

Invigorating the Celebrations of the African Statistics Day: Lessons Learned from the 2006 Edition

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Summary

One of the effective advocacy mechanisms used in Africa to raise awareness of the importance of statistics in the development process of countries is the celebration of the African Statistics Day (ASD). Celebrated every year on the 18th of November, this event was initiated by one of the former subsidiary bodies of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Joint African Conference of Planners, Statisticians, and Demographers. Although it has been celebrated since the nineties, this event has benefited from the renewed interest in the up scaling of statistical capacity building activities on the continent. A survey conducted by the African Centre for Statistics (ACS) of the ECA shows that countries intensively use the material prepared by the ECA for the celebrations of the ASD. They also use the proposed theme with the exception of a few countries that used alternative themes and materials tailored to fit national agendas and circumstances. The majority of countries do involve stakeholders from the entire National Statistical Systems (NSS) in the celebrations including high-level officials such as vice presidents and ministers. The media are also invited in order to convey the message to the general public. Finally, countries seize the opportunity offered by the ASD to launch forthcoming statistical activities or products namely surveys, censuses, and publications.

Keywords: *Advocacy, National Strategies for the Development of Statistics, African Statistics Day,*

Résumé

L'un des outils de plaidoyer utilisés par la communauté statistique africaine pour sensibiliser les parties prenantes sur l'importance de la statistique dans le processus de développement est la célébration de la journée africaine de la statistique (JAS). Célébrée annuellement le 18 novembre, cet outil de plaidoyer a été initié par l'un des organes subsidiaires de la Commission économique des Nations Unies pour

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l'Afrique (CEA), la conférence conjointe des planificateurs, statisticiens et démographes. Bien que cette journée soit célébrée depuis les années 90, celle-ci a pris de plus en plus d'ampleur avec le temps et notamment lors de la dernière édition suite à une attention plus particulière accordée au renforcement des activités statistiques à l'échelle du continent. En effet, une enquête conduite auprès des pays africains par le Centre Africain pour la Statistique (CAS) de la CEA montre que les pays ont abondamment utilisé le matériel qui leur a été envoyé par ce dernier. Le thème proposé par la CEA a aussi été retenu par la majorité des pays à quelques exceptions près. Certains pays ont, en plus du matériel et du thème proposé, choisi des thèmes et matériels plus adaptés à leurs agendas respectifs et situations particulières. La majorité des pays a aussi impliqué les intervenants et parties prenantes de l'ensemble du système statistique national incluant des hauts dignitaires tels que les vice-présidents et les ministres dans les célébrations. De plus, les media ont participé à la plupart des activités. Finalement, plusieurs pays ont profité de l'occasion pour lancer ou annoncer quelques événements statistiques d'envergure comme le lancement des enquêtes et recensements ainsi que d'autres produits statistiques comme les publications.

Mots clés : *Plaidoyer, stratégies nationales de développement de la statistique, journée africaine de la statistique*

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that quality statistics are, among other things, needed for evidence-based policy making, planning, and for the tracking of progress towards nationally and internationally agreed upon development agendas. African countries have witnessed an increase in the demand for quality statistics during the last decades because of, *inter alia*, initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), poverty reduction strategies (PRSs), and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Accordingly, African countries are expected to develop their statistical capabilities in order to support their economic, political and social development efforts in a sustainable manner and to ensure the production of good statistics for planning, monitoring progress and evaluating the outcomes and impacts of development initiatives.

Despite the wide recognition of the importance of statistics in accompanying the development agenda, it is likely that more needs to be done to advocate in favour of elevating statistics to the top of the international development agenda as well as to promote statistical literacy in Africa. Advocating for statistics includes raising awareness of their importance among statistical producers, users, and other stakeholders. This can be achieved by

putting statistics firmly onto national agendas, demonstrating to government planners, policy makers, managers, administrators, legislators and other users the power of statistics, promoting a culture of making policy and decisions based on real evidence, and mobilizing national and international resources for developing strong National Statistical Systems (NSS).

The African Statistics Day (ASD) has been established as an advocacy tool aimed at raising awareness of the importance of Statistics in economic and social development in Africa. Celebrated every year on the 18th of November, this event was initiated by one of the former subsidiary bodies of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Joint African Conference of Planners, Statisticians, and Demographers.

Although the ASD has been celebrated since the nineties, the 2006 edition witnessed tremendous participation of countries and stakeholders across the continent as a result of a general momentum in the scaling up of statistical activities in the region. Several facts confirm this momentum. It is worth mentioning that African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development have renewed their support for statistical development on the continent during their last conference held in Ouagadougou in May 2006, and key regional players have strongly resolved to put statistics at the forefront of their respective agendas. The continent has also witnessed the creation of the African Centre for Statistics (ACS) at the ECA, an upgrade of the statistical function at the African Development Bank (AfDB) to the level of a department, and the renewed interest of the African Union Commission (AUC) in advocating for statistics at the highest level.

Moreover, the last meeting of the Forum on African Statistical Development (FASDEV) held in Addis Ababa in February 2006 endorsed the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity Building in Africa (RRSF) as a guide for statistical development on the Continent. One of the recommendations of the RRSF³ is to invigorate the celebration of the ASD and to consider it as an important event in the national development agenda.

This paper presents the results of a survey conducted by the ACS to gather information on the celebrations of the 2006 edition of the ASD by Afri-

³ AfDB, ECA, PARIS21, and The World Bank, "The Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity Building in Africa: Better Statistics for Improved Development Outcomes," ECA Documents Publishing and Distribution Unit (DPU), August 2006 (Recommendation 8).

can countries. It is meant to share experiences between countries on the celebrations of the ASD and ultimately to encourage those countries that have not celebrated to do so using already existing mechanisms and tools as reported on by other countries.

The paper is organized as follows. After the introduction, the second section presents the process of the selection of the theme as well as the materials forwarded to countries by the ECA for the celebration of the ASD. The third part gives an overview of the survey while the fourth deals with the importance of the 2006 theme. The fifth section presents the results of the survey. Finally, the last section concludes the paper.

2. The Process

Since the inception of the ASD, the ECA has been mandated to yearly identify and propose a theme for its celebration. Following the selection of the theme, it is submitted to the Advisory Board in Statistics in Africa (ABSA) for endorsement. The ECA then prepares a series of advocacy tools that are forwarded to countries at least six weeks before the 18th of November. These usually include but are not limited to a note explaining the importance of the theme, a press Communiqué, and a poster to be distributed for promotional purposes. Although it is expected that the celebrations of the ASD be around the proposed theme, topics to be covered may be specific to the agenda of the respective countries and the material to be used for advocacy purposes may vary from country to country.

The theme of the 2006 edition of the ASD was “National Strategies for the Development of Statistics: Strategic Planning at the Service of Dynamic Development.” For the first time since its inception, the material for the celebration of the ASD was available in Arabic and Portuguese in addition to English and French languages. Moreover, the ECA also coordinated the preparation of a DVD featuring the UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Secretary of the ECA, Mr. Abdoulie Janneh, the Chairman of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC/OECD), Mr. Richard Manning, and the South African Finance Minister, Honourable Trevor Manuel, all advocating for the NSDSs.

3. The Survey

The ACS of the ECA designed a questionnaire and forwarded it to the 53 member States in order to collect the information necessary to compile

African countries' experiences with the celebration of the ASD. The questionnaires were sent by email and copies of both the French and English versions were also distributed during the Africa Symposium on Statistical Development held in Kigali in January 2007.

From the 53 member States, we received 41 filled questionnaires, a 77% response rate. The filled questionnaires were checked for consistency and for missing values according to standard rules.

4. The 2006 Theme

The choice of the theme of the ASD is subject to a large consultation process involving major stakeholders in statistics in Africa especially member States. The theme has to be in line with major statistics and development related issues of the continent.

The 2006 edition of the ASD was devoted to raising awareness of the importance of NSDS as a new benchmark in statistical planning aimed at facilitating the development of statistics in a coordinated manner using modern management principles.

There is an important fact to remember. In 2004, the conference on “Managing for Development Results” held in Marrakech, Morocco, gave birth to the Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics (MAPS), and African countries committed themselves to the “results agenda”. The “results agenda” calls for a focus on performance and the achievement of outputs, outcomes and impact. It underlines the need to have clear and systematic measurement and reporting on the achievement of outputs, outcomes, and the impact of development policies and programs using better statistics. A key recommendation of the MAPS is that each developing country designs an NSDS by the end of 2006. This recommendation was re-emphasised in the RRSF.

Before the recommendations of the MAPS, several countries elaborated plans with various names, including: National Statistical Development Plans, Statistical Strategic Plans, and Statistical Master Plans. However, the majority of the previous plans faced many constraints in their implementation, including uncoordinated donor-driven programmes and projects, which did not often match countries' priorities. These distortions contributed to the non-sustainability of the programmes, and to a situation where the management of the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) has often had to work on an ad-hoc basis without predictable perspectives.

Clearly much work still needs to be done across the continent in order to meet the goals set by the MAPS. In summary, by November 2006 only three (3) countries have adopted their NSDS and twenty-eight (28) countries were designing their NSDS; seventeen (17) countries had a statistical master plan, and five (5) had no plan at all⁴.

Given this gloomy picture, the 2006 ASD's theme aimed to increase advocacy on this issue and to urge all African countries to meet the commitment of designing their NSDS by the end of 2007.

5. Results of the Survey

The survey was sent to all Fifty-Three African countries and Forty-One, 77%, of the countries on the continent responded. Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chad, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Lesotho, Libya, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe and Sierra Leone all failed to respond to the survey. Among the survey respondents, Thirty-Five of the countries, 85%, reported celebrating the 2006 ASD, and six countries, Comoros, Eritrea, Liberia, Madagascar, Tanzania and Tunisia responded as not having participated in the celebration.

Given the importance of a theme in organizing and publicizing the ASD, countries were asked if they used the theme proposed by the ECA, "National Strategies for the Development of Statistics: Strategic Planning at the Service of Dynamic Development" in their respective celebrations. Thirty-Three countries, 94% of countries that reported celebrating the ASD, responded that they used the proposed theme, the only exception, South Africa, reported using an alternative theme for the Day. South Africa instead decided to use the theme "Promoting Statistical Literacy Through Accessibility and Outreach." Algeria did not respond as to whether or not it used the proposed theme or an alternative one.

When asked whether or not they used the promotional materials prepared by the ECA, such as posters and press communiqués, Thirty-Two countries, 91 %, answered yes. One country, Uganda, answered no instead opting to provide presentations in dissemination workshops in order to raise public awareness of the upcoming ASD. Two of the 2006 ASD participants provided no response. Many countries also used other means for promoting the event. Rwanda hung banners, and publicized the event on radio and television. Mass media was utilized in Somalia as well, in the form of radio and television. Sudan and

⁴PARIS21 assessment. For more details, see www.paris21.org.

Zambia also reported utilizing media, and Kenya prepared a newspaper pull-out publicizing their celebration of the ASD. Other countries distributed materials published by their respective NSO's publicizing the event. Ghana held a series of lectures and Gabon distributed T-Shirts in their publicity campaign as did Zambia. South Africa prepared DVDs on censuses, posters on statistical literacy initiatives and designed a website promoting the 2006 ASD.

Increasing statistical capacity building efforts on the continent requires a joint effort by different stakeholders within countries and cannot only be an endeavour undertaken by countries' respective NSOs. In this vein, we asked countries if other stakeholders, outside of their respective NSOs, were involved in the celebration of the 2006 ASD. Thirty countries, 86% of the ASD participants, reported that there were stakeholders outside of the NSO involved in the celebration, only three countries responded that no other stakeholders were involved and two countries offered no response. Among the stakeholders outside of the NSO's involved in the celebration were other line ministries and members of the civil society.

Thirty countries, 86%, also reported that a high ranking government official was invited to the Day. Rwanda noted that the minister of finance and economic planning was invited as well as all directors of planning from every ministry. Zimbabwe and Ethiopia reported the attendance of their deputy ministers of finance. Somalia invited members of the transitional federal government, and Ghana's vice president was invited to its celebration. Angola invited the speaker of parliament and the minister of planning. Congo also invited its state minister for planning. Judging by the various high ranking government officials invited to the event, many African countries placed a high degree of importance on the celebration.

Along with the various government officials invited, many countries also reported that members of the press were invited to the events. In fact, Thirty-Two countries, 91%, invited the press. Only one country responded as not having invited members of the press, and two countries provided no response to the question. The large number of countries that welcomed members of the press to the celebration is an encouraging sign as the press plays a vital role in conveying to the general public the emphasis that countries are placing on statistical activities.

Along with raising awareness of a general need for the elevation of statistical activities on the national agenda, the annual ASD also serves as an opportunity for countries to announce upcoming surveys, censuses and other statistical activities. When countries were asked if they used the cele-

bration of the 2006 ASD as an opportunity to announce the launching of an upcoming statistical activity like a census or survey, twenty-eight countries, 80%, responded yes. Three countries failed to use the day as such a platform, and one country stated that no such activities were planned in the near future.

Some of the best practices in the celebrations of the ASD are worth mentioning. Uganda devotes an entire week to the celebrations beyond the recommended one day. In 2005, many African countries converged to Kampala for an entire statistics week celebration that included several statistical events such as the meeting of the International Comparison Programme for Africa (ICP-Africa) which cumulated in the opening of the Statistics House, the new home for the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS). In 2006, Angola organized a statistics week during the first week of December. Several African countries and stakeholders converged to Luanda for a number of statistical events including a meeting on organization and management of NSOs for Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries. The climax of this week was the special African statistics day opened by the speaker of the Angola parliament and chaired by the minister of planning on 7 December 2007. This was attended by high ranking officials from across the continent including the UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Secretary of the ECA and the Commissioner for Economic Affairs of the AUC.

6. Conclusion

Although the ASD has been celebrated since the nineties, the 2006 edition has witnessed an increased participation of countries as a result of a renewed interest in statistical capacity building activities on the continent. According to the survey, countries made extensive use of the materials and tools sent to them by the ECA even if some of them didn't limit themselves to these materials. The proposed theme was also used by the majority of countries while other countries used themes in line with their national agenda, priorities, and circumstances. More importantly, the celebrations were attended by stakeholders from the entire NSS including high ranking officials such vice-presidents, ministers, deputy ministers etc. denoting the increased importance accorded to statistical activities in African countries. Members of the press were also invited in most countries conveying the importance of the Day to the general public. Finally, most of the NSOs seized the opportunity offered by the ASD to launch a number of statistical activities (surveys/censuses) or announce new products.

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