



The ISibalo Capacity Building Programme

Launching the African Young Statisticians Research Programme

A Report on the Outcome of the 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians held in Pretoria, 1-3 July 2008

10 July 2008

The 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians

The 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians was held in Pretoria, 1-3 July 2008. This ground-breaking meeting, the first of its kind in the history of African statistical development brought together 228 young statisticians from African national statistical offices, universities, research institutions and government line ministries who presented papers on a range of topics which include the improvement of data quality in Africa; agriculture, food security and nutrition; climate change; biostatistics and the disease burden of Africa; measurement challenges of the MDGs; HIV and AIDS; business sector performance in Africa; trade and market access; African labour market dynamics, gender issues in education; tourism and other issues that affect the development path of Africa today.

A total of 26 African countries were represented at the 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians. Recognizing the limited capacity to write “policy-friendly” reports, the conference was preceded by a scientific report-writing workshop. The conference itself was a combination of parallel and plenary sessions and a number of roundtable discussions on topics that include data archiving and dissemination; public health, HIV /AIDS and African society; agricultural economics and statistics in data collection; energy statistics and emerging issues in labour statistics in Africa.

A multi-disciplinary advisory team from across Africa has been established to assist in mentoring and coaching the participating young statisticians over a period of time. Papers presented will be refereed in preparation for the 57th Session of the ISI wherein African young statisticians will participate in the ISI Young Statisticians Olympiad in August 2009.

The birth of a young statisticians programme for Africa, which the 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians forms a part of, is an outcome of a currently aggressive path of rejuvenating statistics in Africa and the institutions that drive the development of statistics in the continent. The birth of this programme is also indicative of a realization that if Africa is to sustain its own statistical systems within its broader development plan, the next generation of leaders in the statistical fraternity must be groomed and

positioned to meet the demands of a results agenda for development. The next generations are the young statisticians from 26 African countries who were gathered at the 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians in July 2008.

The underlying ideology of such a programme is to revive a void in Africa's ownership of thinking around national and regional development agendas and the discourse of measurement and methodology in Africa by a fresher generation than is currently at the helm.

The ISibalo Capacity Building Programme

The young statisticians programme for Africa, launched in July 2008 by Statistics South Africa, is a sub-programme of the flagship ISibalo Capacity Building Programme whose aim is to:

- Promoting broader African scholarly participation and the expertise in the core areas of statistics within the statistical fraternity at the 57th Session in the 122 year long history.
- Ensuring ongoing participatory activities in the key focus areas of statistical development through the promotion and dissemination research in the statistical sciences in SADC and in Africa;
- Building human capacity in South Africa, SADC and the African region, especially young statisticians and women; and,
- Bridging the divide through working cooperatively in statistics education.

The ISibalo Capacity Building Programme has five focus areas;

- ISibalo-1: Africa Statistical Research & Capacity Development***
- ISibalo-2: Africa Research Programme for Young Statisticians***
- ISibalo-3: Maths, Stats and the Girl-Child***
- ISibalo-4: The ISibalo International Statistical Education Programme***
- ISibalo-5: Africa Women-in-Statistics***

The 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians as a facet of ISibalo-2 that recognizes:

(i)

A renewed demand for better statistics placing renewed pressure on the statistical community for better data, more innovative statistical research to better inform development interventions. The statistical community has responded to the growing demand for better indicators in a variety of ways. The successful initiatives have been demand driven with a clear link to policy work.

(ii)

That as a number of related disciplines explore the need to turn research into action towards developing policy programmes and interventions, within the framework of the current African legacy of promoting and strengthening statistical capacity in the African continent, space needs to be provided for a number of scholarly and scientific research activities to promote broader African and South African participation at the 57th Session of ISI in 2009 through special topics, workshops, contributed papers and special ISI Presidential sessions.

(iii)

The dearth of research in statistics for utilization in policy. ISlballo-2 recognizes the poor linkages between official statistical production processes and relevant policy interventions and frameworks. ISlballo-2 recognizes the need for statistical research into action to support evidence-based planning, and to provide a platform for cross-pollination of ideas, sharing of experience and development of critical mass of knowledge in statistics, and its innovations.

(iv)

The demographic profile of Africa's statistical community is dominated by older predominantly men. Little room has been made for the intellectual participation of young statisticians. No clearly defined plans exist to hand the baton of leadership over to young statisticians as the custodians of information and demand needed for Africa's development agenda.

The overall objective of ISlballo-2 is to boost the participation of young statisticians in statistical research and training through stimulating their participation in the methodological and technological development of the discipline of statistics, and to

foster the integration of the young statisticians dimension throughout African research and training.

ISibalo-2 will focus on young statisticians in their early career years with primary degrees in statistics, demography, economics, population studies or GIS pursuing careers in demography, statistics and population studies in South Africa and in the SADC region. Young statisticians will be drawn into this programme from the African statistical community across the continent.

Emerging Issues from the 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians

Out of the conference, seven (7) clustered themes have been identified that will need to be driven intensely through fostering partnerships for capacity building in statistical research for programme planning and utilization for policy. The themes are:

1. Agriculture, food security (and climate change)
2. Public Health and the burden of disease
3. Finance, Macro-economics and National accounts
4. Demographic Analysis
5. Survey Methodology
6. MDGs and related development frameworks
7. Statistics and Mathematics Education

Gender and HIV/AIDS will be cross-cutting issues across all themes. For each theme, an advisory committee is being set up which will establish a work plan for young statisticians identified in each of the themes through research, training and mentoring towards preparing young statisticians for the 57th Session of the ISI in 2009 and for the broader dissemination of research into use through publications in refereed journals, special reports and commissioned papers. A seed grant program has been negotiated with PARIS21 to foster the research of young statisticians. Training programmes are also being negotiated with NEPAD's African Centres of Excellence across the African continent based on the aforementioned themes. These partnerships are critical to

helping young statisticians understand the development context in which they produce data. Their limited understanding of the development context was a glaring gap in the otherwise excellent papers presented at the 1st Africa Conference of Young Statisticians. Retired, near-retirement senior expert statisticians and practitioners and those on sabbatical leave will be involved in the mentoring programme. Finally, a Young Statisticians Olympiad will be held at the 57th Session of the ISI to provide young statisticians with the opportunity to present their work to the international statistical community in 2009.

Conclusion

The responsibility of entrenching the relevance of statistics lies with Africa's young generation of statisticians who will this month engaged in debates that must address many of the social and economic ills that continue to plague Africa. Through collaborative partnerships, as a way forward, this historic meeting of African young statisticians marked a new page in Africa's forward looking vision on statistical development as we look at developing a new cadre of leaders to form a new generation of African thinkers who stand apart in their being custodians of information and data for better development outcomes in Africa. The 2nd Africa Conference of Young Statisticians will be held in 2010.