

Background

Statistics have been supported by donors in the Pacific for many years at both regional and country levels. The future of statistics in the region was discussed at a regional meeting held in September 2007 between the regions' Heads of Planning and Heads of Statistics, institutions within the region and development partners. A Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat/ Secretariat of the Pacific Community benchmarking study, that was due at the end of 2008, aimed to set the scene for the regional approach to statistics. In the meantime, Australia , New Zealand and the World Bank, in consultation with other partners, agreed to undertake a rapid review of their own options for assistance in the region in order to allow a timely response to the findings of the benchmarking study and identify any more immediate needs that can be met by donors.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this review was to contribute to consideration of the future of statistics assistance by identifying and synthesising lessons, conclusions and themes from past experience that have been already documented and are readily available.

The objectives of the review were:

- to identify key lessons learnt from assistance to strengthening statistics capacity in the past five to ten years
- to draw conclusions with regard to relevance, effectiveness, efficiency (including value for money and cost effectiveness), impact and sustainability of that assistance
- to summarise themes that are evident with regard to strengths, weaknesses and challenges for that assistance.

Main Findings

A range of donor and technical agencies active on statistics in the Pacific provided a total of 33 reviews, evaluations, completion reports and brief comments dating back to 2003. The review noted that the quantity and scope of reports available was disappointing. In particular, there was a general lack of evaluative material which made it difficult to confidently draw many conclusions on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

From the available evidence, the review cautiously concluded that most assistance for statistics in the Pacific over the past five to ten years had been relevant and, in an immediate timeframe, effective. However, impact and the sustainability of benefits had been limited. Threats to sustainability included:

- lack of political will, understanding, demand and use of statistics
- a range of resources, staff or management issues in the National Statistics Office or partner organisation that had not been addressed by the intervention
- unmet follow-up needs such as for additional staff training and development.

The review noted positive outputs from various aid interventions in the statistics field including:

- useable statistical outputs

- quality of training and of capacity building activities
- interaction with stakeholders
- vision and leadership from a counterpart.

Key Issues and Learning for NZAID

A number of lessons were identified which should be taken into account in future identification and design of capacity development assistance for statistics:

- more efforts should be directed to the broader institutional environment in which the statistical system operates—technical assistance that focuses narrowly on technical statistical skills is unlikely to have a significant sustainable positive impact
- assistance for statistics should not neglect dissemination of short, simple, digestible statistical products for wide audiences
- providers of technical assistance—donors and technical agencies—should coordinate better
- designs must be realistic, flexible and prepared for assistance to be provided over a long period
- good practice project management such as risk management, monitoring and evaluation is as important in statistical capacity development as elsewhere in aid
- basic to medium training in computer skills, word processing and spreadsheets is an important pre-requisite for higher level statistical training and such training in these skills can be outsourced relatively cheaply
- attachments of National Statistics Offices staff to host organisations need to be carefully structured for the person to get the greatest capacity development benefit.

Follow-up

The review was not asked to make recommendations but did list key lessons. The report was distributed to stakeholders, including the team undertaking the 'benchmarking' study that was due to be completed by the end of 2008. The 'benchmarking' study explicitly drew on the findings and lessons of the report in identifying and recommending options for future assistance for statistics. It will be considered at the Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting in the second half of 2009.

To request a copy of the full report email aidevaluation@mfat.govt.nz and quote the reference number - Eva0825.