

From **Brunelli, Lina & Cicchitelli, Giuseppe (editors). Proceedings of the First Scientific Meeting (of the IASE).** Università di Perugia (Italy), 1994. Pages 299-302. Copyright holder: University of Perugia. Permission granted by Dipartimento di Scienze Statistiche to the IASE to make this book freely available on the Internet. This pdf file is from the IASE website at <http://www.stat.auckland.nz/~iase/publications/proc1993>. Copies of the complete Proceedings are available for 10 Euros from the ISI (International Statistical Institute). See <http://isi.cbs.nl/sale-iase.htm> for details.

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THREE DECADES OF TRAINING GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL STAFF IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

James P.M. Ntozi and George W. Kibirige
Institute of Statistics and Applied Economics, Makerere University
P.O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda

1. Introduction

Almost all official statistical services in Africa were introduced during the colonial era with the setting up of statistical units in the colonies and territories whose functions were largely determined by the ruling colonial powers. In East Africa, the service was set up in 1926 as the Statistical Section of the East African Governors' Conference with a mandate of "collecting statistics gradually, on the same method, throughout the territories, and to tabulate and compare results so that true inferences can be drawn" (Singh, 1971). Nigeria's statistical office was established in 1947 with personnel deployed from the Treasury, Customs and Office of the Chief Secretary.

Belgium and France set similar units in territories under their control to produce statistics for the administration of the colonies and provide a framework for the orderly conduct of export and import trade.

During the reign of the colonial powers, often there was no impetus for the training of indigenous statistical personnel. Citizens of the administering power provided the small core of professionals to operate the units.

The count-down period to independence in the witnessed 1950s an increasing demand by the countries for urgent data on social and economic conditions. The pressure for expansion of national statistical services was intensified at independence or soon after (1960s and 1970s) as countries sought more comprehensive and reliable data to formulate and implement satisfactory development programs. This expansion, however, was being hampered by a serious dearth of statistical personnel, not only professionals (qualified statisticians), but also supervisors and assistants needed to carry out censuses and surveys as well as to process data compiled in these and other activities. Efforts were made at supplying statistical personnel to the services through the establishment of local and regional statistical training programs as well as support of formal study at universities, professional

training centres and other institutions of higher learning, and in service and on the job training programs.

2. Training government statistical personnel

During the last thirty years a number of training schemes and projects have been devised to assist in the training of personnel for government statistical services and improve on their supply. These schemes can be grouped into four categories: middle level, professional level, postgraduate training and re-training, and area or subject specific short-term courses and seminars.

3. Middle level

Initial training efforts arose out of the pressure for data compilation as statistical needs increased in the countries. The focus was on producing personnel who could assist the few professionals in the country in supervising censuses and surveys and processing of data compiled through such activities. A need therefore arose for a training scheme whose emphasis was more on practical aspects of statistical operations. Regional and international training centres were established for this purpose. The trend of establishing centres at regional and international level was due to shortage of professionals in any one country to carry out the training activities and the cost considerations. These centres have continued to train semiskilled statistical personnel for many countries. One shortcoming which arose with regional centres was that the practical training tended to be characterized by the social and economic condition of the host country which at times was at variance with conditions applicable in other participating countries. The language problem in fieldwork was a major handicap.

Many national statistical offices require a large number of personnel trained at this level. Only a few from each country can be trained at regional centres or abroad. Besides, releasing trainees on a full-time basis for long period is at times not feasible. Some countries established national training centres so as to bring the training content near to the actual requirements for each country.

Besides the setting up of national training centres, countries have organized in service and on the job statistical training programs. However, national training programs at the middle level have faced the problem of getting competent teaching staff. In some cases external lecturers from universities have been used. These, at times, have not been found suitable

especially in handling practical areas. There is also a lack of appropriate materials at this level.

4. Professional and postgraduate level

Professional level training was initially given in overseas institutions and universities. African statisticians who manned statistical offices after independence were almost invariably trained in U.K. or France. Later, institutions were established from which professional statisticians could be recruited.

In 1978, the Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA) was set up with the primary objective of making Africa to be self-sufficient in the supply of statisticians by the 1990s. A ten-year program was set up by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) with the assistance of various donors to enable STPA to obtain its objective.

This was to be achieved by increasing the number of trained statisticians and improving and maintaining the quality of the current statistical staff. It was envisaged that during the 1978-87 period, the STPA centres would increase their output by 50%, with greater increases in the professional training of the Anglophone centres. In addition, a special project for training professional statisticians in the Portuguese-speaking African countries was to be implemented. Hence, the centres were to aim at improving their efficiency and output, make their training programmes more practical, and ensure self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, the top priority of STPA was to produce professional statisticians. Such programs aimed at offering a basic university training leading to one of the following degrees (diplomas): *ingenieur de travaux statistiques*, *ingenieur d'application de la statistique* for the Francophone countries and first degree in statistics (Bachelor of Statistics or equivalent qualification) for the English-speaking areas.

Related to the professional statistical training were the more specialized courses offered to the statisticians at the postgraduate level. These scholars would then become specialists in various fields, such as national accounts, agricultural statistics, sample surveys, demographic statistics, economic statistics, labour force statistics, social statistics and statistical computing. These programs would lead to qualifications, such as *Certificat d'études Supérieures Spécialisées*, graduate diplomas in Statistics, or Masters and Doctorate degrees. In addition, short term courses, workshops and seminars were to be organized for working statisticians by the local STPA centres or foreign institutions.

5. Conclusion

A number of training schemes and programs have been devised to ensure a steady supply of statistical personnel to governments statistical services in Africa. However, the statistical needs of the countries have continuously been diversifying and increasing dramatically. The schemes and programs have to adjust accordingly. In addition, the loss rate of trained personnel at various levels is quite high. One of the solutions to this problem would be that of improving the supply position.

Bibliography

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