

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

Session 5 - Donor activities in the field (what went well, what needs to be improved). Sustainability

Title: Experiences in cooperation projects

Institution: Swedish SIDA

Why create a statistics group?

- Well functioning and trustworthy statistics is of obvious importance for planning and monitoring all policies serving at reducing poverty.
- The Paris Declaration indicates new aid modalities such as Sector and General Budget Support aligned on a country's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). The PRS framework is thus important for estimating the degree to which targets have been achieved on the different components of poverty reduction. Statistics are crucial to as well donors as the government in this process.
- The Paris Agenda also points at improved harmonisation of donor support to reduce the administration charge for countries receiving aid and to make extern funding more efficient. In the Malian donor landscape, this is done through a number of thematic groups organized and coordinated by the Donor Harmonisation Secretariat. The statistics group is part of this structure.
- Support to the national statistical system in Mali is very much defined by donors and designed primarily on a short term vision and partly in order to satisfy donors' own needs for statistics. This seems to be more a rule than an exception in the neighbouring countries. As a consequence, the projects and programs are often poorly harmonised with regard to methodology, planning and financing. Nor is there a strategy for long-term sustainable funding. The National Agency of Statistics and Information Sciences (DNSI) in Mali has repeatedly brought up the difficulties to handle ill harmonised donor support and the frustration that donors do not align their support on the national strategy, the Schema Directeur de Statistiques (SDS) elaborated in 2005 and covering the period of 2006-2010.
- The Swedish experience of working in other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America is that poorly coordinated donor support is a major constraint for statistical development work to achieve results. Being primarily focused on creating possibilities for stronger ownership at the National Statistical Offices (NSOs), Swedish programme implementers has until today worked little on aligning or harmonising donor support. This working method is about to change with the setting up of the new project in Mali. Leadership within the national statistical system needs to be accompanied by leadership towards the technical and financial partners. Our expectation is to help enable an environment for development of the statistical system, mainly to be steered by the National Statistical Office, DNSI.

Vision

- Financial sustainability of the statistics domain, in the long term without external funding.
- Improved dialogue on potentially sensitive issues such as data credibility and accessibility. Donors speak with one voice.
- A complete overview of current and planned support to the National Statistical System is available, presenting the sources from the national budget and from

different external funds. To obtain this an inventory is currently conducted in Mali. The results will not least be an important input for the upcoming Round Table discussions between the Government and the donors during which the Mali National Statistical Strategy (SDS) is an important issue on the agenda.

- The national strategies and procedures are the starting point and the reference for all donor support. The statistics group is to promote a common vision of aligning support on a basis of the activities already elaborated in the Mali National Statistical Strategy.
- The Coordination Committee for the national statistics system (CCSI) is well functioning and can serve as a counterpart for intern coordination. Its bi-annual meetings function as sector reviews for the statistics domain. During these meetings, donors can together with actors in the national system go through the action plan for the National Statistical Strategy and discuss the planning of the upcoming year. A functional structure of the internal coordination of the national statistics system is crucial for donors to harmonise and align on national procedures. It makes it easier to identify the different supports and in that way avoid double financing. It also strengthens the national ownership and makes the system more efficient. Furthermore the Coordination committee's meetings allow for bringing up political dialogue issues with participants of the whole system.
- The donors have signed a memorandum of understanding stating that common principles guide their work for Technical Assistance to the National Statistics System. Donors adopt budget support as the primary aid modality to statistics. This is based on the existent National Statistical Strategy and an expected long-term, realistic and prioritised action plan. As mentioned, the ordinary sessions of the coordination committee serve as sector reviews for this budget support. This is expected to further emphasise DNSI's ownership of the National Statistical Plan and diminish the handling of support from different donors.
- A plan for coordinating analysis and missions within statistics is put in place. This is an important instrument for better predictability and planning but also for harmonised approaches.

Challenges

- It takes time and trust to put a functioning harmonisation of donors' activities in place. Each donor organization has its own logic, working methods and time tables. Coordination requires that all actors, the national statistics system as well as donors, inform and discuss well ahead on suggested activities. Donors also have to accept that a common initiative means less focus on potential bilateral agendas. Obtaining complementarities between different projects may require that some have to change in priorities to better harmonise with other projects. The national statistics system has to be able to refuse donor interventions addressed to areas already covered, or at least inform that other donors are planning similar support. It is a fact of creating a new "culture" and another way of doing things on both the government's and the donors' side. Instead of governmental structures going "shopping" for different supports, donors and government should have a common and long-term vision. Still, this is difficult to put in place and it remains a challenge how to handle donors working "outside the frame".
- Statistics remain an under-funded area in the national budgets of almost all developing countries. It is thus heavily donor dependent. Donors are no more to be convinced of the importance of statistics, but what about the governments? Not least within the logic of the Paris Agenda, governments need to take increased responsibility for financing statistics production. In this context, it should be taken into account that a constant demand for statistics is the main argument for securing a

durable national financing. To create such a demand, the national statistics system has the responsibility for improving the promotion of statistical data and its use.

- If the internal coordination of the national statistics system does not work, donor coordination can hardly make a difference. In Mali, the Coordination Committee (CCSI) was created on paper almost three years ago but just recently had its first meeting. It is positive that the committee is finally made functional. The task laying ahead is to continue improving communication within the system. A general problem in the Malian public administration is the lacking inter ministerial / sector coordination. This is often made evident within the statistics domain as statistics is covered by a number of ministries. Thus, improved exchanges of information and harmonisation of working methods and action plans are needed. In Mali there are current discussions as to how the statistics group may be able to support DNSI and the rest of the system to strengthen its coordination function, to which the CCSI is one important tool.

Advices and experiences to share

- It is important to discuss who is being the lead of a statistical group and to define the role of national structures such as the National Statistical Office. Here in Mali, DNSI expressed all from the beginning that they did not have human resources to take the lead. Another reason for them not to be the lead was that it might complicate dialogue with governmental structures, among others the ministry that DNSI itself depend on. It was therefore decided that Sweden remains the lead of the group but that DNSI is a central member. It is crucial to have Mali as an active counterpart in the process and the discussions, not only through DNSI but also by the participation of other governmental structures such as the PRS unit and users of statistics. The donors of the group may meet alone to discuss certain issues related to the harmonisation and modalities of their different supports, but this is rather an exception than a rule and in that case the governmental structures are always kept informed and ToRs are shared. As lead, Sweden may have specific meetings with DNSI in order to discuss more profoundly on themes relevant to the group. The most important working method is to make sure that all communication is based on openness and transparency.
- In February 2008, Statistics Sweden visited Mali on a two-week mission to create a set-up for the planned institutional cooperation project with DNSI. The presentation of the results of the Swedish mission constituted a chance to initiate the discussion on how to practically coordinate support and make all donors adhere to a common approach. This experience showed that fruitful discussions on coordination may be more likely to take place with a concrete proposition of support as point of departure compared to general discussions on priorities. It made it easier to visualise the process and the possible structure of making different projects fit with each other. The risk of having a donor or project dominating others is tackled through gradual building of a common agenda.
- As mentioned before, one should always bear in mind that it takes time to put in place functioning coordination of donor support. In Mali, there is still a long way to go, but the logic of working together within a domain to which donor support has been so fragmented is slowly being introduced. Together with DNSI we see great changes, positive attitudes and new dynamics as to how to coordinate support to statistics. We believe that this will improve the quality of the production, analysis and dissemination of statistics, and in the long run result in better planned national politics for poverty reduction.