

Workshop on Good Practices for Dissemination of Official Statistics

Doha, 2-4 February 2003

- Summary of presentations and discussions -

Session 1: Dissemination Practices in the ESCWA Countries

In this session a panorama of the main features of statistical dissemination and marketing in the region was presented. Information had been collected by UNSD through a questionnaire that had been filled out by 9 out of the 13 countries involved. Clearly, the information received was not suitable for a precise analysis and comparison, partly because certain concepts (e.g. “a publication”) may be interpreted differently and partly because more knowledge about institutional arrangements is needed to better understand differences between countries. However, the information obtained was useful to get an impressionistic picture of the situation and offered also a basis for a first discussion.

It was noted that most countries published 10 – 50 printed statistical publications (titles) per year. A few countries published higher numbers of (small) publications. Most countries had a Statistical Yearbook/Abstract as one of their flagship publications. Other frequently mentioned flagships were National accounts, External trade statistics, Employment statistics, Enterprise statistics and the Consumer Price Index. Print run numbers were often 300 – 1000 and are partly a function of the size of the country. Sales numbers were as a rule very limited (with a few exceptions).

Most of the countries now have a website, or are planning to launch one in the near future. Websites as a rule contain general information and statistical abstracts, but most countries have the intention to add a comprehensive statistical database, which will often be searchable free of charge.

A release calendar is issued by a majority of the countries and in almost all of the countries data are not released to anyone before they are made public.

Almost all the countries regularly issue press releases and most of them organize occasional press conferences. Most countries also have a press unit.

As a rule, statistical publications are distributed free of charge to government users, while private users often have to pay a price that covers marginal costs. Many countries have a unit dealing with marketing and sales, some have a unit that deals with requests for information. Only some of the countries have a user council or advisory group that reviews the publication program or individual publications.

Most countries have a statistical library that is open to the public; the annual numbers of visitors ranges from 300 – 1500.

The discussion mainly focused on country-specific explanations of the results obtained through the questionnaire.

Session 2: Disseminating statistics with IT

The first presentation entitled “Role of ICT in data dissemination” (ESCWA) covered the basic definition of data dissemination and its importance. It also covered the historical transformation of IT tools and techniques for data extraction and tabulation and for producing electronic output. Emphasis was given to the role of the Internet for data dissemination was made and steps to be taken to support and maintain a dynamic web site.

The second presentation was entitled “Road map to statistical data warehouse” (Qatar). It dealt with Qatar’s experience in data dissemination and data flow, the architecture adopted for the design of a data warehousing project for Qatar.

The third presentation was entitled “Improving statistical data dissemination services to meet users’ needs” (Saudi Arabia). It gave an overview for planning and designing statistical surveys, data collection procedures, data analysis, data dissemination and criteria for posting data on the Internet.

During the discussion the following issues – inter alia – were raised:

- The importance of devising regional guidelines for improving web sites of central statistical offices,
- The role and functions of content management,
- Internet penetration and therefore awareness in the region is low. It may be premature to aim for greater dependence on the Internet at present,
- The extent of ESCWA technical assistance in statistical web site design and other ICT related activities,
- E-government applications and networks and the functional links with central statistical offices,
- Statistical data as a commodity,
- Issues relating to data collection in the region are more pressing than issues relating to data dissemination,
- The Internet as a means of cutting down cost of the data dissemination budget,
- The use of common software tools as a practical step towards adopting common regional standards for statistical data handling,
- The quality of published statistical data when posted on the Internet requires more attention than in the case of published data by conventional means as the audience for the Internet is much larger,
- The dangers of relying on the Internet for archiving,
- The importance of synchronizing data announcements with the publication of the published documents that support these announcements,

- The Internet, though a very important channel for statistical data dissemination, should not be the sole channel for distribution of statistical data.

Session 3: Customers - Reaching, Servicing and Learning

The agreed purpose of marketing is to reach out and match the products to the users' needs. The group has a very strong understanding of the need for integrating marketing and dissemination, while at the same time thinking of them as distinct processes. It is understood that different countries have different marketing systems. Ultimately, the key is to find how to maximize the benefits to users. In this regard the need to charge must be balanced with the desire to maximize use, which can be a delicate cost-benefit-problem.

The marketing function requires specialists either working as a team or even as a full department.

The main additional points raised in the discussion are:

- Even at the stage of data collection, you need to design the format according to different user needs.
- Dissemination is difficult and requires technical assistance and is different, but linked to data collection.
- International experts to develop useful dissemination programmes.
- To be successful a deep understanding of each marketing process is needed.
- Customer list maintenance is crucial to the process of outreach.
- Advisory groups consisting of varied specialists must be utilized.
- Answering inquiries is also be part of the dissemination process.

Session 4 – Part I: The Government: Key User and Stakeholder – Statistics as a Public Good

There was agreement that official statistics were intended as a public good and that it was part of the role of national statistical offices to ensure that everyone could obtain easy access to statistical data, under equal conditions. Nevertheless, it was recognized that in all countries the government is the most important user of official statistics and also has a strong say in statistical work programmes. This is certainly true in a decentralized system, where ministries produce the statistics that are necessary for policy analysis, policy planning and for monitoring purposes. However, also in centralized systems the influence of the government is strong, partly because it pays most of the cost of statistics and partly because it controls many of the administrative sources that are used to help produce statistics.

The specific needs of various types of government ministries were discussed in some detail. While ministries of Finance, National Economy and Planning usually have a broad interest in statistics that describe macro-economic performance and important socio-economic phenomena (such as employment and unemployment) sectoral

ministries (transport, energy, agriculture, etc.) and service ministries (education, health, justice, etc.) often need more or less detailed statistics about the performances of their sector or service areas, about effectiveness of government programmes, as well as about demographic and socio-economic development that influence supply and demand.

Regional and local authorities were also important users of statistics and often demanded statistics at a detailed geographical level, which were not always easy to supply.

The partnership between the government and the national statistical office should be based on mutual understanding and trust and often took a long time to develop. Because the demand for statistics was almost always greater than what statistical offices could produce, it was important to set priorities and to agree on the principles for priority setting.

In this respect, it was always helpful for the statistical office management to build a strong support basis of advisory groups. Furthermore, it should systematically build its reputation by being transparent, professional and credible, adhering to the *Fundamental Principles Of Official Statistics*. On that basis, it should also be able to sometimes deny requests from the government and explain the reasons for such a denial.

A country example of dealing with government users was discussed in some detail. Various mechanisms of building up an ongoing dialogue with government representatives were described, leading to partnership in data collection, use of statistical data and statistical capacity building.

Session 4 – Part II: The Private Sector: A Market with Specific Requirements

There should be a partnership between the producers and the private sector. The data from statistical agencies are the basis for the decisions made in the private sector. The discussion focused on the following issues:

- The agencies do not necessarily provide the services needed by the private sector as described for the United States. They do not have to.
- Capabilities of producers must be meshed with priority setting needs.
- Although data needs of government may be different from those of the private sector, yielding data not necessarily important to private sector needs, the private sector must work with that reality and make the best use they can of the data that are produced.
- Updating is an opportunity for the private sector.
- It's up to both the private sector and the agency to bridge the gap between what is produced and what is needed.
- A user service to answer data questions may be the best way to respond to specific questions or customized data needs.

Session 5 – Part I: Development of a Media Policy

It is necessary for statistical offices to deal with the media, because they are the most important channels to disseminate statistics to the general public as well as to politicians. In addition, the news media are a marketing tool and can help to promote the brand name of the NSO.

Therefore, journalists must be given a high-quality service. This will result in increased press coverage.

In dealing with the media, the NSO has to be trustworthy:

- Announce release schedule and keep it;
- Provide easy access to information;
- Treat all journalists equally;
- React to misuse of figures;
- Demand credit when figures are used; and
- Correct erroneous figures.

Also, the NSO must demonstrate professional competence:

- Make subject matter units responsible for their own media relation, but have them report about all press contacts, to the central press unit; and
- Let the most competent people deal with the media.

Timeliness is also very important, because to the media it is a matter of survival. Therefore, it should be easy for journalists to get in touch with the right professionals, even outside office hours.

Offering a service to the media also includes that it has to be made clear what is available, but that even the press may have to pay in case detailed and customized information is required. In addition, it is important that the NSO tries to get to know journalists and their specific interests. In this regard, it is necessary that a central press station is staffed with people who have journalistic experience. Finally, NSO's should keep track of what the media write or broadcast about them.

All new statistics should be presented in news releases, which must have a uniform format and have to be approved by the press section as well as the subject matter unit.

As to making analytical comments to the press, this should be delegated to select members of senior staff. All employees must be able to judge when inquiries should be passed on vertically or horizontally. The press section should act as internal guide in such matters.

During the discussion it was noted that many of the guidelines mentioned above did not apply to most of the ESCWA countries, but were rather based on situations where

the NSO is very independent and where the media are free, competitive and not tied to the government.

In countries where a Ministry of Information is responsible for relations with the media and/or controls (part of) of the press, the situation is entirely different. In addition, in some countries, the NSO could get into great difficulties when they would provide commentary to the press.

Session 5 – Part II: Implementation of a Media Policy

In this session the principles set out in the previous session were discussed in practical details.

In order to develop a media policy it was first of all necessary to convince senior management of the importance of such a policy. The press unit should be placed in close contact with top management. It may be difficult to convince the statisticians that an active media policy pays off; they tend to mistrust the media, are afraid to be misquoted, are afraid that statistics are too much popularized and are afraid of over-exposure. Therefore, the press unit has an important educational role: they must initially write or edit press releases, must train subject matter specialists in writing press releases and should monitor press contacts, as well as keep track of media coverage (and systematically report about it).

Writing press releases has to be learned, because it is important to choose one specific news angle, to present the news with a journalistic headline and illustrate it with graphs or maps.

Distribution of press releases may be organized through e-mail and may be selective (e.g. agricultural statistics only to selected journalists).

Misunderstandings by the press should be corrected, preferably in such a form that the news story can be continued. It is important to build long term relationships with the press by:

- Knowing the journalists and their interests;
- Introducing new journalists to the subject matter area; and
- Giving regular media seminars.

Press conferences should be given only sparingly.

All employees with media contact have to be trained in media relations and a printed guide on media relations appears to be useful.

By implementing a new media policy, Statistics Denmark had been able to almost double its press coverage within a period of three years.

It was furthermore noted that the Economic Commission for Europe/Conference of European Statisticians would shortly publish a guide on “statistical story telling”.

Session 6: Country specific issues and general discussion

The discussion started off with a *tour de table*, during which participants expressed their assessments of the workshop, including topics that had not been addressed and issues regarding their own countries, on which they sought further guidance.

Among the missing topics were the following:

- The use of GiS in the dissemination of statistics;
- The use of OCR and handheld devices in data collection;
- How to develop attractive products for private sector users;
- How to build bridges to the media;
- How to develop successful statistical products;
- An international guidance manual for statistical dissemination;
- How to effectively use IT for dissemination within existing budgetary constraints;
- The development of training material for courses in statistical dissemination.

It was also noted that:

- There had been insufficient exchange of country experiences;
- It would have been beneficial if dissemination specialists had been involved in the workshop, in addition to the chiefs statisticians and senior managers.

Several of these issues were subsequently briefly addressed. Furthermore, several participants thought it would be useful to review and edit the responses to the UNSD questionnaire, and to circulate the individual country responses after this had been done. This would be an additional way of sharing country experiences.

In closing the workshop, a UNSD representative noted that there had been some gaps:

- In full and timely attendance of all participants in all sessions;
- In effective communication, partly due to linguistic problems, including interpretation, partly due to a deficient technical infrastructure (insufficient microphones); and
- In the applicability of western experiences to the situation in ESCWA countries.

On the other hand, there had been some excellent presentations and some useful exchange of views. He thanked the consultants for their thoughtful and well-prepared contributions and the participants for their engagement in the discussions. Last but not least he thanked the Department of Statistics and the government of Qatar for their generous hospitality in hosting this workshop.