Engaging Stakeholders in Vanuatu

Vanuatu National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS)

6 July 2011, Port-Vila

Workshop Summary

Acknowledgements

The Vanuatu National Statistics Office (VNSO) appreciates the ongoing support of its stakeholders and partners in the national statistical system illustrated by the excellent participation at the stakeholder workshop for the NSDS and looks forward to sustaining these good relationships. The VNSO gratefully acknowledges the commitment shown by the Minister of Finance, the Hon. Moana Carcasses Kalosil for his commitment to the ongoing development of statistics in Vanuatu and for making himself available for VNSO undertakings. The VNSO gratefully acknowledges the assistance provided by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management; notably the Department of Customs and Inland Revenue, the IT Department and the Department of Finance for assisting with logistics arrangements for the workshop. Finally, the VNSO is appreciative of the technical support and financial assistance from PARIS21 and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) for providing the experts who led the workshop and the funding for the workshop venue.

This report is all the richer for the contributions made by the workshop participants during the discussion session. These will make a significant contribution to the initial stages of the drafting of the Vanuatu strategy for the development of statistics.

Welcoming remarks

The Minister of Finance, Hon. Moana Carcasses Kalosil gave a welcoming address to the 54 workshop participants (including 26 staff from the Vanuatu National Statistics Office, participant list attached) and highlighted the need for informed decision making in the context of monitoring and evaluating the development outcomes contained in the national -medium-term development strategy the Priorities and Action Agenda (PAA) and the shorter term priorities in the Planning Long, Acting Short strategy. He stressed the need for a unified strategy with continuous assessment tools which meet user’s needs for statistical information and knowledge management while maximising synergies across sectors of the National Statistical System (NSS) and the importance of using the strategy to mobilise resources.

Session 1: Workshop objectives

Dr Gerald Haberkorn, Statistician from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) summarised the policy and political environment for the development of statistics in the Pacific region noting that the Pacific Plan provides the foundation for the development of statistics in the region with statistics being a key objective in the Plan.

He noted challenges in the region including the need to have standard concepts and definitions as well as collection systems for statistical data and indicators such as standard definitions for economic activity and unemployment. The Ten Year Pacific Statistics
Strategy, 2011-2020 (TYPPS) provides the regional strategy for the development of statistics. Vanuatu is one of the six Pacific Island Countries selected for the design and the implementation of NSDS between 2011 and 2013.

A National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) does not belong to the national statistics office alone but to all stakeholders in the NSS including agencies like the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu, private sector and government agencies collecting statistical information.

In closing Dr Haberkorn stressed the importance of political will and support for the development of a NSDS and its implementation and monitoring and evaluation and noted the strong support given to the workshop by the Minister of Finance and Economic Management as very encouraging for NSDS development in Vanuatu.

**Session 2: NSDS overview**

Mr Christophe Duhamel from the PARIS21 Secretariat gave an overview of PARIS21 and its commitment towards developing statistical capacity globally. He highlighted the importance of an NSDS in organising country statistical systems and success stories, as well as some failures based on experience. PARIS21 has a key function of promoting mechanisms of dialogue between governments and development partners on questions linked to statistical capacity building.

An NSDS promotes the good use of timely, reliable and responsive statistics, which is important because:

- It plays a key role in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national public policy frameworks and international agreed goals such as the MDGs.
- It facilitates the analysis of complex social and economic issues and enables both government and the private sector to make appropriate policy choices benefiting the people.
- It enhances transparency and accountability at all levels of decision making, critical to good governance.
- It ensures that existing resources are used in a timely and efficient manner and enables people to evaluate the outputs, outcomes and impacts of government policies.

Christophe stressed that an NSDS is not a wish list but is the result of a participatory process inclusive of all stakeholders and integrated into the development planning and policy process at the national level. He noted that while NSDS drafting and consultations are consuming and laborious; with difficult choices to make and priorities to set; but the returns from the end product is worth this investment. This was in terms of a document for advocacy, resource mobilisation and streamlined data collection and analysis systems across the whole statistical system. National ownership is paramount to ensure that the NSDS is implemented and the action plans continued within it are monitored and evaluated.

Christophe summarised the steps in the preparation of an NSDS and the outputs of each stage. He stressed that an NSDS has to be flexible to meet emerging needs for statistical information and technological developments. Based on his experience he estimated that it would take 12-15 months to draft the Vanuatu NSDS.

**Discussion**

The workshop participants discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the national statistical system and strategic planning in Vanuatu. Every agency present took part in the
discussions. Some points raised were specific and technical in nature while others were more generalised across the wider statistics-policy spectrum. These reflect the various and diverse priorities and needs of the stakeholders present which will be taken into account during the drafting of the NSDS.

Many noted that the workshop and NSDS is timely as policy and monitoring and evaluation frameworks are now in place in most sectors of government, although there are still some gaps. This means that there is more demand for statistical information than ever before.

The Priorities and Action Agenda highlights the need for timely and relevant statistical information for monitoring and evaluation of the key priority areas it contains and likewise the NSDS should link with the priorities of the PAA. The Prime Minister’s Office produces the Annual Development Report, a requirement of the EU for the release of budgetary support, to analyse progress towards achieving the objectives in the PAA and finds it extremely difficult to get timely and reliable statistics to derive the indicators required. The example of the indicator set of the Millennium Challenge Corporation was also cited along with the difficulties in providing the information for the required annual update to meet an eligibility criterion. It was stressed that many times the required information is available but the data is not organised or not in an easily accessible format for analysis. This applies especially to administrative data systems where the statistical ‘by product’ information is often not accessible in a timely manner.

The need for more and better coordination was another common theme expressed by many with the need for a central access point to statistical information and analysis in light of scarce resources for data collection and limited capacity in data analysis. More dialogue and understanding is needed between users and producers of statistical information. An issue related to this was the need for harmonising standards and definitions across surveys conducted by different organisations to make the results comparable and increase the usefulness of the information. However it was also noted that some flexibility is also required with standards, with the example given of the youth age group which internationally is defined as 15-24 years but in some communities can be as high as 34 years.

Increasing statistical literacy is a common challenge for all in the NSS; not only for the general public but for government employees to understand the importance of statistics. It was noted that many people do not understand statistics and are not able to interpret a statistical cross tabulation and the difficulties of translating an analysis written in English into Bislama. This problem is related to the lack of people with adequate training in statistical data collection, database design and analysis.

Data collection and analytical skills are equally as important at the province level as at the national level. An increasing number of ministries will rely on statistical data collection systems based at the province level as decentralisation continues. This involves addressing issues such as the sustainability of systems at the province level and the need for standard systems and operational procedures.

There is increasing demand for the raw survey data, so called ‘unit record data’ for specialised analysis of survey results by key stakeholders. There was a request from the Department of Agriculture for access to the survey database from the 2007 Agriculture Census so they could do their own technical analysis on the data.

Some users voiced frustrations at the delays in releasing statistics which should be available in a timely manner. Some institutions rely on statistical information at the daily and weekly level, while others are less demanding at the quarterly, annual and bi-annual series. The delays are sometimes the result of capacity constraints, human, financial or
technological, but nevertheless such delays make the work of users relying on the statistics for informed decision making very difficult.

The use of Implementing Entity Agreements was raised as a possible mechanism to improve coordination and expectations between users and producers of statistics. These are basically a contract between the statistical provider and users. These agreements could stipulate the specific information required and the date of delivery with associated accountability and transparency. There is potential for this kind of agreement structure to be built into the NSDS. The NSDS has to provide clear direction as to practical arrangements for data collection and use and clear delineation of tasks and responsibilities.

The VNSO is constrained by its current statistical legislation which is out of date and does not provide enough powers for compliance in providing statistical information, access to statistical records or guarantees of confidentiality. For example non-response to the business survey has caused a delay in the release of the GDP estimates for 2010 which are still not available. The Government Statistician stated that the revised statistical legislation should be presented to parliament later this year.

Some raised concerns that there is no way of verifying the accuracy of the statistical information provided or how reliable it is and the need for more information about how the statistics are collected and manipulated (or meta data documentation).

The 10 yearly Census isn’t frequent enough to provide users with timely population statistics and the VNSO was requested to publish annual estimates of population and households.

Closing

Dr Haberkorn summed up the discussions stressing three important common themes: capacity, communication and coordination which will be addressed in the NSDS. The Government Statistician, Mr Simil Johnson, thanked the workshop participants for their cooperation and constructive input into the workshop. The next stage in the NSDS is the government endorsement of the NSDS followed by the drafting of the roadmap containing general information on who will be doing what, when, where and how to move the drafting of the NSDS forward.

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