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Addressing capacity gaps in the production of the SDG indicators in the Caribbean

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Policy Brief

Addressing capacity gaps in the production of the SDG indicators in the Caribbean

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Introduction

The Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Indicator Framework is endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission as the monitoring mechanism for the 169 targets and more than 230 indicators of the SDGs. Reporting of these indicators will pose a formidable challenge to the Caribbean given the statistical capacity of countries of the subregion. The results of an ECLAC survey show that only three of the eleven countries that participated reported having the capacity to produce at least 50 per cent of the indicators. The capacities of National Statistical Offices will need to be significantly enhanced to meet the data requirement of the SDGs. Addressing the legislation and policies issues relating to data collection, processing and dissemination will be a desirable first step in this direction.

I. Status of statistical capacity in the Caribbean

The production of adequate and timely official statistics in a consistent manner is a challenge for most Caribbean countries. The reasons for this are multifaceted. Many countries do not have an independent National Statistical Office (NSO). Even among the countries with an established NSO, the National Statistical System (NSS) is not coordinated. The statistics act of most countries typically tasks the NSO with the collection and publication of official statistics but without the required authority to source data from other data producers within the NSS. In addition to these challenges, the NSOs have to operate with limited technical capacity due to their small sizes, the scarcity of statistical expertise, the high turn-over of staff, and/or inadequate funding. Consequently, most Caribbean countries have focused on the production of economic statistics to the detriment of social and, to a greater extent, environmental statistics.

The experience with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) showed serious lags by Caribbean countries in their reporting of progress in the attainment of the MDGs. As Abdulkadri, Evans, and Ash (2016) noted, no Caribbean country reported on up to 50 per cent of the 60 MDG indicators in 2013 even though four countries met this mark in 2005 and 2010. Indeed the subregion performed better in their MDG reporting in 2005 than they did in 2010 or 2013. This highlights the problem of data timeliness that persists in most countries in the subregion.

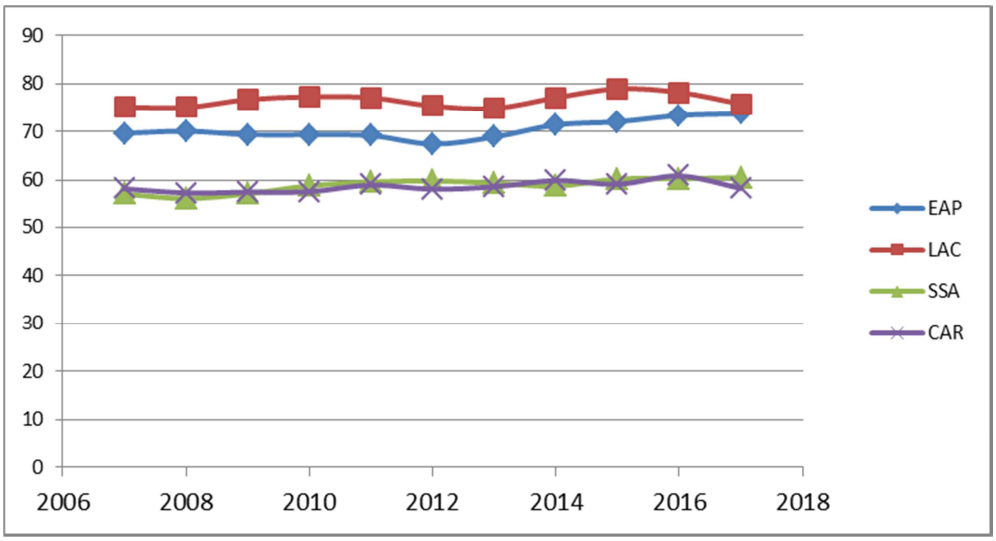
The performance of Caribbean countries on the Statistical Capacity Indicators[1] (SCI) index of the World Bank underscores the problem of data timeliness in the subregion. The SCI is a diagnostic framework that provides information on the capacity of the NSS of developing countries based on three major dimensions. It consists of rating on the methodology, source data, and periodicity and timeliness dimensions with each dimension rated on a scale of 0 to 100. An overall SCI score is then

[1] See [online]://http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=statistical-capacity-indicators.

computed as the simple average of the three dimensions. The SCI score is available for most countries from 2004 and thirteen Caribbean countries[2] are covered in the index.

A ten year trend in the average overall SCI score for the thirteen Caribbean (CAR) countries covered by the indicator, in comparison with the average score[3] for Latin America and Caribbean (LAC), East Asia and Pacific (EAP), and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), is shown in Figure 1. The figure shows that statistical capacity in the Caribbean is significantly at a lower level compared to that of the wider Latin America and Caribbean region. It is also lower in comparison to the East Asia and Pacific region but comparable to that of Sub-Saharan Africa. Statistical capacity in the Caribbean increased marginally between 2007 and 2016 but all the gains recorded over this decade dissipated in just one year, between 2016 and 2017. During 2007 to 2016, statistical capacity in the Caribbean was identical to that of Sub-Saharan Africa. While Sub-Saharan Africa maintained that trend to 2017, the Caribbean, in contrast, witnessed a decline in capacity. Although a few countries in the subregion maintained and even improved their statistical capacity during this period, the Caribbean, in general, recorded a decline in statistical capacity.

Figure 1
Trend in the statistical capacity indicator score (2007-2017)
(Percentage)



Source: World Bank Statistical Capacity Indicators database

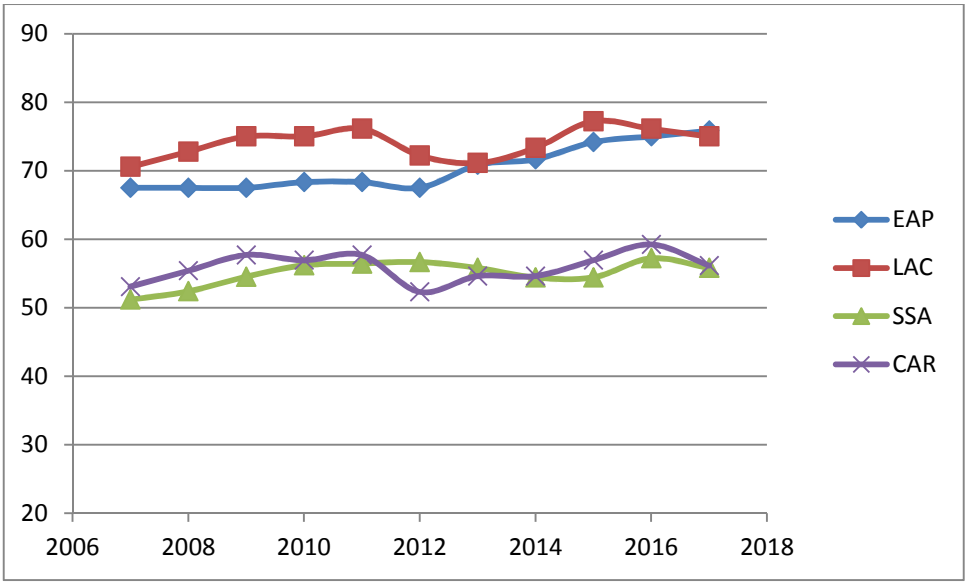
In examining the trend of the three dimensions of the SCI (see Figures 2-4), the problem with timeliness of data in the Caribbean was apparent. As Figures 2 shows, the pattern noticed in the overall SCI score is also reflected in the source data dimension. As for the methodology dimension, Figure 3 shows that the Caribbean consistently scored higher than Sub-Saharan Africa. However, as Figure 4 shows, when it comes to periodicity and timeliness, the Caribbean scored the least. The gap in statistical capacity related to this dimension is also widening between the Caribbean and the regional groupings represented.

[2] These are: Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

[3] For all regional and subregional groupings, the average SCI score does not include high income countries.

It is fair to assume that statistical capacity is not trending in the right direction in the Caribbean. This is against the backdrop of the call for Data Revolution for Sustainable Development where high quality data provided in a timely manner are used to design, monitor and evaluate policies[4]. This is highly relevant in the era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets and more than 230 indicators, there will be a great demand on the NSOs and other data producers to provide timely data for the follow-up and review of the Goals. To meet this demand, Caribbean countries need to pay particular attention to strengthening statistical capacities of the national statistical systems of the subregion.

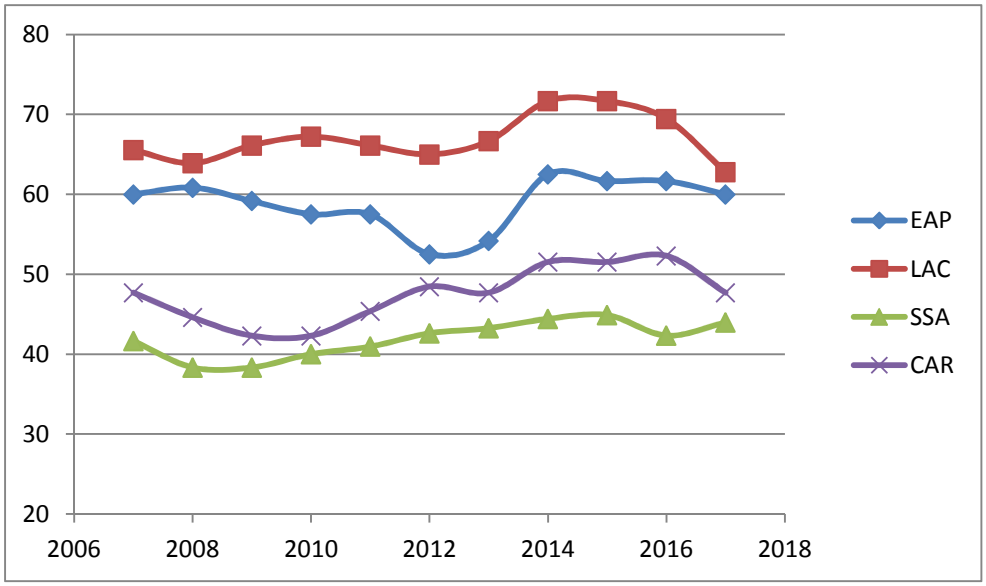
Figure 2
Trend in the statistical capacity indicator's source data dimension score (2007-2017)
(Percentage)



Source: World Bank Statistical Capacity Indicators database

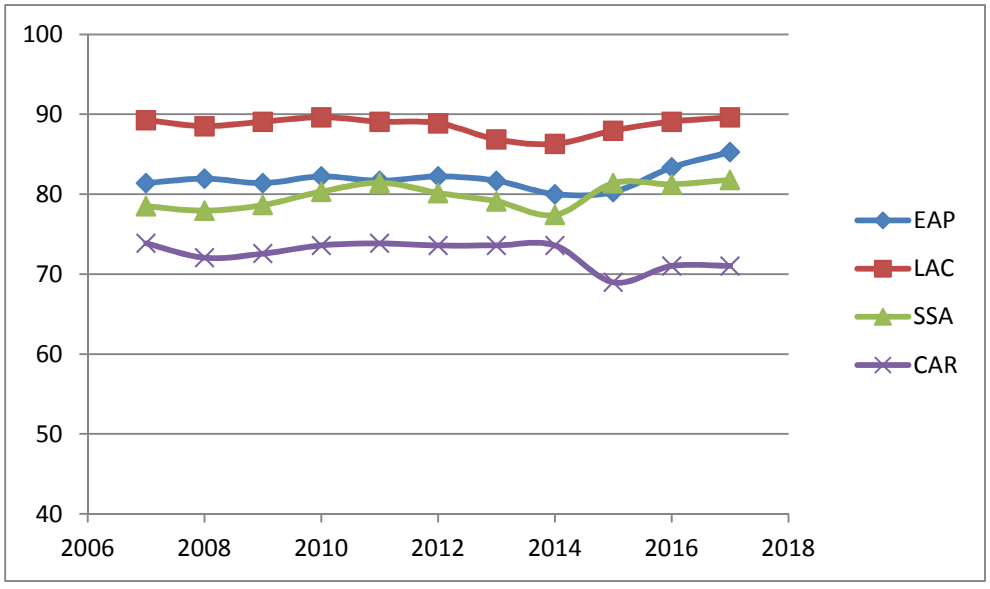
[4] See IEAG (2014) [online]:// http://www.undatarevolution.org/report/.

Figure 3
Trend in the statistical capacity indicator's methodology dimension score (2007-2017)
(Percentage)



Source: World Bank Statistical Capacity Indicators database

Figure 4
Trend in the statistical capacity indicator's periodicity and timeliness dimension score (2007-2017)
(Percentage)



Source: World Bank Statistical Capacity Indicators database

In anticipation of the need for technical assistance in statistics by Member States that may result from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the Statistics Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, as part of the activities of the Statistical Coordination Group for the 2030 Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean, conducted a survey on national statistical capacities for the production of the global SDG indicators. Using the data from that

survey, this policy brief shows that there is a critical capacity constraint in the Caribbean to meet the reporting requirements of the SDGs. To ensure that no one is left behind in the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the subregion, policy makers should pay urgent attention to developing the statistical capacity to collect, analyse and disseminate official statistics for development purposes in a timely and sustainable manner.

II. National statistical capacities survey

A. Methodology

The Statistics Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean prepared and disseminated a "National Statistical Capacities Questionnaire for the Production of the SDG Indicators from the Global Monitoring Framework[5]" to countries of the Latin America and Caribbean region in early 2016 with data collection lasting from April 2016 to February 2017. The results of this survey are contained in the first annual report on regional progress and challenges in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2017) presented at the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development held in Mexico City, Mexico in April 2017. Only ten of the 24 countries in the Caribbean included in the survey provided a response during the original survey timelime. Subsequently, an additional country returned the completed questionnaire to make a total of eleven[6] countries.

B. Capacity to produce SDG indicators

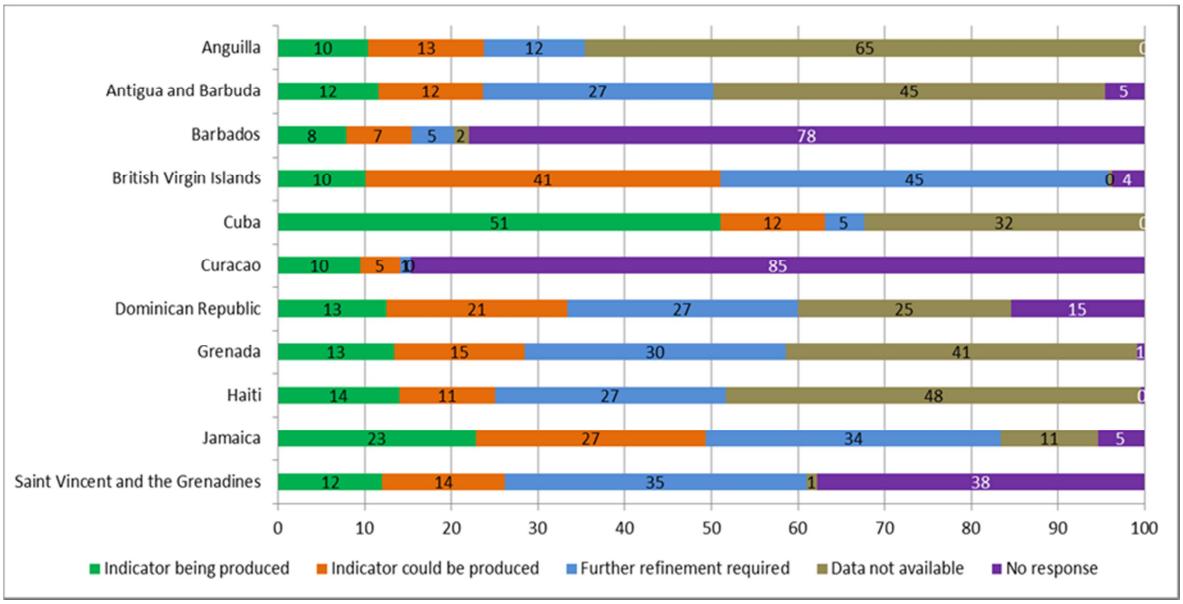
Through the survey, information on the level of availability of data to produce the indicators on the global SDG indicator framework was collected from Member States. Figure 5 shows the summary result for the eleven Caribbean countries that participated. As at the time of data collection, only Cuba was already producing at least 50 per cent of the indicators. Jamaica was next to Cuba in its production of data for 23 per cent of the indicators. No other Caribbean country was producing up to

[5] The survey questionnaire is described in ECLAC (2017).

[6] Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Cuba, Curacao, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

15 per cent of the indicators. When available data in the country for production of the indicators are considered, even if the indicators were not being produced, the capacity to produce data for the indicators improves somewhat, with Cuba being able to produce 63 per cent, British Virgin Islands 51 per cent, and Jamaica 50 per cent of the indicators. The remaining countries would still not be able to produce at least 50 per cent of the indicators.

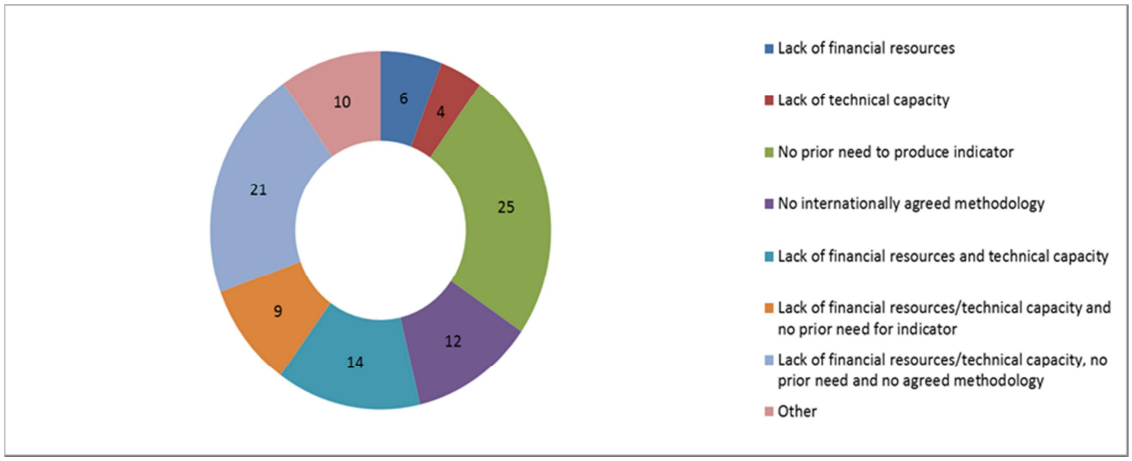
Figure 5
Level of data availability for SDG indicators in Caribbean countries



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Annual report on regional progress and challenges in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Latin America and the Caribbean Santiago, 2017.

Among the reasons given by the countries for the non-production of indicators from existing data sources, the lack of a prior need for the data was the single most cited reason 25 per cent of the time. The next singular reason was the lack of an internationally-agreed methodology for producing the indicator. Other reasons such as lack of financial resources and lack of technical capacity are well-known obstacles to official data production in the subregion.

Figure 6
Reasons for the non-production of SDG indicators by Caribbean countries



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Annual report on regional progress and challenges in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Latin America and the Caribbean Santiago, 2017.

C. Implications of survey findings

Currently, there is a low level of data availability for computing the SDG indicators in the Caribbean. Relatedly, Caribbean countries are less likely to offer technical assistance to other countries on any of the major topics covered on the national statistical capacities survey[7]. Surprisingly, they are also less likely to indicate a need for technical assistance in comparison to countries from the other subregions in Latin America. Meanwhile, a country-by-country analysis of survey responses indicates that many countries seriously lack data on most of the environmental indicators on the global SDG indicator framework.

Information from the survey also revealed that the main sources of data for the SDG indicators are the population and housing censuses, the household budget surveys, the surveys of living condition, and administrative records and databases. This has serious implications for policy. Due to tight fiscal constraints facing most Caribbean countries, governments have significantly reduced funding for surveys and even censuses. Furthermore, access to administrative data is not managed in any coordinated manner with each agency setting its own rules on access to data in its custody. The need to maintain confidentiality, although a valid concern, is generally used to deny, or at least hinder, NSO access to administrative records held by other data producers within the NSS.

In order to successfully meet the data requirements for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, policy makers will need to address these and other issues that hinder statistical capacity development in the Caribbean.

[7] See ECLAC (2017).

III. Conclusions and recommendations

The two major reasons given by the sampled Caribbean countries for non-production of data for the SDG indicators relate to the absence of a prior need for the data and lack of an agreed methodology for computing the indicators. These are entirely associated with the SDGs and constitute additional challenges for the statistical offices that are already understaffed and under-funded.

Addressing emerging and existing challenges that confront national statistical systems in the Caribbean will require a new paradigm of statistical capacity strengthening that incorporates technology and embraces the data revolution for sustainable development. For this to happen, legislative action will be needed. Currently, most modern and innovative approaches to statistical data collection, processing and dissemination will be precluded by the existing statistical act of some countries. These acts need to be reviewed, revised and updated to address the demands of the data revolution age and to ensure that the NSOs are adequately empowered to serve their coordinating role in the National Statistical Systems.

It is high time that standard data sharing protocols be established at the national level among the Ministeries, Departments and Agencies of the Government in each country to promote efficiency in data collection and processing, and to ensure the timeliness of official statistics production.

Given the huge capacity gap in the production of environmental data, a concerted effort must be devoted to improving the capacity to collect and process data on the environment amidst the vulnerability of the subregion to the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events. If the subregion is to live up to the purpose of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to serve as a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity, policy makers must step up efforts to ensure that information on the planet is more readily available in order to guide decisions and actions that affect people and their quest for prosperity.

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