

Regional Strategies for the Development of Statistics

Regional integration or cooperation processes pursue different objectives such as achieving economic and monetary integration, building a free trade area, stepping up cooperation to promote socio-economic development, among others or a combination of all the above. Regardless of the objective, such processes require comparable statistical indicators based on methodologies harmonised between countries. Hence, the need to set up an efficient Regional Statistical System (RSS) which may be facilitated through a **Regional Strategy for the Development of Statistics (RSDS)**

What is a RSDS ?

A Regional Strategy for the Development of Statistics (RSDS) is a masterplan for regional statistical development. It is not a contract but a guide to good practice in regional statistics cooperation. It is linked to national and regional priorities and is consistent with the NSDS of member states. It adopts the NSDS Principles and is formulated with the objective of responding to specific regional policy objectives.

The design of the RSDS may be spearheaded by a regional statistical steering committee with secretariat support from the statistical unit of a regional organization (e.g., ASEAN, CAN, SADC, SPC) (1). Member states should approve the RSDS ensuring it is aligned with regional development agenda and consistent with national priorities. It is ideal to have the RSDS adopted and its implementation supported at the highest political level in the region or subregion.

(1) Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Comunidad Andina (CAN), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC).

The purpose of designing RSDS includes:

- **Respond to the statistical requirements of regional development agenda**, without infringing on any country's national sovereignty, as the regional development agenda comprises priorities that have been identified and agreed upon by the member states. Some of the data needs to inform regional development agenda may not be currently available in member countries, and if these are available, may not necessarily be comparable between countries. RSDSs are appropriate instruments to address this challenge and help narrow statistical development gaps among member states.
- **Assure comparability of data in all member states**: The formulation, implementation and monitoring of regional policies would require harmonised and comparable data in all member states. The RSDS would identify regional strategies and activities that would harmonise conceptual frameworks, methods, and tools for ensuring data comparability. This may also include the adoption of binding statistical regulations in compliance with recommendations and international standards.

- **Strengthen links and convergence between regional and national levels** , as RSDS implies close cooperation and collaboration among member states.
- **Pool statistical skills, expertise and resources at the regional level** . One of the value-added aspects of regional statistical cooperation that should be a crucial part of the RSDS is the identification and pooling of human resources with statistical skills and expertise(e.g., demographer, national accountant, survey expert, gender specialist, etc.) needed in the region. These experts will be deployed in member countries where their specific services are required. Alternatively, regional statistical experts could share their knowledge through conduct of capacity building activities in regional training centres. This approach is of particular interest for small countries and it is currently practiced in small island developing states (SIDS) regions such as in Pacific and Caribbean.
- **Enable the development of statistical tools and services at the regional level** that are more cost effective than at the national level. Likewise, it contributes to strengthening statistical capacities and promotes harmonisation.
- **Facilitate, coordinate and strengthen representation with respect to external partners**. The RSDS include strategies that strengthen relationship and engagement of member countries with development partners and the larger international statistical community. It also defines the region's common position in the international fora related to statistics.
- **Highlights south-south collaboration** as means for strengthening statistical capacity across the region and facilitates sharing of best practices.
- **Serve as a framework for the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs (Agenda 2030) at the regional level**. For some countries such as the small island development states (SIDS), a regional approach for maintaining and continuing statistical operations for generating official statistics make more sense given the paucity of the available financial and human resources, particularly in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. The RSDS could be a framework whereby member countries could comply with the SDG requirements while ensuring consistency with national and regional priorities and taking into consideration existing capacities. For instance, any regional agreements on core SDG indicators to be generated by member countries, as in the case of Caribbean and Pacific regions, could be part of the strategies in the RSDS.

RSDS DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The RSDS process adopts the methodology employed in formulating an NSDS. Key prerequisites in the preparation of an RSDS include a comprehensive review and assessment of the current state of the regional statistical system, its organizational and institutional environment, resource availability, data requirements to fulfil the objectives of the regional development agenda, and a diagnosis of the capacities of the national statistical systems of member states. The assessment should also consider the data gaps in and capacity and readiness of the regional and national statistical system to properly monitor the SDGs and the role played by regional organizations.

The RSDS will involve:

- **Strong political will and validation by the authorities** of the regional organisation

and national authorities at every stage of the process.

- **Establishment of an overall process**, covering the entire regional statistical system with the following key players: the regional organization and its authorities, the NSSs including the national statistical offices (NSOs) and related authorities of member countries, and the national, regional, and international users of regional statistical information.
- **A participatory methodology** involving all the key players, driven by the statistical unit of the regional body, where it exists, that has a mandate to carry out specific working cooperation with the NSS authorities of member countries
- **A stage-based organisation**: i.e., road map preparation, RSS assessment and validation, strategy formulation, action planning and costing, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

The RSDS approach is likely to be all the more successful with: i) a significant political commitment at the highest regional level and from the countries, (ii) a constructive dialogue between data producers and users at national and regional levels; iii) the mobilisation of necessary resources; iv) continuous co-ordination and collaboration with technical and financial partners; and v) the regular monitoring of the implementation of the RSDS by a recognised regional organisation that would report to member countries; and vi) periodic review and evaluation of the implementation of the RSDS.

The RSDS process must, by transcending national constraints, take into consideration an agreed regional vision and new players, the authorities and agencies of the integration system. Consultation, accordingly, is not simply carried out within a country's borders; it also takes place across borders, between the member countries of the integration area and regional authorities.

NSDS and RSDS: COMPLEMENTARY PROCESSES

The NSDS and RSDS should be complementary processes and, as such, each should take into account the requirements and activities of the other. The NSDS must include activities to produce the data needed at the regional level, and the RSDS must recognise the constraints and limitations placed on countries at the national level and their needs in statistical capacity development. In most cases RSDSs will be prepared while NSDSs are already in place in the member states. The adoption of a RSDS may then entail a revision or an updating of the NSDSs of the member states to include country commitments articulated in the RSDS.

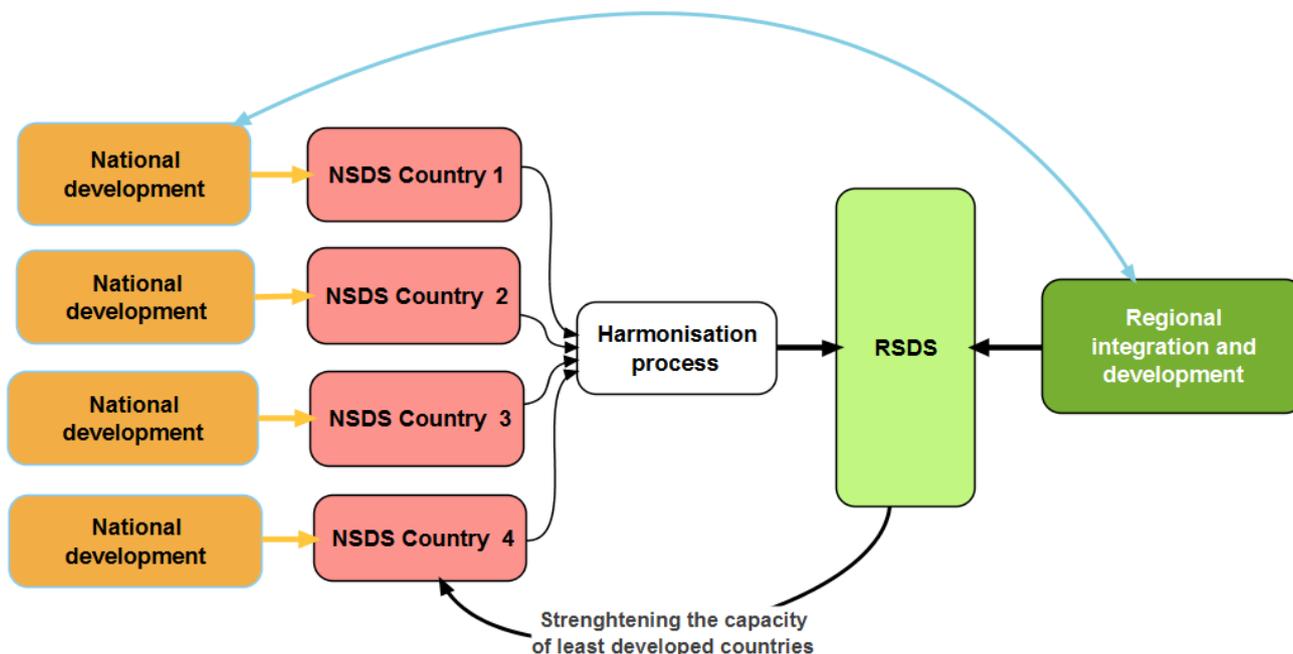
The initiatives aimed at meeting the information requirements in the region will ideally be reflected in existing or upcoming NSDSs. This will ensure that statistical information produced in member countries are rendered comparable through harmonised methodologies, while coordinating the availability of data according to an agreed well-defined timeframe.

Further, the data requirements to monitor Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development would affect the existing RSDSs and NSDSs. The monitoring processes at the regional level may need to be revisited to take into consideration the region's commitment on the SDGs while ensuring it is aligned with member countries' plans and priorities. For some regions with existing statistical strategies to generate data for the MDGs, a similar approach may be

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considered for the SDGs. The revision on existing strategies or formulation of new ones to align with the SDGs should have taken place already, alongside the changes in the NSDSs of the member states for the same purpose. NSOs and the regional statistical unit should consult as soon as possible in this perspective and prepare the revision process accordingly.



In practice

The general organisation of work on RSDS must be defined in a roadmap. Against the regional backdrop, it must specify who the players are, define the work to be carried out, the processes and activities, the implementation timetable and resources requirement.

Acknowledging, Recognising, Understanding

The authority of the regional body receives a mandate from the Presidents of the member countries of the area to organise the regional statistical system. It would be an Executive body who decides which work is to be carried out and supervises it.

However, as countries have to answer as a priority to their national authorities, one has to ensure coordination with the authority of the NSS of the countries including through the chair of the regional statistical commission if established. In this manner, coordination between the Region and Nations is ensured in all the work dedicated to the elaboration of the RSDS.

Experience in the NSDS processes in developing countries must be referred to when defining the programme of operations to be carried out for RSDS. Consultation must be organised between national and regional statistics players, in an on-going process between countries and region. In order to inform on the process and ensure good understanding and cut costs, large-scale workshops or seminars may be organized exclusively during key

phases of the RSDS process.

Preparing

With respect to the designing of the RSDS (once the decision has been taken), one needs to draw a distinction between the preparatory phase and other technical phases. Aforesaid preparatory phase covers the following tasks:

- disseminating information and making requests within the region primarily in order to mobilise internal support and cooperation of all stakeholders
- choosing who will write the draft RSDS road map; one might consider setting up a steering committee at this stage
- drafting and adopting the road map
- setting up the project management team

Organisational arrangements

Work on designing the RSDS can be carried out by the following bodies:

- Statistical unit appointed by the regional body, reporting to the executive body or regional authorities; this unit shall be responsible for managing the overall design process.
- National Committee in each country composed of 2 or 3 representatives of each NSS, in charge of coordination with their respective NSSs.
- Regional Technical Committee that drafts documents and prepares decisions to be taken and sends them to the Steering Committee.
- Regional Statistical Steering Committee that oversees the design technical process and submits for approval reports and recommendations.
- Commissions of national, regional or international experts, which will deal with specific aspects of the work programme of the roadmap.
- Group of users and beneficiaries to identify the needs and quality aspects they give priority to.
- This work can be backed, if need be, by a regional (or international consultant) to provide support throughout the process.

Assessment

The starting point of work aimed at designing the RSDS will consist of reviewing the development agenda and priorities in the region, the plan of operations related to the statistical information needs of the regional organization, and any statistical commitments

of countries in the region. This includes consultation with national and international stakeholders about their expectations with respect to RSDS.

Two activities that are crucial in the RSDS process have to be planned:

- Setting up a process aimed at disseminating information about the preparation of the RSDS. A web page on the site of the integration body should be reserved for this purpose.
- Identifying activities aimed at extolling, promoting and raising awareness about regional statistics.

Furthermore, three types of action should not be neglected when designing the RSDS, as all three provide added value with respect to a successful RSDS:

- Allocation of funds for the design of the RSDS and mobilization of resources for its implementation, i.e. both national and international funds. Setting up a regional statistical sub-group of donors, with representatives of the authorities of the integration area, would be a highly positive initiative.
- Drawing up a list of requirements in the field of international technical cooperation.
- Defining the human resources requirement to implement the RSDS.

Vision, Strategies, Action plans

The process of designing the RSDS can be completed within 12 to 18 months of work. To meet this objective, a Gantt chart could be adopted, following a suggested timeframe:

- Drafting and adopting the roadmap: 2 months.
- Drafting and adopting the diagnosis: 5 months.
- Drafting the vision and strategies: 3 months.
- Choice of regional strategy: 1 month.
- Drafting and adopting the action plan: 4 months.
- Setting up a monitoring and evaluation process.

The choices made to draw up the Gantt chart will have to be, first and foremost, realistic and agreed upon with all regional statistics players.

The ultimate goal for the vision of the regional statistical system would be good synchronization between the RSDS design and the NSDS design or revision.

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