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**Peer learning in Africa: a partnership for
statistical capacity building**

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Peer learning in Africa: a partnership for statistical capacity building

Abstract

Building data capability in Africa is becoming a key objective for many international organizations, focusing efforts and resources in the region. The European Commission has become a key donor in the continent through the establishment of the Pan-African Statistics Programme II (PAS II). This programme aims to support the African integration process by strengthening the African Statistical System (AfSS), to ensure the use of quality statistical data in the African integration decision-making and policy monitoring, and to translate continental priorities at regional and national level.

The PAS II programme constitutes a great opportunity to contribute to sharing European standards and best practices in statistics with African Union countries and adapting them to the African context. The programme is being implemented via different budgetary mechanisms, one of them is through grants awarded to National Statistics Institutes (NSIs) of the European Statistical System (ESS). It is a novelty in the context of statistical cooperation, since it is the first time that a project on statistical capacity building in Africa is implemented through EU grants to Member States. The European Commission has awarded two grants: one aimed at developing social statistics in African NSIs (SOCSTAF); another directed to developing economic and business statistics (ECOBUSAF). To cover both goals and enable transformation and progress, the creation of efficient partnerships is a key element to work across sectors and to address common needs.

In order to succeed in the implementation of this programme, two consortiums of European NSIs have been established which constitute an efficient partnership for capability and competence building, taking advantage of the key values of the different stakeholders. This partnership is a fundamental tool to increase the quality of the work, activities and practices of the institutions involved. Something that represents a great added value for the African counterparts is that the transmission of knowledge is implemented through a peer-to-peer approach, allowing for the sharing of good practices already implemented in similar organizations and collaborating to better adapt the procedures to the specific characteristics of the partner institutions. These good practices also include the way of working of the ESS as a supranational system, which could be of interest for the African statistical offices.

In this paper we analyse the characteristics of this kind of capability model, based on the case study of the ongoing grants implementing PAS II, and share some lessons learnt for the time being of the project.

Keywords

Capability, capacity building, partnership, statistical cooperation, peer learning

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Peer learning in Africa: a partnership for statistical capacity building

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Abstract

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1. Introduction

The Pan-African Statistics Programme II (PAS II) was launched in 2022 by Eurostat with the aim of supporting African integration through strengthening the African Statistical System, to ensure the use of quality statistical data in the Africa Integration decision-making process and policy monitoring, in order to facilitate monitoring of societal progress in Africa. This programme, which is a continuation of the PAS I, is structured around several budgetary components: a service contract (managed by Eurostat and implemented by Expertise France), grants to international organisations such as the OECD and FAO, a grant to UNECA (the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa), and finally, two grants (named ECOBUSAF and SOCSTAF) addressed to National Statistical Institutes of the European Statistical System. This paper focuses on the implementation of this latest component, building from the experience of the NSIs that have been awarded the referred grants.

These two grants have the specific objectives to reinforce the capacity of selected African national statistical offices in producing independent, comparable high quality social statistics in fields of health, education, labour, demography and SDGs (in the case of SOCSTAF – Social Statistics in Africa) and in the fields of economic statistics, national accounts and business statistics (in the case of ECOBUSAF – Economic and Business Statistics in Africa).

The PAS II constitutes a great opportunity to contribute to sharing European standards and best practices in statistics with African Union countries and adapting them to the African context. African NSIs have considerable capacity-building needs in all areas of statistics: the need to train new staff in the context of high staff turnover, the need to train teams so that they can adopt innovative statistical methods to improve performance in statistical production, the need to train staff in international standards so that NSIs can produce statistics that are more in line with these standards (in the context of the 2030 Agenda, for example) and more integrated at pan-African level, etc.

These needs were assessed during the inception phase of the two grants, in which the statistical capacity of the NSIs in Africa was examined. When considering the global picture of statistical performance at a glance, it is beyond doubt that the African continent includes the countries that are most in need of improving their performance. The World Bank's Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI) tool represents a clear overview of the situation in Africa: although, statistical performance greatly varies across countries, in general, there is a need of strengthen capacities as regards the production of official statistics in Sub-Saharan African. Except for some countries such as Egypt, Mauritius and South Africa which rank better (with a performance comparable to some South American countries), most African countries are in the lowest quintiles (1st to 3rd quintiles) according to this indicator.

African National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) suffer from a lack of human and financial resources to carry out their missions, due to the persistent economic difficulties faced by these countries. It is in this context where the PAS II project as a whole plays an important role, supporting African countries by improving the availability of high-quality statistical information. In the particular case of the SOCSTAF and ECOBUSAF grants, all the activities to be implemented contribute to building capacities in the region. They are focused in specific domains and the knowledge transfer is done between equal partners (NSIs to NSIs).

SOCSTAF and ECOBUSAF aim to contribute towards bettering the situation for the countries able to participate in these activities. These grants aim at ensuring that the lessons learned are reaped and that the capacity improvement is documented and collected for ease of sharing and further increasing capacity at regional level within Africa. This will ensure that the reinforcement of capacities and the general enhancement of the statistical landscape achieved through these activities is of benefit beyond the immediate project participants.

2. Implementing a cooperation project via grants: an opportunity for peer learning

The PAS II has brought to scene a novelty in the context of funding modalities for statistical cooperation activities; it is the first occasion that a statistical cooperation project is implemented through EU grants to Member States (MS), and more specifically to NSIs.

As mentioned, ECOBUSAF and SOCSTAF are two components of the PAS II funded by the EU, which has entrusted its implementation to NSIs from MS (France, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Norway and Poland) working in two consortiums. These components aim at supporting African integration through the reinforcement of national, regional and continental statistical systems, by developing social statistics (SOCSTAF) and economic and business statistics (ECOBUSAF) in national statistical offices of the African union countries.

The use of this modality has represented a challenge for the NSIs involved, taking into account the lack of previous experience and the inherent administrative work that a grant represents. However, after two years of implementation, we are already in a position to think about the added value that this modality also brings to the system in terms of efficiency and quality.

Having the opportunity to implement such a programme directly by NSIs has a singularity: the knowledge is directly transferred from NSIs (European in this case) to NSIs (African), meaning that it represents a peer-to-peer learning without intermediaries. The grant system admits consortium partners to work at the same level with the African partners – as it is mentioned previously “peer to peer”.

From our point of view, it represents a great added value in comparison to other funding modalities, and it is worth mentioning some of its advantages. First, it is important to highlight

that the grant modality gives the consortium partners (NSIs in this case) more responsibility in the project implementation. Besides, it offers the opportunity to collaborating between consortium members, sharing experiences, and complementing each other.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that it gives the consortium partners the possibility to work with a broader range of countries than if they were working individually.

The PAS II overall objective above mentioned is elaborated in specific objectives. In the case of ECOBUSAF, they are producing good quality statistics in the fields of macro-economics and international trade in goods and enhancing harmonization and reinforce the development of statistical business registers. For SOCSTAF, the specific objective is reinforcing the capacity of selected African national statistical offices in producing good quality social statistics in fields of health, education, and labour. So all in all, the PAS II and the activities designed under these programme have to contribute to improve the quality of statistics in Africa.

3. Building partnerships for effective cooperation

3.1 Joining efforts through a consortium

Joining forces in PAS II as a consortium offers a myriad of opportunities, with each consortium partner contributing to a collective synergy that goes beyond individual efforts.

One of the most evident advantages is the ability to combine different competences, promoting a comprehensive approach towards achieving lasting impact. By leveraging the diverse capacities and perspectives of each consortium partner, a richer variety of solutions and opportunities materializes, enabling more innovative activities.

Another inherent strength of having consortia lies in the capability to reach a higher number of beneficiaries. Through collaborative efforts, SOCSTAF and ECOBUSAF can reach NSIs who might otherwise be overlooked. This expanded outreach not only enhances the project's impact but also reinforces the objective of strengthening the African Statistical System and having a regional impact.

Furthermore, participation in a consortium allows the partners to capitalize on their areas of specialization. By pooling together competences, consortium members can tap into each other's expertise, seizing strengths and mitigating shortages. This cooperation fosters a sphere of mutual support and learning, through which partners can evolve alongside one another.

Flexibility is another asset of working in consortia. In the face of challenges and changing circumstances, the collective nature of a consortium offers adaptability and resilience. Partners can change directions and adjust strategies as needed, filling gaps and responding to emerging needs with efficiency and agility. This is essential when navigating an ever-changing world and ensuring the project's continued implementation.

It also allows for the possibility to put in place different approaches, for example by combining face-to-face and online activities.

To conclude, joining efforts through a consortium is not only about collaboration; it is about mobilizing the collective abilities of diverse institutions to effect meaningful change. Through synergies, greater outreach, specialization, and flexibility, consortia unlock a multitude of opportunities, pushing PAS II towards greater impact and success.

3.2 Coordination as a key element

In recent decades, the international community has provided African countries with extensive technical assistance in connection with statistics. International or regional organisations and the NSIs of developed countries have cooperated with African NSIs on statistics for some time through regional or national projects, some of which have received substantial funding.

In this context, it is of high importance to avoid duplication of efforts while providing capacity building that is fully absorbed and translated into concrete outputs. However, no mechanism for coordinating stakeholder actions officially exists yet. Although attempts have previously been made to compile data on initiatives (such as Eurostat's Donor Survey and Paris21's Data Clearing House), those mechanisms do not allow for comprehensive and up-to-date information to be collected and for actions to be coordinated between partners.

Support may therefore be funnelled to a limited number of countries, recipients may be granted support from multiple providers and duplication of efforts might take place with different donors providing support in the same areas.

The ECOBUSAF and SOCSTAF grants form part of this ecosystem. Their success will therefore partly depend on whether African NSIs and all the stakeholders can establish a system of coordinated actions, or even collaborations, with the various organisations that provide African Union countries with support for issues that are also covered by the ECOBUSAF and SOCSTAF projects.

Such a system must make it possible to identify the initiatives carried out by the partners involved and also areas in which our two consortia would be adept at supporting those activities, for example fostering dialogue between NSIs, disseminating European statistical standards, establishing a pool of European experts whose skills complement each other, and working at national level with a view to harmonising actions at European level.

We can identify various degrees of coordination according to how close the partners are to beneficiaries.

Coordinating with international institutions is mainly a matter of exchanging information. Knowledge of the initiatives and the countries receiving support from international institutions

will dictate what we do and the countries with which we ultimately cooperate. Great efforts were made on this front during the grants inception phases in which we held meetings with many stakeholders (regional World Bank branches, UN agencies such as UN Statistical Division and their work on the Data4Development-project, and the African Development Bank). This has helped us to identify common themes between our various projects, to prevent the duplication of efforts and to create synergies, particularly in relation to national accounts, administrative data and alternative sources of data.

Even closer cooperation has been set up with ILO, which, as an example, has accepted to contribute to the study visit on labour force statistics and informal employment organized by INSEE in September 2023 and is keen to further collaborate with the SOCSTAF project in the context of individual country supports. Their knowledge of the African situation is a major bonus for the implementation of individual support to African NSOs.

A second form of coordination was established with the other components of the PAS II programme. In addition to the coordination organised at institutional level by Eurostat (the advisory forum), this coordination has primarily been established with the Expertise France team, which is implementing the service contract and with UNECA. Connections were also established with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

A close collaboration on national accounts was established by means of the service contract. In order to boost support for the countries trailing furthest behind, regular discussions were held to support those countries and create synergies between the forms of support offered by various PAS II components. This collaboration is specifically being achieved by means of a single roadmap established under the service contract, monitoring of this roadmap by all partners, joint missions and shared documentation (mission reports, in particular).

Another collaboration has started with UNECA on administrative data, which is a shared topic between the PAS II component implemented by UNECA and SOCSTAF. A common mission has been carried out in South Africa.

Finally, as regards the coordination within the two grants, both projects hold their quarterly coordination meetings together, with a session reserved for discussing each grant and a joint session. Decisions on certain activities are made collectively, such as communication activities related to the project.

As an example of good practice in coordination, the official logo of the PAS II was developed under the service contract and now it's being used by all the PAS II components. It contributes to the branding of the programme as a whole. Many other examples could be mentioned, such as the joint organization of activities between different components, which creates important synergies and a more efficient use of resources.

4. Activities implemented and main results

The implemented activities under SOCSTAF and ECOBUSAF have already led to promising results. Through a series of workshops, technical assistance missions, and training courses, the project has successfully reached a wide array of countries, surpassing initial expectations. Under ECOBUSAF, missions to Liberia, Tunisia and soon to Madagascar have been provided for the implementation of 2008-SNA jointly with the ERETES tool implementation, which have bolstered the outcome of producing good quality statistics.

Côte d'Ivoire has been supported on regional accounts, which has helped the NSI in building regional accounts and made them in a position to produce regional accounts.

Two training courses on national accounts has been successfully carried out, contributing to enhancing the production of good quality statistics in national accounts across Africa. With 37 experts from 22 countries participating in the latest training, it notably improved their skills, resulting in higher-quality statistics.

Two workshops on tourism satellite accounts were carried out with great satisfaction of the attendants. They facilitated the familiarization of 25 countries with tourism satellite accounts, benefiting 66 experts from 25 African NSIs. The workshops garnered high satisfaction rates, with 90% expressing satisfaction and 97% willing to continue discussions on TSA.

In the business register component, the 3 identified countries (Mauritius, Namibia, and Senegal) were supported both through virtual meetings and technical assistance missions and will meet for a study visit in Oslo in May 2024.

Under SOCSTAF, missions on administrative data in South Africa and Nigeria in 2024 have facilitated stakeholder meetings and workshops on the use of administrative data with missions slated to follow ensuring further development of capacities in the two countries, depending on national circumstances.

Additionally, a workshop on dissemination and communication was conducted in September 2023, further strengthening engagement with Nigeria and contributing to the development of related skills and competences. Emphasis on data dissemination and communication is to ensure that statistical insights reach relevant stakeholders effectively.

Another highlight was a study visit on labour force statistics and informal employment in September 2023, drawing participants from 11 countries and fostering interactive discussions. The participants appreciated the quality of the exchanges with both the experts and the other participants, as well as the opportunity to share their experiences and best practices. They expressed the need to continue the discussions after the study visit through an exchange network to be set up.

Online census workshops have bolstered participant engagement and contributed to increasing the institutional capacity of the African statistical system and harmonizing methods and approaches to censuses and the acknowledgement of the importance of censuses inspiring plans for an on-site workshop in Tunisia later in 2024. The key goal was to show countries how important censuses are amongst statistical surveys and how widely the collected data is used, and to maximize the outcome of census and the use data to produce high quality social statistics. Censuses remain important sources of data for social statistics where register-based data is not sufficiently available, and census continue to be carried out throughout Africa. The transferred knowledge will allow the participants of the trainings to organise the censuses in their countries more effectively.

Furthermore, successful training sessions have been implemented on demographic, health statistics, education statistics and SDG indicators, alongside high satisfaction ratings and completion rates. These capacity building efforts will have impact on the statistical capabilities of African NSIs and related stakeholders. These initiatives contribute to the institutional strengthening of the African statistical system, fostering knowledge exchange and collaboration across countries and institutions.

Finally, a Hackathon "Exposure of African agriculture to climate change " took place in April 2024 with the participation of the teams from ten National Statistical Offices in Africa. It represented a brilliant opportunity for the African Statistical System to raise awareness among experts from the national statistical institutes of the African Union of the use of new data sources, whether administrative data or private sources, and to foster innovation.

These multi-country activities have not only facilitated knowledge exchange and collaboration among participants but have also fostered synergies that are expected to endure beyond the project's duration. Moreover, the sharing of experiences among African National NSIs has provided valuable insights, contributing to a collective pool of best practices and lessons learned.

5. Lessons learnt and reflections in view of future cooperation projects

The ECOBUSAF and SOCSTAF grants have obtained quite successful results, exceeding initial expectations by reaching more countries through various means such as workshops, technical assistance missions, and training courses.

In addition, multi-country activities have fostered synergies among participants. African NSIs have actively shared their experiences with one another, serving as a source of inspiration, ideas, and learning opportunities. An anticipated outcome is the continuation of exchanges on specific topics through discussion forums with both European and African NSIs taking part.

Also, successful coordination with other partners, such as the UNECA during the mission to South Africa and the ILO during the study visit on labour force surveys has been instrumental and useful in achieving project objectives.

In addition, a lesson learned is also that it takes time to establish new cooperations with new African partner NSIs. This typically also involves appropriate organisational, logistical and other arrangements. Therefore, several of the technical missions will be to countries that a consortium partner also cooperates with on another activity under ECOBUSAF or SOCSTAF, to build on the relations and working paths already established.

Another learning is that building capacity of a skilled NSI will enable that NSI to contribute to South-South cooperation in the future by providing support to its neighbours.

Lastly, a key determinant of the program's success lies in its flexibility in organizing activities. This flexibility includes adapting activities and modifying the countries with which to collaborate as new opportunities arise. Flexibility has also been possible thanks to the combination of different modalities. We consider important to make use of modern technological advancements, as they represent opportunities for adapting cooperation activities to new situations or unexpected scenarios such as the one experimented with the Coronavirus pandemic. Within this context, the promotion of new ways of cooperation such as e-learning has been essential. ECOBUSAF and SOCSTAF activities initiated in 2022 and the restrictions continued to be very significant. The inclusion of online activities has been essential to reduce travelling (and its associated costs), to reach a broader audience, and to be more flexible.

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