

The network of Government Statistical Service in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In Hong Kong, the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) together with statistical units established in various government departments and bureaux form the Government Statistical Service (GSS), representing a network for the provision of government statistical services. The principles governing the management of statistical staff in the latter statistical units by C&SD embrace both the need to provide support and guidance to the staff concerned and that to monitor and maintain standard in the work performed by them. Through this network, co-ordination on areas of statistical work across different departments can be achieved.

The Commissioner for Census and Statistics, as the government's principal adviser on all statistical matters and the head of GSS, is responsible for drawing up a balanced statistical programme that best suits the interest of various sectors of the community while fulfilling international requirements. In the process, views and advices are sought through established consultation mechanisms. A Statistics Advisory Board, consisting of established professionals in different fields, has been set up to advise the Commissioner for Census and Statistics on all statistical matters pertaining to GSS. Besides, various user groups are in place and extensive communication network is maintained with other government bureaux and departments so as to tap the views of both public and private sectors for development and implementation of statistical plans.

This paper outlines the network of GSS in Hong Kong, and introduces the various advisory and consultation channels of C&SD.

Key Words: government statistical service, co-ordination of statistical work, advisory board, consultation mechanism

1. Organisation of the Government Statistical Service of Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) together with the statistical units established in various government bureaux and departments (outposted statistical units) form the Government Statistical Service (GSS), representing a network for the provision of government statistical services. C&SD, being the central statistical authority of Hong Kong, is responsible for compiling general-purpose official statistics for use by the government and the wider community. For outposted statistical units, they produce specific purpose statistics, usually with inputs sourced from administrative records, and assist respective departmental administrators and planners in the application of statistics to strategic planning and administration. These statistical units deal with different subject matter areas, including education, housing, health, social welfare, law and order, transport and strategic planning, etc.

The Commissioner for Census and Statistics (C for C&S) is the adviser of the government on all statistical matters and the head of GSS. While staff in outposted statistical units (outposted statistical staff) are responsible to the bureaux / departments

to which they are posted in respect of the day-to-day work, professional guidance and advice are provided to them by C&SD headquarters whenever required. Moreover, the outposted statistical staff come under C&SD in such matters as recruitment, training, posting and promotion.

2. Coordination and assurance of statistical standards

Being a territory of small area, Hong Kong operates a relatively centralised statistical system. C&SD serves as the central authority for co-ordinating statistical standards within the government. It takes the lead in developing statistical standards, definitions, classification systems and promoting their general adoption in the government.

Co-ordination of statistical standards among GSS

Co-ordination of statistical standards in the GSS network is mainly performed through the following management principles for outposted statistical staff:

- To uphold the professional standard of the services provided by outposted statistical staff to the host departments;
- To provide guidance and where necessary resources to assist outposted statistical staff in day-to-day problem solving of a professional nature, as well as in planning and developing statistical systems to meet demand from users of statistics; and
- To help achieve co-ordination on areas of statistical work affecting different departments by keeping in view the statistical work carried out by different outposted statistical units.

C&SD implements the above principles by designating appropriate professional officers to be statistical functional supervisors of the outposted statistical units. While the outposted statistical staff report to their direct supervisors in the host departments in their day-to-day work, the functional supervisors endeavour to monitor, through regular communication with the staff in the outposted statistical units, the applications of statistical data or statistical methods in the host departments with a view to promoting the scope and quality of the applications. Outposted statistical staff are encouraged to consult their functional supervisors in C&SD on professional matters whenever required.

In addition to providing guidance on professional matters, C&SD is also concerned with the career development of the outposted statistical staff. The functional supervisors keep in view the training and posting requirements of the outposted staff where applicable. Performance of the outposted statistical staff is continually monitored by C&SD to ensure that appropriate management action can be taken in a timely manner. As a result, a quality team of outposted statistical staff could be maintained, thus securing the statistical standards of their output.

The functional supervisors also maintain close communication with the host departments to explain C&SD's departmental policies on such matters as posting and training affecting the outposted staff, foster understanding of the statistical work undertaken by the outposted statistical units and help achieve co-ordination on areas of work affecting different departments.

Furthermore, C&SD has long recognised that nurturing the culture of sharing knowledge, standards and experience is of utmost importance for the continual growing and enhancement of GSS. On top of the ongoing professional forums and sharing sessions for statistical professionals and sub-professionals, a web-based

Knowledge Management Support System (KMSS) has been developed for more effective harvest, organisation and management of work knowledge and experiences. KMSS is a one-stop portal providing all statistical staff in GSS with a collaborative working and learning environment. It enables knowledge, expertise, standards and processes to be organised, shared and managed in an effective, creative and consistent manner through the leverage of information technology.

Professionalism of official statistical work

While being a government department, C&SD is to be distinct from other departments of the government responsible for policy making and enforcement activities and maintains its autonomy and independence in devising and operating its statistical system. Such a particular identity enables C&SD to carry out its work smoothly, fastening an image of impartiality, integrity and objectivity which form the central ethos of its work culture. There are a few key elements contributing to this – following international standards closely, using statistical techniques properly and emphasising on professional ethics.

C&SD follows closely the widely accepted definitions, concepts and methods on statistical matters and classification systems promulgated by international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in compiling and disseminating statistics. The adoption of internationally accepted standards helps ensure a definite level of quality in the statistics compiled and comparability with statistics of other economies. The Department is also careful in ensuring that proper statistical methods are used in the compilation of statistics. It has been undertaking studies on the new statistical techniques developed or employed by international statistical community with a view to identifying appropriate tools for possible adoption in the local statistical system.

On professional ethics, C&SD makes regular references to international codes of practices, including the UN's Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, the IMF's Special Data Dissemination Standard and the ISI's Declaration on Professional Ethics, and adopts a transparent approach in carrying out its various activities. Policies and practices which C&SD adopts in discharging its statistical duties are published in the website on "Country Practices on National Official Statistics" maintained by UN. Descriptions or explanations about coverage, definitions, methodology, sources of data and limitations are readily available to the public on the C&SD Website. Notice for changes in methodology and revisions of official statistics, if any, would also be given. An advance release calendar for regular press releases on various statistics is made available to the public in the preceding year and is strictly adhered to in practice. Commentaries provided by other government officials are clearly distinguishable in the press releases issued by C&SD. Clear guidelines and procedures are put in place to safeguard statistics under embargo from unauthorised release or unintentional leakage.

It is noteworthy that the work of C&SD is governed by the Census and Statistics Ordinance, which on the one hand empowers C for C&S to carry out census of population and statistical surveys while on the other hand requires the Department to keep information in regard to individual persons, households or companies in strict confidence. Through enactment of the Ordinance, C&SD is designated with a clear and independent role in collecting, analysing and disseminating statistical information.

Quality assurance

C&SD attaches great importance to quality assurance (QA) of its statistical data. A review programme of the QA mechanism of various statistical systems has been established, involving both self-assessment and independent third-party review of the statistical products and systems concerned. In the review process, the Department draws upon international experience and strives to ensure that statistics are compiled and disseminated in accordance with scientific principles, professional ethics and international standards. The Department has also developed an assessment framework for assessing the quality level achieved for key statistical data through a set of quality indicators. Based on this framework, subject professionals perform self-assessment of the quality level of their statistical products regularly so as to identify areas for improvement and delineate concrete action plans for enhancing the corresponding statistical systems. As a further step, the Department has implemented an audit programme since 2010. Under this programme, an independent QA team of the Department conducts a series of internal audits on the QA measures of each of the statistical processes for major statistical systems.

Reviews on the data quality assurance system of the Department are conducted from time to time and ongoing enhancements to the QA mechanism are made where appropriate. For example, a departmental committee has been set up recently with a view to tackling quality assurance issues of the General Household Survey in a more coordinated and coherent way.

3. Advisory and consultation framework

It is the goal of C&SD to maintain a balanced statistical programme with the right prioritisation of statistical outputs and services that best suit the interests of various sectors of the local community while fulfilling international requirements. Adequate consultation can ensure that the statistical work undertaken by GSS meets the needs of the community, that the statistical and survey methods adopted are practical and that, with support from relevant parties, statistical surveys or projects can be carried out smoothly and in a cost-effective manner. Through various means described below, C&SD continuously taps the views of informed parties in both the public and private sectors in order to keep in pace with the evolving environment and changing demands for its services.

Statistics Advisory Board

To ensure that the needs of various sectors of the community can be suitably taken into account in the development of government statistical activities, a Statistical Advisory Board (SAB) was established by the government in 1972. The Board is a non-statutory advisory body chaired by C for C&S and composed of 11 non-official members and 3 official members.

Non-official members of SAB, who constitute the majority of the Board, consist of established professionals of the business sector, the academia and other sectors of the community, providing for a wide representation to assist the C for C&S in integrating views of data users, data suppliers and statisticians. Representatives of the Director of Planning, Government Economist, and the Principal Assistant Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury (Financial Services) serve as the official members. They represent government interest in regard to statistics on economic and social fronts.

SAB meets regularly to provide advice to C for C&S on statistical matters pertaining to GSS. In the meantime, important statistical projects/developments are brought to

the attention of the Board Members as and when required to seek their timely advice. To ensure the transparency of the Board, its terms of reference and detailed membership list (including the name, post title, organisation and years of service of each Board Member) are made available on the C&SD Website. A press release on the key issues discussed is issued to the media and uploaded onto the C&SD Website after each Board meeting. Besides, attendance records of Board Members are ready to be released to the public upon enquiry.

Inter-departmental coordinating committees

Extensive communication network is maintained between C&SD and other government departments to ensure that the work programmes of C&SD are responsive to newly arising needs for official statistics for policy formulation and monitoring in the government. In particular, inter-departmental coordinating committees comprising senior government officials responsible for different functional areas are set up as and when required to coordinate efforts in dealing with complex statistical issues. For instance, an Inter-departmental Coordinating Committee on Population and Related Statistics has been set up to synergise the expertise and intelligence available from different bureaux and departments to address important population issues that Hong Kong is facing. Another example is the Co-ordinating Committee on National Income and Balance of Payments Statistics (CCNB), which is formed to involve key data users to deliberate the strategic and technical issues relating to the development of the relevant macro-economic statistics. Members of CCNB include representatives from the Economic Analysis and Business Facilitation Unit and the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, as well as professional officers of C&SD.

Consultations for new statistical systems

In establishing new statistical systems and planning for new statistical surveys, C&SD conducts consultations with both users of statistical data and prospective data suppliers (such as survey respondents) where appropriate. This has the advantages of tapping the users' views on data requirements, assessing the feasibility of obtaining the required information and understanding the reporting burden of data suppliers.

Meet-the-clients sessions

Our success in producing accurate and timely statistics largely rests on the co-operation of data suppliers in furnishing quality data. To gain and maintain their support for various statistical surveys, the Department has been conducting discussion sessions with them and paying courtesy visits to prominent establishments and trade associations from time to time.

Customer Liaison Group on Trade Matters and customer opinion surveys

One main area of work of the Department is to compile merchandise trade and other related statistics from information contained in import/export declarations and cargo manifests. C&SD has been operating a Customer Liaison Group on Trade Matters (CLG) since 1994 to obtain customers' opinions on the services provided by the Department. CLG comprises personnel from various sectors who are either users of trade statistics or users of services provided by the Department in the lodgement of import/export declarations or cargo manifests. Customer opinion surveys are also conducted annually to collect opinions of customers visiting the Service Centre on Trade Statistics of the Department.

4. Promotion of statistical literacy

Good understanding of statistical concepts and methodologies and proper interpretation of statistics are the keys to effective application of statistics. Over the

years, C&SD has been organising a variety of programmes and activities targeting at different sectors of the community, such as students, teachers, media workers, business sector and civil servants, to promote the proper and effective use of statistics.

In addition to direct promotion of statistical literacy, C&SD also encourages the wider use of statistics by ensuring accessibility and openness in disseminating statistics. To meet the divergent needs of data users, the Department disseminates official statistics through various media, emphasising the service principles of friendly access and prompt delivery. With the spirited effort of the staff of GSS over the past years, the Hong Kong society has become more knowledgeable in using official statistics generally.

5. Continuous enhancement to the GSS network

As the society has been growing more complex in the age of information and globalisation, the demand for statistics from users for understanding, studying and monitoring the social and economic trends and developments is ever increasing. While the official statistical network established in Hong Kong has been proven to be sound and effective in this relatively small territory, C&SD strives to further strengthen the professional co-ordination and standard within the government through continuously enhancing the guiding management principles and quality assurance mechanism of the GSS network as well as widening its advisory and consultation framework. Furthermore, C&SD will continue to keep in pace with the latest statistical practices worldwide and maintain close dialogues with its international counterparts with a view to identifying potential enhancements to its statistical infrastructure.