



Economic Commission for Africa
Statistical Commission for Africa
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Statistical capacity development in Africa

Progress report for the period 2019–2020

I. Introduction

1. The African statistical system has achieved significant improvements in recent years. In spite of that progress, the provision of high-quality statistics in most African countries remains a challenge owing to the vulnerability of national statistical systems, especially in transitional States. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and development partners continue to support statistical development in member States to address these challenges. ECA has regularly produced reports on statistical development in Africa that have been presented to both the United Nations and the Statistical Commission for Africa. The previous report on statistical development in Africa, submitted to the United Nations Statistical Commission at its forty-ninth session, in March 2018, was followed by a report that was endorsed by the Statistical Commission for Africa at its sixth meeting, in October 2018.

2. The present report highlights statistical development initiatives during the period 2019–2020 with a key focus on statistical strategic frameworks, statistical capacity assessment and the governance of national statistical systems. Given that national statistical systems in Africa have been negatively impacted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the report takes that into account when considering the need for transformation and modernization of national statistical systems. The report concludes by proposing a set of recommendations for the consideration of the Statistical Commission for Africa.

II. Statistical strategic frameworks

A. National level

3. The design, implementation and evaluation of national strategies for the development of statistics at the national level have been continuously supported by pan-African organizations such as the African Development Bank (AfDB), ECA and the African Union; the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century; and the Economic and Statistical Observatory for Sub-Saharan Africa. The countries that have benefited from that support include, and but are not limited to, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Namibia, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Togo, Uganda and

Zambia.¹ Several institutions, agencies and other partners, including the World Bank and bilateral and multilateral partners, have also supported the formulation of national strategies for the development of statistics in various countries.

4. The World Bank has contributed to strengthening national statistical systems in several countries, including Djibouti,² Mauritania and Togo. In 2020, the Bank introduced a project to strengthen the capacity of African Union organs to facilitate economic development and transformation through enhanced institutional efficiency. The Bank also supported Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo in strengthening their statistical systems.

5. The African Union Commission, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the United Nations Development Programme have jointly designed a project to support African countries in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic through capacity-building and knowledge-sharing.

6. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Bank jointly implemented a survey to monitor national education responses to the COVID-19 pandemic with respect to school closures. The survey sought to collect information from member States on the country-wide scope of national education responses to mass school closures from the pre-primary to the upper secondary levels.

7. In March 2019, the findings of an evaluation of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics was published and disseminated through various formats, including online. Handbooks and guidelines on agricultural statistics that could enhance national statistical systems in African countries were also disseminated. In implementing the Global Strategy, AfDB, through its statistical capacity-building programme, continued to offer technical and financial assistance to countries in Africa to produce strategic plans for improving agricultural and rural statistics. Through that initiative, 24 African countries so far have been assisted in preparing such strategic plans. In addition, 52 countries were supported in developing minimum sets of core data for use in agricultural policy formulation; six countries were supported in developing master sampling frames; eight countries were supported in developing their food balance sheets; 11 countries were trained in the use of computer-assisted personal interviews in agricultural data collection; and five countries were supported in developing agricultural cost-of-production statistics.

8. AfDB effectively coordinated the collection, collation and validation of data and the dissemination of results in connection with the 2017 round of the International Comparison Programme, in which 50 African countries participated and 176 countries participated globally.

9. AfDB provided technical and financial support in the process of rebasing gross domestic product in six countries (Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Malawi, Uganda and Zambia). In addition, it supported the development of statistical business registers in Botswana and Malawi.

10. In July and November 2018, a new round of the African Infrastructure Knowledge Programme was held to train infrastructure focal persons from selected African English- and French-speaking countries in the use of data collection instruments. Nearly 45 participants from national statistical offices

¹ See the 2019 progress report on national strategies for the development of statistics of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century, available at <https://paris21.org/nsds-status>.

² By way of example, in Djibouti, the World Bank supported a project that linked that country's national strategies for the development of statistics with the strengthening of its production of national account indicators.

were trained on how to fill in the templates on the electricity sector and fiscal data, respectively. The Statistics Department of AfDB continues to provide assistance to all 54 African countries through the infrastructure statistics system of the African Infrastructure Knowledge Programme in submitting timely data on infrastructure (e.g., electricity, water and sanitation, information and communications technology (ICT), fiscal, and transport data).

11. In the field of geospatial information, ECA and its partners have taken several steps to promote the development of geospatial information on the African continent. Those efforts have increased the awareness of stakeholders, promoted the formulation of policies and strategies in the region, and facilitated the integration of geographic information policies into other national strategies. ECA is the secretariat of the Regional Committee for Africa of the United Nations Initiative on Global Geospatial Information Management, whose key pillars are: frameworks and policies; fundamental geospatial datasets; the African Geodetic Reference Frame; second administrative level boundaries; geographic names; and the integration of geospatial information and statistics with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want.

12. At the regional level, ECA is leading activities under the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework, which provides a basis and guide for developing, integrating, strengthening and maximizing geospatial information management and related resources in all countries. The goal of the Framework is to assist countries in bridging the geospatial digital divide, to secure socioeconomic prosperity and to leave no one behind. The Framework focuses on location information that is integrated with other meaningful data to solve societal and environmental problems, to act as a catalyst for economic growth and opportunity, and to understand and make progress in respect of national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals.

13. In general, the implementation of national strategies for the development of statistics has allowed most African countries to improve their statistical governance, notably by putting in place legal frameworks for statistical activities. Efforts to produce statistics that respect international standards have been undertaken as part of the implementation of national strategies in many countries. However, progress in the production of statistical data in many countries continues to be constrained by numerous difficulties, including the mobilization of financial resources, limited human resource capacity, and a lack of technical resources (mainly ICT). For instance, UNESCO, in the 2020 iteration of its Global Education Monitoring Report, observed that, owing to a lack of data, sufficiently good learning assessments for reporting on the quality of education (in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 4) remained rare in Africa.

B. Subregional level

14. Regional economic communities have increasingly recognized the need for an overall vision and strategy for the development of regional statistical systems.

15. The 2013–2018 regional strategy for the development of statistics of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) was designed to improve development outcomes and governance by strengthening national statistical systems in the region. In particular, it was intended: (a) to raise awareness of the critical role of statistical information in planning, policy research, monitoring and evaluation; (b) to promote greater use and adoption of statistics for evidence-based decision-making; and (c) to improve capacity for statistical production and the sustainability of statistical information systems in the region, in line with international best practices and norms, using relevant state-of-the-

art technological innovations. SADC, with support from AfDB, conducted an evaluation of the regional strategy in June 2020 and has since embarked on designing a successor regional strategy.

16. The statistical strategy for the period 2017–2020 of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) seeks to improve and harmonize the production of statistical data and also to improve the capacity of the COMESA secretariat and national statistical offices. The strategy has built the capacity of member States to produce statistics related to the strategic objectives of the COMESA medium-term strategic plan. These include statistics related to market integration, foreign direct investment, industrialization, the blue economy and gender. An independent mid-term review of the strategy took place in mid-2017; it was again reviewed in November 2019 by representatives from key pan-African institutions. The mid-term review determined that the strategy had an overall implementation rate of 54 per cent. A new statistical strategy, covering the period 2021–2025, will be developed once member States have approved the new medium-term strategic plan for the period 2021–2025, which is presently under development. Like its predecessor, the new strategy will support the statistical needs of the strategic plan for the corresponding period. Therefore, it will focus on strengthening capacity and the availability of statistics that support policy work related to trade integration, production integration, physical integration, and gender and social integration, which will be the objectives of the new medium-term strategic plan. In addition, AfDB has supported COMESA and SADC countries in regularly producing a harmonized consumer price index at the national level, in addition to a harmonized consumer price index for each regional economic community.

17. The regional statistical development plan for the period 2017/18–2021/22 of the East African Community (EAC) is anchored in the fifth EAC development strategy. The development plan seeks: (a) to broaden and deepen the production of high quality and harmonized community statistics; (b) to promote easy access to and use of community statistics; and (c) to build statistical capacity in the priority areas of national accounts, agricultural statistics, poverty statistics, household surveys, trade statistics, financial statistics and price statistics.

18. The regional strategy for the development of statistics of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) serves as a framework for taking into account the realities and specificities of its member States with respect to statistical capacity-building. Within that framework, ECCAS adopted a regulation on the collection and processing of foreign trade statistics; adopted a regional action plan for environment statistics; and built the capacity of member States to collect and process environment statistics. AfDB provided technical support in the evaluation of the regional strategy during the period 2019–2020.

19. The regional strategy for the period 2019–2023 of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), on harmonizing and improving statistics in West Africa, aims to strengthen the statistical systems of participating countries and regional and subregional bodies, to help them harmonize, produce, disseminate and enhance the use of core economic and social statistics.

20. In April 2020, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) started a process to formulate a regional strategy for the development of statistics, in collaboration with the African Union Commission through the Pan-African Statistics Programme. An inception report for the development of the regional strategy has been finalized. Consultations with various stakeholders, namely IGAD divisions, national statistical offices, development partners and pan-African institutions, were held through online meetings and the completion

of questionnaires. A final report on the regional strategy will be produced by November 2020.

C. Regional level

21. The continental strategy, the second Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa, covers the period 2017–2026. The main objective of the Strategy is to harmonize statistics produced in Africa to inform the regional integration agenda, as well as Agenda 2063, the 2030 Agenda, and the five development priority areas of AfDB. Pursuant to the Strategy, the African Union Institute for Statistics has been given the legal mandate to harmonize, produce and validate official statistical data across Africa. Accordingly, the Institute will have the authority to validate and ultimately publish official statistics on African countries. Arrangements have been made by the African Union Commission regarding the operationalization of the Institute. To support the implementation of the Strategy, the mechanisms for coordination and collaboration among ECA, AfDB and the African Union Commission have been revamped for greater synergies in the implementation of statistical programmes.

22. AfDB has coordinated the regional work under the International Comparison Programme for generating purchasing power parities, which are major inputs in the implementation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area. The purchasing power parities illustrate the comparative performance of all African economies and the differences in price levels among countries.

23. Within the framework of the United Nations reform plan, the United Nations Sustainable Development Group is working to improve the use of data for evidence-based decision-making and to develop strategies to generate and utilize high-quality data for the development of inclusive, sustainable and resilient societies in Africa. In April 2020, the Secretary-General initiated the “Data Strategy for Action by Everyone, Everywhere”. The aim of the Data Strategy is to build an ecosystem across the United Nations that unlocks its full data potential, with a view to improved decision-making and stronger support for people and the planet when it matters most. ECA is customizing this strategic initiative in the context of the African statistical system.

24. AfDB has facilitated data dissemination and storage in the region through its Africa Information Highway initiative. Approved in May 2015 by the Board of Directors of the International Monetary Fund as its main data reporting and dissemination system in Africa, the initiative facilitated the posting by 30 countries of a variety of macroeconomic statistics on their national summary data pages through an open data platform. In addition, using the open data portal created under the initiative, AfDB has developed a dashboard for statistics relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, by which it has disseminated those statistics on a regular basis since June 2020.

III. Statistical capacity assessment

25. An index of statistical development indicators was endorsed by the Statistical Commission for Africa at its fifth meeting, in December 2016, with the aim of promoting ownership and enhancing the sustainability of the statistical development process in Africa. Moreover, it will provide a model for measuring statistical development that can be emulated by other developing countries outside the African continent. The Statistical Commission for Africa has requested pan-African organizations and countries to put in place institutional mechanisms at the continental level to support the implementation of the index. A manual³ and data collection application have been developed

³ Available at <https://www.uneca.org/acs/statdi>.

under the leadership of ECA. The manual, designed within the framework of the statistical development indicators, can serve as a practical tool to enable countries to measure and assess progress in all relevant dimensions of statistical development. Its objective is to assist in monitoring progress achieved in statistical development and to support the production of high-quality data to overcome the challenges posed by the absence of timely and reliable data, which are required for tracking and reporting on progress made in respect of national development, the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. ECA shared hard copies of the manual with the Committee of Directors General of National Statistics Offices during its most recent meeting, in November 2019. A related online questionnaire was also developed by ECA.⁴

26. To pilot statistical development indicators in assessing national statistical systems and establishing a baseline, ECA issued the questionnaire and the statistical development indicators manual with all national statistical offices in Africa, 14 of which responded to the questionnaire.⁵ The next step is to assess the national statistical systems of each country on the basis of the estimated baseline.

27. AfDB provided technical and financial support to 52 countries in the region in reporting annually on their agricultural statistics capacity indicators for the years 2017 and 2018. In addition, an assessment was conducted in all English-speaking countries of the level of development of their statistics business registers. The assessment report was completed in 2020.

IV. Statistical leadership training

28. Under the overall umbrella of the African Group on Statistical Training and Human Resources, ECA, as the secretariat of the Group, continues to seek partners in enhancing the skills of African experts.

29. ECA is pursuing a partnership with the Centre for Development Data, a World Bank hub based in Rome, to facilitate the production of high-quality, timely and relevant microdata for evidence-based policymaking and investment decisions to achieve poverty reduction, food security and growth. The goals of the partnership are: (a) to build the capacity of African statisticians to improve and harmonize the curricula of regional statistical training centres; (b) to facilitate the uptake of global standards and best practices in household survey design; (c) to create a network of household survey experts at the regional level; and (d) to promote harmonization across countries. Training-of-trainers meetings and seminars targeting experts and representatives of national statistical offices have been organized in accredited training centres in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania.

30. ECA is currently working with the Office for National Statistics of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on an exciting statistical leadership programme for African statistical systems. The programme aims to establish and deliver statistical leadership training to equip senior leaders of national statistical offices in Africa with the skills required to lead their organizations on a programme of statistical modernization. Such modernization is essential to harnessing growth in new data sources, methods and technology to deliver improved statistics to meet the demands of Agenda 2063 and the 2030

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The pilot countries are Angola, Botswana, Cabo Verde, Central Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Namibia, the Niger, Sierra Leone (which re-submitted the questionnaire owing to missing data), and Tunisia. The responses were published in the pilot baseline assessment for 2019 and were shared with all participating countries, except Sierra Leone.

Agenda. The leadership training has focused on five key principles: integrity, strategy, knowledge, leading people and communication.

31. So far, the programme has been successfully piloted in four national statistical offices, of which three have been in anglophone Africa (Ghana, Malawi and Namibia) and one, in partnership with Expertise France, has been in francophone Africa (Benin). In 2020, a new partnership was formed with the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning to leverage the Institute's expertise in training and capacity-building. A blended programme consisting of e-learning and facilitated online seminars is being developed and will be available before the end of 2020. Once tested, piloted and reviewed, this flexible programme could stand alone or could be used to complement classroom-based training. As a result, a suite of training options for statistical leaders should be made available to African national statistical systems and training centres in 2021.

32. The African Group on Statistical Training and Human Resources is engaged in close collaboration with the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning to develop online courses in various subjects that will provide leadership training using the expertise of the Institute.

V. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on national statistical systems

33. To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national statistical systems, a rapid assessment questionnaire composed of seven questions was sent by ECA to all 54 member States in early April 2020. A total of 37 national statistical offices completed the survey. The main findings are summarized below:

(a) Data collection operations have been significantly affected. Twenty-five per cent (42 out of 168) of the surveys that had been planned have been either halted or suspended, and a further 48 surveys have been postponed. In addition, even where operations are ongoing, higher non-responses rates and low sample coverage have been observed. Moreover, 22 per cent of population and housing census activities that had been planned have been either halted or suspended.

(b) Changes made in the work practices of national statistical offices have limited their resources and responsiveness. Business continuity measures that they have adopted include new work hours, limitations on the number of staff in the office, remote-work arrangements, and methodological adjustments. However, despite the adaptations that have been made, numerous challenges remain.

(c) There has been a considerable increase in the demand for data and supporting activities. National statistical systems, and national statistical offices in particular, have been overwhelmed by requests for data, statistical services and information to support and inform responses to the pandemic, such as projections of the likely impact on various segments of the population, and information graphics to capture the socioeconomic impact in a visual format.

(d) The results of the survey provide insights into several general areas where, in order to cope with the above-mentioned effects, countries must receive additional support, as follows:

- National statistical offices will need technical assistance to rapidly build their capacity and skills, and to adopt innovative data collection methods to face new challenges, such as higher non-response rates and the need to maintain time series data sets.

- National statistical offices will need financial support to cope with the negative effects of the pressures brought on by increased demand for their services, the halting of activities, disruptions to planned activities, and government reallocations of funds in order to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

(e) Although the challenges faced by countries will vary owing to local circumstances, there are commonalities that require collaborative solutions that are relevant, methodologically robust and adaptable, and provide the opportunity to modernize national statistical systems by leveraging modern technologies.

34. Pan-African organizations and partners will need to work together to deliver the rapid and wide-ranging support that is required. Some steps have already been taken in that direction, including the reinstatement of the African Statistical Coordination Committee, the goal of which will be to better coordinate the support that is provided to countries.

35. To monitor the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national statistical offices, the first wave of a global web survey⁶ was carried out in May 2020 by the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat, in partnership with the World Bank's Development Data Group, in coordination with the regional commissions of the United Nations. The response rate for Africa was 57 per cent (31 countries out of 54). The key findings of the survey in respect of Africa are as follows:

(a) Owing to the pandemic, most national statistical office headquarter locations were partially closed. In other words, many remained partially open, while a few closed entirely. Office staff were mainly instructed to work from home.

(b) Two out of three national statistical offices have stopped field data collection involving face-to-face interviews.

(c) The production of essential monthly and quarterly statistics and administrative data has been affected by the current situation in more than 90 per cent of national statistical offices, making them unable to report data in accordance with international requirements.

(d) Eight out of 10 national statistical offices have had to modify their dissemination and publication calendars. For approximately 40 per cent of the offices, the calendars were altered substantially.

(e) The main operational difficulties encountered by national statistical offices relate to mobility restrictions and funding limitations.

(f) Thirty-seven per cent of national statistical offices have also been severely affected by information technology (IT) challenges, such as lack of connectivity and IT infrastructure that is not suitable for remote work.

36. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national statistical systems, the transformation and modernization of official statistics in Africa has become an urgent challenge.

⁶ See "Monitoring the state of statistical operations under the COVID-19 pandemic: highlights from a global COVID-19 survey of national statistical offices". Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/covid19-response/covid19-nso-survey-report.pdf>.

VI. Transformation and modernization of official statistics in Africa

A. Reflecting results

37. Given the need to track progress made in respect of the 2030 Agenda, Agenda 2063 and national development plans, numerous demands and expectations have been placed on producers of official statistics. It is globally recognized that producers of official statistics need to transform and modernize themselves to respond to all these data demands adequately. The urgency of the transformation has been emphasized by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national statistical systems.

38. The transformation and modernization should cover all areas of official statistics, including the institutional environment, production processes, coordination and collaboration. Several countries have taken steps on the institutional environment front, starting with the revision or amendment of their legislation and regulations governing statistics, in order to be in a position to respond to growing data demands adequately.

39. Many efforts are underway to use alternative and new data sources to fill existing data gaps, improve data quality, and respond to new and emerging needs. Moreover, information and communications technologies have an increasingly prominent place in statistical processes, as illustrated by initiatives in such fields as data science, big data, and data campuses. Coordination, collaboration and coordination within and across national, subregional and continental statistical systems are being improved.

40. Pan-African institutions and partners are sponsoring various initiatives modernize and transform official statistics in Africa. However, those initiatives are being carried out with limited coordination and minimal harmonization within and across countries. In addition, no standards have been set regarding the modernization of statistical institutions, nor do metrics exist to assess the degree thereof. Countries are at different levels of statistical development, with diverse priorities and needs that have not been systematically taken into account in the modernization projects that have been proposed by statistics partners. Moreover, a lack of guidelines has created confusion and problems in some countries after the revision of national statistics regulations.

41. ECA therefore proposes to establish a working group that would guide the transformation and modernization of official statistics in Africa. The working group would be led by an African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics, along with technical teams to be known as “transformation and modernization teams”.

42. The mission of the African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics would be to direct, oversee and approve the development of frameworks, guidelines, methods and standards to support the transformation and modernization of official statistics in Africa. The group would create, direct and oversee the work of the transformation and modernization teams that would work on specific subjects. The group would report to the Statistical Commission for Africa. It would be composed of ten Directors General of national statistical offices in such a way that two countries would represent each ECA subregion.

B. Transformation and modernization teams

43. The mission of the transformation and modernization teams would be to propose, develop, promote, support and facilitate the implementation of guidelines and standards for the transformation and modernization of official

statistics in Africa. The teams would report to the African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics. Each team would be composed of experts from national statistical systems. A secretary, who would be an ECA staff member, would assist each team in its work. A consultant would compile inputs from the members of the team and draft various written products. Digitalization, and institutional and organizational reform would be the areas of focus of the two first teams.

C. Proposed way forward

44. It is proposed that, during its seventh meeting, the Statistical Commission for Africa consider the establishment of the African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics; the development of the terms of reference of the first two transformation and modernization teams, which will focus on digitalization, and institutional and organizational reform; and the recruitment of consultants to work with those two teams.

45. The members of the African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics should have a mandate of four years and select a Chairperson from among group members. The group should meet physically, when it is possible, at least once per year, in the margins of the meeting of either the Statistical Commission for Africa or the Committee of Directors General. All work between meetings should be done remotely. Each transformation and modernization team should meet physically, when it is possible, at least once per year in the margins of events. All work between meetings should be done remotely.

46. The guidance and approval of the Statistical Commission for Africa are requested for the creation and operationalization of this initiative.

VII. Points for decision by the Commission

47. The Statistical Commission for Africa is requested:

(a) To take note of ongoing statistical capacity development at the national, subregional and continental levels in Africa in the context of sustainable development and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic;

(b) To provide guidance and approval on the request to create and operationalize the initiative on the transformation and modernization of official statistics on the continent;

(c) To call upon member States to use statistical development indicators on an annual basis to measure their statistical development progress;

(d) To call upon pan-African organizations and partners to work in close collaboration and foster synergies to support African countries, in particular those with the lowest levels of statistical development, to mitigate the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic;

(e) To call upon countries to strengthen integration between geospatial information systems and other statistical systems;

(f) To call upon member States to implement the statistical leadership programme within their national statistical systems, and development partners to support the initiatives of countries in the area of leadership training.