Government and the highest authorities of the national statistical system should acknowledge and recognise that statistics are indispensable for development, that the existing statistical system is sometimes fragile and does not always fully match the demand, and that it is important to adopt a strategic planning approach such as NSDS to bring change.

1. QUALITY STATISTICS DO MATTER FOR DEVELOPMENT
Quality statistics (fit for purpose) provide a basis and the evidence required to design and monitor effective development policies, to help governments to identify the best courses of action in addressing complex problems and managing the effective delivery of basic services. Quality statistics are good only to the extent that they have a breadth and depth of coverage to meet all policy and user needs.

Quality statistics also improve the transparency and accountability of policy making, both of which are essential for good governance, by enabling media, non-governmental organisations and citizens to judge the success of government policies and to hold their government to account for those policies and to elaborate propositions. They also provide a sound basis for the design, management, monitoring, and evaluation of the national policy frameworks and any regional or international development framework the country has endorsed.

Good and reliable statistics are also essential to international organisations and other donors: they are vital to ‘Managing for Development Results’, with mutual accountability between beneficiaries and donors. These need to assess where aid is most needed, whether resources are used efficiently, to measure progress, and to evaluate results.

2. QUALITY STATISTICS ARE PRODUCED BY THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM
Official statistics are produced by the national statistical system, the structure established with units mainly from the public sector. The technical mission of official statistics is to provide government, public organisations, the private sector, the media, civil society, political organisations, citizens, elected representatives, and external partners with data needed in all fields to take informed decisions.

In many developing countries, however, statistical systems are fragile. They are under increasing pressure and still lack the capacity to produce, analyse and use the range and quality of statistics required to support effective development progress. Survey programmes still hardly provide the necessary flow of reliable, timely, comparable, and accessible data; the timing of national surveys is not always optimal; data collection programmes still lack methodological consistency; and existing data often remain largely unexploited. New demands for data, from processes such as the increasing emphasis on results management, are putting already weak statistical systems under considerable strain. At the same time, the managers of the national statistical system (NSS) and in particular statistical agencies (NSOs) are coming under pressure to reduce expenditure, cut costs, improve efficiency, and do so with scarce financial and human resources. As a result, many statistical systems are still struggling, with limited public confidence in the reliability and integrity of the data and with limited capacity to turn things round in the short-term.

3. QUALITY STATISTICS REQUIRE ORGANISATION AND PLANNING
All effective statistical agencies need to plan and manage collectively their activities strategically to deal with situations where the supply of statistics fails to meet demand, when improvements are needed in critical areas of the national statistical system and where critical weaknesses have been identified, when resources are limited and their use needs to be prioritised, or when there is a need to raise the profile of statistics and to develop sustained demand for statistical products and services.

Strategic planning for statistics is not new. In the field of statistics one approach became a benchmark over recent years: the NSDS (National Strategy for the Development of Statistics). The preparation and subsequent implementation of an NSDS provides the opportunity for stakeholders to assess the current status of statistics, review data needs, agree on a long term perspective and develop a medium-term plan that will address key constraints. If managed effectively, the NSDS process can provide a means to raise the profile of statistics, build a constituency for the future, and ensure that all stakeholders are agreed on the main priorities going forward. It is a complex and challenging exercise that requires very careful design and management (10 main principles are proposed) and should not be undertaken lightly. It is important to recognise that changes are inevitable; hence, a good plan should build in flexible mechanisms to respond to change. A key requirement of the implementation process, therefore, is that it includes mechanisms for managing change, monitoring and reporting on progress, reviewing the strategy, and adapting and changing it as need for doing so arises.

Acknowledging in practice

Who and When
The initiative may come from the highest position in the national statistical system —
depending on the model of the NSS employed, this may be the National Statistician, Director of the National Statistical Office, or President of the National Statistical Council — or may be directly addressed by policy makers. It is extremely important that a need for change is acknowledged by national authorities of the country and then the commitments are later strongly relayed to other political levels (Chapter B COMMITTING). Acknowledging the need for change is a prerequisite for starting the NSDS process.

How
There are many opportunities for publicly acknowledging the importance of statistics for development and the need to improve the national statistical system: it can be during an official national event (roundtable on development, presentation of a national policy document, launching of a nation-wide statistical survey, etc) or an international event (statistics day, regional meeting). This information should be carefully prepared so that some advocacy work (Chapter D ADVOCATING) can be engaged and information disseminated. For developing countries with scarce financial resources it is crucial that technical and financial partners are informed about the idea of launching such a process.

It should be well understood that strategic planning is a necessity (continuity over time, multi-years surveys and census programmes, changing demand, multi-years development plans) and that politicians have their say from start to finish, and in between, as for any national plan.

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