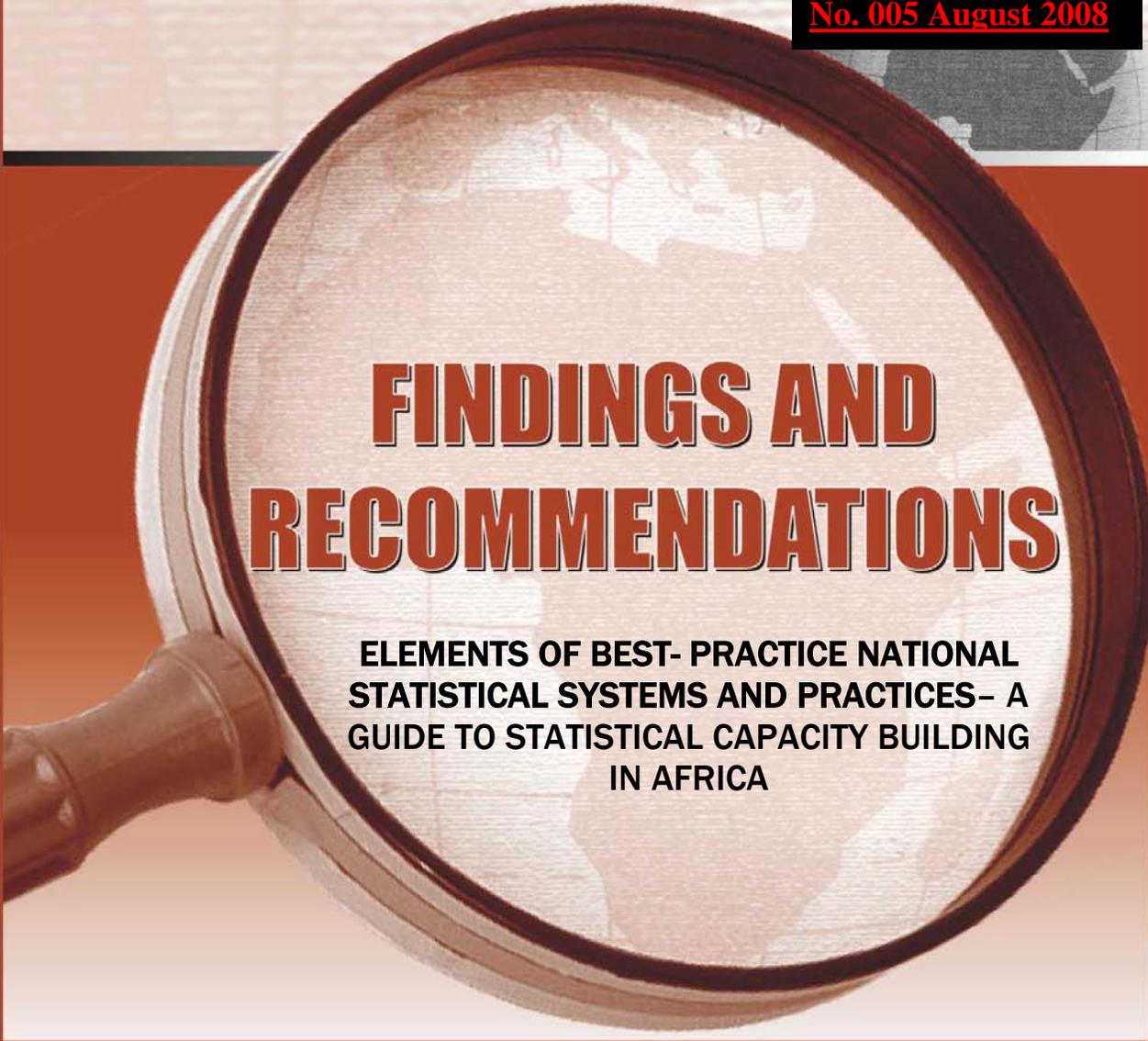THE AFRICAN CAPACITY
BUILDING FOUNDATION

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ELEMENTS OF BEST- PRACTICE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES– A GUIDE TO STATISTICAL CAPACITY BUILDING IN AFRICA

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## I.	INTRODUCTION

This issue of Findings and Recommendations presents key results of a study that reviewed national statistical systems and practices in all 53 African countries with a view to providing a guide to the Operations Departments of the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) in the choice of countries and results indicators in the building of statistical capacity in Africa. Undertaken by ACBF Knowledge Management Department and led by the Foundation's Technical Advisory Panel and Network on National Statistics and Statistical Systems (STATNET)[1], the study had as a primary objective the identification of countries, as well as national statistical systems and practices that could serve as the continent's emerging best practices and thus benchmarks against which performance can be measured in the strengthening of the capacity of countries with weak statistical capacity. To this end, the study reviewed recent statistical developments in Africa, particularly efforts made by countries to reform their statistical systems. It highlighted the qualities of countries that can be ranked as best performers in the reform of their statistical systems, and drew lessons from their experiences. The study also provided some guide in response to questions as to why African countries need to reform their statistical systems; factors driving the need for reform; how reforming countries are responding to challenges; and countries that can be regarded as emerging best practices to which others can aspire.

## II.	ISSUES EXAMINED

Issues examined by the study consisted of a review of major international and regional developments that have taken place in the last few years, which have measurable impact on the way in which national statistical agencies and statistical systems are organized; key elements of an effective national statistical system, including possible indicators for measuring the success or failure of statistical systems; and based on the indicators, a ranked ordering of countries to allow for cross-country comparison and to explain how different countries in Africa measure up against the bench-mark countries.

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[1]*This Note is based on the study "Towards Reforming National Statistical Agencies and Systems: A Survey of Best-Practice Countries with Effective National Statistical Systems in Africa" conducted by ACBF Technical Advisory Panel and Network on National Statistics and Statistical Systems (STATNET).*

The study thus identifies countries that are strong in some aspects of their statistical systems, but weak in others, as well as countries that have statistical capacity indicators that are improving over time as against those whose indicators are reflective of deterioration in statistical capacity and practice. It also highlights some of the characteristics of best-practice countries, points to areas for improvement, and suggests how the process of statistical development can be carried forward by offering suggestions for future activities.

III.   MAIN FINDINGS

The study finds that the key requirements for the establishment of an effective national statistical system are: adequate financial resources to enable the statistical system to operate effectively, and good investment in new technologies for the collection, collation, processing, analyses, storage and retrieval of statistics; country ownership of all aspects of the statistical capacity development process (design, implementation, production, monitoring and evaluation of statistics); independence from, or sensible use of, donor funding, so as to avoid the risk of distorting a country's development priorities, which could potentially arise from externally influenced priorities; regular and sustained technical-skills building training and career development programs for staff in statistical agencies; competitive remuneration to motivate qualified staff to stay in their posts and perform to the best of their abilities; application of standard methodologies in the processing of statistics; promotion of easy access by users of statistics; existence of a good management structure in the statistics office and in the rest of the statistical system to enable the staff to work to optimum efficiency; as well as transparency and open access to data. It stands to reason, therefore, that the provision of a statistical system with an adequate level of human, physical and financial resources is an essential first step in ensuring the emergence of a high-quality statistical system.

The study observes that it is not sufficient to carry out censuses and surveys with the required periodicity. The responsible statistical agency needs to have in place sufficient and skilled human resources and equipment to analyze the data and timeously produce the range of vital statistics that are required for development planning and management. In addition to analyzing the data generated through censuses and surveys, statisticians need to pay attention to the potential uses of data from the various administrative systems of the government. Resources devoted to improving administrative systems might have a double spin-off effects by helping to improve the quality of government administration itself, and providing additional statistical information at low cost.

Based on results from empirical analysis using three statistical performance measures developed by the World Bank, namely, statistical practice, data collection, and availability of indicators, the study finds that the spectrum of performance of statistical systems and practices in Africa is very wide.

At one extreme are two countries - Egypt and South Africa - with four points on a five-point statistical performance rating scale. At the other extreme are two countries - Liberia and Somalia – without any point at the time this study was conducted. In between the two extremes are 22 countries rated three points, 21 countries that received two points, and 6 countries whose statistical systems and practices were characterized by elements equivalent quantitatively to a one-point position in statistical capacity.

Based on the foregoing, the study identifies the following as key elements of a best practice national statistical system:

- o The existence of a national statistical legislation to establish the authority and powers of the statistical agency.
- o The existence of a statistical master plan and a national strategy for statistical development to provide the vision and direction for statistical activities.
- o The existence of an autonomous, efficient and effectively resourced national statistical agency to implement the national strategy for statistical development.
- o The availability of an up-to-date web site, which provides background information on the country's statistical system, the statistical series on production, as well as recent and planned activities.
- o The application of the most current international guidelines and methodologies in the production of all the major statistical series.
- o Conduct of major censuses and surveys at regular intervals (at least, once every ten years for population and agricultural censuses, and, at least, every three years for the other main surveys such as on poverty, health, education, the environment, among others).

The study notes that one specific area where almost all countries in Africa are failing badly is the very poor state of vital registrations, which generate important planning and management statistics. Tremendous progress has, however, been made in this area by the small island countries in Africa, particularly Cape Verde, Mauritius, São Tomé and Prìncipe, and Seychelles.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR ACBF OPERATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF STATISTICAL CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

What then are the implications of the findings of this study for the building of statistical capacity in Africa? Some of these are as follows:

- The ranked ordering of countries by level of statistical development (systems and practices) provides vital information to guide ACBF Operations Departments in the development of interventions to build statistical capacity in African countries. Two of these are of immediate operational relevance. They are:

o The country statistical performance ranking provides entry points for interventions in the building of statistical capacity, as it identifies countries with the most pressing needs to guide ACBF and other partners' interventions. The priority countries for ACBF's support in the building of statistical capacity are the 29 whose rankings fall in the range of 0-2 points. The list of 29 countries in a descending order of intensity of needs is in Annex I. This list is a guide as to the countries most deserving of capacity building support.

o The ranking provides baseline information for developing results indicators for each country in terms of its relative position on the scale and the extent to which the country has in place the key elements of an effective national statistical system and practice. It is recommended that results indicators, among other measures, be defined for the country whose statistical capacity is being built in terms of the expected movement that will be generated by a particular capacity building intervention along the statistical performance scale or its ranking against the best-practice countries. It is also recommended that performance indicators for statistical capacity building projects be derived for the level of improvements measured by the key elements outlined for a best-practice national statistical system and practice.

- Egypt and South Africa are Africa's best-practice countries in national statistical development. ACBF Operations Departments are encouraged to use them as benchmarks when developing projects and programs to strengthen statistical capacity in countries other than the two on the continent.

- ACBF Operations Departments should be cognizant of the elements of an effective national statistical system and practice that are the characteristics of best-practice countries. These are:

o The existence of a national statistical legislation to establish the authority and powers of the statistical agency.
o The existence of a statistical master plan and a national strategy for statistical development to provide the vision and direction for statistical activities.
o The existence of an autonomous, efficient and effectively resourced national statistical agency to implement the national strategy for statistical development.
o The availability of an up-to-date web site, which provides background information on the country's statistical system, the statistical series on production, as well as recent and planned activities.
o The application of the most current international guidelines and methodologies in the production of all the major statistical series.
o Conduct of major censuses and surveys at regular intervals (at least, once every ten years for population and agricultural censuses, and, at least, every three years for the other main surveys such as on poverty, health, education, the environment, among others).

These elements constitute some key results areas for projects and programs developed to build national statistical capacity.

Annex I: Countries with Challenged National Statistical Systems[2]

1.	Somalia	15.	Botswana
2.	Liberia	16.	Sao Tome and Principe
3.	Equatorial Guinea	17.	Namibia
4.	Sudan	18.	Republic of Congo
5.	Angola	19.	Togo
6.	Libya	20.	Seychelles
7.	Eritrea	21.	Nigeria
8.	Central African Republic	22.	Cape Verde
9.	Burundi	23.	Zimbabwe
10.	Guinea-Bissau	24.	The Gambia
11.	Gabon	25.	Guinea
12.	Democratic Republic of Congo	26.	Swaziland
		27.	Comoros
13.	Djibouti	28.	Ghana
14.	Sierra Leone	29.	Chad

[2] *Presented in a descending order of intensity of capacity needs.*