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y la
Alimentación

APCAS/08/10
June 2008

Agenda Item 7b

ASIA AND PACIFIC COMMISSION ON AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS

TWENTY-SECOND SESSION

Kuching, Malaysia, 9-13 June 2008

Validation at Country Level during the FAO-WB Study on Indicators for Tracking Results of Agricultural and Rural Development: Cambodia Case

The monitoring and evaluation policy environment – There is presently a favourable environment for putting in place a functional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system in Cambodia. The current

National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) provides clear policy guidelines for the integration and use of an M&E system as a tool for systematically tracking progress of strategic programmes and actions towards achieving goals and objectives of the plan.

Institutional supports for M&E – The Ministry of Planning (MoP) was designated as the lead ministry responsible for: preparing the overall framework outlining the methodology; determining the frequency of reporting; coordinating activities; and consolidating and preparing the NSDP Annual Progress Report. The line ministries/agencies are responsible for monitoring and collecting input and output indicators, while the MoP is in charge of monitoring and evaluating outcome indicators through its periodic surveys undertaken by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), the only legally and technically competent agency for the collection, processing, management, and presentation of various data on the country. In general, almost all government line ministries/agencies, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Ministry of Rural Development (MRD), have M&E Offices, which are usually placed under the Department of Planning and Statistics of the Ministries.

In the case of MAFF, the Office of Project Coordination and Monitoring and Evaluation (PCMEO) was established in 2004. The system is decentralized, giving all the authority to the implementing departments. The M&E Offices do not have legal authority to directly monitor and evaluate the outputs and outcomes of the activities and projects carried out by implementing departments. Hence, M&E activities are largely limited to the consolidation of reports. The institutional capacity of the M&E Offices is generally underdeveloped. Some constraints faced by implementing agencies include the limited number of staff with limited skills, and a lack of resources and authority.

The indicator system for M&E – In support of the current NSDP Monitoring Framework, a “two-tier structure” indicator system has been adopted. At the national level, the first tier, 43 core indicators have been set, in line with macro-development goals and the Cambodia Millennium Development Goals (CMDGs). At the line ministry/agency level, the second tier, sets of performance indicators have been developed based on the NSDP focus, CMDG indicators under its jurisdiction, and other indicators relevant for sectoral-level monitoring. A third tier of indicators may be added at the ministry/agency level to monitor programme and sub-programme activities.

The country-level development indicators for ARD Programmes – Cambodia’s experience in using the indicator system as a tool for monitoring and evaluating ARD projects is still in its early stage. The institutional capacity and various underpinning infrastructures for an effective development indicator system are still underdeveloped. However, there have recently been significant steps taken to improve the system. Key milestones for the various attempts made to upgrade the system include: the enactment of the Statistics Law; the establishment of the National Statistical System (NSS) and the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) in MoP and the adoption of the Statistical Master Plan (SMP). These highlight the growing need for ample, timely, reliable and quality statistics relevant to development endeavours in the country. To date, notable improvements have been made in the areas of formal structure, management, staff training, dissemination practices and accessibility of data.

The current NSS is: (i) external funding-dependent and donor need-driven; (ii) fragmentary and disorganized, due to lack of agreement of statistical activities and standardized procedures; (iii) General Data Dissemination System (GDSS)-based; and (iv) largely decentralized. The first two features were reported to have imposed many limitations on the development process towards harmonizing official statistics in the country. This is due to a lack of or unstable financial support, which resulted in the piecemeal development of official statistics in the country. Data produced were largely aimed to meet the needs and priorities of external donor programmes, rather than the country’s own perceived needs for relevant and appropriate data for monitoring national programmes. The lack of consensus on priorities for statistical activities and standardized procedures were said to have caused difficulties with processing, analysis and interpretation. These resulted in a limited use of the data for policy, planning and programme formulation and evaluation.

The key sectors that make up the indicator system to provide economic, social, demographic and environmental statistics include agriculture, health, nutrition, education, commerce and the economy. A relatively large stock of indicators related to these sectors is available in the CAMInfo database produced by NIS of MoP. In addition, e-data of the Economic Institute of Cambodia (EIC), accessible via a prepaid card, is another online source of official statistics and indicators related to the country.

Statistics Law 2005 sets out a clear demarcation of responsibilities and relationships between ministries/agencies that are NSS stakeholders. Pursuant to the law, NIS is responsible for preparing official statistics policies, coordinating, and prioritizing activities, standards and methods necessary for creating an integrated NSS. Various ministries/agencies collect and produce statistics as part of their work. Some data come from administrative systems and others from statistical enquiry.

Based on the NSDP monitoring framework, 26 out of 43 core indicators are to be updated on an annual basis through the collection of administrative statistics. In general, indicators on macroeconomics, the labour force and employment, agriculture and food production, and education and literacy are suggested to be updated and disseminated annually. Most of the health and nutrition indicators are to be disseminated every two years; however, it was suggested that some of these should be disseminated annually.

Hard copy publications have traditionally been the main medium of dissemination for government statistics. To date, the usual hard copy publication known by users is the *Statistics Yearbook* published annually. Other forms of dissemination adopted by the NIS include: (i) Web sites; (ii) CD-ROMs (e.g. CAMInfo CD-ROMs); (iii) e-mail; (iv) the Data User Centre; and (v) the library. Necessary metadata on statistics series explaining the detailed methodologies used for the various statistical collections, periodicity, timeliness and dissemination are accessible on the GDDS Web site.

The lack of guidelines for setting national standards was cited as a major problem with much of the statistics work in Cambodia. The use of different methodologies has caused confusion and difficulties with data analysis and interpretation. For instance, data on income and poverty abound, yet poverty analysts were reported to have difficulties in drawing conclusions from these data. Moreover, there are concerns over the quality, timeliness and reliability of the data, especially those collected through the administrative system. Data gaps were also observed in some key areas such as economic statistics, finance, health, education and agriculture. The lack of financial and human resources has been cited as major constraints in efforts to develop NSS and overall official statistics.

The ARD framework – Results obtained from a series of consultations with a number of experts revealed general agreement on the usefulness of the proposed *Sourcebook* as a toolkit with a wide range of indicators that can be adapted/adopted for ARD programmes. Access, use and satisfaction indicators were all felt to be relevant with respect to the policy, planning and M&E dimension.

The subsector indicators – Findings indicated that almost all indicators proposed in the *Sourcebook* are appropriate and feasible, although nearly half of the indicators were not yet available in the country. The agribusiness and markets, community-based rural development, rural finance and water resources management are the subsectors that have very few indicators proposed in the *Sourcebook* compared to other subsectors.

It is not advisable at the moment, however, to use the findings to draw conclusions on the adequacy or inadequacy of ARD indicators in the country. In fact, an expert in charge of the CAMInfo Unit in MoP confirmed that the current database contains more than 500 indicators, but they are mostly different from the proposed ones. This may not necessarily mean that the country has lagged behind in terms of the development and use of indicators; they may simply be different from the proposed ones. Should time permit, a more extensive review would surely provide an even clearer picture on the country-level indicators used in various subsectors.

Data supply for core indicators – Administrative records remain the main sources of data for at least 26 NSDP core indicators that should be collected and monitored on an annual basis. The rest of the core indicators, mostly outcome/impact indicators, are to be supported by data supply from periodic and large surveys/censuses. Important periodic and large surveys/censuses conducted to date include agricultural surveys (e.g. crop cuttings, marketing surveys, and production cost surveys), demographic and health surveys, socio-economic surveys, inter-censal population surveys, child domestic worker surveys, child labour surveys, labour force surveys, industrial establishment surveys and the population census. The CAMInfo database and the *Statistics Yearbook* produced by MoP, and the e-data produced by the Economics Institute of Cambodia are important sources of data and official statistics for the national core indicators and the proposed ones.

To date, it is understood that Cambodia's capacity to supply data for core indicators is still limited, despite significant improvement made as a result of adopting the General Data Dissemination System, the Data Quality Assessment Framework and the integrated dissemination strategy. Data sources are still not adequate to meet the multiple needs of all relevant data users. Considering the context where technical, institutional and financial limitations still prevail, it is believed that there is still a long way to go before Cambodia could become fully capable of building a system that produces and supplies adequate data for core indicators in line with the international standards.

Conclusions and recommendations – The study's findings suggested that Cambodia's experiences related to M&E, statistics and indicator systems are generally limited. Nevertheless, the road ahead is not an impossible journey. A better prospect for an improved capability of the country's M&E, supported adequately by timely and quality statistics inputs, is imminent, should the following recommendations be taken into consideration:

- The SMP roadmaps should be vigorously pursued.
- A systematic inventory of current indicators used within and outside the national institutions should be conducted.
- Harmonization and standardization of national M&E system should be proactively promoted.
- The M&E Units should be empowered with broadened legal authority and privileges.

The results of the study indicated an acceptance of the proposed Guidelines. In view of further improving the Guidelines, the following recommendations are made:

- Some indicators need to be transferred to appropriate subsectors, including indicators on livestock values/volumes, agricultural imports/exports and forest area.
- Some indicators of significant importance for Cambodia need to be added to the proposed Guidelines, including indicators on agribusiness and markets, community-based rural development, fisheries and aquaculture, forestry, livestock, and policy and strategy.
- Some indicators were considered neither appropriate nor feasible, so it was suggested to delete them from the Guidelines. These included indicators on ARD, agribusiness and markets, and water resources management.
- Modifications of indicators including the simplification of language or insertion/deletion of words used for constructing the indicators need to be made to improve clarity and understanding of indicators by users. It was suggested that some indicators be modified, including those on research and extension, agribusiness and markets, policy and strategy, rural finance and food security.
- The current global initiative to strengthen M&E and indicator systems from the conceptual to implementation level should be expanded. Capacity-building programmes in the areas of M&E and indicator systems development should be considered.