

Striving after Good Practices in Technical Co-operation in Statistics to Support Social and Economic Policies

Ralf Hussmanns

International Labour Office, Bureau of Statistics

Rte des Morillons 4

1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland

hussmanns@ilo.org

Enver Tasti

State Institute of Statistics, Department of Labour Force, Services, Price Statistics and Indices

Necatibey Cad. 114

06100 Ankara, Turkey

enver.tasti@die.gov.tr

1. Introduction

The activities of the ILO Bureau of Statistics fall within three main areas: (i) collection and dissemination of labour statistics and related methodological information from member States; (ii) development of international standards on labour statistics for adoption by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians; and (iii) technical co-operation in labour statistics with ILO constituents. The three areas are closely related. Data collection and technical co-operation make it possible to identify topics on which international statistical standards need to be developed or revised. Standard-setting and technical co-operation are aimed at the development or improvement of national statistical systems and help to fill gaps in national statistics as identified during data collection. Last but not least, technical co-operation serves to promote the application of international statistical standards.

Section 2 of the paper outlines the characteristic features of ILO technical co-operation activities in statistics. Section 3 describes the history and scope of these activities. Section 4 indicates some of the lessons learnt, focussing on several aspects that play a prominent role in the discussion about technical co-operation in statistics: dialogue between users and producers, data dissemination, donor co-ordination, staff commitment, and sustainability. Finally, Section 5 provides a concrete example of ILO technical co-operation in statistics with a specific country, i.e. Turkey.

2. Characteristic features of ILO technical co-operation in statistics

Technical co-operation in statistics is seen by the ILO Bureau of Statistics as an integrated part of its work programme rather than a separate activity, and is mainly carried out by staff members of the Bureau who, at the same time, are also involved in other activities. In fact, the contact with the practical realities of data collection and use established through technical co-operation activities contributes greatly to the maintenance and development of the professional skills of the staff of the Bureau. Other characteristic features of ILO technical co-operation in statistics are that the ILO is a technical agency rather than a funding agency, and that it engages in technical co-operation with countries that are virtually all members of the organization. The work of the ILO is determined by its constituents themselves, which participate in programme decisions irrespective of the level of their contribution to the budget of the organization. There is thus no typical relationship of the type donor agency - recipient country. The vast majority of ILO technical co-operation is demand-led, i.e. undertaken upon the request of countries. Consequently, the assistance provided is tailored to the specific needs and problems of each country. Past experience of the ILO with supply-led technical co-operation has not been very successful. Finally, ILO technical co-operation in statistics aims primarily at enhancing the capacity of

countries to produce and use national statistics in order to improve their statistical system, rather than satisfying the organization's own need for data. On-the-job training of national statisticians is therefore an important part of the activities.

3. History and scope of ILO technical co-operation in statistics

ILO technical co-operation in statistics covers a wide range of subjects and takes various forms. The subjects of statistics, on which the ILO provides technical assistance and training, include the economically active population, employment, unemployment and underemployment, the informal sector, child labour, earnings, wages and labour cost, hours of work, consumer price indices, household income and expenditure, occupational injuries and diseases, industrial disputes, and classifications by occupation and status in employment.

Founded in 1919 as part of the League of Nations, the ILO has a fairly long history of technical co-operation in statistics. It was towards the end of the 1930s that experts of the ILO Bureau of Statistics began to visit countries in order to advise them on specific topics. These types of missions became more frequent in the 1950s and 1960s as more countries of different levels of development joined the ILO. Later, long-term assistance became the norm, in the form of technical co-operation projects lasting several months or years, for establishing or strengthening the statistical capacity of countries and training national staff. At present, short-term assistance on specific technical problems is once again the dominant activity, provided by the staff of the ILO Bureau of Statistics, regionally based labour statistics specialists and, to a lesser extent, external consultants. Some of the requests for such assistance can be dealt with by telephone or correspondence, but many involve visits of ILO staff to the countries concerned or visits from national statisticians to the ILO.

Backstopping of statistical development projects or of the statistical components of other projects is another part of ILO technical co-operation in statistics. While in the past this activity used to be assigned to chief technical advisors recruited for the entire duration of a project, to enable the project funds to be used more efficiently it is nowadays mainly undertaken by ILO statistics specialists from Headquarters or field offices, supported by short-term external consultants if necessary. Since the ILO is a technical agency, it relies mainly on the funding of projects by other agencies, especially the UNDP, World Bank and bi-lateral donors. The funding agencies usually determine the procedures for project formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Due to its limited staff resources, the ILO Bureau of Statistics cannot execute many large-scale technical co-operation projects at the same time. Substantial efforts are therefore made to document and widely disseminate the experience gained through reports and international or regional seminars and workshops, in order to make it possible for other countries to benefit from the lessons learnt. Countries are also encouraged to share their experience with others on a bi-lateral basis, in the form of technical co-operation among statistically developing countries. Technical co-operation projects in statistics funded from the ILO's own budget are generally of a smaller scale; they normally involve the conduct of experimental surveys in selected countries to develop and test new statistical methodologies. In order to reach as wide an audience as possible and to introduce statisticians to new statistical methods and standards, the ILO also organizes international, regional and national seminars, workshops and training courses, and contributes to such activities organized by other institutions. The technical co-operation activities in statistics of the ILO are supported by manuals and other technical guides on the concepts and methods of labour statistics prepared by the Bureau of Statistics.

4. Some lessons learnt

Labour statistics can be an important, evidence-based tool for the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social and economic policies. In order to fulfil this role, the statistics produced must be relevant, i.e. correspond to user requirements. It is therefore

important to assess user requirements right from the outset of a project. In practice, the user-producer dialogue is however often hampered by difficulties, which users face in articulating their requirements in a way that the statistics producers can understand. To improve the dialogue, training of both users and producers is needed.

Furthermore, the statistics produced should be widely disseminated to make them available to users. All too often, the data obtained from technical co-operation projects remain within the agencies that produced them. But even when the data are disseminated, they are not used by users as much as they could be. Producers should therefore pursue a proactive dissemination policy, and the training of users should include training in the analysis of data.

Donor co-ordination helps to avoid duplication of effort and to enhance the complementarity and synergy of projects, including the use of harmonized concepts, definitions and classifications. Since donor agencies tend to have their own objectives and priorities, which do not necessarily include national statistical capacity building, national statistical agencies must play the key role in the co-ordination process. National statistical development plans are a necessary but not sufficient condition for donor co-ordination. The management of the national statistical agency should take a firm stand to prevent the statistical programme from becoming donor-driven. Sometimes, donor agencies are obliged to recruit experts, or to provide equipment, from their own country or region. Such rules should be reviewed as they can be an obstacle to joint ventures with other donors.

Strong commitment of the staff involved is an important factor contributing to the success and sustainability of a project. The staff needs to be supported by the management of the agency. Payment of wage supplements for the duration of the project may help to motivate the staff; however, technical co-operation should not be relied upon to compensate for low wages in national statistical services.

Technical co-operation in statistics is generally intended to complement national resources, not to replace them. Many of the activities have a catalyst function, to assist national statistical agencies in the development or improvement of specific components of the national statistical system. Once the system is established, donors are unlikely to be willing or able to ensure its continuity. It is therefore crucial that governments recognize the importance of national statistics, and that statistical agencies succeed in obtaining an appropriate share of the government budget. Donors of assistance should however avoid to design technical co-operation projects with overambitious objectives which the recipient country cannot sustain later on.

5. Co-operation between the State Institute of Statistics of Turkey and the ILO

Since 1987, the State Institute of Statistics (SIS) of Turkey has carried out various projects with technical assistance by the ILO. Owing to these projects, the statistical infrastructure of the SIS has improved, and the SIS has evolved from a recipient of assistance into a provider of assistance.

Until 1987, labour statistics in Turkey were not comparable over time nor with the data of other countries. Available data were obtained from the 1927 population census and estimations made by institutions like the SIS and the State Planning Organization. For this reason, the need arose to carry out a labour force survey as a regular component of the national statistical programme. Hence, as part of a UNDP-funded Labour Market Information System Project, a regular labour force survey was launched in 1988 with ILO technical assistance. The co-operation between the experts of the SIS and the ILO during the project provided important contributions for the SIS staff and for obtaining internationally comparable data. The SIS and the ILO organized jointly seminars on labour force and wage statistics. On the basis of this experience, seminars became widely used by the SIS. Moreover, as from 1994 the SIS started itself to provide technical assistance on various issues to several countries in the region. Due to the similarity of their

statistical problems with those of Turkey, these countries felt that they could benefit from the technical and practical experience of the SIS.

It is not always easy to put international recommendations into practice. While the ILO has an in-depth knowledge of theoretical issues, it has less practical experience in field applications than national statistical offices. Since each country has its own specific characteristics and problems, field application issues must be taken into consideration when international guidelines are developed. In the present case, the combination of a high level of theoretical knowledge of the ILO experts with the extensive practical experiences of the SIS experts led to an excellent, mutually beneficial co-operation.

The co-operation of the two agencies was expanded under the Labour Market Information Component of the Employment and Training Project, which was started in 1994. The project enhanced the technical capacity of the SIS not only in labour force statistics, but also in informal sector and wage statistics. It also promoted the co-operation between academicians and SIS experts. Turkey became one of the countries conducting special surveys of the informal sector as part of its national statistical programme. Measurement of the informal sector continues to be one of the most important statistical problems of developing countries, and is increasingly becoming an issue for developed countries, too.

Studies have shown that the international standard definition of unemployment does not adequately reflect the labour market situation of Turkey. Additional concepts like informal sector, unrecorded economy, child labour and women's employment are needed to understand the labour market in Turkey. Various studies and surveys on the use of these concepts were undertaken as part of the ILO-assisted projects. The SIS is now able to obtain data on informal sector employment, as well as on unregistered employment, from the labour force survey. Information on child labour (12-17 years) has been available from the labour force survey since 1988. The SIS has satisfied an important need for additional data on the topic in carrying out two special child labour surveys with ILO assistance. The survey methodology was presented as a model for other countries. Studies reveal that the level of employment in Turkey is insufficient, especially for women. In particular, the employment of women in urban areas is very low as compared with other countries. In spite of all these studies, the data obtained do not permit an adequate analysis to be made of changes over time. This is a widespread problem, especially among developing countries. There is a need for the continuous production and analysis of data throughout the world. The SIS therefore aims at making its data more appropriate for dynamic analyses. To this end, it has already started to conduct the labour force survey on a monthly basis, with a quarterly dissemination of the results.

The SIS is looking forward to continuous relations with the ILO, Eurostat, OECD, etc., as it sees great benefits in working closely with international organizations. In addition, a continuous contact, information exchange, joint projects and studies with similar other countries (less developed and more developed than Turkey) would be beneficial for the SIS. The SIS therefore arranges seminars and shares its experiences with other countries in the framework of the MEDSTAT project (Eurostat).

REFERENCES

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RESUME

Le papier donne un aperçu des activités de coopération technique du Bureau international du Travail (BIT) en matière de statistiques (caractéristiques, histoire, portée), ainsi que de certaines leçons qui en peuvent être tirées. Comme exemple concret, la coopération technique entre le BIT et l'Institut national de la Statistique de la Turquie est invoquée.