
Country Paper – Sri Lanka
“Developing Professional Capability for National Statistical Systems”
40th Anniversary Celebration of SIAP
Ninth Management Seminar for the
Heads of National Statistical Offices in Asia and the Pacific
31 August – 2 September 2010, Tokyo, Japan

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1. Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) and several statistical units in various other key government Ministries and Departments constitute the National statistical System and it provides an extensive network for the delivery of government statistical service. DCS is the Central agency of the national statistical system. The current staff strength of the DCS is about 1300. The recruitment and development of staff with relevant qualifications, experience and skills is challenging and necessary for the success of organizations. The DCS have adopted many strategies for development of professional capability through enhancing the professional knowledge and competency of its staff.

This paper briefly outlines the development of professional capability in the DCS, with Part A Covering measures taken by the DCS for both developing and maintaining professional capability and Part B highlighting a major strategy implemented for achieving long-term target of enhancement in professional capability.

2. Developing and maintaining professional capability

The DCS has adopted various measures to develop and maintain professional capacity of the National Statistical System. Given below is a brief description on some of these measures.

2.1: Recruitment

Currently there are about 1300 employees working in the DCS: Director General (1), Directors (10), Deputy Director (16), Senior Statistician/Statistician (122), Senior Systems Analyst/Programmer & Systems Analyst /Programmer (12), Statistical Officers (370), Statistical Assistant (133), Other Staff (For data processing, administration etc) (624).

According to the Scheme of Recruitment, Statisticians, Statistical Officers and Statistical Assistants are recruited based on the performance of an open examination and an interview. Degree with a class in the subject areas of Statistics, Mathematics, Economics, Population Studies, Computer Science, Information Technology, Geography, Management etc is the recruitment qualification for Statisticians and Degree in the subject areas of Statistics, Mathematics, Economics, Population Studies, Computer Science, Information Technology, Geography, Management etc is the entry qualification for Statistical Officers. According to the new recruitment policy, Management degree holders are also recruited as statisticians in order to develop the

managerial capabilities of the department. This will enable them to perform their duties well when they become heads of various divisions/sections of the department.

DCS assist the universities in equipping students with technical and practical knowledge and skills in statistics to meet the needs of the country. For example, DCS provides opportunities to university students to gain practical experience in official statistical work through giving them on the job training opportunities. In certain instances even the students are paid an allowance as a measure of encouragement.

2.2: Development

Most of the development programmes of the Department are run in-house or in collaboration with other professional bodies such as universities. These development programmes include training, providing funds for following postgraduate programmes, giving opportunities for gaining experience of other technical divisions etc. Also, DCS is now implementing a capacity development project. A brief description on these programmes is given below.

It is has been planned to implement a rotation policy enabling statistical staff to gain experience in at least 3 technical divisions within first 15 years from their recruitment. A Transfer policy was recently introduced in this regard. The main objective of this are enhancing the professional capability of the employee and to prepare statistical staff to lead divisions in future. This was experimented with the National Accounts division of the DCS successfully.

After the recruitment, the staff of the DCS is trained not only on statistics but also in other subjects such as management, presentation skills, English etc, on a regular basis. Giving opportunity for practical is an important component of most of the training programmes.

A training plan is prepared for the department annually. Details on the training needs of each division of the DCS are collected through a specially designed format. A committee appointed by the Director General reviews it and prepare the training plan. Another committee headed by the Director General reviews it further and approve it for implementation.

In order to be thorough with the theoretical aspects of the subject, it is necessary for the statistical staff to follow relevant postgraduate courses. Therefore, staff is encouraged to follow postgraduate courses in relevant areas. DCS has a policy on funding for postgraduate programmes. The eligibility for funding is decided based on the experience, performance etc. Foreign grants, at least to some extent are available for postgraduate programmes.

Officers for trainings are nominated by a selection committee appointed by the Director General of the DCS and consisted of a few senior managers of the department. Experience, educational qualifications, appraisals, training already received etc. are criteria considered for selecting staff for training.

The DCS has a procedure to follow up trainings. Officers who have followed overseas trainings are required to make presentation to share their knowledge gained during training and training materials with other staff members especially of the subject matter division and with senior level officers of other relevant divisions. Followed by the presentation is a discussion in which the possibility of further improving the departmental work is discussed and reported to the DG.

The Department of Census and Statistics is now implementing Statistical Capacity Upgrading Project (STATCAP) with the financial assistance from the World Bank. This project has two components namely improving capacity of the staff of the DCS and construction of the building for the DCS. Improving capacity of the staff is done through training, consultancies and providing infrastructure facilities including ICT infrastructure. Most of the technical divisions of the department are currently located in rented out buildings. Under the STATCAP project, construction of a building for the department will be commenced shortly.

2.3: Organizational strategies

The DCS organize its strategy considering whether functions are best arranged to achieve efficiency, quality and capability outcomes. A few examples of organizational arrangements of the DCS are briefly elaborated below.

It is essential to grasp the current, emerging and future requirements from users, for DCS to formulate its professional capability development strategy. DCS just formed a National data Committee and its first session will be held shortly. This will be a forum for users and producers of data to get together and discuss and decide on bridging data gaps, data needs, further improving data quality etc. This committee will be chaired by the Deputy Secretary to the treasury. This will provide the DCS a feedback on professional capability development strategy.

DCS has its branch offices in District Secretariats. A few measures have been taken to recognize their contributions. One such measure is selection of the best district office. District offices have been assigned to the Directors in the Head Office and they are responsible for improving those offices through proper guidance. Also residential regional workshops are conducted and these workshops are attended by all Directors. Each member of the statistical staff in the regional offices gives a presentation on a pre-assigned topic. This enables them to further enhance their ICT and presentation skills. A Cultural event is a part of these workshops and it improves team spirit of the staff.

Six Functional Coordination Committees were formed recently. Currently there are about 14 technical divisions and it is required to strengthening the interaction among these divisions. One FCC is Functional Coordination Committee on Sample Surveys. Hereafter, before conducting a survey in the department, it is required to get the recommendations from the FCC. FCC is expected to study all materials on the survey and give its recommendation either to execute the survey or to make necessary improvements. Committee is represented by all relevant divisions and it will provide an opportunity to interact well on subject matter issues.

Staff membership is encouraged to actively involve with professional associations. There are several active professional associations in Sri Lanka. Applied Statistics Association of Sri Lanka is one such organization. As a measure of encouragement, DCS funds participation of staff members who are members of professional associations to participate in events organized by these organizations.

ICT is used in the DCS to a considerable extent to improve the efficiency. All divisions are provided with internet and e-mail facilities. Now among divisions, e-mail is most common and popular means of communication. DCS maintain its own website. Another example for using IT is proposed plan to use scanning technology to capture data in the forthcoming Census of Population and Housing.

3: Example for improving professional capabilities

Until 2008, National accounts Statistics for Sri Lanka were compiled by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka as well as DCS. Since these statistics were compiled by two different agencies discrepancies were unavoidable. In 2008, a decision was taken to compile National Accounts Statistics only by the DCS. During this time, number of senior Officers including the head of the division retired. It was a challenge, to develop the necessary skills of the available staff to compile the statistics. However, several measures were taken immediately and arrange to equip the staff with skills and other facilities. Since 2008, only DCS has been compiling these statistics in timely, reliable and accurate manner. Now DCS not only compiles annual national accounts statistics but quarterly statistics as well. Some of those measures are described below.

a. A weekly lecture series

A weekly lecture series was organized. Officers of the National Accounts Divisions presented their work in the division. These seminars were attended by staff of the National Accounts Division and all the heads of other divisions. This series was a forum for understanding each other's role and others in audience expressed their views not only for current work of the division but also on improvements as well.

b. User - Producer dialogue within DCS

In each quarter there is a special group discussion with the staff of National Accounts Division and all senior officers (director level) & young Directors/ Deputy Directors who will likely to be the leaders of the department in the future. At these discussions, data providers for compilation of national accounts, specially Agriculture, Industry, Prices, Household Surveys divisions get an opportunity to identify the specific data requirements from their divisions. Accordingly they revise their questionnaire and methodologies to meet the data requirements of National Accounts division. At the same time, National Accounts Division comes to know the limitations of other divisions in providing required data. These series of discussions were introduced about 4 years back and it seems to be very popular and useful for both data producers and data users within DCS as compared with previous arrangement where National Accounts division independently produce their National Accounts while subject matter divisions (Agriculture, Industry, Prices, Household Surveys) independently produced their statistics.

c. Training

Almost all officers of the National Accounts division were trained both locally and internationally to improve their skills and the confidence on the challenge of compiling National Accounts Statistics in timely, reliable and accurate manner. Arrangements have been made to provide on the job training for a few officers on compiling regional accounts in another country having this experience. The exposure and the confidence they gain from these training programmes, adds a lot of value to their working attitude.

d. Press briefing

Main mode of dissemination of National Accounts Statistics is press briefing. Quarterly press briefings are organized for this. A wide publicity is given for these statistics as most of the electronic and print media generally attend these meetings and it also provides an opportunity to train senior officers to meet the press.

4: Conclusion

DCS takes every possible measure for capacity building and development of professional capability of its staff continuously. The strategic human resources management and development programmes of the Department help strengthen staff's professional knowledge and skills. NSOs need to modernize their infrastructure and adopt new developments in statistical arena. This is a dynamic process. It is with such a competent team of staff that the Department can play its role efficiently and effectively to cope with the rising aspirations.

In conclusion, author wishes to make three suggestions for the consideration of the relevant organizations. The first suggestion is to organize trainings particularly on small area estimation techniques (both theoretical and practical) on analysis of population census and economic surveys data. Population censuses of many countries are about to be commenced, and it's high time to organize this kind of trainings for the NSO staff. Second suggestion is that staff of the NSO's should be trained on interacting with the press. Press is a very useful and powerful means for data dissemination. To take the maximum advantage of it, it is required to train NSO officers in this area well. Third suggestion is to devise a mechanism to assess the standards of capacity building programmes of NSOs, findings of which could be used to further improve their capacity development plans.