CountrySTAT: better statistics for better decisions

Data availability concern

Agricultural development plays an important role in poverty reduction and achieving food security especially in developing countries where three out of four poor people live in rural areas and rely on agriculture for their living. Having access to timely, reliable and accurate data on food and agriculture is particularly important to monitor national trends and allow the formulation of decisions on national agricultural and food security policies. However evidence shows that in many countries there is a lack of trained staff, tools and methodology are often inadequate and funding opportunities insufficient. Production and reporting on agriculture and food security data continues to be a challenge and existing data is not easily comparable.

CountrySTAT- developing national capacities for improved quality data access

CountrySTAT is an information system capable of managing relevant data originating from a variety of national sources. Its main objective is to improve access to food and agricultural statistics at national and regional levels which can support data analysis and evidence-based decision making and monitoring with the ultimate goal of improving eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. In particular, it aims to:

➢ Provide quality statistics on food and agriculture, and promote evidence-based decision making;

➢ Assist countries in integrating and organizing national data to make them comparable at the international level

➢ Promote partnerships between various statistical institutions within countries, including national statistical offices and other statistical authorities – establishing a one-stop centre for accessing existing food and agriculture statistics in the country and across the regions.

How does it work?

In practice, it acts as a one stop center which centralizes and integrates data coming from various sources and allows its harmonization according to international standards while ensuring data quality and reliability. This supports analysis and informed policy-making with the ultimate goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

CountrySTAT is based on the FENIX platform in line with the "Open Data" approach, which is expected to establish a more efficient flow of agricultural-related data across countries and regions. Its main purpose is to increase the accessibility of quality and timely food and agriculture data, information, strengthen the capacity to develop and carry out multi-sector data

analysis and improve data exchange. The system is capable of processing large amounts of data and to produce results in "real time". Data analysis is easy, due to customized tools that allow the creation of different outputs and formats (e.g. tables, charts, maps, etc), while the application is distributed on a free-of-charge basis to all CountrySTAT members and partners. Finally, it supports multiple-sourced data integration and harmonization according to international standards and ensures at the same time data quality and reliability. In doing so it plays an active role in the establishment and consolidation of a global information network and community.

Evolution

CountrySTAT system was created within the scope of the project "CountrySTAT for SubSaharan Africa" funded by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Since then, more than 35 countries from several regions worldwide have embraced the system. CountrySTAT ensures long-term sustainability by developing capacity of regional and national experts. It is owned and maintained by the member countries. Through national and regional CountrySTAT projects, FAO forms partnerships with statistical offices and the ministries of agriculture, fisheries and forestry among others to introduce the system and build the national and regional capacity to use it. CountrySTAT system is constantly evolving in order to better match the users' needs. Future plans include real time and forecast data relevant to agriculture and the use of mobile technologies and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for data collection.

Country experiences

For many countries CountrySTAT serves as a valuable tool to inform policy-making and emergency planning. In Cameroon for instance, that system was launched in February 2010 and it soon became mainstreamed into the activities of the Ministry of Agriculture, which continues to provide the necessary funding. Today CountrySTAT Cameroon contributes to the National Programme on food Security by providing reliable and comparable national data.

Kenya is another example of how CountrySTAT data can be used for evidence-based policy-making. In 2011 data from CountrySTAT was used during a government meeting and a decision was made to increase the price of sugarcane after almost 8 years without an increase in the price of the product, which resulted in a positive direct impact on farmer's living conditions.

In Bhutan the implementation of CountrySTAT started in 2009. Today its data collection and diffusion is entirely self-managed and data are available on-line, thus providing a window into national food and agriculture statistics.

Since its launch in October 2009 the CountrySTAT system in Burkina Faso has made significant efforts to provide a reliable one-stop centre for access to national and sub-national statistics related to food and agriculture. A food security analyst in Burkina Faso said: "The *CountrySTAT platform of Burkina Faso is a gold mine for me. It allows me to access at any time the updated data on food security. I use these data regularly to make proposals to my superiors on urgent issues related to food insecurity in order to take decisions and overcome the suffering.*"