

International conference on International Outreach and Coordination in National Accounts for Sustainable Growth and Development

Session 8 - Training

Titre: Prospects for teaching national accounts at ENSEA

Institution: ENSEA

The purpose of national accounts is to provide a statistical overview of a country's economy. They make it possible to indicate the vitality of the economy and to study trends in economic activity. In addition, they permit analyses of the effects of economic and social policies by providing the appropriate data models. Indicators such as GDP, the balance of trade and the rate of inflation are the widely used results of this activity.

In spite of delays in collecting data, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, the statistics supplied by the national accounts departments are essential for the activities of investors and economists. Indeed, it is important to support the training of those working with national accounts in order to improve the quality of human resources and the performance of national accounts departments.

At the moment there are no establishments which provide specific training in national accounts. The work of compiling national accounts is performed by economists who have graduated from university or by statisticians who have studied at the major statistical training institutes.

I - ENSEA: one of the institutes in the African statistical training network

ENSEA (Ecole Nationale de Statistique et d'Economie Appliquée), located in Abidjan, was established in 1961 with the task of training statisticians for French-speaking countries in Africa. As at other regional schools in French-speaking Africa, the teaching methods are adapted to the various subjects in order to provide both theory and practice. Traditional lectures and tutorials cover the theory, while papers, field surveys, conferences and seminars are widely used to put theory into practice.

Training is provided in five separate syllabuses, which are designed to match the level of recruitment of the students and their expected career after leaving ENSEA :

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| - Statistical economists: | school certificate+2, three years' training |
| - Statistical officers: | school certificate+2, two years' training |
| - Statistical assistants: | school certificate, two years' training |
| - Statistical agents: | school certificate level, one year's training |
| - Diploma in applied statistical analysis | master's degree, one year's training |

II - Situation of training in national accounts: a basic subject of statistical training

Ever since ENSEA was established, its teaching has included modules on compiling national accounts and price indices. Statistics and national accounts are in fact quite complementary fields. The compilation of national accounts depends on the availability and collection of data on various sectors of activity. When they leave, statisticians need to be ready to start working on national accounts.

II.1 - Teaching national accounts

National accounts are taught in two separate courses of 30 hours each. The first course outlines the usefulness of measuring the economy and emphasises both statistical collection and the application of summary tools. This course is taught in each syllabus and has three main aims:

- to define the main concepts of national accounts (aggregates, accounting framework, nomenclature, etc) and to present the construction of accounts and tables, as recommended by the SNA93;
- to indicate the position and the role of national accounts in the statistical set-up (sources, data collection, statistical processing, etc);
- to highlight the importance and the limitations of using an accounting framework in a macroeconomic approach.

The course is based to a large extent on the KANGARE teaching aid developed by INSEE of France. It involves compiling the national accounts of a fictional country. KANGARE is supplemented by presenting and using the national accounts of Côte d'Ivoire.

The second course is part of the syllabus for statistical officers and provides more in-depth study of national accounts by compiling heavy accounts for a base year in the SNA and by using real cases. Students are introduced to the use of computers in compiling national accounts via the ERETES module. The course ends by mentioning recent developments (balance sheets, satellite accounts, intermediate systems, etc).

II.2 - Teaching related subjects

A special 25-hour course is devoted to price statistics. The aim is to provide real examples in the field of collecting, processing and analysing information on prices and to refer to the methodology used by the WAEMU to calculate the HIPC index, which relies on CHAPO software. Mention is then made of the use of the index in the ICP approach developed by the African Development Bank.

Aspects of national accounts are otherwise studied by students of the various syllabuses in courses on sectoral statistics, balance of payments and computable general equilibrium modelling.

III - Difficulties encountered: national accounts – a less appealing profession

The teaching of national accounts is subject to three major constraints.

III.1 - Turnover of teachers of national accounts

A perfect understanding of national accounts depends to a large extent on the professional experience of those involved. There is very little literature about the problems encountered and the solutions proposed with regard to the difficulties of collection or concepts which occur in Africa. Consequently, teaching relies on a limited number of experts who are in great demand at international level and whose replacements, if they can be found, are relatively inexperienced.

III.2 - Lack of appeal of national accounts departments

In spite of the reforms introduced in some countries, the national statistical institutes generally continue to lack appeal in comparison with other public or private bodies. The fact is that young statisticians prefer to work in banking or for financial, tax or customs authorities, where the money is much better.

The national accounts departments offer traineeships which are of little real use to students and make only limited use of their skills, since very often they are asked to deal with problems of data collection. Also, any economic analyses which are carried out tend to refer to fairly outdated data, which no longer reflect the current economic circumstances.

In addition, the national accounts departments are often regarded as the statistical departments which demand more but pay less. The fact is that courses on national accounts are less popular than courses on finance, insurance, statistical methods or economic analysis.

III.3 - Lack of simple and harmonised statistical tools

The most common teaching aids for national accounts have been devised for professionals with some experience, the idea obviously being to provide a quick fix to boost capacities in the NSIs. In the circumstances, they are not suitable for basic teaching geared to young students without experience. What they learn depends to a great extent on the teacher's experience, with the result that there is a degree of variety in the practical teaching of national accounts.

IV - Prospects: updating national accounts and upgrading national accounts departments

Teachers at ENSEA have recently been helping to highlight research activities in connection with the ICP programme implemented by the African Development Bank. In a few months ENSEA will accordingly organise a sub-regional seminar to show the relationship of statistical methods resulting in the calculation of price indices to economic analyses in connection with purchasing power parities. Ultimately, the idea is to incorporate in teaching various aspects highlighting national accounts work. The ADB initiative seems relevant since it stresses the need to provide a common syllabus in regional statistical institutes for those who will work on national accounts in the future.

The reforms undertaken as part of the NSDSs should result in making the NSIs more attractive by making better use of their human resources so that the poorer national accounts departments are in a position to recruit staff and revitalise their work.

Basic training in national accounts must be harmonised and updated using simple teaching tools which can be adapted to specific local circumstances.

V - Conclusion

To sum up, the practical and theoretical teaching of national accounts has always been a key element in the training of statisticians at schools in the region. Solving the problems it faces requires greater regard for a career in national accounts and greater attention to basic teaching in NSDS promotion policies.