

**INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE PACIFIC STATISTICS METHODS BOARD
3-4TH MAY 2018**

THOUGHTS ON THE POTENTIAL WORK OF THE PACIFIC METHODS BOARD - Paper 2

1. SUMMARY

This paper provides an input into the initial discussions of the Pacific Methods Board. It aims to identify some approaches the board might take to its work. It finishes with some suggestions about work that the Board might commission for subsequent meetings.

2. BROAD STRUCTURE OF THE BOARD'S WORK

Ensuring that what has already been identified as commitments can be executed confidently.

The notion built into the work programme is that we keep a focus on “how do we execute the programme?” The idea is to think of work in two categories;

- i. Meeting the Regular Production Commitments.

The notion here is to examine how everyone is doing in producing their regular outputs, what issues they regularly encounter, and what this suggests in terms of priorities for improving capability, methods and tools.

- ii. Undertaking regular “large scale, or more complex work”.

With the large scale work the challenge is to get a sense of how we are going about it, whether the capability to execute the activities have been identified and resourced. There are obviously only so many problems that have a methodological component but the hope here is that by looking at the totality of what needs to be done we can achieve some economies of scale.

The idea would be to work out how these commitments get met, working out as we go along where the approach we have tended to use is ready for some sort of improvement.

Realising the potential of new Methodologies and data sources.

This is discussed under subsequent headings but the critical issue seems to be about what capacity we have to explore using new data sources, tools and methods when there is so much pressure on how we deliver the existing work programme.

3. WHAT SHOULD BE THE FOCUS OF IMPROVING THE PRODUCTION OF EXISTING COMMITMENTS

There has been a lot of talk about options for making improvements;

- i. Clarifying accuracy requirements
- ii. Standardising methods
- iii. Improving data sources, software tools and methods
- iv. Arranging for irregular technically intensive tasks to be rationalised across the Pacific.

The suggested approach is to use the scheduled work programme to identify what commitments are the most challenging to meet so that are efforts are targeted at problems that need to be solved.

I would be really interested in people's thoughts about what process we should go through to identify what the most problematic issues are and what the key features of the solutions would have to look like. I have built up my own perception along the lines of;

- In many countries it is not easy to extract user concerns in a way that makes the critical accuracy requirements clear. It seems that the thinking about how a smaller nations government having less resources to take action should be reflected in a reduced need for data either hasn't been done or isn't very visible.
- In general the demand for data about pacific nations is large relative to their resource base. This contributes to a sense of the overall work programme not being feasible.
- The capability of statistical offices in the region is oriented to operational work. This tends to mean that where implementation activities are well articulated they get done, but large technically intensive activities that occur relatively infrequently pose problems.
- Historically this has been offset by SDD and other support agencies supplying technical expertise. However, this hasn't changed the fundamental problem that a wide range of measures are being produced with limited funding. To manage this situations trade – offs have been made. The choices made to trade – off quality and cost in some of this work has been questioned from time to time.
- This Board will be providing a place to debate this type of issue. It is not clear what evaluation of methods have taken place (even calculation of sampling errors) and there doesn't seem to be a repository of knowledge about what has been learned. In many cases there isn't a lot of documentation available so there isn't a great basis for a discussion among interested parties.
- The countries of the Pacific are very diverse with respect to sizes and other attributes and the measurement approaches need to reflect this diversity. It is not clear that SIDS in particular have good methodological choices available to them.
- There is a sense that Household surveys are very expensive, even that they crowd out other statistical activity, administrative data is not in a form it can be used and software systems are difficult to maintain.

Without trying to start on the detail of solutions, I suggest it would be desirable to try and build a repository of knowledge about what is done, what is effective about it, what needs addressing. I'm happy to be guided by judgement and experience in identifying what we focus on initially but my own reading of concerns and our own experience of trying to help is that the lack of documentation and assessment of current practice makes it very difficult to be confident about what could be usefully improved.

It seems that it would be useful to develop some capability roadmaps for Pacific countries that recognised that they are going to be on different pathways. The Micro - States will need to figure out what they can collect without surveys, Fiji may have realistic aspirations to be a NSO with a full range of outputs and in the middle the questions about what has to be good, and what can be done regionally become particularly acute.

I would like to collect views about what doesn't work and information about what has been evaluated at the meeting. We looked at some of the household survey design and I will provide that document. I am sure we will all be interested in the results of the exercise that the World Bank and SPC are doing to test recall related issues in HEIS diaries.

I will resist the temptation in this document to start to suggest very specific solutions as this would lead to numerous detailed qualifications. In any event it would be more useful to surface in discussion what the important dimensions of a solution look like.

4. HOW DO WE GET AHEAD WITH METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

The lack of economies of scale in the pacific make investing in new production tools difficult. The risk being that the nations of the Pacific do not get the benefit of improvements in data sources, methods and tools that occur in the wider international statistical system. If we are going to make progress we will need to make sure that the work is well directed at a significant need.

I would appreciate guidance from members about what problems we need to focus on. In the time I have been attending PSSC and Capability building workshops I have heard both that looking at these issues are essential and that this is essentially a distraction that we don't have mechanisms to implement. I wondered that this Board might be interested in developing some information about what possibilities might look like.

What might we consider.

If there was an appetite to look at some possibilities my thoughts on where to start are;

- i. Building on the work of CRVS towards a wider system of personal administrative data
- ii. Cell phone data, initially for Tourism related statistics (is there a need ?) but going from there. It appears one of the CARICOM countries might have developed a model
- iii. Data Bank of representative samples with cell phone numbers to do rapid assessments in the case of natural disasters.
- iv. Exploiting satellite data to progress SDG measurement

How can we find a mechanism to understand the possibilities that are emerging out of the initiatives like the Committee for Earth Observations?

Without getting too extensively into the detail, this area is an example where what is “within reach” has significantly changed. The range of what has been produced in a range of measurement contexts is impressive. Some of the best practice examples have been created in developing country contexts.

Some of the software infrastructure appears to be readily available, providers seem to be committed to getting the data used and there are manuals being written about some of the wider process issues.

It all seems too good to be true and I'm sure that there would be complexities in trying to implement it now but if some sort of SDG calculation “package” becomes available then we would want to know what capability would be needed to take advantage of these facility.

5. WHO CAN HELP

The traditional partners.

These are represented around this table. There has been a great deal said and written inside and outside formal reviews and I will not attempt to cover this extensively here. I understand that we are working to a model that SDD will play a key role in collating requirements and keeping track on what assistance has been organised to whom, and what collective, collaborative activity is being undertaken.

Other Sources of assistance.

For all the demand that they create, the approval of the SDGs by the policy parts of the UN has provided impetus for the wider UN system to focus on the contribution it can make to helping ensure measurement can happen. The experience OFA, Epeli and I had in the UN made me suspect that we might find that there are a number of UN agencies that are looking for guidance about what would be the most helpful activities to undertake.

Examples of this are;

- i. The UN Statistics Division has been doing work about how to simplify the compilation of National Accounts for smaller economies.
- ii. Stats Canada does work with the Caribbean countries and has looked at how to use satellite data to look at some environment stats and cell phone data to measure tourism data
- iii. The Government Statistician of Jamaica gave a great presentation at a side event on why measuring climate changes matters a lot for a SIDS. It made me think that these measures may have had greater importance than a number of “core” measures. They published a report that we should look up.

- iv. ESCAP approached us, very keen to establish a presence in the Pacific, and generally feel a bit more connected. We suggested they communicate directly with the USP, and we generally agreed it would be better if all the assistance was a lot more visible so that it is easier to find gaps.

As well as these, there are a number of international collaboration processes which the ABS and Stats NZ participate in that we can try and use to get attention given to our issues.

Do we want to use this structure to increase links with CARICOM?

CARICOM are an interesting example to look to. They have a number of countries, diverse in size and other attributes, and technically supported by Statistics Canada. They appear to have been relatively successful making progress and there seems to be a great deal of goodwill and willingness to share their experiences.

In general they will be able to provide valuable experience on what they have done to identify collective priorities, and in some cases they will have done good work simplifying frameworks and methodologies.

They are unlikely to have worked miracles – for example I suspect that they will not have a way of making sampling work in very small states.

However it would be very useful to understand what avenues they thought about and ruled out. This would be especially true if they had tailored some of their solutions to different members.

I know that Ofa's equivalent in CARICOM, Philomena, has attended at least one Pacific meeting before and it seems like it would be worth asking her to reflect on what she feels the most relevant aspects of their experience have been.

6. FINDING A WAY TO COMMISSION WORK ON WHAT MATTERS TO US

My own experience is that a group like this needs to be able to follow the logic of its own thinking and get work done for it that allows it to work through concerns systematically and come to conclusions about what most needs to be done. The alternative is that the committee ends up passively receiving papers on issues that are most interesting to the better resourced members.

This is not to denigrate the idea of members of the committee using it to raise and resolve methodological matters of concern. The idea is that if we know that to make a decision we need some information then we ideally should be able to find a way to generate this sort of solution.

Clearly there will be resource constraints around how much of this we can do but it seems important to me that we identify what knowledge gaps are really getting in the way of making progress.

7. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Picking up on some of the points made in the main sections of this paper;

- Do you agree that looking at how we meet statistical commitments is a good way into identifying what matters? Are there any other suggestions that you would like to make?
- How should we develop a view of our most pressing problems in meeting our work programmes? Do you think there are a few obvious things or do we need a more systematic process?
- What sort of priority should we give to exploring the possibilities of using new data sources?
- Is there any reason not to engage actively with CARICOM and understand what was critical to achieving things we would like to make progress on?
- Assuming there is the interest, do we want further work done in the areas of;
 - i. Developing some sort of methodological assessment framework and populating it with any "what works" material that we can;
 - ii. Taking the forward work programme commitments across the Pacific and start to identify "hotspots" that could form the focus of our attention;
 - iii. Developing a series of briefings around the possibilities of looking at the new data sources;
 - iv. Writing a paper that attempts to map out what sort of options we might have for reaching out further than we traditionally have in involving new sources of assistance.