

Lifelong experience in African official statistics, thoughts and perspective

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1. How could you describe the status and work of the Zambia Statistics Office when you started working there in your early career? What have you learned through this professional experience? How has the institution transformed and grown since then?

I began my career at the Zambia Statistics Agency (formerly known as the Central Statistical Office, or CSO) at a very young age in the early 1980s. At that time, the office was still relatively young, having been established just 14 years earlier and recently separated from the main office in Salisbury (now Harare). Despite its youth, the office was staffed with numerous international experts, although it was led by a Zambian. It also received substantial support from the government and international development partners, including United Nations (UN) agencies.

By the 1990s, CSO had grown into a robust institution and became a reference point for several countries in the region. Many came to learn from CSO's best practices in developing national statistical offices. Throughout my career, I progressed through the ranks, benefiting from various local, regional, and international training in statistics. This eventually led me to the role of Team Leader as a senior statistician for key surveys, including the Labour Survey, Employment and Earnings Surveys, and the first Household Budget Survey. Later, I was promoted to Deputy Director of the Research and Dissemination Division, which also included overseeing the information and communication technology (ITC) branch. During this time, I gained invaluable experience in understanding statistical processes across the data value chain,

including how to effectively engage both data users and producers, and collaborate with development partners to deliver high-quality, credible, and usable statistical products.

During my tenure at the Zambia Statistical Office, I also became involved in numerous international initiatives and associations. These included the International Statistical Institute (ISI) and its various associations, such as the International Association of Survey Statisticians (ISSA), the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS), and the International Society for Business and Industrial Statistics (ISBIS). I have served on the councils of each of these associations and currently hold the position of Vice President of ISI. Additionally, I became a member of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) of the United Kingdom and later attained the professional qualifications of Chartered Statistician with the Royal Statistical Society and Chartered Scientist with the Science Council of the UK.

Over the decades, the Zambia Statistical Office has not only expanded but has also transformed the way it conducts its business processes. It has developed a highly skilled workforce in most areas, although there are still some areas that require improvement. The office has also transitioned from paper-based data collection to using tablets and smartphones, among other changes.

2. How could you describe the changes (for the best and for the worst) that you have witnessed over time in African national statistical offices (ANSOs)? What are in your opinion the remaining major challenges affecting their functioning nowadays?

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The African national statistical systems (NSS) have undergone significant transformation over the last 30 years. The evolution of these systems has been shaped by several factors, including globalization, technological advancements, international cooperation, and the need for better governance and development planning.

• **Pre-1990s: Early Foundations of National Statistical Systems**

Before the 1990s, most African countries had basic statistical systems primarily designed for administrative purposes. Many of these systems were rudimentary, with limited data collection and analysis capabilities. Statistical offices were often underfunded, faced with a lack of technical capacity, and had limited infrastructure.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of national statistical offices (NSOs) in newly independent African countries. These offices were crucial for tracking basic demographic data, agricultural production, and economic performance. However, many of these institutions struggled with resource constraints, both in terms of financial and human capital.

• **1990s: The Awakening – International Support and Reform**

The 1990s marked a significant turning point in the development of NSS across Africa. A major driver was the African governments' realization that reliable statistics were essential for national planning, economic policy formulation, and international credibility. As part of a broader push for democratic governance and economic reform, many countries began to strengthen their national statistical systems.

Key events during this period include:

- *The African Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD)*: This initiative, launched in 1993, provided a forum for African statisticians to share experiences and identify common challenges. This laid the groundwork for future collaboration and reforms.
- *The African Charter on Statistics (2009)*: While this was officially adopted in the late 2000s, its groundwork was laid in the 1990s. It provided a framework for statistical governance, data quality standards, and the professionalization of statistical offices.
- *International Support*: With the support of international organizations such as the UN Statistical Commission, the World Bank, African Development Bank and bilateral aid agencies, African countries began to modernize

their national statistical system. Many received funding for statistical capacity building programs, as well as technical assistance and training.

• **2000s: The Growth of Statistical Systems and the Focus on Data for Development**

By the early 2000s, many African countries began to embrace the importance of robust data systems for improving governance and driving sustainable development. Several initiatives contributed to this:

- *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*: Adopted in 2000, the MDGs created a framework for countries to measure and report on key development indicators. This spurred investments in national statistical systems to collect, analyze, and disseminate data on education, health, poverty, and the environment.
- *The African Union's Agenda 2063*: The African Union set out a framework for the continent's future, and the need for accurate and timely data became clear in terms of monitoring progress towards economic integration and sustainable development.
- *National Statistical Systems Modernization*: Many countries started developing national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDS), focusing on improving data collection methodologies, technology infrastructure, and human resources in statistical offices.

During this period, there was a visible increase in national censuses, household surveys, and economic censuses, enhancing the availability of key data across sectors.

• **2010s: Technological Advancements and the Rise of Data-Driven Governance**

The last decade witnessed significant improvements in the integration of technology within national statistical systems. Digital technologies, including mobile phones, geographic information systems (GIS), and satellite data, were increasingly used for data collection and analysis.

Some important developments included:

- *Big Data*: The advent of big data technologies allowed for more sophisticated methods of data collection and analysis. This included the use of administrative records, social media data, and data from mobile phone usage to supplement traditional survey methods.
- *The African Information Society Initiative (AISI)*: AISI focused on bridging the digital divide and promoting information and communication technologies (ICTs) across Africa, including within the statistical systems.

- *Strengthening Statistical Capacity:* The African Development Bank and other regional institutions began supporting statistical capacity building efforts, including through training, workshops, and funding for digital infrastructure.
- *The African Statistics Day:* Established in 1990, African Statistics Day gained prominence over time as a vehicle for promoting statistical awareness and advocacy in Africa.

• 2020s and Beyond: Data for Sustainable Development and the Challenges Ahead

As the world moved into the 2020s, African countries faced both opportunities and challenges in their national statistical systems. The emphasis on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has put additional pressure on national statistical offices to provide reliable and disaggregated data on poverty, health, education, gender equality, and more.

Key trends and developments include:

- *Integrated Data Systems:* There is a growing trend to integrate multiple data sources, such as administrative data, survey data, and big data, to improve the timeliness and relevance of statistics.
- *Data Revolution:* There has been an increasing recognition of the role that data plays in development. This includes the use of data to drive policy decisions, monitor SDG progress, and foster transparency and accountability in governance.
- *Advocacy for Open Data:* Open data initiatives are becoming more common, encouraging the free flow of statistical data to the public, researchers, and policy makers.
- *Data and Artificial Intelligence:* Countries are exploring the use of AI, machine learning, and advanced analytics to process vast amounts of data efficiently and to extract actionable insights.

Major Changes in the African National Statistical System over the Last 30 Years

- *Institutional and Legislative Reforms:* Stronger legal frameworks and institutional structures have been put in place to ensure data quality and transparency.
- *Technological Integration:* A shift from paper-based data collection to digital methods, including mobile surveys and data mining techniques.
- *Regional Cooperation:* Increased collaboration across countries through regional platforms and agencies like the African Centre for Statistics at UN Economic Commission for Africa, providing

technical assistance including harmonized data standards.

- *Capacity Building:* Improved technical skills and training for statisticians, as well as stronger partnerships between national statistical offices and international organizations.
- *Focus on Sustainable Development:* A stronger alignment of national statistical systems with global frameworks, including the SDGs and the Agenda 2063.

Current Challenges Facing African National Statistical Systems

- *Data Gaps and Quality:* Despite advancements, there are still significant gaps in data coverage, especially in rural areas and for marginalized groups. Additionally, the quality and reliability of the data collected can be inconsistent.
- *Financial Constraints:* Many African countries still face budgetary constraints that limit the expansion of statistical infrastructure, data collection, and technological upgrades.
- *Political and Institutional Challenges:* Political instability and weak governance structures in some countries can hinder the effective implementation of national statistical strategies. In some cases, there is resistance to providing open access to data due to fears of exposing governance challenges.
- *Coordination and Integration of Data Sources:* While there is a push for more integrated data systems, many countries still struggle to effectively combine different sources of data, such as administrative records, surveys, and big data.
- *Technological Barriers:* While technology offers great potential, it also presents challenges such as limited internet access in rural areas, lack of digital literacy, and cybersecurity concerns.
- *Data for SDGs:* The need for accurate, timely, and disaggregated data to monitor progress on the SDGs remains a key challenge, especially as many African countries lack the necessary systems and resources to produce such data consistently.

Overall, African national statistical systems have undergone remarkable changes over the past three decades, transitioning from basic, underfunded units to more sophisticated and data-driven institutions. While there has been significant progress in terms of technology, capacity building, and regional cooperation, challenges such as financial constraints, data gaps, and political instability still hinder full realization of the potential of these systems. Moving forward, strengthening institutional frameworks, integrating new technologies,

and ensuring robust funding will be crucial to addressing these challenges and improving the quality of data for development across the continent.

3. Given the heterogeneity of situations in ANSOs, what governance rules are in your opinion needed in any case? What other would be a useful addition?

Governance Rules for National Statistical Systems in Africa

Given the significant **heterogeneity** in national statistical systems (NSS) across Africa, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for governance. However, some fundamental governance principles are universally important, even if their application needs to be adapted to the unique contexts of individual countries. Proper governance of NSS is essential for ensuring data quality, credibility, accessibility, and reliability, which are necessary for informed policy-making, resource allocation, and monitoring of development progress.

Key Governance Rules and Principles for African NSS

• Independence of National Statistical Offices (NSOs)

One of the core principles for effective governance is ensuring the **independence** of national statistical offices. This means that statistical institutions should be free from political influence, especially in terms of data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

- *Legal Protections for Independence:* Legal frameworks should clearly establish the autonomy of statistical offices and prevent interference in their operations. This is especially crucial for the credibility of statistics, as political pressures may lead to the manipulation or withholding of data.
- *Budgetary Autonomy:* National statistical offices should have dedicated, secure funding sources, free from political cycles, to maintain the continuity and sustainability of statistical activities.

• Clear Institutional Framework and Coordination

Given the diversity of systems, many African countries require clear frameworks to ensure effective coordination between different stakeholders in the NSS, such as the NSOs, ministries, and other data-producing entities.

- *Establishing an NSS Governance Structure:* A well-defined governance structure should be in place, outlining the roles, responsibilities, and authority of various actors within the national

statistical system. This structure could involve a high-level committee or coordination body with representation from key government and private sector stakeholders.

- *Coordination Mechanism:* A central coordinating body (for example, an inter-ministerial committee or a national statistical council) can help ensure that all data-producing agencies work harmoniously, avoiding duplication of efforts and ensuring consistency across data collections.

• Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is critical in ensuring that statistical processes are open, inclusive, and subject to public scrutiny. Citizens, policy makers, and international organizations must trust the data generated by national statistical systems.

- **Public Availability of Data:** Making data publicly available in accessible formats and through open data portals is crucial for transparency. This fosters accountability, allowing users to assess the quality, reliability, and timeliness of statistics.
- **Clear Methodological Standards:** There should be transparency regarding the methodologies used for data collection, processing, and analysis. Consistent and documented standards will help users of the data understand its context and limitations.
- **Audit and Evaluation Mechanisms:** Independent audits and evaluations of statistical activities can be an essential part of ensuring accountability. These evaluations can help identify areas for improvement and ensure that resources are used effectively.

• Data Governance and Ethics

Data governance rules should be well-established to ensure that data is handled responsibly and ethically, especially in the context of sensitive or personal information.

- *Data Protection and Privacy:* Robust data protection laws must be in place to ensure that personal or sensitive data is collected, stored, and used in compliance with privacy standards. This is especially important as African countries adopt new technologies for data collection, such as mobile surveys or social media data.
- *Ethical Standards for Data Use:* Establish ethical guidelines to govern how data is collected, processed, and used to avoid misuse or abuse. For example, there should be protocols for protecting vulnerable groups and ensuring data is used for public good.

• Professionalism and Capacity Building

Strong governance of NSS requires the development of human resources with the right skills and expertise to manage and produce high-quality statistics. This involves both continuous training and ensuring a professional culture within the statistical community.

- *Training and Capacity Building:* Training programs should be designed to build both technical skills (data collection, processing, and analysis) and managerial skills (project management, budgeting, and planning). This will be crucial in building the necessary capacity to meet evolving data needs and challenges.
- *Promoting Professionalism in Statistics:* Establishing codes of conduct and professional standards for statisticians and data producers helps to create a professional ethos that prioritize quality, objectivity, and impartiality.

• Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusiveness

Statistical governance should promote inclusiveness by ensuring that all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, private sector, and data users, have a role in the development of the NSS.

- *User-Producer Dialogue:* Statistical offices should engage regularly with data users, including policy makers, civil society organizations, and the private sector. This ensures that the data collected is useful, relevant, and timely.
- *Public Participation:* To enhance the legitimacy and relevance of statistics, public consultations and feedback mechanisms should be incorporated into the statistical processes, particularly when setting national priorities and conducting censuses or large-scale surveys.

• Quality Assurance and Data Validation

To ensure that data is reliable, robust quality assurance mechanisms should be embedded in governance rules. These mechanisms help to maintain the integrity of the statistical process from data collection through to reporting.

- *Data Validation Processes:* Establish clear procedures for validating data before it is released to ensure its accuracy and reliability. This can include internal and external review processes, as well as cross-checking with other data sources.
- *International Standards Compliance:* National statistical systems should adhere to international best practices and standards (e.g., those set by the UN Statistical Commission or the African Centre for Statistics). This can facilitate

comparability and interoperability of African data with global datasets.

• Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

National governments should pass comprehensive legislation to ensure the formal recognition and legal protection of statistical institutions and processes.

- *Statistics Act or Law:* A formal legal framework (e.g., a Statistics Act) that defines the responsibilities, authority, and duties of the NSO, other data producers, and users is essential for the long-term stability and functionality of the statistical system. The act should address issues such as the confidentiality of data, the release of information, and penalties for non-compliance with data reporting requirements.
- *Funding Legislation:* A clear, legally defined source of funding for the NSO ensures that there is a long-term, stable source of resources for statistical work, independent of short-term political pressures.

4. What Would Be Useful for Governance in Africa's Diverse NSS?

The governance of African national statistical systems requires a blend of independence, transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness, all while recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the continent's diversity. Establishing a flexible but robust governance framework will be crucial to enhancing the effectiveness of NSS in Africa, ensuring that reliable, timely, and relevant data can support sustainable development and informed decision-making. Some of the elements for consideration are the following.

- *Flexible Frameworks:* Given the heterogeneity in statistical capacity, governance rules must be flexible, allowing for the adaptation of strategies based on local context. Countries with more advanced statistical systems may require more sophisticated governance frameworks, while others may need foundational reforms and capacity building.
- *Regional Cooperation Mechanisms:* Collaboration among African countries can help improve governance by promoting shared standards, pooling resources, and creating synergies in data production and use. Establishing a regional body to facilitate data sharing and standard-setting across countries could help harmonize approaches while respecting national differences.
- *Performance Monitoring and Data Use:* Regular monitoring of the NSS's performance, including assessing the relevance and utility of

the data produced, can help track progress and identify gaps in governance. Data use audits or assessments can ensure that the statistics produced are actually being utilized effectively for policy-making and development.

- *Public Awareness and Advocacy:* Raising public awareness of the importance of good statistics and fostering public trust in statistical processes can strengthen governance by ensuring greater societal demand for high-quality, transparent data. Advocacy campaigns can also help secure funding and political support for statistical systems.

5. What advice would you give to a newly appointed director general of an ANSO?

Being appointed as the Director-General (DG) of a National Statistical Office (NSO) is both an exciting opportunity and a significant responsibility, especially in the context of an African country, where statistical systems are often challenged by diverse factors such as limited resources, capacity gaps, political influence, and data demands. Below are key pieces of advice for navigating this role successfully:

I. Establish a clear vision and Strategic Plan

- *Assess the current state:* Begin by thoroughly assessing the existing state of the national statistical system. Understand its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis). Review the existing data quality, infrastructure, staff capacity, and technological tools.
- *Develop a vision for transformation:* Develop a long-term vision for the NSO that aligns with national development goals and regional (e.g., the African Union's Agenda 2063) or global frameworks (e.g., the UN Sustainable Development Goals). The vision should focus on enhancing the credibility, accessibility, and utilization of data for policy-making, governance, and development.
- *Create a Strategic Plan:* Formulate a comprehensive National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS). Ensure that this plan addresses critical areas such as capacity building, data modernization, governance, and integration of modern technologies like big data and geographic information systems (GIS).

II. Ensure independence and build institutional credibility

- *Advocate for independence:* Advocate for the institutional independence of the NSO to protect it from political interference. A clear legal

framework and transparent operational procedures are critical to maintaining credibility.

- *Strengthen legal and institutional frameworks:* Work with policy makers to ensure that the NSO is governed by clear and supportive legislation (such as a Statistics Act). This helps define its role, powers, and autonomy, protecting it from external pressures.
- *Build trust with stakeholders:* Cultivate strong relationships with government officials, other data producers, international partners, civil society organizations, and the media. Transparency in processes and the provision of quality, timely, and reliable data are key to earning trust.

III. Focus on capacity building

- *Invest in Human Resources:* Statistical systems thrive on skilled human capital. Focus on recruiting, training, and retaining highly qualified statisticians, data scientists, and other professionals. Collaborate with universities and international organizations to establish continuous professional development programs.
- *Mentorship and Knowledge Transfer:* Foster a culture of mentorship and knowledge sharing within the NSO. This will ensure that younger staff members are empowered and able to take on leadership roles in the future, thereby ensuring institutional sustainability.
- *Develop a Professional Workforce:* Promote ethical standards, professionalism, and a commitment to data quality among all staff members. Ensure that everyone in the NSO understands their role in delivering credible, transparent, and reliable statistics.

IV. Modernize data collection and analytical processes

- *Leverage technology:* Make use of new technologies, such as mobile-based data collection, satellite data, geographic information systems (GIS), and big data analytics. These can help overcome challenges related to limited infrastructure and improve data timeliness and accuracy.
- *Move towards digitalization:* Move away from paper-based surveys and censuses where possible, transitioning to digital platforms that enable real-time data collection, processing, and dissemination.
- *Improve data integration:* Promote the integration of administrative data, survey data, and big data sources. This will allow for more accurate, comprehensive, and timely national statistics without duplicating efforts.

- *Enhance data storage and management:* Invest in state-of-the-art data management systems to store and secure national statistics, ensuring that data is easily accessible to authorized users and protected from misuse.

V. Strengthen data quality and consistency

- *Establish strong quality control mechanisms:* Implement robust data quality assurance frameworks to ensure that all statistics are accurate, consistent, and comparable. This includes developing clear methodologies and maintaining high standards for data collection, processing, and analysis.
- *Regular monitoring and auditing:* Conduct regular reviews and audits of statistical processes to assess performance and compliance with international standards. This also includes the evaluation of statistical surveys, censuses, and administrative data.
- *International best practices:* Ensure that the NSO adheres to global best practices and standards set by the United Nations, the African Centre for Statistics, and other international bodies, while also adapting them to local conditions and needs.

VI. Promote stakeholder engagement and data accessibility

- *Open data initiatives:* Advocate for open data policies that make national statistics publicly available in accessible formats. This promotes transparency and empowers citizens, researchers, and policy makers to use data for decision-making.
- *Foster dialogue with data users:* Establish regular consultation processes with key data users such as government ministries, the private sector, and civil society. This ensures that the data collected is relevant to national and sectoral needs and enhances the use of data in policy-making.
- *Promote data literacy:* Work to enhance data literacy across the country by providing training to government agencies, the media, civil society, and the general public on the importance of using data for decision-making.

VII. Strengthen data governance and ethical standards

- *Adopt robust data governance policies:* Create policies that govern the collection, storage, analysis, and dissemination of data. These policies should address issues such as data protection, privacy, confidentiality, and the ethical use of data.

- *Ensure ethical compliance:* Establish a code of ethics for data collection and handling, ensuring the protection of vulnerable populations and the ethical use of data for development purposes. This is especially important as NSOs may begin collecting data via mobile phones or using alternative data sources like social media.

- *Coordinate across sectors:* Ensure that all government and non-government entities involved in data collection are adhering to common standards and working towards a unified statistical framework. This can help prevent duplication of efforts and improve the overall quality of national statistics.

VIII. Secure financial and political support

- *Advocate for adequate funding:* A key challenge for most African NSOs is limited financial resources. As the DG, it is important to actively seek adequate and predictable funding for statistical work. Lobby for support from both the national government and international partners.
- *Ensure political support:* Political backing is crucial for the success of any statistical reforms. Engage with policy makers and key political figures to ensure that statistical systems are recognized as a priority for national development.
- *Maximize International Collaboration:* Explore partnerships with international organizations (e.g., the World Bank, UNDP, UNECA, SADC, COMESA, African Development Bank) that can provide technical assistance, capacity-building support, and funding for statistical development.

IX. Promote regional and international cooperation

- *Engage with regional bodies:* Collaborate with regional statistical organizations such as the African Union's StatAfric, African Centre for Statistics and the African Development Bank to benefit from shared resources, harmonized data standards, and regional initiatives. Regional cooperation can also help reduce costs and improve the comparability of data across countries.
- *Participate in global data initiatives:* Ensure that the NSO participates in global and regional initiatives like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) monitoring framework. This will align national statistical efforts with global priorities and enhance the visibility of the country's statistical contributions.

X. Communicate the value of statistics

- *Advocate for the role of statistics:* As DG, part of the role is to continuously communicate the

importance of high-quality statistics for good governance, policy formulation, and economic development. This involves raising awareness at all levels of government, civil society, and the private sector about the need for reliable data.

- *Use statistics for evidence-based decision-making:* Demonstrate how statistics can drive national development by highlighting success stories where data-informed decisions led to positive outcomes in sectors like health, education, and economic growth.

The role of the Director-General of the National Statistical Office is pivotal in shaping the future of a country's statistical system. Through a combination of strategic vision, strong governance, capacity building, technological modernization, and effective communication, the DG can transform the NSO into a robust institution that meets the data needs of the country and ensures that statistics are used effectively for national development. By balancing independence with accountability, fostering innovation while adhering to ethical standards, and collaborating with national, regional, and international partners, the new DG can make a significant impact on their country's statistical landscape.

6. What would you suggest to your successor at the African Centre for Statistics at UNECA? Could you tell us what the Centre does these days and stress out its peculiar value added in the African statistical ecosystem?

First, I congratulate my successor on the new appointment to the position of Director of the African Centre for Statistics (ACS) at UN Economic Commission for Africa. This is a pivotal role, not only in the African Union's broader development agenda and the Global agenda on Sustainable Development in supporting African countries, but also in advancing the critical role of data in driving evidence-based policy-making and sustainable development across the continent. As my successor takes on this important position, I would like to share a few suggestions based on my experiences that I believe can help to lead effectively and make a meaningful impact:

Champion data-driven decision making

One of the core mandates of the African Centre for Statistics is to foster the use of statistics in policy-making. My advice would be to continue promoting the value of high-quality data and statistics as essential tools for decision-making. This involves actively engaging with policy makers, national statistical offices, and regional organizations to demonstrate the power of data in driving progress on the agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Strengthen regional cooperation and harmonization

Africa's statistical landscape is diverse, with varying levels of statistical capacity across countries. I recommend working closely with national statistical offices to enhance collaboration, capacity building, and the harmonization of data standards. This can help ensure that statistics are not only robust, but also comparable across countries, enabling better cross-border analysis and coordination on regional issues. Focus on building strong partnerships with regional bodies such as the African Development Bank, African Union's StatAfric, and regional economic communities (RECs) is key.

Promote innovation and technological integration

The statistical community is increasingly embracing new technologies like big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and satellite data to complement traditional data collection methods. My advice is to explore opportunities for integrating these technologies into national statistical systems. You can collaborate with both public and private sector players to find innovative solutions for real-time data collection, processing, and dissemination, which can accelerate the achievement of development goals and improve data accessibility.

Focus on capacity building

One of the most critical aspects of improving Africa's statistical capacity is through training and knowledge transfer. I recommend to prioritize building a sustainable talent pipeline by working with universities, training institutions, and international partners. Consider facilitating mentorship programs and creating opportunities for young statisticians across the continent to acquire hands-on experience in statistical work. A young statisticians programme - "Takwimu" should be explored fully to harness its potential. Strengthening the human resource base will enable the continent to meet growing data demands and reduce dependence on external expertise.

Encourage stakeholder engagement and inclusivity

The role of data goes beyond the statistical community. It's essential to ensure that all relevant stakeholders—governments, civil society, private sector, and international organizations—are actively involved in statistical processes. Regular consultations with key data users will ensure that the data collected meets national needs and is relevant for addressing local challenges. It will

also help in building trust in the data produced by national statistical offices.

Strengthen data governance and transparency

As the African Centre for Statistics plays a critical role in setting standards and fostering good data governance across the continent, I encourage to continue promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical practices in data collection and use. Advocate for open data policies and the public availability of statistical information to support transparency and accountability in governance. Strengthening data protection and privacy policies will also be crucial as the continent increasingly moves toward digital and mobile-based data collection.

Expand advocacy and awareness of statistics

Finally, continue to be an advocate for statistics on both the continental and global stages. Many policy makers and the public are not fully aware of the importance of statistics in achieving development goals. I suggest working with the media, academic institutions, and civil society organizations to raise awareness on the centrality of statistics in driving Africa's development agenda. Promoting African Statistics Day and other initiatives can help further elevate the profile of the statistics community.

Remain flexible and responsive to emerging needs

The landscape for statistical work is rapidly evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, highlighted the critical need for accurate and real-time data to respond to health emergencies. Stay attuned to emerging challenges and be prepared to pivot in response to new demands. This includes adopting adaptive methodologies for data collection during crises or other rapidly changing circumstances.

As you take up this important responsibility, always remember that statistics are at the heart of Africa's ability to transform its economies and societies. Your leadership will have a lasting impact on the direction of statistical development, and the legacy you build can set the stage for Africa's future in the global data ecosystem.

7. Could you share with us some examples, such as success stories, surprises, good news that you have witnessed around the continent during your career?

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to witness and be part of many success stories across Africa that highlight the significant role of data, statistics, and policy-driven decision-making in driving development. Here are some memorable

examples from my time as Regional Advisor for the IMF, Manager of the Statistics Division at the African Development Bank (AfDB), and as Director of the African Centre for Statistics:

a. Success Story: Statistical Capacity Building in East Africa

- **The Initiative:** While at the IMF, I had the privilege of working closely with 21 English Speaking African countries, particularly during the implementation of **Statistical Capacity Building Programs**. These programs aimed to improve the capacity of national statistical offices to produce reliable and timely data, especially related to GDP, inflation, and poverty indicators.
- **Impact:** One of the significant success stories came from several countries where these programs significantly improved national statistical systems. The countries enhanced their data collection methodologies, integrated new technologies, and implemented best practices for data management.
- **Surprise/Good News:** A key surprise was the speed at which some of these countries adapted to new statistical tools, especially in collecting data from the informal sector (which is a significant portion of African economies). Tanzania's **GDP rebasing** exercise in 2014 was a notable milestone. By incorporating the informal economy, they recorded a 30% increase in GDP, which dramatically altered the economic outlook and policy focus of the country.

b. Success Story: Implementation of the International Comparison Program (ICP) 2011 round

- The International Comparison Program (ICP) is one of the largest, and most enduring, statistical initiatives in the world, managed by the World Bank under the auspices of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC). ICP's main objectives are (i) to produce purchasing power parities (PPPs) and comparable price level indexes (PLIs) for participating economies; and (ii) to convert volume and per capita measures of gross domestic product (GDP) and its expenditure components into a common currency using PPPs. The African Development Bank under my leadership worked very closely with countries during the 2011 round and produced two reports within two years – unprecedented record.
- **Impact:** The programme enabled us to make available data on the size of economies and prices levels that is comparable across the continent.

- **Surprise/Good News:** many countries GDP and CPI compilation improved.

c. Success Story: The African Information Highway (AIH) by the African Development Bank

- **The Initiative:** During my time at the AfDB, one of the key initiatives I was involved in was the development of the **African Information Highway (AIH)**. The AIH is an ambitious project designed to make African statistical data accessible and available to the public and policy makers across the continent.
- **Impact:** This platform enabled real-time access to statistical data on key economic, social, and environmental indicators for all African countries. It facilitated evidence-based policy planning, monitoring, and regional integration. It also contributed to boosting transparency, governance, and accountability within national statistical offices.
- **Surprise/Good News:** One of the most rewarding aspects of this initiative was witnessing how countries with limited statistical capacity, through regional cooperation, were able to not only contribute data, but also use the AIH to enhance their decision-making processes. The platform became a powerful tool for regional bodies like the **African Union** and regional economic communities to monitor progress on Agenda 2063 and the **SDGs**.

3. Surprise: Data-Driven Economic Reforms in Ghana

- **The Initiative:** One of the most striking examples of how statistics directly influenced policy came from **Ghana** during a period of significant economic reforms. The **IMF** worked closely with Ghana to support the country's economic stabilization program, and a key component of that was enhancing the country's statistical systems.
- **Impact:** Ghana's **rebasement of its GDP** in 2010, which incorporated a broader set of economic activities, led to a remarkable 60% increase in its GDP size. This exercise transformed the way the country presented its economic strength to the international community and helped it unlock new opportunities for investment.
- **Surprise/Good News:** The surprise was how swiftly the Ghanaian government adopted data-driven reforms. It used the newly rebased data to effectively negotiate with international institutions and to attract foreign investment, resulting in more favorable economic conditions and a much stronger international economic profile.

5. Surprise: The Rise of Mobile Data Collection

- **The Initiative:** Across the continent, we saw a rapid shift towards **mobile data collection**, which was championed as part of efforts to improve data access in rural and remote areas. With the widespread use of mobile phones, governments and international agencies began adopting mobile technology for surveys and censuses.
- **Impact:** This led to faster, cheaper, and more accurate data collection in previously underserved areas. Kenya, for example, implemented mobile technology for real-time reporting during its **Population Census** in 2019, drastically reducing errors and costs. Tanzania, for example, undertook its census and disseminated data with forty-five days.
- **Surprise/Good News:** The surprise came when we saw how rapidly governments, even in countries with traditionally low technological adoption rates, were willing to embrace mobile-based tools. This innovation has brought about a new era of data collection, contributing to more inclusive, accurate, and timely statistics for policy-making.

These are just a few examples of the exciting and surprising developments I witnessed throughout my career. They highlight the transformative power of data and statistics in African development. As I reflect on these moments, it's clear that Africa's future is bright, and with the continued strengthening of statistical capacity, we can look forward to more success stories across the continent.

Each of these examples reinforces the fact that when statisticians and policy makers collaborate, they can unlock the full potential of data to improve governance, drive sustainable development, and create positive outcomes for all African citizens.

8. Official statistics struggle sometimes to be appreciated and used as they should by policy makers. How could ANSOs increase their visibility and the trust decision makers have in them? Could you give us some examples?

It's true that in many African countries, national statistical offices (NSOs) often face challenges when it comes to being appreciated and utilized as they should by policy makers. However, there are several strategies that NSOs can adopt to increase their visibility, foster trust, and ultimately improve the use of official statistics in decision-making processes.

1. Enhancing communication and engagement with policy makers

NSOs should proactively engage with policy makers and government officials to demonstrate

the importance and relevance of official statistics. By positioning themselves as key players in policy formulation, NSOs can showcase how reliable data can guide evidence-based decisions that contribute to national development goals. Some of the examples include:

- **Regular briefings and policy dialogues:** NSOs could organize regular data briefings and workshops for policy makers, highlighting key findings from national surveys, censuses, and administrative data. For example, in South Africa, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) and in Zambia, the Zambia Statistics Agency (ZamStats) regularly hold data dialogues with policy makers to highlight how statistics inform national policy development.
- **Data dashboards for policy makers:** Some countries have created data dashboards tailored to decision makers, allowing real-time access to relevant statistics for quick reference. This type of tool can enhance policy makers' awareness of the available data and its importance in daily decision-making.

II. Demonstrating the impact of statistics on national development

Policy makers are more likely to value official statistics if they can clearly see the tangible impact data has on improving governance, resource allocation, and development outcomes. NSOs need to link their data directly to national development strategies and policies, showing how accurate data leads to better decisions. For instance,

- **Uganda's National Development Plan:** The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) has worked closely with policy makers to ensure that their national statistical data directly informs the National Development Plan (NDP). By providing data on poverty, employment, and education, UBOS has made it clear how statistics help track the country's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Impact of the Population Census in Ghana:** After Ghana's Population and Housing Census, the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) worked with government agencies to ensure that census data was used for planning housing and infrastructure development, showing policy makers how critical the data was for resource distribution and national planning.

III. Building strategic partnerships

Strategic partnerships with both national and international organizations can amplify the role of NSOs in policy development. Collaboration with international organizations, research institutions,

and civil society groups increases the visibility and credibility of statistical data, making it more likely that decision makers will trust and use it. Some examples:

- **The African Development Bank (AfDB) and the African Centre for Statistics at UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)** have collaborated with NSOs in various African countries to enhance data collection and statistical capacity. By working together on data-driven projects, such as the African Information Highway, NSOs can increase their visibility and the perceived value of their work at the regional and global levels.
- **Public-Private Partnerships for Data:** In countries like Kenya, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) has formed partnerships with private tech companies (e.g., mobile providers) to improve data collection methods, such as using mobile surveys to reach remote populations, which makes their work more visible and widely acknowledged.

IV. Improving data accessibility and transparency

One of the key ways to build trust is through transparency. Making data easily accessible, understandable, and available to the public fosters trust in the statistical system. When policy makers can quickly access and verify reliable data, they are more likely to incorporate it into their decisions. For instance:

- **Nigeria's National Data Portal:** The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in Nigeria has created an online data portal where government officials, researchers, and the public can access a wide range of statistical information. The portal provides not only raw data, but also detailed reports and analysis, making the data more accessible and usable for policy-making.
- **Open Data Initiatives in Rwanda:** The National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) has launched an open data portal to ensure the transparency of its statistics. By making data public, it builds credibility with both the government and the public, demonstrating how the use of data enhances policy-making.

V. Improving the timeliness and relevance of data

Policy makers need timely and relevant data to make informed decisions. If official statistics are outdated or not aligned with current issues, decision makers may seek data from other sources. By aligning their data collection efforts with key national priorities and ensuring timely releases, NSOs can make their statistics more valuable to policy makers.

Examples:

- **Real-Time Agricultural Data in Ethiopia:** The Central Statistical Agency (CSA) of Ethiopia has developed an innovative agricultural data collection system that provides real-time insights into crop production, helping policy makers make timely decisions on food security and agricultural policy.
- **Kenya's Economic Survey:** The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics releases an annual economic survey that is tailored to current national priorities, such as the government's "Big Four Agenda." This timely and relevant data allows policy makers to monitor and adjust their strategies based on the most up-to-date statistics.

VI. Public education and awareness campaigns

Many policy makers may not fully understand the importance or value of official statistics. NSOs should engage in public education campaigns that highlight the role of statistics in national development and demonstrate how data influences various sectors, from healthcare and education to infrastructure and economic growth. There are a few countries with good practice, such as:

- **Public Awareness of Statistical Products in Egypt:** The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) in Egypt has made efforts to increase awareness through outreach campaigns, media engagement, and educational materials that explain the significance of national statistics in shaping policy and improving livelihoods.
- **Statistics on SDGs in Malawi:** The National Statistical Office of Malawi (NSO Malawi) has held public campaigns and educational workshops to raise awareness about the importance of collecting and using data for tracking progress toward the SDGs, which has helped build support from policy makers.

VII. Regular and transparent reporting of NSOs performance

Reporting on the performance of NSOs, including successes, challenges, and areas of improvement, fosters a culture of accountability and transparency. Regular reports on the NSO's progress, challenges, and innovations will allow policy makers and the public to understand the challenges the office faces and recognize the value it brings.

Examples:

- **Annual Statistical Reports:** Many African NSOs, including Zambia's Zambia Statistics Agency (ZamStats), produce annual reports outlining their data collection activities, methodology,

challenges, and successes. This transparency builds trust in the institution's work.

- **Feedback Loops:** Countries like Botswana have established feedback loops where policy makers and data users can provide input on the usefulness of the data and request additional information, which ensures continuous improvement and better alignment with policy makers' needs.

Overall, increasing the visibility and trust of national statistical offices in Africa requires a multifaceted approach. By enhancing communication with policy makers, building strategic partnerships, ensuring transparency, improving timeliness and relevance, and actively engaging in public education, NSOs can create an environment where decision makers value and utilize official statistics.

Each of the examples provided demonstrates practical steps taken by NSOs across the continent to increase the credibility of statistics and improve their use in policy making. As NSOs continue to refine their strategies and expand their influence, they can become invaluable assets for evidence-based governance and national development in Africa

9. In 2025, what advice would you give to a young African official statistician willing to contribute to the development of his/her country and the continent?

As a young African official statistician involved in the *Takwimu Young African Statistician programme*, you're in an excellent position to make a meaningful impact. The Takwimu programme is a valuable initiative that empowers statisticians with the skills to contribute to evidence-based decision-making for development. Here are some pieces of advice for you and other young statisticians in this position:

1. Master the basics, but focus on practical application

- While having a strong theoretical foundation in statistics is important, the true impact comes when these skills are applied to real-world problems. Make sure you understand how to design surveys, interpret data, and communicate results in ways that can influence policy and decision-making. Focus on areas like data quality, national accounts, and social and economic indicators that directly impact public policies. These are critical to guiding sustainable development.

2. Learn data storytelling

- It's not just about collecting data but also about telling a compelling, actionable story.

Learn how to present statistics in ways that are accessible to policy makers, civil society, and the general public.

- In Africa, there is often a gap between data availability and its effective use for policy. Learning to present statistics visually, using infographics and dashboards, can greatly enhance your impact.

3. Understand regional and global frameworks

- Familiarize yourself with global initiatives such as the SDGs, Agenda 2063, and how they intersect with national development goals. Statistical data plays a key role in tracking progress on these agendas.
- Understanding and contributing to regional statistical initiatives like SADC, EAC, and ECOWAS can open doors for collaboration and cross-border projects.

4. Focus on data governance and ethics

- In an era of big data, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, data governance and ethics are increasingly important. Protecting the privacy of individuals while ensuring accurate data collection is crucial, particularly in areas like health and social services.
- Advocate for robust data governance frameworks in your country, ensuring that statistical data is used responsibly and effectively, and that it fosters trust in public institutions.

5. Develop cross-sectoral partnerships

- Collaboration is key! Seek partnerships with various sectors, from agriculture and health to education and infrastructure. Work closely with ministries, development partners, and international organizations.
- Networks like the African Union, African Centre for Statistics at UN Economic Commission for Africa, and African Development Bank (AfDB) could provide opportunities for you to contribute at a higher level and amplify your efforts.

6. Promote capacity building and knowledge sharing

- One of the ways you can contribute is by ensuring that your work empowers others. Collaborate with universities, research institutions, and other government departments to build statistical capacity across the board.
- Share your knowledge with others in your community. Training younger statisticians, or even those in the private sector, will strengthen national statistical systems and create a culture of evidence-based decision-making.

7. Stay curious and continuously learn

- The world of data is always evolving with new technologies, methodologies, and tools emerging regularly. Stay up-to-date with developments in data science, machine learning, and statistical methodologies.
- Participate in international conferences, workshops, and online courses that focus on statistics and data science. This not only expands your skill sets, but also helps you build a network of peers.

8. Champion African data for African development

- There is a unique opportunity in Africa to leverage local knowledge and indigenous data systems to complement official statistics. Many African communities have rich, informal data systems that are not captured by traditional statistics.
- Advocate for more inclusive approaches that recognize the value of community-driven data alongside official statistics to paint a fuller picture of development challenges and solutions.

9. Be patient, but stay resilient

- Statistical work, especially in the context of national development, can sometimes feel slow and bureaucratic. Change takes time, and statistical data often faces challenges of timeliness, accuracy, and consistency.
- Stay resilient and continue pushing for the use of evidence-based policies. Even small incremental changes can have a profound long-term impact on the development trajectory of your country and the continent.

10. Promote policy-relevant research

- Focus on conducting research that directly supports policy. Whether it's on poverty, inequality, gender, or climate change, ensure your research is not just academic but practical and geared towards informing decisions that can lead to development.
- Partner with policy makers and development agencies to ensure your work directly impacts planning and resource allocation.

By contributing to **Takwimu**, you're already part of a growing movement of African statisticians who are committed to transforming the continent through data. Take pride in the role you're playing and keep looking for ways to amplify your impact as you continue growing in your career. You have the ability to shape the future of your country and Africa.

