Official Statistics in the Arab Region: Viable Arab framework to respond to common challenges

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Abstract

To examine possible challenges that face Arab official statistics, one would not be surprised that much of the challenges to certain extent resemble those that either had faced or currently applicable to the context of African, Asian or even American and European official statistics. Although the environment is different in many aspects, yet learning from best and worst practices in each specific area of official statistics is perquisite to launch viable coordinated efforts in the Arab region to catch up with well developed NSOs worldwide. The initiative that was supported by PARIS21 to develop National Strategies for Official Statistics (NSDS) was an opportunity for collective Arab framework to amplify potential gains in the pursuance towards greater public trust, relevancy, competitiveness and attractiveness of Arab official statistics.

There are many challenges facing the improvement of Arab official statistics including managing statistical priorities, relevancy of statistics (utilizing statistics by users and meeting their demands), statistical literacy of users, influencing decision makers and the emerging of new statistical areas.

This paper examines the potential development of Arab framework that focuses on autonomy, trust, relevancy and attractiveness to better respond to major challenges supported by best practices in each area.

Key words: Official statistics, relevancy, attractiveness

I. Literature Review

1. *Attractiveness of A service provider*
    The attractiveness of a service provider relies on internal and external dimensions of effectiveness. The internal part could be comprised of many dimensions most important of which is quality which is viewed as *"the driving force"* for continuous improvement and fulfilling customer needs (Aarts, 2001). The external part is comprised of interrelated core dimensions including trust and corporate image (Elmuti, 1996). National Statistics Offices are viewed as service providers and the image of institution is strongly tied to the concepts of independence, relevancy and professional ethics.

2. *Independence*
    There has been a trend towards giving National Statistical Offices greater autonomy and independence as part of what is seen as good governance arrangements. This has led to greater trust in official statistics by both national and international users (Trewin, 2007).

    The independence of statistics from political interference is enshrined in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (Ocampo, 2004). According to the findings of the report "*Implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* E/CN.3/2004/21"[1] that was submitted to the Economic and Social Council in 2004; Confidentiality (principle 6) and Legislation (principle 7) seem to be the best-implemented principles among the participating countries in the self-assessment survey. However, Prevention of Misuse (principle 4) and National Coordination (principle 8) seem to be the least implemented principles. The UN report highlighted political interference at the dissemination stage as one of the major problems preventing better implementation of these Fundamental Principles. Such political interference harms the credibility of national statistics and contradicts the essence of statistics as a public good. The issue of NSO credibility is strongly highlighted in UN relevant manuals due to its interrelation with independence[2]. The issue of independence is strongly related to the issue of relevance. To be relevant, NSO must be independent enough to gain credibility among stake holders (Habermann, 2007).

    Legal acts are precondition for the application of the principle of independence, but what really counts is the practice on the ground. Accordingly, it is important "to fill these principles with life in everyday practice" and to protect them where necessary (Kopsch, 2002).

3. *Relevancy*
    Relevance is defined as *"proximity between the concept we want to observe and the result that is obtained"*[3]. In the context of official statistics, the meaning of the

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[1] E/CN.3/2004/21

[2] Handbook of Statistical Organization, Third Edition: The Operation and Organization of a Statistical Agency

[3] http://www.insee.fr/en/insee-statistique-publique/default.asp?page=qualite/principe11.htm

concept may vary widely according to the needs of users and their appreciation of the subject being investigated. Possible measures for relevancy include user satisfaction survey (quantitative) and user producer dialogue (qualitative). However, the fact remains that there is no *"objective measurement of the relevance of a given statistic"*[4]. Indicators to measure relevancy include processes to consult with users are part of the project cycle, Users' priorities are reflected into the statistics program and Users' satisfaction that is regularly monitored.

National Statistics Offices have produced large amount of statistical data for the past decades that users might not know about or consider it is of low relevancy due to absence of standard data catalogue. On the other hand, the demands of users have increasingly become complicated and resource demanding from the point view of NSOs. Such perception requires greater emphasis on presenting the whole data in stock in different formats with possibility for linkages to increase its relevancy to users (Medstat, 2011). The utilization of all available data can produce new statistical information without the need to collect any new data. This would certainly increase the attractiveness of the National statistics Office.

4. Ethical challenges
There are also ethical challenges that face official statistics including sound methodologies, data confidentiality and integrity of the national statistics systems (Seltzer, 2005).

II. Relevancy Framework

Considering the literature review about effectiveness of service providers and mapping the concepts and practices of the private sector to the context of official statistics, one would consider that relevancy has been long pursued by international statistics community and there has been substantial progress in this direction. Official statistics has been notoriously viewed by many as lacking *"human touch"* (Cook & Cowan, 2005), which is true from attractiveness point of view. The degree of attractiveness of a National Statistics Office sits on factors that are determinant of its internal and external effectiveness.
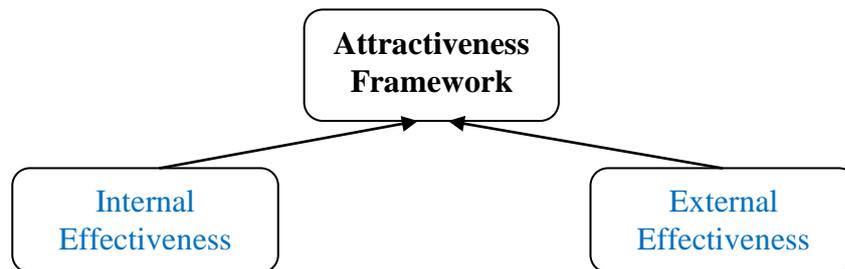
1.   External effectiveness
As for external effectiveness of NSOs, the core issue is related to the relevancy of statistics to respond to user demands. Other interrelated factors that shape relevancy include trust of the public in the national statistics system and the "corporate image" of NSO. Other factors that play important role include the statistics act and the code

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[4] http://www.insee.fr/en/insee-statistique-publique/default.asp?page=qualite/principe11.htm

of practice, despite the fact that these are viewed by many as "formal statements" that not necessarily reflect the actual practice on the ground.

The external effectiveness of a National Statistics Office (NSO) in delivering users perceived value depends on users' perception on different NSO's related issues including overall service quality, satisfaction, intention to continue to receiving services, and willingness to refer colleagues to the NSO. These items were found to measure the external effectiveness of service providers adequately. The variables of trust and NSO's good reputation are also considered due to the importance of these two items in the context of measuring attractiveness (Adamson, et al., 2003; Malhotra, et al., 2005).

2. Internal effectiveness

Internal effectiveness stems from many organizational factors including systems management, reduction of variation in the system to allow continuous improvement, ICT infrastructure and HRM. For NSOs, other areas have also been pursued as of priority including quality framework, knowledge management and Metadata framework. Recent practices in NSOs include the adoption of ISO 9000 but with differences between anticipated and actual benefits. However, there has been actual benefits in documentation, standards and quality awareness. Many would also argue that the adoption of ISO 9000 positively affect the perception of users about the quality of the perceived services. On the other hand, others argue that such international standards would result in higher user expectations about the quality of the perceived services. Nevertheless, experiences have shown that the adaptation (not mere adoption) of international standards such as ISO 9000 or Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM) would have positive impact on the effectiveness of internal processes related to planning, monitoring and management of different statistical activities as well as rationalization of operations cost.

III. Towards Attractiveness Framework

The proposed Arab Framework to better respond to challenges while remain compatible with international practices focuses on the concept of attractiveness rather than just relevancy. To develop factors that are determinant in the attractiveness of Arab Official Statistics, the proposed framework also inherit the concepts of internal and external effectiveness with variation in the sub factors that comprise these concepts. Such framework would enable Arab NSOs to better respond to emerging challenges most important of which trust, independence and user satisfaction.

For internal effectiveness,
1. Planning for **a National Statistical Program** that reflect national priorities through integration with the **Mid Term Development Plan (MTDP)** of the country. Such practice must be exercised on the ground and not for mere public relations. This also would positively contribute to strengthen fund raising to finance the national statistics program. A **National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS)** could be the tool to capture national priorities.
2. Adaptation of **International Standards** such as ISO 9000 or GSPM to improve internal processes and improve documentation. The immediate objective should be to infer internal improvements more than marketing.

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3. Development of **National Metadata framework** to strengthen the National Statistics System and to be better prepared for dissemination of statistics through interactive databases.
4. Investigate the use of **Administrative Records** as main source of statistical data to reduce production cost of official statistics.
5. More emphasis on **Development Projects** through establishing **Innovation Structure** by benchmarking current experiences in statistical organizations. Data visualization and techniques for statistical story telling could be potential areas for investigation.

For external effectiveness,
1. Develop a **User Producer Dialogue Program** that aims to establishing channels of communication with users and stakeholders. The program should be an integral part of the project cycle. As supplementary to this program, NSOs may consider the implementation of regular **User Satisfaction Survey** to measure attitudes, preferences and quality of services. Such activities would provide NSOs to identify local shifts in user preferences and make comparisons either at the regional or international levels. This program could be further developed in the future for fully fledged Customer Relationship Management (CRM).
2. Develop tools to catch **Local Trends** that might have impact on the practices and services of the NSO and monitor global trends that might impact the functions of the organization in the long term. Such activities might shed more light on the utilization of internet for data collection and smart phones for dissemination.
3. Develop a **Code of Practice** and the related standard procedures to regulate the functions of the NSO and its relations with other entities in the national statistics system. A general model for Arab Code of Practice for official statistics could be pursued as a first step towards local adaptation. The code of practice could be only alternative to revising the statistics act to formally position the professional independence of NSO.
4. Disseminate **Public Use Data Files (PUF)** to better respond to the needs of users and to free local resources for research and development activities.
5. Develop system for **Documentation and Cataloguing** of statistical data available at NSOs (old and new) to increase the relevancy of available statistical data and to ensure that users are better informed of the data stock.

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