

EVALUATION SERVICE

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FAO role and work in statistics

Evaluation of FAO's role and work in statistics

FAO's work in collecting and disseminating statistical information on food and agriculture is a core element of its mandate. The aim has been to maintain the best possible capacity to process, validate, harmonize and analyse incoming data and generate accurate and timely information. An important priority within this has been improving the quality, transparency and coverage of FAO's statistical data, as well as access to it. Another priority has been enhancing national governments' capacities to develop and use their statistical system. While several organizations provide data on agriculture, forestry and fisheries, none of them in such a wide range of areas as FAO. The Organization's global statistics are continuously quoted and used for external global analyses by academics, research institutions, governments and the private sector.

The Independent External Evaluation (IEE) of FAO advocated for a greater priority to be given to the provision of basic data and statistics as well as the necessity for a 'fundamental rethink' of statistical activities which would involve users more. This evaluation mandated by the Programme Committee benefited from an expert panel throughout the process, which produced "An Ideal FAO 21st Century Statistical System" that served as the analytical framework against which FAO's work in statistics was assessed.

Findings and Conclusions

The FAO Statistical System. The collection and dissemination of statistical information covers almost all sectors from agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries and land and water. Major producers of statistical data are the Statistics Division (ESS), divided among the Global (ESSG) and Country (ESSS) Services, the Forest Assessment and Reporting Service (FOIM) the Fisheries and Aquaculture Information and Statistics Service (FIES) and to a lesser extent the Land Tenure and Management Unit (NRLA) and the Water Development and Management Unit (NRLW). ESS has a 'data assembly role', as well as being responsible for collecting crop and livestock statistics, and other services play a similar role in their respective sectors. The main statistical series produced are contained in FAOSTAT. Statistical activities are not limited to these units, in fact many units have their own specialized databases in their specific technical subject areas. Given the fragmented nature, some coordination mechanisms would be expected, yet the evaluation found no evidence of any corporate mechanism providing coordination or oversight across the statistics system.

Findings and Conclusions cont.

FAO's Statistics Programme's stakeholders can be found worldwide, both as providers and users of data and clients of its technical services. A certain amount of confidence is vested by its user community in the Organization's Statistics Programme as an unbiased body of reliable and relevant global statistics. Users generally value FAO data and utilize it to conduct work and decision making. Furthermore, the Organization is generally responsive to statistical needs of the member countries and has contributed to strengthening permanent statistical capacities. However, these positive perceptions contradict a rapidly deteriorating statistical environment.

National statistical capacity has been in decline, particularly in agricultural statistics as a result of a lack of donor interest in capacity building and a consequent decline in priority and resources allocated at the national level. This is particularly the case in Africa where only one in four countries is reporting basic crop production data. This trend might be directly tied to a lack of institutional capacity, with inevitable consequences for the data in FAO's global statistical system. The evaluation team concluded that this can be attributed to a few inter-related circumstances, among which: lack of country capacity for basic agricultural data collection following a period of overall deterioration of national statistical capacity; low priority by FAO given to work on quantity and quality of data submissions by countries; and limited field presence and poor networking with member countries and partners. As a result, a lot of data is based on estimates with obvious implications for quality

Quality. The evaluation concluded that the FAO Statistics Programme suffers from extensive quality issues. This ranges from the quality of collection methods, over to the quality of data as it comes from the national source, to the quality of how data reaches the user.

Resources. The ability to develop new methods and techniques for use in national statistics systems and provide support to member countries is affected by critical human and financial resource limitations. A trend in resource and priority reduction in basic statistics collection has been evident from donors and national governments, with FAO following a similar path. Not only have there been declines in appropriations for Statistics with the Organization's declining budget, but smaller and smaller shares of appropriations for technical work has been received for Statistics. Some of the FAO's Statistics Programme's key activities are on the verge of collapse, if there is not a significant re-direction of resources.

Recommendations

- **National Statistical Capacity** is the most pressing concern and most significant quality issue affecting the FAO Statistics Programme. The improvement of member country capacities for the collection and dissemination of country data should witness a re-direction of resources. Country submissions should be improved through enhanced communication, training and dialogue with national statistical offices. In addition, countries should also be assisted in developing gender responsive statistics.
- **CountryStat** was identified as holding the potential to raise national and regional capacity to collect, analyse and disseminate food and agricultural statistics, while at the same time increasing national ownership of the data. Through this countries will be empowered by gaining a better understanding of their agricultural sector and the issues related to food security providing the possible 'sustainability' element of FAO's renewed statistical capacity building programme.
- **Visibility and Leadership:** FAO maintains visibility in the international statistics community, especially at the working level where it partners with other organizations on aspects of data collection and dissemination. However, there is a noticeable vacuum in leadership of agricultural statistics at international level, wherefore FAO should take the action to regain global leadership and set up a plan with major partners and donors for statistical capacity building.
- **Strategic Planning and Prioritization:** FAO lacks a set of principles of good practice for the collection, processing and dissemination of international statistics. Therefore a corporate quality framework, which includes a set of statistical standards and "best practices", should be developed. In addition, a corporate mechanism to coordinate and provide oversight across the FAO Statistical System is missing. The position of Chief Statistician for FAO with the mandate to lead all of the FAO Statistical System into the 21st century should be established. Also, a corporate Statistics Programme Strategic Planning Process should be implemented and a biennial Statistical Programme of Work should be produced. In order to reflect this prioritization at regional and country level, regional statistician posts should be filled through rotation with ESS, allowing for those in Asia and Africa to be expanded, as well as involving FAO country offices more directly..
- **A User-oriented Strategic Approach to Integration of Statistical Systems:** FAO should develop a strategy for integrating statistical systems, based on a strong user perspective and identified user requirements, and provide full and free access to all of its data and statistics.
- **In-house need for training and skills enhancement:** In-house teams will require a programme of continuous training on statistical methods and applied statistics to maintain theoretical knowledge and raise skills, so as to be effective in their dual task of capacity building and country assistance in data collection.
- **Scenarios Proposed:** The measures recommended in order to improve and bring coherence to FAO's Statistical System will only be effective if they are supplemented by re-directed resources. Three scenarios were formulated:
 - I. Status quo:** It assumes that no additional resources will be allocated in 2008-09 to Statistics;
 - II. Recovering Lost Ground:** It assumes that resources are increased by 33 percent, through higher allocation to staff and non-staff. While recognizing that more than these resources would be required to achieve a full-fledged FAO statistical system for the 21st century, the team recommended this as a feasible option: it would allow FAO to be considered a credible partner and player.
 - III. Partially Recovering Lost Ground:** Resources would be increased but less than in Scenario II.

Management response to the evaluation

Management accepted and broadly agreed with all recommendations, fully endorsing the Evaluation's major conclusion identifying the most pressing 'emerging' data need, which actually is a 're-emerging' need, as the need to improve member country capacity in the collection and dissemination of country data. Furthermore, management support Scenario II 'Recovering Lost Ground' in order to re-establish FAO as the global leader in agricultural statistics.

The Programme Committee complimented the high quality of the evaluation and found it to be useful and timely in justifying statistics as a core function of FAO and an Impact Focus Area (IFA) within the new results-based framework. The need for an FAO strategy that would set priorities in its work in statistics was stressed. The Committee agreed that, as the evaluation had recommended, the Organization should seek an increase in resources for priority areas in three ways: i) reallocation within the Statistics Division in accordance with the new strategy; ii) an increased allocation within the Regular Budget; and iii) extra-budgetary funding, i.e. through an IFA. Inadequate extra-budgetary support was noted with concern. The evaluation's recommendation to give priority focus to greater support within countries through capacity building and improved communication was fully supported by the Committee. In addition, emphasis was given to the fact that, as the task ahead is rather large, FAO cannot act alone and should seek partnerships, in particular with governments and the relevant institutions as well as multilateral organizations. The recommendations for organizational arrangements to improve coordination within FAO as well as the establishment of the position of a Chief Statistician found support

FAO Governing Bodies' conclusions (Programme Committee)

References

Independent Evaluation of FAO's role and work in Statistics. PC 100/3 a)..

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