

National Strategies for the Development of Statistics and their Expected Impact on Agricultural and Rural Statistics

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Recently the international development community has shown considerable interest in the preparation and implementation of national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDS). These are increasingly being promoted as the best way of responding to the demand for better data to monitor development progress. At all levels, demand for statistical data and hence the political profile of statistical systems is increasing, driven by the preparation of poverty reduction strategies, monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals and the need to demonstrate development results. The increasing importance of statistics is mobilizing additional resources for capacity building. The international community is now committed to improving statistics and is focusing on the NSDS approach as the best way to do this. If agricultural and rural statistics are to benefit, then it is essential that these data systems participate fully in both preparation and implementation. There are a number of challenges and opportunities facing managers. Efforts are needed to integrate and coordinate more closely with other components of national statistics, there must be closer collaboration in all data processes and effective management structures must be set up. In particular, it will be increasingly important to demonstrate that results are being achieved and that the needs of data users are being addressed.

1. Introduction

This paper argues that the current climate for statistics, especially in developing countries is probably more supportive than at any time in the past thirty years. A number of initiatives at the international level and within developing countries have increased demand for the outputs of government statistical agencies and hence interest in how these agencies operate. This presents an opportunity to the managers of statistical agencies in government, but also an important set of challenges. In order to meet the new demands, managers need to improve the quality and the quantity of their products and services. An enhanced awareness of the need for good statistics on the part of politicians and decision-makers, presents an opportunity to raise the profile of statistical services generally and to address some pressing resource constraints. This is by no means a one-way process, however. Government operations everywhere are being subject to the discipline of demonstrating results and providing value for money and statistical agencies too will need to play their part. Indeed an important part of the process that has led to an increased status for statistics, the results agenda, also has important implications for the way that statistical agencies operate and are managed. Managers, in particular, need to adopt a broad strategic approach if they are to take advantage of the opportunities that are opening up in many countries. If rural and agricultural statistics are to benefit, it is crucial that they too participate in this process.

The paper itself is organized into four further sections. Section 2 provides a brief overview of official statistics in developing countries and looks at the problems facing the managers of statistical agencies. It reviews the role of governments as well as

development assistance agencies and summarizes the arguments that led to the setting up of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21) at the end of 1999. The section also discusses the new development paradigm that has emerged at the beginning of the twenty first century and the implications that this has for statistics.

Section 3 focuses on what have now become known as national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDS). It presents the arguments for a strategic approach to the development of statistics, reviews the emerging concept of national statistics and looks at how strategic planning has worked in practice. Section 4 then goes on to outline some of the main implications of the NSDS process and approach for rural and agricultural statistical agencies. The core argument of the paper is that the managers of these agencies must become centrally involved in the preparation and implementation of national statistical development strategies, if they wish to address many of the serious problems they face today and if sustainable improvements are to be made to data quality and coverage. Section 5 then presents some conclusions and goes on to suggest some important actions that will be needed to improve rural and agricultural statistics in developing countries over the next few years

2. Statistics for Development

2.1. *Why Statistics?*

Official statistics, that is, statistical data collected and disseminated by governments about different aspects of life in a country, are needed for a number of important purposes. They provide the information, the evidence, needed for the business of government – both day to day administration and for policy purposes. At the same time, statistics are also important for users outside government. They provide information needed for business decision making and to keep individual citizens informed about what their government is doing. In a world where national economies are becoming increasingly inter-dependent, official statistics provide a basis for understanding how a country interacts with the rest of the world and how local conditions compare with those elsewhere.

Good statistics, numerical information that has been collected according to agreed good practice, using appropriate methods for data collection, processing and dissemination are crucial as a tool for economic and social development. They provide an objective and replicable picture of the state of a country, enable comparisons to be made, both over time and space, and set benchmarks for measuring progress in the future. The use of well-established data processes and statistical methods provide information that can be manipulated and analyzed using the powerful tools of mathematics and statistics.

Official statistics are public goods. The use of them by one person or agency does not detract from their use by another. While they are often costly to produce, they are readily disseminated and once they are publicly available, it is difficult to exclude other users. But the value of statistics depends upon their quality. Because it is not easy to

ascertain the quality of statistics directly, users must have confidence in the producer and in the methods and standards employed in the production of statistics. For all these reasons, it is difficult to establish functioning markets in statistics, leaving national governments and international agencies to produce and disseminate statistical information. The compilation and public dissemination of official statistics, therefore, is a core function of government. The kinds of statistics that are collected and disseminated will depend on needs and have to be determined in consultation between users and providers. In developing countries, with many other calls on government revenue, and with scarce human and technical resources, not all statistics that are needed can be provided and very difficult decisions need to be made on priorities.

Every country needs good statistics, therefore, and almost all countries have established specialized agencies whose job it is to collect, process and disseminate official statistics. Indeed, the collection and use of statistics to support government is as old as the business of government itself [Pearson, 1978]. The problem is that in many countries, especially those in the developing world, the work of these agencies has been under-appreciated and under-valued. In almost all countries, at different times there has been a debate about the role and function of official statistical agencies [Fienberg, 1991]. It is only fairly recently, however, that the importance of statistics in developing countries, to guide crucial resource allocations and policies that have a direct bearing on the welfare and even survival of most of the population, has received more widespread recognition.

2.2. *National Statistical Systems and the Development Process*

The need for better statistical data to build effective policy responses to the complex development problems facing the world, as well as to monitor development progress, has become even more acute in recent years. Since the end of the second world war, the developing world has experienced strong, but very uneven progress on sustainable growth and poverty reduction. Based on agreements reached at the international conference on financing for development that took place in Monterrey, Mexico in 1991 [United Nations, 2002], a broad partnership for development has identified the main components for improving on this record: the need for good, country-specific and country-owned, policies and institutions; together with a continuing commitment to provide effective development assistance. There is now international consensus, for example, that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) identify the desired development outcomes, as well as the means for measuring progress. There is also agreement that consistent and coherent implementation are the key requirements for achieving the MDGs, with a shared accountability and a new focus on results.

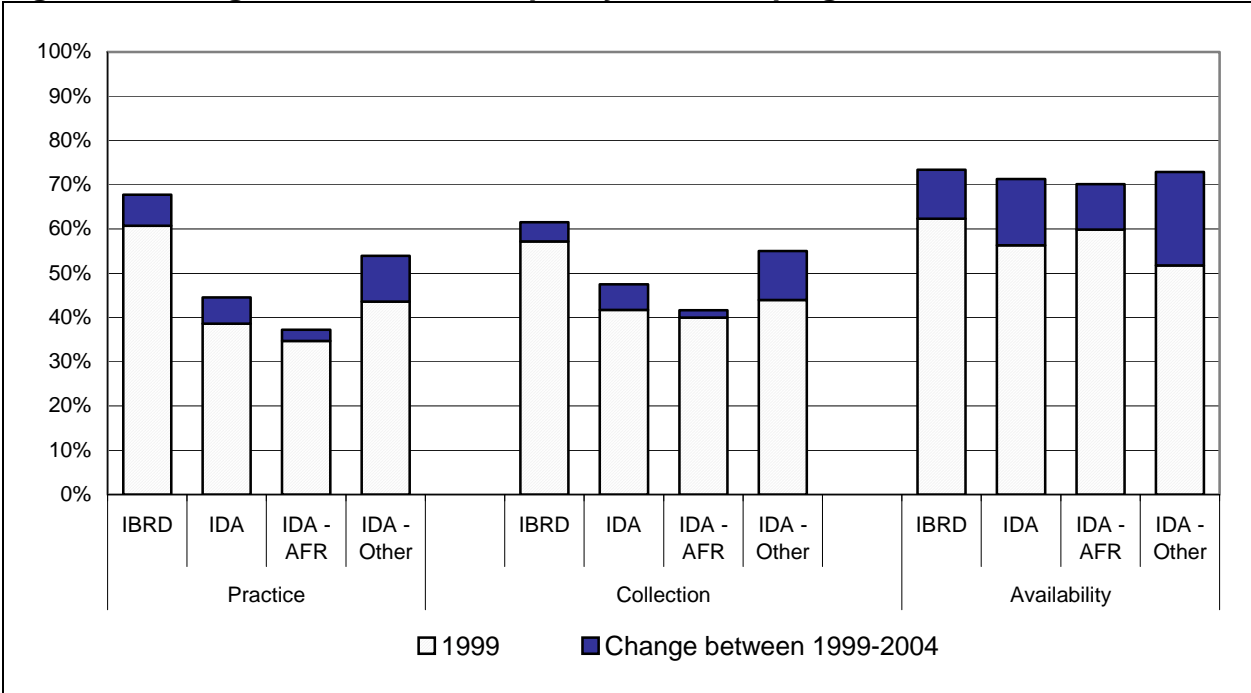
The international attention placed on the Millennium Development Goals has, inevitably, resulted in an increased awareness of the need for effective statistical systems to generate the data need to monitor the indicators. Of the 48 indicators identified by the UN to monitor the MDGs, at least 35 are derived from data generated by national statistical systems. The international community has recognized, therefore, that actions

are required to help develop the capacity of these systems if reliable and comprehensive data are to be provided to monitor development progress.

Within developing countries too, there is an increasing awareness at the policy level of the need for better data, to assess problems, to set priorities and to monitor change. Those countries eligible for assistance under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) have been required to prepare Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and there is now widespread acceptance that these strategies should provide the basis for policy formulation and the coordination of external assistance [World Bank and the IMF, 2004]. More than 40 countries now have full poverty reduction strategies in implementation and as part of this process have defined poverty monitoring systems, with a specified set of indicators and mechanisms for generating the data required.

It is clear, however, that much needs to be done to help the statistical systems of developing countries to meet the data challenges of the twenty-first century. Recent analysis by the World Bank [World Bank, 2004a], has developed some measures of statistical capacity in developing countries, especially those that are members of the International Development Association (IDA). This has attempted to measure capacity in three main dimensions, representing statistical *practice*, data *collection*, and indicator *availability*. Although any such measurement system will inevitably be simplistic and will miss many details, the analysis does indicate, for the first time, the level of statistical capacity in developing countries as well as a mechanism for measuring change over time. Figure 1, shows the identified change in the three dimensions of capacity between 1999 and 2004. It also compares middle income countries (labeled IBRD in the figure) with the poorest group and with IDA countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Figure 1: Changes in Statistical Capacity in Developing Countries: 1999 to 2004



Source: World Bank, 2004

The figure illustrates that in many countries especially the poorest and those in sub-Saharan Africa, there has as yet only been limited improvement in statistical capacity, especially in relation to statistical practices and data collection. There has, however, been some improvement in the availability of key indicators, especially those used for monitoring the MDGs. Here, efforts by the international community have helped to fill gaps in coverage, although much of the data is based on the use of models and interpolation.

The lower scores for both statistical practice and data collection, especially for IDA countries is also indicative of the lack of an adequate infrastructure to support statistical activities. Good practice and the setting up of regular data collection programs require that countries have in place an adequate statistical and physical infrastructure, including such things as business registers, sampling frames, classification schemes, as well as buildings, transport and information and communications equipment. A serious problem faced by the managers of many developing country statistical agencies has been that their budgets have been insufficient even to maintain this infrastructure, let alone expand and develop it.

2.3. *Development Assistance for Statistics*

The provision of donor assistance to help less developed countries improve their statistical systems is not new. A number of developing countries have received financial and other kinds of support from both multilateral and bilateral aid agencies for many years, in areas such as survey design and implementation, economic statistics and training. And yet, to a large extent, there is widespread recognition that the impact of much of this assistance has been limited [OECD, 1999]. Much of the assistance has been organized on an ad hoc basis and has often been as much about meeting the immediate needs for data by the donor agency itself as it has about building sustainable capacity. In many countries, there is a feeling that the statistical agenda is being increasingly donor-driven, with data collection programs defined by the availability of resources rather than by any detailed analysis of demand or need [UN Statistical Commission, 2002]. As a result, for example, statistical agencies have been able to conduct household surveys when donor resources were provided, but have often been unable to maintain even the most basic of regular data collection systems such as establishment surveys.

This concern with the effectiveness of donor assistance and the lack of control that managers of statistical systems in the least developed countries felt that they had over statistical programs were two of the key factors that led to the establishment of the PARIS21 Consortium in 1999 [OECD, op cit]. At the end of the twentieth century, it was felt that a new approach was needed, that placed developing countries at the centre of the development process in statistics, that focused as much on creating demand for data as on supply, and which brought together data providers and users. Sponsored by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations, OECD and

the European Commission, PARIS21 was set up to promote coordination and to act as an advocate for this new approach.

3. National Strategies for the Development of Statistics

3.1. *The Need for a Strategic Approach*

Strategic planning is not a new concept nor is its application to official statistics. For example, in the 1990s the United Nations promoted the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa [UN, 1993]. A core element was to encourage African countries to prepare strategic plans for statistics. It has also long been recognized that an effective statistical organization needs to manage strategically, making best use of the resources it has available to meet both the current and future needs of its customers and users [UN, 2003]. Indeed, because needs for data are elastic and can change rapidly, while the supply of statistics is fairly inelastic, since it can take some time to set up new data collection processes, a strategic approach is really essential. Since statistical managers need to allocate resources without the benefit of price signals provided through the operation of a market for official statistics, their job is really quite difficult.

National strategies for the development of statistics (NSDS), being promoted by PARIS21 and the international community more generally, are something that many managers of statistical agencies should be familiar with therefore. There are some important features, including: coverage of the whole of national statistics and not just the output of the central statistical agency; involvement of all the main stakeholders in statistics, through a comprehensive consultative process; building in political endorsement; and the definition of mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on progress in implementation. To a large extent, they put into effect the important principles of national ownership and wide consultation that underpin the PRSP approach.

Although the process will clearly vary between countries depending on local circumstances, it is expected that most NSDS will include: high level political endorsement; a detailed assessment of current capacity strengths and weaknesses; the identification of an appropriate mission and goals for statistics; the setting of clear priorities, especially for the use of the scarcest resources; and agreement around a detailed, time-bound and properly costed implementation plan. Overall, provided that the international community is able to back its support with real new resources, the NSDS initiative does provide an opportunity for statistical managers and is certainly something that they need to be aware of.

3.2. *The Concept of National Statistics*

Official statistics are collected, compiled and disseminated by government departments and agencies “as an indispensable element in the information system of a society, serving the government, the economy, and the public with data on the economic,

demographic, social, and environmental situation” [UN, op cit]. The source data are derived from a number of processes, including censuses and surveys, as a by-product of administration, or by some other means. The organization of the agencies that undertake these data activities and compile official statistics varies from country to country, but usually includes a specialist central statistical agency with responsibility for specific statistics as well as overall coordination. Even in fairly centralized statistical systems, however, it is likely that a number of different agencies will carry out some statistical functions. Even if the central statistical agency is responsible for all national surveys and censuses, other departments will typically compile and disseminate statistical information from the administrative processes for which they are responsible. The central bank, for example, will usually be responsible for banking supervision and will compile and publish money and banking statistics. Similarly agencies such as the Ministry of Finance will compile and publish statistics on government finance and the Ministry of Agriculture may well do the same for agricultural statistics.

This situation, where official statistics, all of which are important to users in different ways, are produced and disseminated by more than one agency has led, in many countries, to the development of the concept of National Statistics. This term is fairly new in the statistical world and has been defined in different ways, but the basic concept is to bring together the most important indicators and data sets within a coherent framework, which provides users with some assurances about data quality and integrity. It is a key principle behind the IMF’s General Data Dissemination System (GDDS), for example, where countries compile and publish descriptions of methods and procedures about data from different sources and where plans are developed to improve data coverage, quality and integrity.

In general, therefore, good practice is emerging that emphasizes including as full a range as possible of national statistics, or at least the most important data series within the NSDS process. Many early strategic plans focused mainly on the central statistical agency and were concerned with improving the quality, coverage and dissemination of statistics for which the agency had direct responsibility. Other data sets, which were important for national development, but which were not part of the central agency’s work-load, were not covered. More recently though, many countries have been moving to develop strategic plans that cover the national statistical system more broadly. These strategies bring in other data agencies as well as the central statistical office and hence have a broader coverage in terms of data and their use.

How this is done, varies from country to country, but having as broad a coverage as possible has a number of advantages, including: building a broad consensus on the importance of statistics; helping to match the supply of data with the demand for statistics; promoting coordination and increasing the efficiency of statistical agencies; and building on existing processes, including participation in the GDDS. It may also be helpful to consider a staged process, where different agencies are incorporated into the national statistical system over a period of time. Not all agencies may see the advantages of active participation from the outset, for example, and some may wish to retain their independence. In these circumstances a more gradual approach, which

promotes participation by demonstrating the advantages, may well be more effective than one which simply requires participation through external pressure.

3.3. *Strategic Planning for Statistics in Practice*

As more countries prepare their own national strategies for the development of statistics and gain experience with implementation, a substantial body of experience is being built up in terms of what works and good practice. The PARIS21 web-site¹ lists strategic planning documents for 49 countries with a wide range of coverage from Equatorial Guinea to the United Kingdom. While it is not possible to summarize such a wide range of experience here, some important conclusions do emerge. In Tanzania, for example, the process of preparing the plan was seen as being as important as the final product, and considerable care was taken to ensure a comprehensive consultative process and to provide adequate time for a consensus to be reached [United Republic of Tanzania, 2001]. In Kenya, the process first of all defined the strategic objectives and then, later on, set out an implementation plan. Here an important focus was to change the status of the Central Bureau of Statistics and to update its mandate [Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2003]. In other countries the emphasis has been on building on what is already in place, using existing processes such as the GDDS, for example, to assess capacity and performance and to set targets.

An important part of the strategic planning process in many countries is the preparation of a detailed implementation plan, that provides a detailed timetable of what needs to be done and when and includes a detailed budget and financing plan. Experience from a number of countries indicates the importance of translating broad strategic objectives into more manageable implementation programs, that are directly linked to existing budgeting and planning processes. Part of this process will require that specific outputs and targets are set and mechanisms put in place to monitor and report on indicators of progress [INSD, 2003]. Overall, what is required is to identify ways in which the basic principles of strategic planning can be put into practice in the statistical field [David, 1997; Kaplan & Norton, 2001]. The challenge for managers is to develop a strategic approach, while working to improve performance in the short-term and building capacity that can be sustained into the future.

4. The Implications of the NSDS Approach for Agricultural and Rural Statistics

4.1. *Participating*

A basic argument of this paper is that agencies responsible for agricultural and rural statistics need to be aware of and to engage directly with NSDS processes that are either being planned or are already in progress in their countries. The fundamental reason is that, especially in developing countries, the NSDS is increasingly being seen as the vehicle for setting priorities and for allocating resources both for recurrent operations and investment for the medium term. If agricultural and rural statistics are not adequately represented and if their needs are not reflected in the strategy and the

¹ <http://www.paris21.org/>

implementation plan, then there is a real risk that their development will be constrained. Nationally owned and developed strategies for statistics are emerging as the main mechanism not only for addressing existing capacity constraints, but also for allocating resources in the medium-term. Many donor agencies, for example, are providing assistance to the implementation of the NSDS and are unlikely to be prepared to finance other programs outside this framework.

The implication, therefore, is that managers of rural and agricultural statistical agencies, especially where these are separate from the central statistical agency, need to be aware of how the NSDS process is developing locally and to identify how and when they should be involved. There are a number of levels at which participation can and should take place, including in high-level coordination mechanisms, at the technical level and by providing staff to participate in task forces and working groups. Managers also need to ensure that their main data users and providers are also adequately represented in the appropriate consultative forums and mechanisms. It will be important, for example, to persuade senior policy makers to take an active role in whatever coordination mechanisms are put in place, since it is at this level that the final decisions on priorities and on implementation issues are likely to be made.

4.2. *Coordination and Management*

Participation in the NSDS process is also likely to have important implications for the coordination and management of statistical operations and services. The main concern for rural and agricultural statistics is to judge to what extent any loss of independence in terms of methods and procedures will be offset by the gains that will be achieved through greater cooperation and inclusion in the NSDS. Potentially, the gains are likely to be substantially greater than any perceived loss of independence, especially in the medium to longer term, but the arguments will still need to be made. Issues that may need to be reviewed include: the use of statistical concepts, definitions and classifications; the use of common sampling frames and registers; coordination of statistical operations, in terms of timing, coverage and frequency; methods of data reporting and dissemination; and common procedures for setting up databases and for providing access to micro-data for further research and analysis.

Involvement in the NSDS and especially inclusion within the formal set of national statistics, may also have implications for dissemination and other statistical practices. In many cases, the aim of the NSDS is to put into effect recognized good practice in statistics, including, for example, the regular dissemination of metadata on methods and procedures, providing equal access to all users and promulgating advance release calendars. These areas will need to be discussed and agreed, especially where they represent a departure from what is currently done.

There are also important implications for relations with international agencies and for the compiling and reporting of statistics for regional and international use. In particular there will be a need to ensure adequate coordination and harmonization of the international reporting of data. At the same time, donors and international agencies

should respect national priorities as reflected in the NSDS, once they have been properly discussed and agreed. It is clearly important that the needs for international reporting are adequately represented when priorities and work programs are being decided, but once the strategy has been agreed and endorsed, then all stakeholders should agree to support implementation, even if they feel that their special needs have not been fully addressed. Donors and international agencies should agree to work through whatever mechanisms have been established to review the strategy and the implementation plan and not seek to impose their own priorities.

4.3. *Statistical Operations*

Rural and agricultural statistics are generated from a variety of data sources, the most important being censuses, surveys and administrative records. Participation in the NSDS process may have some implications for the timing and coordination of major data collection exercises, and especially of agricultural surveys that collect data from rural households. Agricultural surveys and censuses are expensive and extensive operations, requiring careful planning and execution. In addition to generating estimates of crop and livestock production, they are important sources of data on the welfare and well-being of rural households and the data needed to understand rural poverty.

Especially in the less densely populated lower income developing countries, the high cost of agricultural surveys in Africa is an important element in their sustainability. While random sampling and objective measurements have sound technical foundations, experience shows that they are expensive methods and their application in the field often results in high non-sampling errors with results being available only after long delays. The high cost of surveys and delays in getting results to policy makers together with their perceived lack of relevance has, in many instances, resulted in decreasing attention and priority attached to the systems and insufficient resource allocation by governments. These technical and operational factors combined with a weak institutional framework and poor data management have, in many countries, contributed to a serious decline in capacity. The NSDS process and the high priority being placed on poverty alleviation (especially rural poverty) and food security, offers an opportunity for renewed efforts to re-build rural and agricultural data systems and to develop new, more cost-effective procedures.

4.4. *Focusing on results: Data Storage, Retrieval and Dissemination*

Effective strategic planning places an emphasis on results and outputs, rather than inputs and activities and this has important implications for rural and agricultural statistics. The NSDS process provides an opportunity for managers of statistical agencies to re-focus their attention away from particular data collection activities and more towards providing the data products and services needed by their clients, customers and users. In particular, modern information and communication technology provides managers with the potential to store, retrieve, use and disseminate information in ways that are likely to be of considerably greater utility and relevance for data users than was the case ten to fifteen years ago.

Increasingly, for example, even in the least developed countries, statistical agencies are moving away from the dissemination of statistical data in printed form, as statistical reports, digests and bulletins, towards electronic dissemination, through the Internet and on CD-ROM. Many users have neither the time or the expertise to extract the statistical data they need from different sources and instead are looking for information to be made available through easily accessible databases that can be interrogated relatively simply. The creation of databases, bringing together both time-series and cross-sectional data from many different sources is an important development in improving access and use and in creating demand for statistics. The NSDS process can provide an important mechanism for providing the coordination and integration required for this to work effectively. Data that are geographically referenced and can be accessed through a geographic information system (GIS) are of particular importance for rural and agricultural statistics. In most countries, what is needed here is effective coordination and harmonization to ensure that as many different data series can be included within the same GIS. For users, the value of statistics can increase substantially when data from different sources can be compared and analyzed.

5. Conclusions

Good statistics have always been important for economic and social development, but especially in the least developed countries, the statistical systems needed to generate the data have often not been properly appreciated or resourced. A lack of effective demand for statistics, coupled with poorly performing agencies has resulted, in many poor countries, in a vicious cycle where inadequate output leads to insufficient support and resources. Recent developments at both the international and national levels have reinforced the need for data to support the development effort especially at the highest level. This presents an important opportunity for the managers of statistical agencies to break out of this vicious cycle. The potential exists in many countries to change the vicious into a virtuous cycle, where improved outputs and results lead to increased support and resources. It is important however, that statistical agencies themselves take advantage now of these opportunities, because there is no guarantee that they will continue indefinitely.

The preparation and implementation of national strategies for the development of statistics provides many countries with an opportunity to undertake a holistic and systematic review of their national statistical systems, addressing not just the symptoms of poor performance, but also the underlying causes. To be effective, however, this approach needs to be comprehensive, covering all the main statistical systems and data sets and data users, providers and compilers. It is very important, therefore, that the managers of agencies responsible for rural and agricultural statistics, as well as the specialist agencies that support them are fully aware of and involved in the strategic planning process.

It is also important that the NSDS process is properly supported by the international community. The commitment is there as indicated by the support received for the

Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics (MAPS) that was endorsed by the international development banks as well as the Development Assistance Committee of OECD at the Second International Roundtable on Managing for Development Results, held earlier this year in Marrakech, Morocco [World Bank, 2004b]. What is needed now is that this commitment is translated into action and the mobilization of new resources and the World Bank along with our partners will be working to do just this.

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