

## The Evolution of National Statistical Systems: What Lessons Can We Learn?

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### **Abstract**

In 2007, two events happened in official statistics that shared an interesting historical coincidence. First, Japan's new Statistics Act was approved early this year after more than two years of intensive discussion. The previous Statistics Act was formulated in 1947 and gave rise to Japan's statistical system as we know it today: a decentralized system with statistical units located across ministries. With the creation of a national statistical commission and the drafting of a master plan, there is great expectation that the Japan Statistical System will be fine-tuned to meet the challenges of the next 60 years.

Second, in 1947, when Japan's modern statistical system was born, a global entity, the United Nations Statistical Commission also came into existence. The Commission celebrated its 60 years of building the global statistical system with a number of commemorative events early this year. Over this span, the UN Statistical Commission established the UN System of National Accounts, from its original 1953 formulation to the present 1993 revision, as the universal macro-economic accounting framework. The Commission further put in place a framework of classification schemes for occupation, industry, products and services, as well as methodological guidelines for the compilation of social, economic and environment statistics. Most important of all, the Commission enshrined in 1994 a set of principles that would guide the development of many national statistical systems. These principles are known as the 'Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics'.

As part of the celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Statistical Commission this year, over 130 countries gathered together in a seminar and

discussed the directions in which the national statistical systems have evolved. This reflection was timely as the world has changed profoundly since 1947 and country statistical systems have evolved structurally and professionally to meet these challenges.

Drawing from the discussion of the seminar on the evolution of national statistical systems, I would like to reflect on the best practices that have emerged as we scan across the countries. I would focus on three aspects:

- A. The development of professionalism in official statistics. As official statistics deal with complex subject matters with specialized knowledge base, the need for professionalism and appropriate career management structures becomes obvious. Creating such structures becomes imperative.
- B. The development of a national statistical data management structure. The wide use of administrative data in the compilation of statistics underscores the emergence of a national data management structure that enables the effective sharing of data sets.
- C. The rise of the national statistical system as an independent or 'neutral' national institution, providing objective statistical information to guide national debate or policy formulation. In many countries, this independence or neutrality is guaranteed by law, with or without organizational autonomy.

Japan will now move ahead in its reform of the statistical system and the drafting of the master plan. In the process, I am sure all institutional arrangements will be reviewed and the proposed master plan will put these new arrangements into operation. It is clear that the present decentralized system needs to be made more coherent in order to make the system work more efficiently. To achieve this, a more centralized office with greater influence over the development of official statistics may be warranted. I hope this conference will be able to contribute to this reform process.