in the observance of NSM and a way of encouraging wider involvement in the NSM celebration. In 2009, the 1st NSM Media Awards was launched to recognize the important role of media practitioners who have made significant contributions in promoting, popularizing, and using statistics in information dissemination and other relevant purposes. Invited to serve as judges are advocacy champions for statistics.

3.5 Conduct of Statistics Congress at the Subnational level

At the subnational level, three statistical conferences on statistics are held every year: 1) The Northern Mindanao Regional Statistics Congress; 2) The Mindanao Statistical Congress; and, 3) The Western Visayas Statistics Congress. These conferences provide a forum to present and discuss emerging statistical issues particularly at the subnational level organized by the NSCB Regional Units and local partners. Other regional congresses are in the planning stage. (see [6])

3.6 Publication of Advance Release Calendar (ARC) and Provision of Metadata

The ARC is a mechanism designed by the NSCB to promote transparency, timeliness, and accessibility of government statistics by providing advanced information to the public as to what and when the statistics will become available. It gives the specific dates on when the various statistics will be released by the NSCB, major statistical agencies and other government agencies for the benefit of the data users. The NSCB maintains the ARC for designated statistics on its website which is linked to the respective agency website. (see [2])

As espoused under the GSAP system, the NSCB provides the metadata of economic and social indicators on the website to enhance users' awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the data. The metadata include concepts and definitions, purpose, coverage, units of measure, frequency or periodicity of data, documentation of methodology, sources of the data and other attributes of data quality.

3.7 Improving Access to Statistics through the Internet

The NSCB went online by establishing its website in May 1997. Today, the NSCB website offers the following services: 1) Online databases of time series of economic, social and environment data, standard classification systems, directory of government statistical services and online public access catalogue; 2) Really Simple Syndication (RSS) Feeds of the latest information released by the NSCB; 3) Abridged Mobile Edition of the NSCB Website for users of smartphones, PDAs and other mobile handheld devices; 4) E-Newsletter containing news, data updates, press releases and announcements; and 5) Feedback mechanism to gather comments/opinions as well as inquiries of various users. Users can also order and subscribe to statistical publications online as well as send inquiries and feedback. (see [2])

3.8 Advocacy thru Various Publications and Information Materials

As the overall coordinator of the PSS, the NSCB regularly packages and disseminates statistical publications and CD-ROMs containing official statistics produced by the different agencies in government, e.g. *Philippine Statistical Yearbook*, *Countryside in Figures*, etc. The NSCB also produces user-friendly information materials as a way of popularizing statistics to facilitate easy understanding among readers, such as: a) "*Statistically Speaking*", a web-only article, and a must-read section of the NSCB website, which contains popularized and laymanized statistics; b) **Factsheets** showcasing relevant data/indicators through brief analyses and graphical representations, ; and c) **Statistics Series** presenting in-depth analysis of the latest indicators with corresponding charts and statistical tables. (see [2])

3.9 Connecting with the Media

Press Conferences - To actively involve the media as partners in communicating statistics to the general public, they are invited in various forums and specifically, in press conferences conducted by the NSCB. The NSCB conducts a press conference to announce the national accounts estimates every quarter, and a press conference on poverty statistics every three years. Starting 2009, press conferences on the subnational accounts (the Gross Regional Domestic Product) were conducted in the various regions of the country simultaneously in July, which attracted a huge turnout from the media. This resulted not only in terms of fostering better relationships with the media but also in enhancing public appreciation of statistics at the subnational (regional) level.

Statistical Appreciation Seminars for the Media - To familiarize the media with basic statistical methodologies and indicators and enhance their capacity in writing stories behind the figures released by the PSS, the NSCB spearheads the conduct of Statistical Appreciation Seminars for the Media. This activity also aims to enhance NSCB's understanding and awareness of media's needs, insights and perspectives on statistics.

Media Coverage of NSCB's statistics - The NSCB's efforts in communicating statistics resulted in wider coverage in the mass media, particularly in daily newspapers where they feature statistics in news articles or in opinion sections. In 2005, when the NSCB started monitoring media coverage on statistics it produced and statistical news it released, there were 141 citations of NSCB statistics in newspapers and on TV. This increased to 406 in 2009 and to 615 in 2010, almost two citations per day. From January to April this year, media citations totaled 277 equivalent to 45 percent of previous whole year's count. The print and broadcast media have also shown greater appreciation of the need to interview NSCB/PSS officials to give a better perspective of the stories behind the statistics. At the subnational level, local newspapers have likewise appreciated using statistics in their articles, especially on the release of the gross regional domestic product every July as cited earlier. (see [6])

3.10 Linking with Data Producers and Data Users

As the coordinator of the PSS, the NSCB works closely with data producers in the government. Cooperation takes place in the form of undertaking joint projects, participating in interagency and technical committees, and holding of dissemination forum.

Engagement with users of statistics on the other hand, takes place in a number of different ways, among others: **a) Users' Forums** - The NSCB and the other PSS agencies regularly conduct Users' Forums to solicit comments and feedback from users for the improvement of official statistics. This activity also serves as a way to ensure that proposed improvements are viable to achieve useful results. Users are invited to these forums as participants or as discussants/resource persons. **b) Focal Point of Statistics** - In collaboration with the PSS agencies, the NSCB publishes a directory of statistical information and service providers in the Philippines facilitating the search for information by users of statistics. It provides information on who provides what with the contact persons and contact numbers/addresses. **c) Appreciation Seminars** - Aside from communicating statistics to its stakeholders, the NSCB also holds seminars to explain and make users appreciate the processes behind the production of certain statistical indicators, including their limitations. More importantly, these appreciation seminars serve as venues where users are provided insights on how to interpret and analyze statistics.

3.11 Hosting of International Conferences/Celebration of First World Statistics Day

Cooperation with the international statistical community is enhanced by the PSS under the leadership of the NSCB, through sharing of experiences, practices and expertise on statistics, as well as adherence to international commitments, and adoption of internationally recognized statistical principles, declarations and best practices. The Philippine Government, through the NSCB has hosted various international conferences on statistics, in collaboration with the UN and other international organizations and bodies. These include among others, the International Conference on Poverty Statistics (ICOPS) held in October 2004; International Conference on MDG Statistics (ICMDGS) in October 2007 and the 3rd Global Forum on Gender Statistics in October 2010. This year, the PSS through the NSCB will host the Inter-Agency Expert Group Meeting on MDG Statistics and the 2nd ICMDGS in October, in collaboration with the UN Statistics Division. (see [2])

In the Philippines, the NSCB led the nationwide observance of the global celebration of First World Statistics Day (WSD) on 20 October 2010. (see [7]) Through the endorsement of the NSCB, the Office of the President issued a Presidential Proclamation on the nationwide observance of the WSD in the country. (see [8])

3.12 Monitoring the Uses of Statistics

Amidst resource constraints, it is important that only statistics that are useful and are in fact used in decision-making be generated by the PSS. Toward this end, it is recognized that statistical capacity building efforts extend to the users of statistics and not only among the producers. It is in this area where the admirable efforts of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21) at statistically capacity building of national statistical systems all over the world can be extended: from capacitating the data producers to capacitating the data users. The NSCB has recently

been advocating for data users to actually demonstrate their use of statistics to improve the relevance of the NSCB and the PSS.

IV. Concluding Remarks

One of the most important core values of the NSCB as an organization is professional integrity, wherein we require complete honesty, trust and transparency in everything we do. (see [2]) Thus, establishing and maintaining the trust of users and stakeholders in our statistics and services are recognized as essential ingredients of our work. We have always strived to live up to these principles. While the statistics that we produce are used by our policy makers for program implementation and monitoring, it is a great challenge that other users and the general public put their trust in these statistics, drawing attention to and providing information about people's lives. We believe that in this respect, statistical advocacy is most important.

Effective statistical advocacy embraces efforts to provide accessible, timely and reliable information as well as promote their understanding and use. Advocacy efforts should be an on-going process, as their effects cumulate over time. And so, the best practice is ... promote, promote, promote. One thing is certain, as lead coordinator in the PSS, we shall continue to achieve and promote better statistics and statistical analysis available to and used by decision makers and the civil society through effective coordination strategies and mechanisms.

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