

# African Statistics Day to promote quality data for Africa's progress

Preparations are underway to celebrate the annual African statistics day on November 18 on the theme, ***Quality Data to support African Progress***. Commemorated annually, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) aims to increase public awareness over the important role that statistics play in all aspects of social and economic life in Africa.

According to ECA senior officials, the annual celebration this year will focus on data quality, which is an essential tool for monitoring the achievement of national development plans and international development goals, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The theme was selected following the refocusing of ECA's statistical work towards data quality and wide consultations with countries.

"The theme was chosen to draw attention to the importance of quality statistics for evidence-based decision making in all aspects of socio-economic development processes," say ECA officials. It also provides an opportunity to advocate support for major statistical operations, including censuses and surveys.

The ECA also stresses that unreliable data may falsely allow a country to reach the eligibility requirements for debt relief or membership of a monetary zone, resulting in the destabilization of the zone when the real debt figures are revealed. Further, unreliable, delayed and poor quality statistics affect African countries in a number of ways, including ill-designed adjustment measures and inability to mitigate the risk of devaluation. When drastic austerity measures are taken and over adjustment sets in, economies are often sunk, exacerbating poverty.

There are other advantages to having quality statistics according to ECA. They include planning, forecasting and crises prevention.

The officials underline, "Our expectation is that addressing the challenge of quality statistics can allow the social planner to systematically adjust the number of schools, hospitals and infrastructure, consistent with population and economic growth. These types of statistics provide an unbiased basis for evidence-based policy formulation and decision-making."

## **Background:**

### **Challenges of Producing Quality Data in Africa**

While progress has been made by many African countries to improve their quality of statistics, including compliance with international standards, methodological soundness and accessibility, a lot still needs to be done to improve timeliness, dissemination and credibility. The prevailing practice and resource constraints does not guarantee the independence, integrity and accountability of the national statistical systems in Africa, in some cases the compilation of statistics suffers from political pressures to obstruct the methodology and schedule of releases of statistics. Moreover the quality of primary data sources represents a serious challenge, namely the data collection from national agency custodians of administrative records and the heavy response burden of surveys and censuses. The challenges of conducting censuses and surveys are mainly budget constraints, low response rate and delays in data release due to insufficient skilled staff for data processing. The specific challenges for administrative records consist of the existence of legal frameworks, their poor quality in terms of low coverage and using mixed concepts i.e. fiscal and business accounting concepts, their primary objective is not intended for statistical purposes, financial and monetary data are also highly confidential; consequently, there is a limited access to such records. These constraints in legal frameworks and low response rate represent serious obstacle for the production of quality statistics in Africa. Addressing such challenges requires institutional change, including revision of statistical acts and related laws and improved coordination towards full functional national statistical system.

### **African Efforts to improve Quality of Statistics**

To address the challenges of producing quality statistics, the core activities of ECA, African Development Bank and the African Union Commission emphasize on changing the way of statistics are collected and analyzed, through the implementation of the NSDS, the ratification of the African Charter on Statistics and the strategy on the harmonization of statistics in Africa (ShaSa), in addition to the regular activities related to the implementation of international standards build around the 2008 SNA and related manuals such as balance of Payment and Government finance statistics (GFSM). The implementation of NSDS will improve the collaboration and coordination between users and producers of data within the statistical systems, while the compliance to international standards will improve comparability and harmonization of data. Guidelines and Handbooks were designed to mainstream the African Charter for Statistics in the NSDS, in order to make significant and sustainable improvements in the quality of statistics in Africa, especially in the areas accuracy, timeliness and accessibility. The joint implementation programme for RRSF/NSDS has identified a set of strategies for achieving its objectives including improved processing and compilation techniques, systematic access, use and improvement of the quality of administrative records.

Since the restructuring in 2012, ECA has revamped its statistical function, including the establishment of

data centers in its five Sub-regional offices.

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