

Effectiveness of the outreach of official statistics standards and guidelines, methodologies and recommendations to developing statistical systems: A discussion

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Abstract. How to support the outreach and roll-out of standards in the developing statistical systems and what are the shortcomings in the outreach and roll-out systems? This paper aims to contribute to the debate by discussing the set of papers presented in the special Invited Paper Session of the ISI World Statistical Congress 2021 (The Hague) on the effectiveness of the outreach of official statistics standards and guidelines. I argue that the use of standards is essential to maximize the effectiveness of statistical outputs and the efficiency of the production process, however for the developing countries one should consider issues of capacity in implementation in line with the correct outreach and implementation of standards.

Keywords: Outreach and roll-out of standards, developing statistical systems, official statistics, National Statistical Office, National Statistical System, comparability, quality

1. Discussions

The internationally agreed statistical methodologies for producing statistics form the backbone of comparable official statistics. It is therefore essential to develop and implement standards for the production of official statistics. The importance of standards and norms for the production, analysis and dissemination of statistics is well established. This is the cornerstone of comparable statistics and responds to development concerns of national statistical systems.

The normative work of the Statistical Commission of the United Nations [1] in its capacity of being the highest decision-making body of the global statistical system, supports the centrality of the statistical standards for developing the global and national statistical system. The Commission adopts an overall cycle of production and continuous improvement of its standards. A top-down process is applied that starts by establishing international standards, international guides and imple-

mentation documents. These include specificities by country. This is an ongoing process that takes into account new subjects and themes. The development of SDGs is a good example of such a process.

The work of specialized agencies like UNCTAD and FAO demonstrate that the production of these standards, classifications and principles is carried out according to a participatory approach that considers knowledge and experience. These standards, classifications and principles give rise to statistical capacity building while ensuring monitoring to consider new developments and situations that may affect the production of these comparable statistics.

Overall, we can retain that the use of standards is essential to maximize the effectiveness of statistical outputs and the efficiency of the production process in terms of inter-temporal, national and international comparability. It is key to the coherence and integration of statistics over time and across statistical programs and geographical boundaries.

The use of generally recognized standards by official statistical organizations has an impact on their legitimacy and on the relevance of their outputs for credibility vis a vis to users [2]. The data revolution currently underway, is a transformative impetus for official statistics that calls for a standards-based modernization agenda to facilitate the exchange of practices and technologies within individual agencies, and within the official statistics “industry” as a whole.

From a macro and a micro point of view, the production of norms and standards is constantly evolving with new fields and an increasingly fine granularity or desegregation. Beyond this, there are the issues of guaranteeing sufficient capacity for countries for the implementation of the standards [3]. In short, many challenges remain. These can be summarized along three topics: (1) the effectiveness and efficiency in implementing, (2) the financial, human and technical capacities, and (3) strategies needed to take into account the specificities of a country or region.

AD 1. What are the effectiveness and efficiency in implementing standards and norms as producing statistics is like an industrial process? The correct outreach and implementation of these standards is the most crucial step in achieving comparability not even at the highest but at an acceptable level that facilitates fair decision-making on a diversity of issues particularly in developing countries.

Ad 2. Problems of financial, human and technical capacities arise for all countries, but even more so for developing countries. With poorly developed statistical systems, developing countries often take the production of these standards as a given and are often left behind in the implementation process. It is the case, for instance, in the adoption of System of National Accounts (SNA) or Balance of Payments (BoP) standards or standards in the dissemination process.

Ad 3. In a constantly evolving context, it is necessary to establish a strategy to take into account all the situations and specificities of developing countries. NSO should have several considerations for the adoption and use of international standards and therefore design strategy, mechanism and tools accordingly [3]. Decisions about what to implement, when to implement, and how to implement must be well thought through and must lead to realistic implementation plans.

Here are below some points to consider regarding the adoption of standards in the developing world.

National Statistical Systems (NSS) in developing countries are engaged in a continuous effort to adopt Standards in view of acceptable Statistics to all and

which suffer less from contestation [4]. However, the speed of adoption of standards varies greatly between countries and in many cases, standards and guidelines are more often taken as given without or with less adaptation.

There are also significant efforts to let no one be behind in this direction with the creation of regional institutions (Afristat, Statafric, etc.) and the adoption of principles (Strategy for Harmonisation of Statistics in Africa (ShaSA), African Charter, etc.).

It is crucial to consider the training component. This should be taken into account in a comprehensive approach by combining all forms: in-service training, initial training, in presence or e-learning programmes. There is clearly interest in training and building the skills of existing staff or upgrading skills to reflect the new data ecosystem. The initial training curricula should devote to an important place. This is an essential point of the quality assurance process [3].

One should consider the challenges below

1. In developing countries, standards and principles are often taken for granted. Capacities are poorly developed, and specificities are not taken into account in establishing these standards; while it is crucial to question if international standards address the realities of the society, the economy and the physical environment of the country. National Statistical Offices (NSO) should therefore consider questions as follow: Are all components relevant to local realities or users’ need? What is the rationale for not following certain aspects of a standard, and what would be the impact? How much does the NSO need to deviate from the standard to meet the needs of its own context while respecting the underlying principle of comparability?
All these questions are in line with the correct outreach and implementation of these standards.
2. Standard setting is a process that can be lengthy and not inclusive. For example, the SDGs cover 17 goals, 169 targets, etc.; how do developing countries contribute to the definition of these targets? The GPS¹-SHaSa initiative is an example but remains the only one reflecting the vision and point of view of Africa.
3. There are challenges in obtaining necessary and appropriate funds to implement and maintain the new standard and to reconcile what is available

¹ Governance Peace and Security.

now with what is expected to be coming further to the new implementation [5].

4. An over challenge refers to appropriate and core infrastructure (statistical, information technology, human resources) to populate statistical data using this new standard, in the context of the understaffed and under-financed institutions or NSOs.
5. Regarding mechanism, adopting standards questioned good management practice [2,3]. Is there a governance body for consultation, a specific and specialized organizational unit with the appropriate level of seniority, a communication strategy?
6. Data quality? Do standards and norms contribute to the production of quality data? How do standards and norms help for quality insurance in producing, analyzing and dissemination and use of data?
7. What standard in the production of official statistics (in difficult time) in times of Covid?
8. There is a need for coordination, capacity building and mobilization of funds.

To conclude: Adopting common frameworks and standards needs to be efficiently, consistently and systematically integrated into and linked with the Quality Assurance Framework.

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