



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM SECRETARIAT

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FORUM ECONOMIC OFFICIALS MEETING

8 August 2023

FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING

9-10 August 2023

Suva, Fiji

INFORMATION PAPER 6: REGIONAL STATISTICS

Purpose and Summary

Purpose

This paper provides Forum Economic Ministers with an update on governance, activities and finance relating to official statistics since the 2022 FEMM, and an assessment of the overall state of statistics.

Summary

Statistical systems in the Pacific perform poorly by world standards and are scored by the World Bank as weaker than any other recognised region. The key challenges relate to incomplete and infrequent data sources and “infrastructure” such as legislation and the currency of the base years for inflation and national accounts estimates. Economic statistics face challenges with timeliness and frequency; for example, most member countries have unemployment estimates only once every few years, and merchandise trade statistics lagging several years before publication.

However, the direction of change is positive, with recent successes including the transition to computer-assisted personal interviewing, increased re-use of microdata, improved dissemination, and more than doubling (over two decades) of the number of population-representative surveys and censuses being undertaken in Pacific Island countries and territories. The 2020 Round of Censuses is nearly complete for the Pacific, with only Papua New Guinea a realistic risk of failing to complete a census in the 2015-2024 period.

The refreshed Strategic Framework for Pacific Statistics 2022-2030 is expected to be approved by Heads of Planning and Statistics in October 2023. It sets out a plan for further improvement of the system including through statistical governance and development partner coordination, capacity building, improving coverage and frequency of statistics, strengthening Pacific-appropriate methodologies and standards and classifications, modernisation of data engineering, and making the most of the latest analytical and dissemination technologies.

Statistics are underfunded. Financing from donors and from national governments has not kept pace with increased expectations and the increased frequency of expensive collections. The estimate provided in the 2022 paper to the FEMM of a shortfall of around USD10 million per year, not counting the Papua New Guinea census, remains relevant. However, this represents only the shortfall for social surveys. Other aspects are also underfunded, notably economic statistic and administrative statistics such as births and deaths; and there is severely limited capacity to meet growing demands for environmental and climate change statistics.

A. Background

1. The Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM) in 2018 was the last time regional statistics were discussed substantively at the FEMM and a decision included in the outcomes document. That decision was that Ministers:

- “Noted and endorsed the progress made in statistical developments since the commencement of the Ten Year Pacific Statistics Strategy (TYPSS) and the increasing demand for statistics in the region, especially for reporting on the SDGs and national priorities;
- Supported the call for additional and sufficient funding commitments by governments and development partners:
 - to strengthen national statistical systems across all of the public sector to improve quality of data and analysis (disaggregated by sex, location and disability) for informed national and regional policy making, monitoring and accountability including for the 2030 Agenda, SDGs, SAMOA Pathway, the Framework for Pacific Regionalism (FPR) and the Pacific Leaders’ Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED); and,
 - for the conduct of the core statistical collections presented to Economic Ministers and ensure greater coordination between development partners and governments in scheduling core statistical collections to minimise disruptions by unplanned surveys.
- Agreed that governance and financing of regional statistics will be a standing agenda item at Forum Economic Officials Meeting and will be tabled at the Forum Economic Ministers Meeting, if decisions are required.”

2. The Pacific Community (SPC) has continued its previous practice in providing an annual update for the information of Ministers.

B. Governance

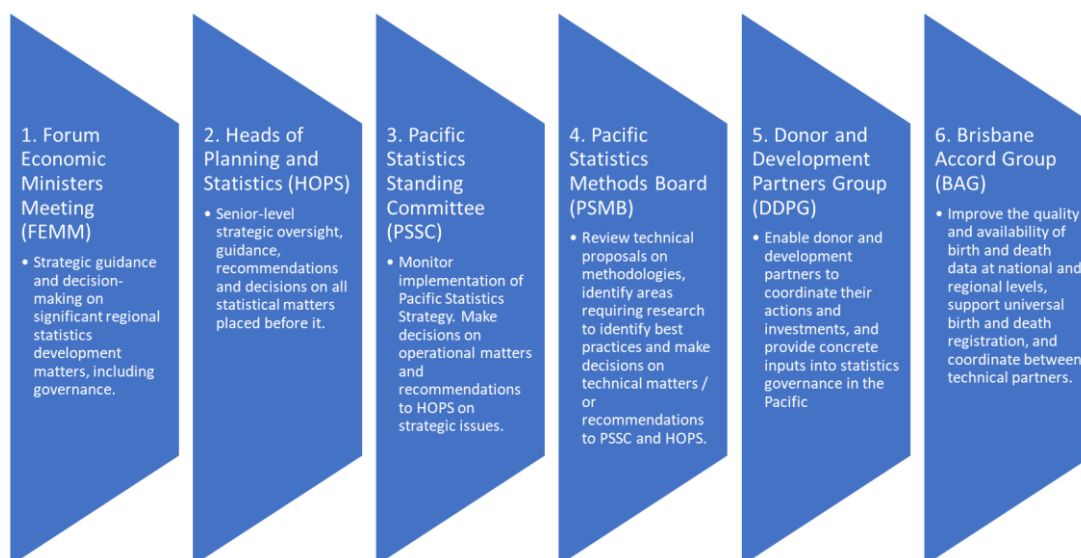


Figure 1 | Governance of the Pacific regional statistical system

3. The Forum Economic Ministers' Meeting (FEMM) is the top tier of governance for regional statistics, shown in overview in Figure 1. No other Ministerial body has a standing item to consider official statistics from a broad perspective. The annual report on governance and financing of regional statistics was tabled and noted at the 2022 meeting of the FEMM.

4. The second tier of governance is the Heads of Planning and Statistics (HOPS) meeting. This critical regional leadership group has not met since 2017 due to multiple reschedules related to Covid-19 and to changes in management at SPC's Statistics for Development Division. A firm date has now been set and planning is well advanced for "HOPS 6" to be held on 3-5 October 2023. Subject to approval at HOPS 6, SPC will convene future meetings of HOPS every second year.

5. Reporting to HOPS are the Pacific Statistics Standing Committee (PSSC), Pacific Statistics Methods Board (PSMB), and Donors and Development Partners' Group (DDPG). Of these, the PSMB has successfully maintained its rhythm and met twice annually, as per its mandated frequency. The Methods Board has shown itself a critical part of the region's statistical governance infrastructure, making important decisions on matters such as how to measure poverty, guiding regional innovation projects, and providing a forum to discuss developments and proposed changes at the technical level.

6. The PSSC met in November 2022, having not met during 2021. The DDPG also met in November 2022, its first meeting since August 2019. At its November meeting it determined that it should meet immediately after each future PSSC and HOPS meeting, as well as increase its less formal inter-meeting engagement.

7. The Brisbane Accord Group comprises donors and development partners cooperating to support the improvement of the region's civil registry (birth and death registration) and vital statistics. This group has continued to meet regularly, with its most recent meeting in March 2023.

8. Above the regional level, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the

Pacific (ESCAP) Committee on Statistics was held as a hybrid meeting in Bangkok in August 2022. The UN Statistical Commission was held in person in February and March 2023 and attended by heads of three Pacific National Statistics Offices as well as representatives of Australia, New Zealand and SPC.

9. A less formal but important part of regional governance is the Pacific Statisticians' Leadership Forum, convened by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and to which all Forum members' government statisticians are invited. This was held in person in Brisbane in May 2023.

10. SPC, in its role as leader of the statistical system and convenor of the formal regional governance groups, regards the recommencement of PSSC and DDPG meetings, the firm scheduling of HOPS 6 and the in-person meeting of the Leadership Forum as the beginning of a successful "reset" of regional statistical governance.

11. With Australian support, SPC now has resources dedicated to supporting regional statistical governance and coordination of donors. SPC has also filled the key leadership role of its Director, Statistics for Development and restructured the Statistics for Development Division to better match its current resourcing and meet member needs. The Division's new business plan defines its roles as: leadership, convening and coordination; direct support for operations (e.g. census, surveys, merchandise trade, and civil registry); pooled regional infrastructure and assets (such as the Pacific Data Hub Microdata Library and Pacific Data Hub. stat (PDH.stat) for dissemination of indicators); and capacity building.

12. The Strategic Framework for Pacific Statistics 2022-2030 was endorsed by the PSSC in November 2022 with minor suggestions and is currently going through its final iteration before presentation to HOPS 6 in October 2023 for formal approval. Figure 2 shows the theory of the change of the proposed Strategic Framework.

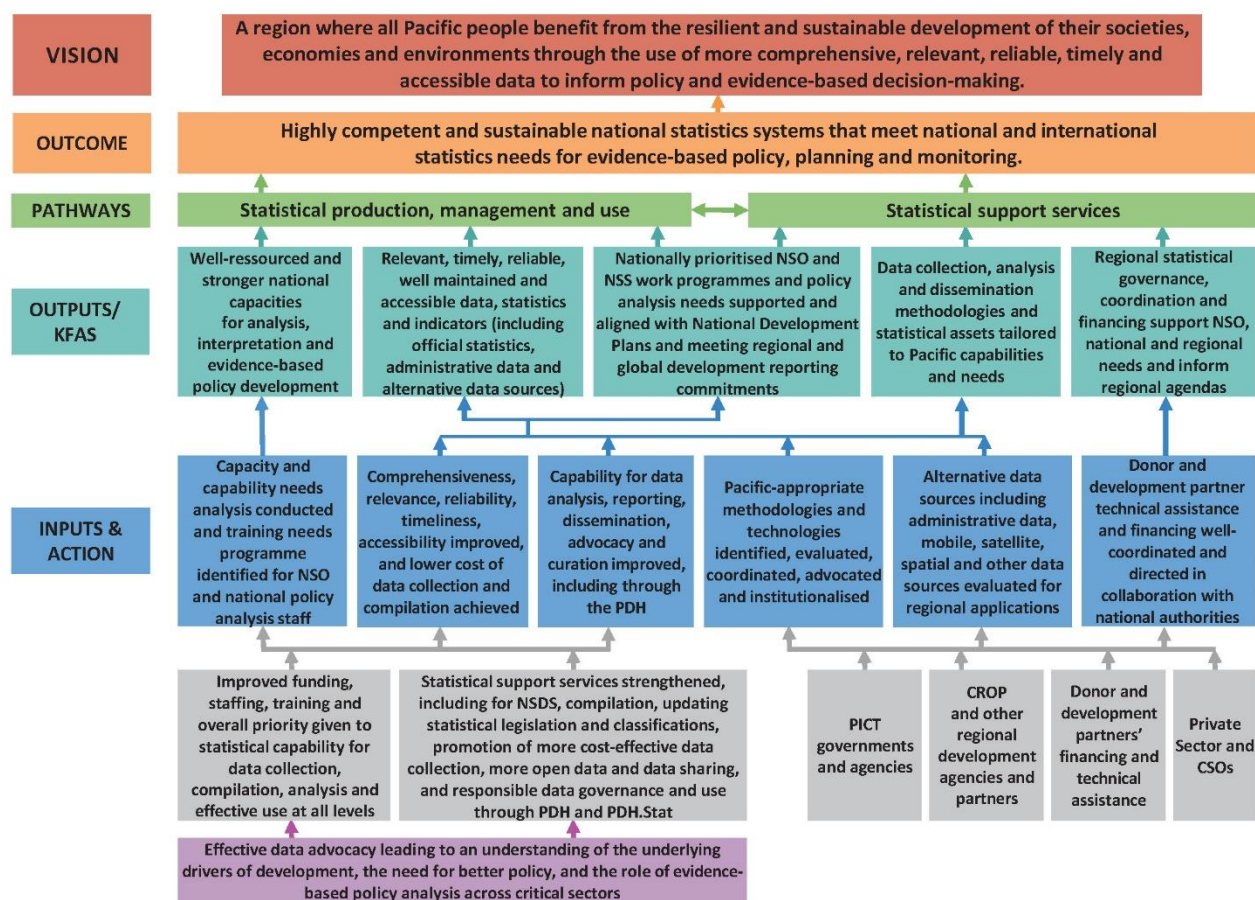


Figure 2 | Theory of change for the Strategic Framework for Pacific Statistics 2022-2030

C. Statistical activities and outputs

13. The Pacific remains one of the weakest regions in the world, if not the weakest, regarding production and use of statistics to support decision-making. The World Bank’s Statistical Performance Indicators, which are now built into the Strategic Framework for Pacific Statistics 2022-2030 as the best available measure of high-level outcomes, has an average score for Pacific Island countries of just 38. This is materially worse than any major regional grouping (Sub-Saharan Africa’s average score is 51; the East Asia and the Pacific average is 60). The lowest scores for the Pacific are in Pillars 4 and 5, for “data sources” (e.g. frequency and completeness of surveys and administrative data sources) and “data infrastructure” (e.g. national legislation, base years of the national accounts and the consumer price index, whether the current System of National Accounts is in use, etc.).

14. SPC estimates that for its member countries and territories, around 59% of the Pacific’s priority Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators (which themselves are about half of the official full set of SDG indicators) have at least one data point at the time of writing. This is an improvement from 48% in 2018 and it is expected realistically to reach around 80% in 2030.

15. However, there are many positive points to make regarding statistics in the region, both in terms of its long-term trajectory and developments in the past year:

- The transition from paper-based to computer-assisted personal interviewing is complete in most Pacific Island countries and territories; this means that most surveys and censuses are now undertaken with the assistance of tablets sending data directly to servers, with big increases in efficiency and quality control.
- An increasing number of national development plans now use SDGs as part of their monitoring and evaluation frameworks, reducing duplication of data collection and increasing the chance that important planning and implementation decisions can be informed by official statistics that are being collected.
- There is a notable increase, more than doubling, in the number of population-representative surveys and census being undertaken - from 35 in 2000-2004 (7 per year) to 85 in 2018-2022 (17 per year).
- Overall coverage, frequency and timeliness of a range of statistics, not just the SDGs, is higher than in previous decades.
- Data availability is stronger than ever with all members' national statistics offices having functioning websites (with SPC assistance). There are now also solid regional dissemination platforms including SPC's PopGIS (primarily census data, at various levels of geography), and the Pacific Data Hub's PDH.stat (with 2.4 million observations against more than 1,600 indicators) and Microdata Library.
- A growing amount of research is being undertaken with microdata, hence making re-use of multi-million dollar assets created by surveys and census beyond their main reports at release time. In 2022 there were 54 approved requests for access to survey or census datasets in the Pacific Data Hub Microdata Library (compared to 21 in 2021 and 17 in 2020). Use cases have included improved estimates of water and sanitation access in an atoll, estimating the cost of domestic violence, and simulating social protection schemes.

16. The Pacific is making good progress in the 2020 Round of Censuses of Population and Housing. Of the Forum's 18 Pacific Island country and territory members and associate members, 15 have published provisional or final census results for this round and two (Nauru and Federated States of Micronesia) are in the collection or analysis stage. Only Papua New Guinea is a possibility to miss the 2020 Round altogether; its last completed census was in 2011 and significant logistical and financial challenges need to be overcome for a successful data collection in 2024.

Country or territory	Year of data collection	Status
Australia	2021	Published
Papua New Guinea	2024	In preparation
New Zealand	2023	Collection in progress
Fiji	2017	Published
Solomon Islands	2019	Provisional results published; final results to be published in 2023
Vanuatu	2020	Published

French Polynesia	2022	Provisional results published; final results to be published in 2023
New Caledonia	2019	Published
Samoa	2021	Published
Kiribati	2020	Published
Federated States of Micronesia	2023	Collection in progress
Tonga	2021	Published
Marshall Islands	2021	Published
Palau	2020	Published
Cook Islands	2021	Published
Wallis and Futuna (associate member)	2018	2018 published, 2023 in preparation
Nauru	2021	In analysis
Tuvalu	2017	2017 published, 2022 completing field verification prior to processing
Niue	2017	2017 published, 2022 in analysis
Tokelau (associate member)	2019	2019 published, 2022 in analysis

17. Registration of births and deaths is an essential component of a functioning statistical system. These registrations are used to calculate indicators such as child mortality and life expectancy and (in combination with immigration data) population estimates between censuses. Birth and death registration remains of variable quality in the Pacific; some countries and territories attain excellent coverage, but a small number have very low registration levels. An important development in early 2023 was the development of a new Action Plan for Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics. This replaces the old Pacific Vital Statistics Action Plan and will guide future improvement in this area.

18. In the sphere of economic statistics of most direct interest to FEMM, nearly all Forum members have regular estimates of inflation, merchandise trade and national accounts including estimates of GDP. Few have estimates of trade in services or of tourism contribution to GDP (via a tourism satellite account) or even tourism expenditure. Estimates of unemployment exist for all members but are usually less than annual. Agricultural censuses are fewer and less frequent than desirable given the importance of the sector in most member economies. While understanding of the demand side of food consumption has increased in recent years with improvements in data from Household Income and Expenditure Surveys, the supply side is not as well served by data.

19. The key providers of support for economic statistics in the region are SPC, the IMF's Pacific Finance Technical Assistance Centre (PFTAC), the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Stats NZ. Details on activities can be found in these bodies' relevant results reports, particularly for SPC and PFTAC, and hence are not included here.

20. In 2022 there was substantial work by SPC and national statistics offices on Household Income and Expenditure Surveys in Wallis and Futuna, Tonga, Tuvalu (as part of the experimental

‘long form census’) and Samoa. Since the last FEMM, UNICEF has supported preparation for Multi Indicator Cluster Surveys in Vanuatu, Nauru, Kiribati, Federated States of Micronesia and Tonga. Agricultural censuses have been held in whole or in part in Kiribati and Vanuatu. Labour Force Surveys were undertaken in 2022 in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Samoa and are planned or underway for 2023 in six countries. Further details on historical and planned surveys and censuses are available on the SPC websites’ Census and Surveys Calendar.

D. Financing

21. Recent funding for official statistics in the Pacific Island Forum members has been around USD 25 million per year for National Statistics Offices from their own governments, and USD 12 million per year from donors. Roughly half this amount is delivered through the SPC, with the rest delivered through a variety of development partners including PFTAC, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Stats NZ, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNESCAP and ILO.

22. The largest donors are New Zealand, Australia and the World Bank. The amount provided by donors has plateaued in recent years but is expected to increase somewhat in 2023 and 2024. SPC is investigating ways to track total support for statistics with more precision.

23. Overall, statistics in the region are underfunded. Financing from donors and from national governments has not kept pace with increased expectations and the increased frequency of expensive collections. Donor funding for statistics peaked in 2013, even in nominal terms. The estimate provided in the 2022 paper to the FEMM of a shortfall of around USD10 million per year, not counting the Papua New Guinea census, remains relevant. However, this estimate was based purely on the shortfall in funding planned household surveys and censuses. SPC’s observation is that other aspects of most national statistics offices are also underfunded, notably economic statistics such as national accounts, balance of payments, business surveys, pricing comparisons; as well as dissemination and user engagement. There is also limited or no capacity and capability in National Statistics Offices in the Pacific to meet rapidly increasing national and global demand for environmental and climate change statistics.

24. As one example of particular importance, the worldwide 2024 round of the “International Comparison Program” is in advanced stages of planning. This is a critical pricing data program that allows purchasing-power-parity (PPP) comparisons to be made of economic production and incomes across countries. At this point it is unclear how many Pacific Island countries will be able to participate and how it will be resourced; currently only Fiji has ongoing participation in the program. SPC is investigating this issue further with support from the World Bank and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

25. The Secretary General of the United Nations recently wrote in the 2023 SDG Progress Report that donors should spend 0.7% of ODA on data by 2030. This implies around USD 25 million per year of donor support in the Pacific, which would double current contributions (depending on how ‘data’ is interpreted).

26. However, national ownership of the statistical system is at least as critical as in other areas

of government activity. National statistical systems should not be 50% funded by donors, which would be the case if donors doubled their funding by Pacific Island governments did not increase their own. National budget decision-makers should consider the importance of statistics for sound policy and program in their own allocations for national statistics offices and other parts of the national statistical system.

Secretariat of the Pacific Community
25 June 2023