

**Lessons Learned From Consulting In 25 Developing Countries:
Becoming A Culturally Intelligent International Statistical Consultant**

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Abstract:

Without effective counterparts it is impossible to build a country's capacity and sustain any accomplishments. This challenge is especially difficult in strife-torn nations such as Cambodia or Afghanistan. In Cambodia, the ruthless Khmer Rouge decimated the professional technocrats in the late 1970s. Afghanistan is divided by having two official languages and differences in religious sects, culture and tribal loyalties. Because of their strict Islamic religion, household survey interviewers must be a couple related by marriage or blood. In many developing countries, illiteracy is a major problem handicapping building an effective technocracy and recruiting staff members for government agencies. In other countries, politics, competing priorities and entrenched bureaucracies are challenges that are very difficult to overcome. Technical assistance from external advisers is seen as a threat rather than as a welcome resource. On the positive side, it is very gratifying to witness improvements in an organization after a survey is successfully completed. Transferring knowledge to counterparts in developing countries is an important contribution to that country's progress and development.

Background:

How did I become an independent international consultant 20 years ago and what countries have I worked since then? I began working for the federal government when I was 19 years old and attended the University of Maryland to get my bachelor's degree. I graduated with a BA in Economics and Business in 1972. When I first started working for the federal government, I worked in various clerical and administrative positions for 4 years before transferring to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in 1967. I worked in the Consumer Price Index Division for a total of 13 years and was recruited by the US Census Bureau in 1978 to go to Saudi Arabia to join their statistics and data processing team.

Because the US Census Bureau handles Business and Economic Statistics, besides conducting the Population Census once every 10 years, they didn't have anyone with expertise in various labor statistics, such as consumer price indexes (CPI), labor force estimates or other statistics that the BLS produces. My role with the Census Bureau team, the Statistics and Data Processing Team, was to help the Saudi Arabian's Central Department of Statistics modernize their CPI. I ended up working for the Census Bureau in Saudi Arabia for almost 13 years as well. At age 48, I could have returned to the BLS because I had "re-employment rights" but by then I had worked for the government for almost 30 years. I decided to embark on a new venture – being an independent international short-term consultant.

My first assignment was a 2-month assignment for the Asian Development Bank in Cambodia helping them conduct a household income and expenditure survey in order to get the expenditure data necessary for constructing a CPI. I returned there a year later to assist them with the development of a CPI. In between that assignment, I had an assignment in Azerbaijan reviewing their CPI. Since 1994, I have worked in more than 20 countries on a short-term basis and in some of these countries on multiple visits. Some of these countries are Suriname (12 visits), Guam (6 visits), the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (8 visits), Republic of the Marshall Islands (6 visits), Federated States of Micronesia, Thailand, the Philippines, American Samoa, Malaysia, Palau, Qatar, Bermuda (2 visits), Russia, Albania, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, Egypt (3 visits), Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Yemen, and the West Bank/Gaza Strip.

Short-term Consultant:

I defined being a “short-term consultant” as being available for any assignment for up to two months. I was willing to return to the same country after a short break of a month or two, but I was not willing to work as a long-term consultant. The reason for this stipulation was because my wife also worked and we didn’t want to be separated for any longer than two months. Besides that compelling reason, a long-term consultant gets the institutional knowledge rather than the local staff members.

I used my long-term experience in Saudi Arabia to begin my consulting career. In some ways, being a short-term consultant has more limitations than being a long-term consultant. Having an effective counterpart(s) is still critical to transferring knowledge and experience, but being in a country for only a few weeks means that the consultant is unable to establish the close rapport and trust with a counterpart that a longer-term relationship permits. As much as a consultant would want to establish a solid relationship with a counterpart, time limitations constrain the consultant. On the other hand, knowing that the consultant will only be in country for no longer than two months, and usually much shorter than that, forces a statistics office to recognize the immediate value of the consultant’s assistance.

Invitation Problems:

On more than one occasion I was invited by the “Team Leader” of a project to provide technical assistance prior to the team leader notifying his local counterparts that he was extending an invitation to me. Even though my name and credentials were vetted by the National Statistics Office well before I was invited, the Team Leader just assumed that it was his prerogative to extend the invitation without asking for prior approval from the statistics office. In one instance, even though the funds for my travel, per diem and honorariums came from a donor agency, and not from the host country, the host country expected a certain amount of courtesy and recognition of its sovereignty before the team leader extended any invitation to any consultant. The Team Leader thought that this was “much ado about nothing.”

This caused a great deal of difficulty with the host country because the statistics office believed the Team Leader had overstepped his authority. It also made my consulting assignment more difficult because of this conflict. Resolving this required a degree of diplomatic finesse so that I could assist their National Statistics Office (NSO) with the technical assistance that I was recruited to provide. It turned out that there was a very good reason for their objection to my visit.

Resistance to Assistance/Fabrication of Data:

Sometimes NSO staff members resent any external assistance even though the consultant has the knowledge and skills that will improve the quality of their statistics. In the country I mentioned previously, the NSO staff resented that these “outsiders” were coming into their offices and looking over their shoulders. Unfortunately, sometimes they simply refuse to cooperate even though it is in their best interests.

In this large Middle Eastern country, the statistics consulting team was working within the Ministry of Planning but was actually hired to improve the NSO’s national accounts and price statistics. Theoretically, the National Statistics Office was subordinate to the Ministry of Planning. With a great deal of effort, arrangements were eventually made for me to meet with the Chief of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) Division. It was after meeting with the CPI group and discussing their index that I strongly suspected that they were not actually calculating the CPI but were fabricating the monthly data.

I mentioned earlier that my first overseas assignment was as a long-term consultant with the US Census Bureau in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. When I first went there to help their Central Department of Statistics develop a modern CPI, I had to hand calculate their monthly CPI for almost a year while the programmer I was working with developed the electronic data processing program. This was in the early 1980s before the advent of personal computers. The American programmer who I worked with used a programming language called “COBOL” to develop a CPI calculation program on an IBM mainframe. With the specifications I gave him, it took him almost a year to develop the program and test it before it was ready for use.

At that time, there were 5 Primary Sampling Units and about 200 items in each of the two primary CPIs that were produced. Data collectors collected 4 – 7 prices each month for each index for most of the items in the sample. This took 5 accountants about 8 hours to do the basic calculations. In this other Middle Eastern country, their index was much more ambitious and they were collecting and processing data for a somewhat larger item sample size in 18 different governates (provinces). But they only had a staff of about 6 people in their Division and none were accountants who were accustomed to entering large amounts of alpha-numerical data. Furthermore, they had no computer system to assist them in processing the data. Because of my previous experience, I was skeptical about whether they were actually entering all of the price data and doing the calculations.

A couple of years later, I returned to again assist on this National Accounts project as a short-term indicators adviser. On this visit, my assignment was to visit various statistics

users and persuade them of the value and advantages of having a higher-level statistical oversight organization that would review the work of the NSO. This is similar to what we now have in the U.S. within the Office of Management and Budget. This office, the Statistical and Science Policy Branch, oversees and approves any new statistics programs that any of the statistical offices (Census, BLS, BEA, etc.) want to implement.

Because of a concern about the shrinking value of its currency, this country devalued it. When this happens, imported goods become more expensive; exported goods become less expensive. On numerous occasions when I was visiting various policymakers to persuade them to support establishing a “statistical policy branch”, I heard repeated concerns about the high cost of imported goods but that the CPI was not reflecting these increases. Even though I never was allowed to visit their actual CPI Division and see for myself their CPI calculation process, I was convinced, even if only by derivation and my personal experience in Saudi Arabia, that they were not producing their CPI according to any established or recognized calculation procedure. It was, in fact, a sham.

Without effective oversight and having a poorly equipped and trained staff, this type of deception can happen. What was really surprising was that it was allowed to occur for so long. Has it changed? I don’t know. Most of the staff members that I met were older and had been there for many years. Their collective attitude seemed to say: “We’ve been doing this for decades and we don’t need any outside help.”

Unconventional CPIs:

In another instance, in the mid-1990s, I was part of a National Accounts Team that visited a large, European country. I was the Price Statistics Specialist on this mission and was supposed to evaluate their CPI and develop deflators. Their National Accounts were indicating that there was essentially little or no economic growth in their economy but many other signs of economic activity showed a very robust economy. Construction was up, retail trade was very healthy, etc.

When I arrived with a team of other specialists, I was surprised that they didn’t have a CPI in any conventional sense. They did collect monthly prices from a number of Primary Sampling Units in the country, but they did not produce actual indexes! What they did publish was the month-to-month and year-to-year price changes. While these were certainly helpful in terms of knowing the current rate of price change, and with these changes it is possible to develop a CPI based on the monthly inflation rate, it made it very difficult to use the CPI in any traditional manner. For example, if someone wanted to know what the price change in their All Items Index from January 1991 to April 1995 (the month I was there), then it required developing a CPI for that period. I have learned since then that they have now modernized their CPI and it meets international standards.

Value of Consultant’s Experience:

As an international consultant you are hired to provide expertise that the host country does not have. Knowing how to calculate a CPI, or to develop a questionnaire that can be

used to collect household expenditures information is valuable, but this is usually something that a host country can do themselves. What the host country does not have is the institutional experience that the consultant brings by having worked in a mature, credible statistics organization. This experience gives the consultant a thorough understanding of the methodology that the established statistical agency uses to approach and solve problems. It is this professional knowledge that is so valuable to the consultant and to the host country and it is transferrable.

Cross-cultural Communication Problems:

In 2003, the US Labor Department had some funds to use to improve the quality of the data collected in the Caricom (Caribbean Countries) region which would improve their statistics. The Labor Department hired two consultants to visit the National Statistics Offices of the various member countries to survey them about what would improve the quality of their data. I happened to be working on an assignment in Suriname and the Director of the Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek (General Bureau of Statistics) Drs. Iwan Sno, asked me to attend the meeting because he knew that I had previously worked at the US Department of Labor. At that point, he had no idea why they were visiting Paramaribo or the GBS.

When the consultants explained the purpose of their visit, and inquired what the US could do to improve the quality of the data in Suriname, the Director of the GBS said that the one single item that would improve the quality of the data was another 4-wheel drive vehicle. This would allow the data collectors to go into the field and collect household and other types of data. Suriname is in the northeast of South America and is a tropical country. While much of the population lives around the capital, Paramaribo, and some other smaller cities to the east and the west, many of the residents live in outlying areas. While the roads in the capital are paved, many of the roads outside of the capital are dirt and sometimes gravel. When it rains, the roads become almost impassable except for a 4-wheel drive vehicle.

The GBS already had several 4-wheel drive service vehicles but these were not enough to accommodate all of the demands of the office. Another vehicle would provide additional support for gathering these critical data. What the Director of the GBS was asking was for a functional, service vehicle with a back seat so it could accommodate three passengers in the back and two in the front. These vehicles are relatively inexpensive, Japanese 4-wheel drive trucks.

When the survey was completed, the consultants submitted their findings to the Department of Labor. The person reviewing the request was from the BLS and thought that the Director was asking for a 4-wheel drive Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) that probably had at least some of the bells and whistles that are common on these SUV's in the US. By coincidence, I spoke to the reviewing official after I returned from my assignment. She told me that she was not about to approve a request to improve the data by approving the purchase of a 4-wheel drive SUV. I think her fear was that these federal

disbursements would be reviewed and she would have to explain and defend why she approved purchasing a SUV for a small Caribbean country.

On the other side of this equation, the Director thought he was making a reasonable request for a functional, 4-wheel drive truck. Clearly there was a communications problem. The Labor Department Official thought he was requesting a high-end SUV. I suspect that the problem originated because the visiting consultants were unaware of the type of vehicle that the Director wanted and did not clearly describe what the Director was requesting. And I didn't recognize the communications problem until well after the request was denied. Sometimes there are cross-cultural communications problems.

Dress for Success:

It's always important to dress appropriately – not too dressy but not too casually either. Sometimes the organization that has contracted the consultant has certain dress codes that the consultant must adhere to. The World Bank and the IMF always want its advisers and consultants to wear a suit and tie.

On several occasions I have witnessed or heard of problems with a consultant's dress. In one instance, the consultant did not use a briefcase or computer bag to carry his papers. Instead, he used a backpack. One project coordinator had heard from one of the senior managers at the Central Statistical Office that this was very "unprofessional" and because of that, he said he would never again hire someone from that consultant's home country. This manager seemed to be out of touch with alternative ways of carrying papers or books aside from using a briefcase.

On another occasion, another consultant was visiting one of the Pacific island countries and decided to dress as I assume he thought the local officials dressed. He was going to be going out to the field to conduct a survey of the housing in various neighborhoods and he decided, because it is in the tropics, to dress in shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and flip-flops, or zoris. If this was typical of the local dress, there would certainly be nothing wrong with wearing this attire; unfortunately, it seemed to some of the local officials that his dress was inappropriate although they were polite enough not to say anything that might embarrass him.

What dress is appropriate? From my experience, unless they are working for an organization that requires a certain mode of dress, such as the World Bank or the IMF, the consultant should dress in a manner similar to the way that most senior managers in the organization dresses. If it is a suit and tie, then that is appropriate; if it is a short-sleeved shirt with a tie, then that is appropriate. Flip flops are never appropriate!

Management Follies:

A few years ago the US Census Bureau became concerned that one of its subordinate divisions that dealt with international clients was not always following the main Bureau's standard protocols. Sometimes other US government agencies would provide funds for the Census Bureau to conduct surveys in other countries and there seemed to be little

control of the funds by the main Bureau. These funds were designated to the area of the Census Bureau that would be conducting the surveys – the International Programs Center. Census management was concerned that this could lead to misuse of the funds and there was no real oversight into how the funds were used. When the previous Assistant Division Chief of the International Programs Center (IPC), International Assistance retired, they decided that what was needed was a new Chief who would correct these types of budgetary aberrations. They wanted this branch of the IPC to conform to all of the existing protocols of the main Census Bureau.

To that end, the US Census Bureau selected a young demographer to head up this Branch, which was called “International Assistance.” Prior to his promotion, he was a special assistant to one of the senior Division chiefs who had recently retired. Shortly after this appointment, I, and a colleague of mine who also had considerable international experience, spoke with his chief deputy who worked very closely with the new Branch Chief. This person explained to us how the new Chief was making some very important management changes to the organization. No longer would this Branch cooperate with countries that were unwilling to give full attention to the Census adviser who was sent to work with that country’s statistical office. It would now only work with them if they agreed to complete cooperation with the Census adviser. If they were unwilling to agree to this “complete cooperation”, then Census would simply refuse to provide any assistance. We understood this to mean that the host statistical office would select a counterpart who would devote the entire time that adviser was in country to being, essentially, his “shadow.”

After our meeting, my colleague and I discussed this new policy and thought that this was a bit overreaching. At that point, both of us had a combined total experience working in other countries of probably about 30 years. Having worked in many countries both on a long-term and a short-term basis, we both knew that if these countries had requested the Census Bureau’s assistance, they needed it. But none of these countries where we worked were so well staffed that they could allow one of their senior managers/statisticians to work as a fulltime counterpart. These countries have their own work responsibilities and must manage to complete these. To think that a Census Bureau adviser is so important that all other pressing work in another country would come to a halt because the “adviser has landed” reflects a simplistic understanding of international assistance. We concluded that this new “policy” reflected the lack of experience that the new Branch chief and his deputy had by never having worked overseas.

Unfortunately, appointing an inexperienced manager with little overseas experience to an organization that is primarily focused on providing training and assistance to international clients can have a devastating effect on an organization. This center had about 20 people when the new Center chief was appointed. Many of these were highly skilled in a large survey processing program called CS-Pro, which stands for Census and Survey Processing. In fact many of the staff members played a significant role in developing this free, survey processing program. This program can be downloaded from the Census Bureau’s website (census.gov). A number of these staff members were bi-

lingual or tri-lingual which was especially helpful when training non-native English speakers who were attending some of the courses that the Census Bureau offered.

Within two years of the new Chief's appointment, the Center's 20 people had shrunk to less than 6 original staff members. Personal Service Contracts that were previously acceptable, such as from the UN, now were no longer acceptable. Each contract had to be vetted by the Census Bureau's Legal Department, a process that literally took months to complete. Smaller contracts from some countries were not accepted because the new Chief did not think the total contract was insufficiently large enough to justify the administrative costs. In the past, these contracts were accepted because in many cases, these smaller contracts led to larger contracts.

Older members who were eligible to retire were given work assignments that encouraged them to leave. Complaints to senior management about the new Branch Chief fell on deaf ears. Other younger staff members simply left because of the erratic management decisions of the new Chief. After about three years, so many career staff had left that the senior management decided that perhaps their original appointment was in error and they decided to transfer the Center Chief to another position within the Census Bureau with fewer direct management responsibilities.

In any organization, senior managers are always reluctant to admit to having made a poor selection of a new manager because it reflects badly on their judgment. Sometimes, though, the situation becomes so detrimental to the organization that it is forced to make a correction.

Senior management then appointed a new Center Chief. He was selected from within the remaining staff at the IPC and he had worked in the International Programs Center for many years. He had also had several years of overseas experience when he was on a long-term assignment in the Philippines. He had a strong programming background as well and helped develop the software that is free for countries processing large-scale surveys, such as censuses, or other large surveys. From all reports he has greatly improved morale of the Center's staff members, although the Center has lost decades of experience and many bi-lingual and tri-lingual staff members because of the retirements and voluntary departures caused by the previous Chief.

Afghanistan:

Without question, the most challenging assignment I accepted was in 2005 when I went to Kabul, Afghanistan, as the Team Leader of a survey statistics team made up of 5 other experts in various disciplines. This contract was funded by the Asian Development Bank and it was awarded to two small "development firms" that were based in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Neither firm had any special expertise in conducting a nationwide household survey, but were selected because they were able to underbid larger, more experienced firms for the contract.

Our mission was to design and conduct a nationwide survey that would collect household income and expenditure information, along with key demographic information – education levels, marital status, employment/unemployment status, etc. It was also an effort to improve the National Accounts capabilities of the Central Statistical Office (NSO). At that time in April 2005, the conflict in Afghanistan was concentrated in only 4 of the 34 provinces and those provinces were not close to Kabul. The Afghanistan ADB Office and the Director General of the NSO thought it was possible to conduct the survey in the 30 provinces where there wasn't this conflict. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a rather optimistic assumption.

Conducting a household survey in a strict Islamic State is much more difficult than in most countries because of the cultural and religious restrictions. A woman in an Afghan household cannot talk to a non-related man so having a single male household interviewer is not acceptable. Nor is it acceptable for the interviewer to be a woman because she would have to interview the man in the household. Even if the husband is present, frequently it is his wife who does the shopping and cooking. In order to conduct a household survey under these conditions, it is necessary to use a “mahrem” couple. This is a man and woman who are either married or related by blood; i.e., husband/wife, father/daughter, brother/sister, etc. In 2000, the CIA Factbook estimated that the literacy rate in Afghanistan was 43.1 percent for males age 15 and older and 12.6 percent for females. Even trying to recruit a “mahrem couple” would be extremely difficult.

Another impediment to launching a successful household survey was the fact that a number of the 30 provinces were completely inaccessible during the winter months. Afghanistan is a landlocked mountainous country and in many of the provinces, heavy snow beginning in October blocks many of the roads leading to settled areas. It is impossible to conduct household surveys if the mahrem couple cannot reach the households.

Of course, the greatest obstacle in trying to conduct a household survey is trying to do so in a conflict area. Unless the safety of the data collectors can be assured, a survey cannot be conducted. When I first went to Afghanistan in April 2005, the situation was not nearly as volatile as it rapidly became. By September 2005, the situation was spinning out of control in many more than just 4 provinces and ADB Project Consultant in Kabul and the Asian Development Bank in Manila decided it was unfeasible to continue this project and closed the project down. This was completely understandable.

Unintentional Interference by the Donor Agency:

While the consultant may be able to provide the technical assistance that is required, sometimes well-intentioned interference from the donor agency causes problems with achieving the goals of the project. In the mid-1990s I won a contract to go to Papua New Guinea for almost two months to assist them in updating the weights for their CPI. The existing weights at the time were based on a 1976 survey. Another household survey was conducted 10 years later but the National Statistics Office had never updated the CPI with

those weights. My principal assignment was to work with the staff, review their CPI procedures and integrate the newer weights into the CPI.

While the intentions of updating the weights were good and it was thought that this could be done in one trip, there were some practical problems. Most countries want to update their weights at the beginning or end of a year, not in April or in the middle of the year, which is when my 51-day mission began. There were also some political considerations that were not taken into account. By having only one trip, the donor agency saved a considerable sum of money by not having to fund a second trip half way around the world, but the problem was that the host country's Director realized that by updating the weights, it would show a greater degree of inflation than if they used the old weights. Although the consultant was assured that the staff understood how to update the weights in the following January, someone in the NSO made a decision that it was politically unfeasible to update the weights, even if it would provide a more accurate measure of inflation.

What could have been done? The consultant and the donor agency, in this case the ADB, should have realized the implications of updating the weights in the middle of the year and suggested that the initial trip be shortened to prepare the updated weights and the remaining days of the contract added to a second trip which could take place early in the next year to implement the change, or simply allocated enough funds for two separate trips. Once the new weights were in place, it would have been a "fait accompli" and would have been much more difficult for the NSO to return to the old weights even if it was politically advantageous. Or, I could have tried to persuade the NSO to update the weights in the middle of the year, even though it was a non-conventional time to do so.

Statistical Consultants:

While some of the larger donor agencies have hiring policies that ensure that they recruit only the most highly-qualified applicants, in terms of their academic qualifications and their language abilities, there sometimes seems to be a disconnect between the capabilities of many developing countries central statistics organizations' staff members and the expectations of the donor agencies. My experience is that in most countries, including our own, statistical agencies are not considered as one of the most critical departments in terms of budget priorities.

In the west – U.S., Europe, Australia and New Zealand, the importance of having strong statistical capabilities is recognized for the value they provide and they usually receive sufficient funds to function effectively. In the developing world, however, their budgets are much tighter and the statistical agencies do not rank very highly compared to other departments in their executive Division. While they do get some recognition and funds to operate, the staff qualifications in these NSOs are much lower than in the west. Most of these NSOs do have a few staff members with college degrees, but they are in the minority amongst the other staff members. Advising them to adopt and implement some of the more sophisticated statistical techniques that some of the more mature statistical organizations are now using can be counterproductive to producing accurate and sound

statistics. This is true not only because of the staff members' statistical limitations, but also because of the budgetary considerations.

I have had the opportunity to work in a number of smaller countries, which I define as countries with a population of fewer than 1 million. Many of these countries are islands, both in the Pacific and Atlantic/Caribbean, but also include Suriname in South America. Suriname is one of the member countries of Caricom, or the Caribbean Community. It is clear to me that some of the techniques that are applicable in the larger economies are just not practical to use in the smaller economies. My expertise is mainly in the area of price statistics – Consumer Price Indexes and Household Income and Expenditures Surveys.

Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Revision – 1974-1976:

During their last “major” CPI revision in the 1974 -76 period, the Bureau of Labor Statistics went from a fixed item sample of about 400 items to a universal sample. By using probability methods, data collectors were trained to use a probability selection technique to select a specific item in the various strata in the CPI. Instead of pricing specific items, such as peas, bacon, a dress shirt, new cars, etc., they began collecting price data for “strata.” A stratum is a higher level classification. Instead of collecting price details on a specific type of “dress shirt”, for example, the data collector would begin by pricing all shirts. Then, by using a probability selection technique, the data collector would narrow the type of shirt she was pricing in an outlet to one specific type of shirt. This technique would cover virtually all shirts sold in the US. By adopting this probability selection method, the BLS is theoretically pricing the “universe” of all retail items in the economy. Once an item is selected in an “outlet”, which is a retail store selected in the sample, the data collector would continue to price that item until it disappeared from the outlet and then select another item, using the same selection method. There are strata for all retail items in the economy.

This system would not work very well in smaller countries because their economies simply do not have enough items available to price the same item reliably from one pricing period to the next. Because of this, when developing CPIs in the smaller countries, I adopted the pricing method that the BLS used prior to the revision. After a Household Income and Expenditure Survey is completed and processed, using a probability selection technique that is called Probability Proportional to Size, an item sample is selected. Then, an outlet sample is selected. When entering an outlet, data collectors will select the “volume selling” brand, in terms of overall sales totals. This method usually allows the data collector to return to the outlet in the next pricing period and collect prices for the same item. For laundry detergent, for example, in one outlet the volume selling detergent might be “Tide”; in another outlet, it might be “Cheer.” The data collector will continue to collect prices for whatever was the volume-selling item in each outlet over time until the item permanently “disappears” from the outlet. Then, a substitution to the closest comparable item is made.

Unqualified Consultants

As an independent consultant, I have sometimes followed a consultant in a country that did a disservice to the country in terms of his recommendations. In one smaller island nation, I was hired to review the previous Household Income and Expenditure Survey's results and determine if I could use the 1989 results to update their CPI. The consultant who had worked on conducting and processing the HIES wrote a 70-page report describing the results of the survey. After reviewing the report, I realized that he wrote the report using only summary data at the subgroup level.

His report used the subgroup totals but this did not show the individual items' expenditures. For example, I could see that the subtotal for fruits was 2.45 percent, meats and poultry were 4.21 percent, medical care was 12.66 percent etc. The problem was that without individual item expenditures it is impossible to select an item sample. I checked every available disc that might have the critical data and there were none that had the original item expenditures. The lowest level for which expenditure data were available was at the subgroup level.

When I then tried to contact the former consultant, who happened to be from Australia, to determine if he still had the original data, I learned that he had left his home country's Bureau of Statistics and was now working in a completely different area. After all of this effort, my only recourse was to recommend they conduct another HIES.

In another instance, I was on a team that visited a smaller Arabic country. They also had conducted a HIES a few years before but the consultant who was sent there told them, because they did not have many computers at the time, that it was unnecessary to key in the expenditure data. A few years later, they had a number of computers but their original expenditures data were now scattered in various archives and were impossible to key because the data were no longer complete.

This illustrates one of the problems donor agencies have in identifying and hiring competent consultants. Because the consultant's pay is generally quite generous, some individuals who work for these donor agencies use various subterfuges to get their friends or relatives hired for these assignments. As long as their last name is not the same as their own, these individuals can sometimes arrange for their brother-in-law, who may have a degree in economics but does not happen to have a current job, to be hired for an assignment.

My own experience indicates that this is not routine, and most donor agencies make a rigorous effort to prevent this type of fraud. However, I know from personal experience that it does happen on occasion. Hiring someone without the technical experience to provide expert consulting leaves the host country with no real technical assistance and drains the finances of the donor agency. Furthermore, after just approving a technical assistance contract to a country, donor agencies are reluctant to provide more funds.

Competition amongst Donor Agencies:

Another problem that also negatively affects the host statistical offices is the occasional competition between donor agencies for funding technical assistance projects. In the early 1990's I worked in Cambodia on a joint Asian Development Bank/UN funded project. I was one of a six-member team trying to assist their Department of Statistics to improve their statistical capabilities. I was working there in 1993, which was only 14 years after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown and fled to the jungles by military intervention of the Vietnamese.

The Cambodians (Khmers) that I worked with recognized their great need for technical assistance and were extremely grateful for our help. As you can imagine, a country that has been embroiled in conflict because of brutal and harsh regime that decimated the population of anyone who had any education had problems. Their whole "middle class" of technocrats had been decimated. They had either been killed or had become refugees. I heard stories that the Khmer Rouge would execute anyone they discovered who had glasses! Why glasses? Glasses indicated that the person could read and did not fit the desired profile that the Khmer Rouge wanted. Because of these brutal tactics, it is not surprising that 15 years later, the civil service was filled with inexperienced staff members who had few mentors from whom to learn.

Intuitively, it would seem good for a country to have several large organizations competing to provide technical assistance. In reality, it was not. The problem was Cambodia lacked the capacity to absorb these technical assistance contracts. There were only so many people in the Department of Statistics who had sufficient education to benefit and learn from the efforts of the advisory team. With many aspects of working in a government's central statistics department, it is not necessary to have a Ph.D. in statistics to be effective, but having a college degree or at least a strong high school background is very helpful. In Phnom Penh, most of the staff members had a high school background and a few had some college or did have a college degree.

Because of the intervention of the proposed technical assistance of the World Bank, a much larger donor organization with much deeper pockets, the original organizations, the ADB and the UN, decided to discontinue their technical assistance project and let the much larger organization, the World Bank, continue to fund the project. Perhaps if there had been greater co-operation between the two donors, one could have waited until after the original organization's efforts were completed before offering to provide their own technical assistance. By working in a joint manner, it would not have strained the capacity of their NSO and the second technical assistance project could have built on the successes of the first project.

Unpredictability:

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of being an independent international consultant in survey statistics is the unpredictability of assignments. My name is on the roster at most of the international organizations that hire someone with my experience and expertise. I

market myself by sending out my resume to organizations and people that I have met in my career and who may know of some upcoming assignments in my area. I update my resume with my latest assignments and send them to the international organizations.

One year, in 2008, I was working for a consulting firm that had received funds for me to complete revising CPIs in two of the Insular Areas of the US. These were the US Virgin Islands (USVI) and American Samoa. In that same year, I had another contract to re-visit Suriname on two different short-term visits. And lastly, I was contacted by the Emirate of Qatar to visit them for a one-week assessment of their CPI. In that year between January and the end of September, I visited the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (once), Guam (once), American Samoa (twice), the USVI (twice), Suriname (twice) and Qatar once. In all, I visited 9 countries in 9 months. This was an exception because in most years, I may have only one to three contracts but I never know if or when they will contact me.

I should mention that I had almost 30 years of service when I retired, at age 48, from the federal government. Because of that, I was able to take an “early retirement”, although I did lose about 13 percent of my annuity by doing that before age 55. There is no question that without having this underlying financial support, it would be impossible for me to work as a survey statistics consultant simply because there is just not enough short-term assignments that I have been able to obtain despite my many years of experience in this field.

If I had worked for one of the international organizations, such as one of the regional development banks (ADB, IADP, etc.) or one of the larger organizations such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund, it would probably be possible because of the contacts I would have before I left. So anyone planning on starting a career as an international consultant, I would caution them with my own experiences.

Conclusion:

After 20 years of working in this field, I can say that it has been a very rewarding experience overall. By in large, I believe I was effective and provided sound economic and statistical advice, and usually, this was accepted with gratitude.

In retrospect, though, to anyone else who wants to become a short-term independent, international consultant I would recommend three things. First, they need to have some underlying financial support, such as an annuity, because the frequency of consulting assignments is very unpredictable. In one year, 2008, I was in 9 countries! Some of those countries I visited twice in that period. In other years, I have had only one or two assignments the whole year.

Second, it is considerably easier to be an independent international consultant if a person worked in an organization where they made a large source of contacts, such as the World Bank, IMF or one of the development banks. These would be invaluable for learning

about potential new assignments and for being remembered in that organization as someone who might be interested and available for a new assignment.

Lastly, even with several decades of experience, it is extremely helpful to have a more advanced degree than a Bachelor's Degree. Someone who wants to start as an independent international consultant needs to have at least a Master's Degree or Ph.D. Someone with less experience but with a more advanced degree will usually trump someone with a Bachelor's degree.

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