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Bakary DOSSO,
Statistician
UN Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa

The Use of the Internet as a tool for Statistics Dissemination in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Countries

Introduction:

The ongoing changes in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have provided National Statistics Offices (NSOs) with new opportunities in providing statistical data and information to users.

Internet is a powerful medium for national statistics dissemination. It has opened a window on the world that could alleviate information scarcity widely experienced by African countries.

A great number of African NSOs have developed websites through which they are disseminating basic statistics. (See www.uneca.org/statistics/nsos.htm).

The purpose of this presentation is to provide a picture of the use of the Internet in statistics dissemination by the NSOs of the ECOWAS' countries. The paper will make recommendations of best practices to ensure the efficiency of the web dissemination.

Outline of the Presentation:

Definition and Scope of Statistics Dissemination

Characteristics of Quality Statistics

The ECOWAS' National Statistics Offices on the Internet

Conclusion and Recommendations

Definition and Scope of Statistics Dissemination

Dissemination of statistics is the release to users of information obtained through statistical processes.

The main tasks of a statistical process are: Data collection, data processing, data storing, data retrieving and analysis, and data dissemination.

The importance of statistical information dissemination is summarized in the principle 1 of the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics:

“Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honor citizens' entitlement to public information”.

Various release media are possible: paper publication; microfiche, fax response to special requests; public speeches, or electronic format via the Internet

Characteristics of Quality Statistics

Characteristics of quality statistics include relevance, accuracy, timeliness, comparability, accessibility and coherence.

Relevance:

Statistics are relevant when they meet users needs. Statistical offices need to identify who the users and potential users are, what they need in terms of content, formats and delivery modes.

To increase statistics relevance, demand driven approaches to the production of statistics must prevail upon the supply driven approaches.

Accuracy

The accuracy of statistical information is the degree to which the information correctly describes the phenomena it is designed to measure.

Key factors for the provision of accurate statistics are:

- Good concepts and definitions;
- Reference period (short);
- Adequate training of staff (field, office and supervision);
- Respondents awareness;
- Clear questions; and
- Pre-testing of questionnaires.

Timeliness

The timeliness of data is an important dimension of its fitness for use.

“Timeliness of information reflects the length of time between the information's availability and the event or phenomenon it describes. Timeliness must be considered in the context of the time period that permits the information to be of value and still be acted upon” (Statistics Canada).

Accurate information on relevant topics won't be useful to users if it arrives after they have made decisions.

Some factors affecting data timeliness include:

- Delays in the implementation of statistical operations;
- Data processing delays; and
- Poor logistics at the various stages of statistical operations.

Interpretability

Provision of metadata is essential in building confidence of the user community in official statistics. Provision of metadata is necessary to interpret statistical information appropriately.

Metadata is the data about data. It describes how and when a particular set of data is collected, the data content and sources.

Some factors affecting data comparability are:

- Lack of uniformity with respect to concepts, definitions and methods;
- Incomplete coverage; and
- Methodology for data collection and analysis.

Accessibility

The accessibility of statistical information reflects how readily the data can be located and accessed.

The accessibility includes the suitability of the form in which the data are available, the media of dissemination, and the availability of metadata and user support services. The cost of the information is also an aspect of its affordability.

Coherence

Data are valuable when they can be compared over time or across different areas.

“Coherence reflects the degree to which the data and information from a single statistical program are brought together with other data information and are logically connected and completed” (Statistics Canada)

The ECOWAS’ National Statistics Offices on the Internet

Countries	Websites
Benin	www.insae.bj
Burkina Faso	www.insd.bf
Cape Verde	www.ine.cv
Cote d’Ivoire	www.ins.ci
Gambia	www.csd.gm
Ghana	X
Guinea	www.stat-guinee.org
Guinea-Bissau	www.stat-guineebissau.com
Liberia	X
Mali	www.dnsi.gov.ml
Mauritania	www.ons.mr
Niger	www.stat-niger.org
Nigeria	X
Senegal	www.ansd.org
Sierra-leone	www.statistics-sierra-leone.org
Togo	X

Four (4) countries out of fifteen (15) (Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Togo) have not yet built a website. The French speaking countries’ websites belong to a network developed by Afristat.

Ghana												
Guinea												
Guinée-Bissau												
Liberia												
Mali												
Niger												
Nigeria												
Senegal												
Sierra-Leone												

Assessing the quality of statistical information disseminated through their Interpretability (provision of metadata) and timeliness (calendar of publications release, date of latest data provided)

Countries	Metadata	Calendar of release of publications	Latest data on environment statistics
Benin	Yes	No	2002 (waste)
Burkina Faso	No	No	-
Cape Verde			
Cote d'Ivoire	No	No	1999
Gambia	No	No	-
Ghana	X	X	X
Guinea	No	No	2003 (rain fall)
Guinea-Bissau			1999
Liberia	X	X	X
Mali		No	2001 (temp. rain)
Niger			1999
Nigeria	X	X	X
Senegal	Yes	No	
Sierra-leone	Yes (GDDS, IMF)	No	
Togo	X	X	X

* GDDS: General Data Dissemination System (IMF)

Very few countries provide data about the data they disseminate (metadata) (3 out of 15). None provide a calendar of release of the data and publications.

www.insae.bj (NSO Benin)

www.statistics-sierra-leone.org (Statistics Sierra Leone)

Conclusion and recommendations

The efforts made by NSOs to disseminate data through the Internet have to be encouraged. The dissemination through Internet can force convergence of countries' statistics, as NSOs will appear as a one-stop shop for countries' data.

There is a need to agree on a framework of environment indicators at the ECOWAS countries level.

More needs to be done to build confidence of the user community in official statistics. The six dimensions of data quality (relevance, accuracy, timeliness, comparability, accessibility and coherence) explained above must be taken into account.

For statistics to be relevant, users needs (local, regional and international) must be assessed. Statistical products should be developed to satisfy information needs. The NSOs must add Metadata to explain the data they provide, and a clear calendar of publications must also be added.

At the regional level, there is a need to encourage common Internet dissemination solution for ECOWAS countries. This will increase the quality of the information provided by the ECOWAS.

Thanks for listening

Sources:

1. NSOs websites (www.uneca.org/statistics/nsos.htm)
2. UNSD/ECA, (3-8 November 1997), Report of the Workshop on the application of new technologies for database management and data dissemination, Addis Ababa,
3. ECA, (14-18 December 1998), Report of the Regional Workshop on improving the quality of African Statistics for English-speaking countries, Addis-Ababa
4. United Nations' Statistical Commission (1994), UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics
5. Managing Data Quality in Statistical Agency, Gordon Brackstone
6. Statistics Canada's dictionaries and definitions
<http://www.statcan.ca/english/edu/power/glossary/gloss.htm>