

Chief statistician suggests agencies could soon be made to share data

By Ida Lim | Tuesday June 13, 2017 03:03 PM

KUALA LUMPUR, June 13 — A legal amendment being studied may make it compulsory for federal agencies to provide the Statistics Department with more comprehensive data, the chief statistician said today.

Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin said government bodies may have detailed data available, but noted the problem lies with government entities that are bound by their own laws such as the Inland Revenue Board and the Employees Provident Fund.

“Moving forward, whether we need to legislate the Statistics Act, I think it’s something in the pipeline, I think we are going to have public engagement as well.

“I consider it’s quite long overdue, it’s 1965, it’s something we have to work. I think the Cabinet, higher authorities also asked us to look into this,” he said at a forum after the launch of the World Bank’s 16th Malaysia Economic Monitor report.

“Everyone knows that it is a long process, but on top of that, there’s a directive from the Cabinet for every ministry, government agency to give their cooperation, in order for us to establish the direction or practice to the third level of government — local authorities,” he said.

Mohd Uzir was responding to a question from DAP MP Ong Kian Ming, who asked if he felt the Statistics Act 1965 should be amended to increase the chief statistician’s powers to compel the publication of data from government departments.

Mohd Uzir later told reporters that the private sector is currently required by law to provide data requested by his department, adding that some ministries and departments can share general data but are legally barred from sharing in-depth data.

“They have their own Act. That’s why they really have to find ways to accommodate. But I think in terms of giving aggregate data, it’s not an issue. The issue is with granular data,” he said, highlighting the importance of granular data for better decision-making and policy formulation by the government.

Mohd Uzir said his department has started releasing localised data or area-specific data such as on births and deaths for the first time this year, noting that it will be a “long journey” as the department continues to make more of such detailed information publicly available.

“It’s a really tall order, not easy, 155 districts,” he said, envisioning however that Malaysians would be able to know of statistics in their own districts.

Earlier, minister Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan said he has asked the Statistics Department to look into more localised statistics such as a district's unemployment rate instead of merely focusing on national statistics, adding that this may help local authorities to formulate better policies that are more relevant to their residents.

Abdul Rahman said the government can address concerns about privacy and data security, adding that the benefits outweigh the risks as greater availability of the data could help aid understanding of the economy and even enable the public to create new businesses.

"The government must feel comfortable in sharing this data, because there are attempts by some people to manipulate data as well which gives the wrong impression of the economy, and tailor make their data usage to their own narrow interest," the minister said.

Mohd Uzir told reporters his department is currently moving towards using technology and online data collection in efforts to trim down the proportion of low-skilled enumerators and boost the numbers of data professionals in their ranks.

"So we are going to increase the number of statisticians, professionals who can really develop the model, look at secondary sources instead of collecting straight from the ground," he said, having noted the cost and labour-saving "modernisation" at the department which allowed respondents to submit information online instead.

Unlike the average rate of 67.5 per cent in the high-income nations of Singapore, Spain and the Netherlands, Mohd Uzir's department as of 2015 only had 13.4 per cent staff members who are in the technical and managerial divisions, while the rest were support staff.

Earlier in the forum, fellow panellist and Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation director of data economy Karl Ng had said that Malaysia aims to have 20,000 data professionals by 2020, including 2,000 data scientists.

The World Bank's country director for South East Asia, Ulrich Zachau, highlighted the positive correlation between well-developed economies and open data.

"The more reliable the data, the more accessible the data to the people, the more developed the country is," Zachau said at the same event.