

Co-operation in Official Statistics in the Asia/Pacific Region

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1. Abstract

The paper summarises regional co-operation activities in the Asia/Pacific region. In particular, it highlights the importance of informal networking activities, to support co-operation on both a bilateral or multilateral basis.

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1 Introduction

There is great scope for official statistical agencies to learn from each other's experiences (good or bad) and developments (successful or unsuccessful). Many of our outputs are similar as are the methods used in producing the outputs. We are fortunate that there is a general willingness to share this knowledge.

The ABS's (Australian Bureau of Statistics) Corporate Plan recognises this. The key element is:

"Encouraging statistical development in the Asia/Pacific region by:

- assisting developing countries in the region to improve their statistical capability, particularly our nearest neighbours
- representing the interests of the region in international statistical forums."

2 Formal Activities in Regional Co-operation

The peak body for regional co-operation is ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific). Annual meetings are held of the Committee of Statistics. Attempts have been made in recent years to make these meetings more business like - concentrating more on outcomes than process.

To quote my predecessor (McLennan, 2000)

"In my view, these meetings put too much emphasis on administrative and UN bureaucratic processes, and not enough on the strategic statistical issues facing the region or the world system. I also think the Committee is not particularly effective in providing leadership in the implementation of standards in the Asia/Pacific region nor in ensuring Asia/Pacific are reflected in international bodies."

Some improvements have been made but there is scope for more. One important initiative is the sharing of the responsibility for the management of the proceedings of these meetings.

There is also a training centre - the Statistical Institute for the Asian and the Pacific (SIAP) - which is main source of training of official statistics in the region. It recently celebrated its 30th Anniversary. A very high proportion of the senior statisticians of the region have spent some time at SIAP. It is mostly funded by the United Nations and Japan which also provides the accommodation and facilities for the centre, but a number of other countries also contribute. A Board has been established to oversight the activities of SIAP and to provide general direction to the Director. The representatives are elected by the countries of the Asia/Pacific region. Currently, a representative of the ABS chairs the Board of SIAP.

The South Pacific Commission also hosts annual statistical meetings. Workshops are usually held at the same time to take advantage of the senior statisticians of the region being in the same place. I have not attended these meetings but the feedback is generally positive. The main difficulty is that the statistical agencies in the small Pacific countries are often used as training grounds for other positions in their countries. Often this loss of experience is difficult to cope with in small agencies.

3 Organised Activities

In the following sections, I will focus on Asian Statisticians as this is a paper for the Asian Statistical Forum.

There is generally a spirit of cooperation and mutual support among the statistical Offices in the Asian countries. In part this is necessary because the secretariat group supporting ESCAP have limited ability to support research and development activities. For example, the senior statisticians of the ASEAN region meet most years to discuss topics of mutual interest. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) also hosts the occasional meeting. Regional workshops, sponsored by ESCAP or ADB, are frequently held (e.g. a workshop has recently been held on the implementation of the 1993 System of National Accounts). In recent years, the OECD has also hosted the occasional workshop. The IMF has established a training centre in Singapore. Organisations such as the IMF and the ISI also host occasional meetings in the region. The United Nations Statistical Office also sponsors a number of these activities.

I am not trying to catalogue all the organised statistical activities in the region - simply to highlight that they are numerous (and increasing) and that there is a lot of collaboration between the statisticians of the region. At the ABS, we also place a high priority on supporting these activities.

The senior statisticians in Asia are highly qualified, many with PhD's in statistics. They are arguably better qualified than the senior statisticians of any other region. The capability is there, if not all the resources that are required to run the full range of desirable statistical activities in the region. However, I do question whether they could do more to support each other in providing technical support as distinct from talking to each other at meetings.

4 Informal Activities

The forementioned activities are excellent at building up networks. The challenge is to use these networks to develop real collaboration on specific issues, whether on a bilateral or multilateral basis. This is starting to happen in our region. It is the area where I believe there is greater scope for cooperation. This could be in the form of:

- sharing research and development experiences, including new systems or new surveys;
- workshopping statistical conceptual issues;
- exchanges of expert staff for short periods; and
- study tours.

It is up to the chief statisticians of the region to take real advantage of the networks that have been established through our collaborative activities.

This applies to international as well as national statistical activities. As McLennan (2000) says,

"The chief statisticians of the countries of the world, recently and perhaps in the past as well, have not played an important enough role, often none at all, in the development and management of international statistics policy. The solution is in our own hands, and I simply note that generally the chief statisticians could make a more significant contribution."

5 Conclusion

There is a strong spirit of cooperation among the official statisticians of the region. We needed to build on that important asset. Some important ways of doing this are:

- focus more on strategic statistical issues, including the implementation of statistical standards, at our formal gatherings;
- getting more involved in international debates on statistical matters to offset the current dominance of Europe and North America in the development of international standards;
- provide more hands on "technical support" to other countries in the region; and
- build on the strong networks that have been established to provide genuine mutual support in meeting our statistical challenges.

REFERENCE

McLennan, W. (2000), "*The Evolution of Official Statistics: Implications for Management and Training*", paper presented at the 30th Anniversary of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific.