

# Autonomy of a National Statistical Agency: The Ugandan Experience<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many countries (both developed and developing) have been assessing performance of their National Statistical Systems to answer questions about continued relevance of their missions, how they are performing vis-à-vis user needs especially for evidence-based policy and decision-making, and how to convince governments that statistics are important and adequate resources are needed to build statistical capacity and produce, manage and use data for the said and other purposes.

These assessments have triggered statistical reforms in many countries of the world aimed at enhancing the performance of National Statistical Systems (NSSs). In some countries, these reforms have been partial for example when some parts of the statistical legislations and/or regulations accompanying the legislation have been revised, or they have been more comprehensive, such as when a new statistical legislation has been written. The key driver of these reforms in developed countries seems to be the need to enhance the credibility of official statistics while in developing countries, the key driver is the need to enhance the effectiveness of the NSS by:

- ensuring that an up-to-date and congenial national Statistics Act underpins statistical operations and activities;
- creating adequate links of statistical systems to policy processes and thereby making data relevant to today's issues;
- aligning statistical production with national planning and budget timetable such as reviews of the PRSs and annual national budgets;
- raising the profile of statistics and the National Statistics Offices (NSOs);
- strengthening arrangements for inter-institutional co-ordination, collaboration, networking and information sharing among data producers; and
- ensuring that the statistics sector is able to monitor adequately the effectiveness of the public sector reforms.

There is a trend toward making the National Statistics Office (NSO) autonomous as part of the said reforms. Different models of autonomy are in vogue, ranging from the Australian model that vests a lot of power in the Chief Executive of the NSO to a corporate model which vests power in a Board of Directors of the NSO and other models in-between. The corporate model which has been adopted in a number of African countries establishes the NSO as a corporate entity (can sue and be sued) with a Board of Directors as its governing body. Uganda adopted this model in 1998 and a number of countries in the region have benefited from the Ugandan experience. In this paper, we briefly describe Uganda's experience with autonomy of its NSO, present key lessons learnt and continuing challenges.

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## 2. UGANDA BUREAU OF STATISTICS AS AUTONOMOUS GOVERNMENT AGENCY

### Short history

For much of the 1970s and 1980s, there was general decline in statistical production in Uganda and Africa in general. This decline was caused by poor economic performance and by low priority successive Governments attached to statistics as well as general lack of appreciation of the role and importance of statistical data and information in society. As result, the Department of Statistics in the then Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development and the national statistical system and services became weak, vulnerable and unable to meet user requirements. Starting from early 1990s, the Government of Uganda realized the need for reforming the national statistical system, raising the profile of statistics and making provision of statistical data more efficient and responsive to user needs. Government took a strategic decision to de-link statistical production from the civil service (which is not known for efficiency) by establishing the Uganda Bureau of Statistics in 1998 as an autonomous agency of government. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics was established to act “*as the principal data collecting and disseminating agency responsible for co-ordinating, monitoring and supervising the National Statistical System*”<sup>2</sup>. The Bureau started operations in 1999 with the appointment of its Board of Directors.

### Board of Directors

The Bureau has a small technocratic Board of Directors of seven (7) members comprising eminent professionals representing main data users, data producers and research and training institutions in the country. The policy roles of the Boards are well defined vis-à-vis the management roles of the Bureau and its Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The specific responsibilities of the Board include both outward looking focus and the focus on the Bureau as follows:

#### Outward looking focus:

- promoting statistics and their use,
- making the case for appropriate levels of funding,
- advising government on all matters related to official statistics,
- promoting and protecting the credibility, integrity and impartiality of official statistics.
- promoting and protecting professional independence of the Bureau,
- promoting the coordination of the NSS.
- meeting with key users on a regular basis to judge their satisfaction with the statistical service they receive, and
- investigating complaints with respect to the quality and integrity of official statistics.

#### Focus on the Bureau involves:

- setting policies on organization and management of the Bureau,
- approving the structures, corporate plans, work plans and budgets of the Bureau,
- approving terms and conditions of service of staff,
- staff recruitment, development and motivation,
- monitoring compliance with best practices and international recommendations on production of official statistics.

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<sup>2</sup> Uganda Bureau of Statistics Act, 1998

## **Staffing and Remuneration**

The Board successfully completed the restructuring of the former Department of Statistics into a Bureau with a lean and manageable structure. The professional to non-professional staff ratio is about 1:3. Of the professional staff, about 20 percent are females and a little less than 80% have had post-graduate training (about 50% have a Masters degree). The Board gives priority to appointment to qualified women. When the Bureau was established, the Board did not want to take on baggage from the former Department of Statistics. So, it advertised all posts in the Bureau and recruited all staff on merit (with no influence and especially political influence). This enabled the Bureau to take on highly qualified staff. Additional staff are hired on a temporary basis as and when need for doing so arises. The Board also put in place attractive and competitive terms and conditions of service for staff and established a sound financial management system for the Bureau's resources. It also approved a Corporate Plan for the Bureau and a National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS).

## **Financing of the Bureau**

The Bureau is jointly funded by Government and donors. Government is responsible for staff salaries and wages as well as core programmes of the Bureau. The budget for the Bureau is appropriated by Parliament under a dedicated vote. Donors have been assisting the Bureau with capacity building and with part-funding for major censuses and surveys. It should be mentioned that the donor support to the Bureau is well coordinated and within the context of the NSDS which was launched in 2006. With coordination of this support, it is expected that the support will have greater impact.

## **Strategies for Development of National Statistics**

The Bureau uses a number of strategies to develop the NSS. Key strategies include:

- creating general awareness about the role and importance of statistics to society;
- improving management processes;
- expanding technical knowledge and skills base;
- establishing mechanisms for enhanced partnerships, networking and sharing of information including a donor forum;
- proactively promoting use of “best practices” in data production across the NSS;
- assisting government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) as well as districts to build their own capacity for statistical production and use;
- mainstreaming data users in the NSS and encouraging them to play proactive and up-stream roles in the development of the system;
- building a comprehensive and user-friendly national statistical databank; and
- designing and sticking to a comprehensive dissemination programme including a "release calendar" for several economic indicators e.g. inflation, quarterly GDP, Producer Price Indices, Indices of Industrial Production, Construction Sector Indices and strict deadlines for dissemination of household survey data.

## **How has autonomy helped the image and fortunes of statistics in Uganda?**

There is ample evidence to show that autonomy of the Uganda Bureau of Statistics has very much improved the image and fortunes of statistics in the country in a way that was not possible when statistics was a mainstream government department. In particular, autonomy has helped in the following ways:

- For official statistics to be used to assess the state of the nation and judge the performance of government, it is crucial that they are not only independent, credible and impartial but also that they are demonstrably free from real or perceived government influence. Autonomy has helped improve public perception about official statistics,
- The Board introduced changes in mindsets of the statistical personnel and new and more innovative ways of doing things away from “business as usual”. Government bureaucratic rigidities – rules, procedures and work culture - make introduction of changes and innovation in ministries and departments difficult even where governments aim to cultivate a new culture of managing for results.
- The Board was able to approve and successfully negotiate with government improved terms and conditions of service for staff. This has led to improved staff motivation and retention as well as sustainability of statistical activities.
- Bureaucracy was cut from the statistical operations, needed changes including change in mindset, better motivating and retaining staff through improved schemes of service, etc. was done. For instance as a government statistics department, decisions on staff (the main resource of any organization) were usually handled by the parent ministry in a slow, unresponsive and very bureaucratic way. In addition, the department was burdened by large numbers of unproductive staff who could not be disposed of and who added significantly to staff costs.
- The Bureau has its own budgets approved by Parliament. Previously when it was a department within the Ministry, its budget was part of the budget of the Ministry and the releases of funds were usually delayed by the bureaucracy at the ministry and in some cases, not all the money due was released;
- When it was a government department, the head of the Statistics Department was appointed on a permanent basis by the Civil Service and usually on promotion from a lower post. Now there is competitive appointment of the Chief Executive Officer of the Bureau and this has led to better leadership of the office. Moreover, the appointment is on fixed-term performance contract. This has enhanced performance of the CEO.
- The Board negotiated construction of a state-of-the-art complex for housing the Bureau and this has greatly improved the working environment, raised the profile of statistics, donned the skyline of Kampala and has become yet another landmark in the city. This state-of-the-art complex is the most visible expression yet of government commitment to statistical development in the country.
- Under the NSDS, the Bureau has up-scaled the level of statistical activities in MDAs through advocacy and the development of Sector Strategies for Development of Statistics (SSDSs). Accounting officers in the MDAs have been mobilized to include budget lines for statistics in their respective MDA budgets, a development that would not have been possible if the Bureau was still a Statistics Department under the ministry and facing the same funding challenges. All statistical developments in the MDAs are now done within the context of the Sector Strategic Plans for Statistics.
- Statistics has been recognized as one of the enabling sectors under the National Development Plan and it indeed has a chapter in this important planning framework for the country.

### **3. SOME KEY LESSONS LEARNT**

The Bureau can boast of 12 years as a learning, innovating and statistical capacity building in the country. During this period, a number of lessons have been learnt about what works and what does not work and why. The following are key lessons learnt:

### **Autonomy is not a “silver bullet”**

Making the NSO autonomous is not sufficient to engender efficient statistical service – autonomy is not a “silver bullet” but rather, the first step in effecting statistical reforms and changes to make the NSOs more effective and efficient. The Board can make or break the autonomous NSO. If it is to succeed, it has to be hands-on at least in the early years of the autonomy of the NSO, and has to champion change at the NSO. It has to make sure that staff are recruited on merit, are motivated and developed. In particular, it has to ensure that an appropriate CEO is selected. And very importantly, the Board should know its boundaries vis-à-vis management. Otherwise there will be recurrent conflict about issues of mandate and direction.

### **Size, nature and function of the Board**

There is value in having a small, focused and technocratic Board. For a start such a Board is easier to appoint. Secondly, it is easier for such a Board to cohere. It is important that members of the Board represent key stakeholder constituencies including the private sector, the civil society sector, research and training institutions, the Central Bank and the parent ministry. However, they should be appointed in their individual capacity to ensure continuity. The Statistics Act should be very specific not only on the composition of the Board but also on the qualifications for members of the Board. This is crucial to ensure that pedestrians are not appointed to the Board. The primary responsibility of the Board should be to promote and preserve the professional independence and administrative autonomy of the NSO as well as enhancing its professionalism.

### **Starting on a clean slate**

Under this model, the autonomous NSO is established by delinking it from the Civil Service. It helps a great deal if the autonomous agency does not carry much baggage from the former Department of Statistics in terms of not only staff but also mindsets. It should start on a clean slate by opening all posts in the autonomous agency to competition. This should be done by advertising all posts and ensuring that well laid out procedures for selection and recruitment are followed. This has the advantage of weeding out dead wood as well as attracting new blood especially from the private sector.

### **Competitive staff terms and conditions of service**

One of the main constraints to statistical development in developing countries is lack of highly motivated and dedicated staff. Usually staff are Civil Servants who are poorly remunerated. It helps a lot if terms and conditions of service for staff can be improved and posts are filled on a competitive basis. Then capacity in statistical production can be built and retained.

### **A consistent statistical advocacy program**

A consistent statistical advocacy program is essential to keep statistics on national development agenda. This is particularly important as often, already sensitized political and other leaders such as ministers and members of Parliament and other assemblies usually change after national elections. It helps a lot if “champions” are identified and/or cultivated among political leaders and senior government officials (key policy and decision-makers) as well as development partners to champion statistical development in the country without jeopardizing the lofty goal of ensuring credibility and transparency of official statistics. This will make it possible for demand for better statistics to be articulated not only by statisticians but also at the highest political and policy levels as well as by development partners.

## **National Strategy for the Development of Statistics**

There is value in designing and implementing a National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) that covers all sectors and all data users. The NSDS presents a comprehensive and unified framework for addressing data limitations, mobilizing and prioritizing use of resources (national and international), integrating statistics within national policy processes and for managing change in statistical organization and management. The process of designing the NSDS provides great opportunities for statistical advocacy especially among political leadership, decision-makers and development partners, and for engendering stakeholder participation, ownership and commitment.

### **Congenial work environment**

A congenial work environment (safe and healthy) is essential to serious work and good performance of the NSO. A congenial environment includes having key staff of the NSO under one central roof to ease communication and coordination; and a modern and customized home for the NSO complete with ICT infrastructure. It also includes a modern management systems and procedures that are essential to ensure that the NSO is run in a scientific, transparent and efficient manner. Building bureaucracy, autocracy and top-down management styles should as much as possible be avoided in preference for a streamlined, participatory and co-ordinated style of management that breaks down organisational silos and encourages cross-functional and problem-solving teamwork. The management style should encourage staff to innovate, release their creative energies and realize their full potential; should promote a culture of performance, of teamwork and of information sharing.

## **3. CONTINUING CHALLENGES**

There is no doubt that the statistics sector in Uganda was buoyed by the establishment of the Uganda Bureau of Statistics as an autonomous government agency. However, this notwithstanding, the statistics sector continues to experience a number of challenges. Key challenges among them include:

### **Statistical advocacy**

In most Sub-Saharan countries, statistical awareness is generally low at every level of society. In these countries, statistical advocacy is necessary and is a strategic issue in the development of statistics. It cannot be emphasized enough that in many countries, it is not obvious that:

- resources will always be made available for data production,
- once data are produced, they will be used, or
- that policy and decision-makers at all levels understand that statistics are essential for the management of a modern state or economy, or
- that statistics are part of the enabling infrastructure for development, or
- that it is necessary for national governments to invest in statistical production and development.

It is, therefore, important to design and implement a consistent advocacy programme for statistics in these countries especially targeting policy and decision-makers, politicians, program managers, data analysts, and donor community, etc. Identifying high-level policy and decision makers as well as development partners to champion statistical development will give a boost to the advocacy programme. Newsmakers and news media should also be used to great effect in support of statistical advocacy.

This requires that both the Board of Directors and the CEO of the NSO become very proactive, persistent

and innovative in the way they advocate for statistics.

### **Management of expectations**

Autonomy of NSO brings with it many expectations for different stakeholders. Data users assume that autonomy will answer all their data requirements for comprehensive, integrated, accurate, consistent and timely data. And indeed initial improvements in the statistical products of the NSO immediately following establishment of autonomy lead to expectations of continuous improvements which are at times not maintained leading to frustrations of users. . Similarly, a successful advocacy programme if not matched with continuous delivery of statistical products will lead to frustration of users.

### **The Statistics Act**

Having a congenial national Statistics Act is an integral part of institutional development in support of statistics. It helps if the Act covers the entire NSS rather than the NSO. The Statistics Act for Uganda covers the Uganda Bureau of Statistics and not the entire NSS. This has limited the ability of the Bureau to effectively coordinate the NSS. A case has been made to have the Act revised with a view to making it more comprehensive to cover the whole NSS.

### **Attracting and retaining high quality human resources**

At the time of its establishment as an autonomous government agency, the Bureau was able to recruit highly qualified and skilled staff. However, inadequacy of financial resources available to the Bureau since then has meant that the organization structure cannot be expanded as desired to allow for professional growth and development. The situation is worse in MDAs which invariably have one or two statistics establishments.

### **Coordination of the NSS**

The Bureau is not only expected to be a centre of excellence in statistical production but also an effective coordinator of the NSS, and particularly government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) that produce mainly administrative data. In spite of the best intentions, there remain challenges of coordination of the NSS by the Bureau. The coordination challenges arise because the MDAs are under different administrative arrangements where priority and funding for statistics varies from one MDA to another, coordination is sometimes seen as an intrusion rather than providing value addition to their work by the Bureau, advocating for resources for the Bureau and supporting advocacy for resources for MDAs has not been easy, and sometimes coordination is made difficult by limited capacity of the Bureau in terms of staffing and other resources. Furthermore, the Statistics Act establishing the Bureau provided for the Bureau to coordinate the NSS but did not provide for how this was to be done.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

To reverse the decline in statistical production and get firmly started on the process of national statistical development, the Government of Uganda undertook in mid- 1990s far-reaching and cutting-edge statistical reforms by transforming the then Department of Statistics into an autonomous government statistical agency, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, to oversee and improve the management of the NSS to provide reliable, consistent, accurate and timely data for policy formulation and planning. The Bureau was established as a corporate entity with a Board of Directors as its governing body.

There is ample evidence to show that autonomy of the Uganda Bureau of Statistics has very much improved the image and fortunes of statistics in the country in a way that was not possible when statistics was a mainstream government department. In implementing the corporate model of the Bureau, a number of lessons have been learnt about what works and what does not work and why. Based on these lessons, it can be concluded that autonomy is not a “silver bullet”; it is better to have a small, highly professional and technocratic Board for an autonomous NSO; when the NSO is established as an autonomous government agency, it is better that it starts on a clean slate with minimum baggage from the former status; it is essential to have competitive terms and conditions of service for staff to attract and retain highly qualified and skilled staff; statistical advocacy should be a continuing activity; an NSDS should be designed and implemented as a comprehensive framework for statistical capacity building and development; and a congenial work environment should be ensured.

The statistics sector, however, continues to experience a number of challenges that are testing the commitment of government to statistical development and further reform of the statistics sector, the ability of statisticians to advocate for their profession, commitment of data producers to coordination, managing expectations, ensuring that the Statistics Act is comprehensive and covers all sectors, attracting and retaining highly skilled staff, and engendering better coordination of the NSS.

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