C.4. Users and data dissemination

C.4. Users and data dissemination

20.30.   Major users of trade in services statistics that a statistical agency disseminates are likely to include BOP and national accounts statistics compilers (generally the central bank or the statistical office). Key government agencies, such as ministries of the economy or trade, are other major users that will need detailed data on the international supply of services to assist in the determination, monitoring or modification of specific trade or industry policies. Industry bodies, researchers and the media may also be important users. Given the complexities surrounding statistics on the international supply of services, users will often require support, by way of explanatory material of key statistical concepts, for example, and their expectations may need, initially at least, to be more closely managed. Effective interaction with users also includes the promotion of metadata so that they can make better use of the data disseminated.

20.31.   It is therefore essential that the compiling agency (or agencies) responsible for the dissemination of data on the international supply of services negotiate with its users in terms of content, standards, classifications, accuracy, timeliness, output format and platform for delivery. Such discussions would also seek clarity concerning the unavoidable trade-off among timeliness, accuracy and cost. When users are from other government agencies, the discussion should occur in the context of the institutional arrangements (see chapter 3). Ideally, users' output requirements would be discussed well before data is to be disseminated, as those requirements have a significant impact on decisions made throughout the statistical process, including the scope of the collection, its cost, required levels of accuracy, timeliness, standards, classifications, explanatory material, format of the output, platforms for its delivery, possible or likely limitations imposed by data providers' confidentiality requirements and the handling of ad hoc requests.

20.32.   The compiling agency should be aware that users' requirements may evolve over time. It is a good practice to systematically monitor changing user needs in order to ensure higher relevance of the compiled data, for example via user satisfaction surveys. A well-designed user satisfaction survey regarding data dissemination would normally focus on the following aspects of data dissemination: (a) user-friendliness of the trade statistics database interface, (b) clarity and completeness of available metadata, (c) desirability of continuation of traditional paper publications and (d) ways to improve data and metadata presentation.

20.33.   It is also good practice to establish close and long-term relationships with representatives of major user groups in order to identify the most effective ways to disseminate data and metadata. That contact might be done via regular forums for structured communication involving key users and stakeholders, such as standing advisory committees, as well as via ad hoc promotional events. While statistics can be acceptably used and interpreted in many different ways, it is important to maintain trust in, and the credibility of, official trade statistics. The responsible statistical agency, therefore, has to prevent obviously erroneous interpretation of the data, and undertake the necessary corrective actions if such faulty interpretations are detected (for instance, conducting press conferences and press releases, and writing letters to the editor of publications in which misinterpretations have been detected). A good practice for avoiding the misinterpretation of data is to place special attention on establishing direct contact with the main users of trade statistics whose analyses have a major impact on public policy and public opinion.

20.34.   At all stages of the production cycle of statistical output, a statistical agency should have clearly formulated and documented procedures for communication with users. Those procedures should cover content, frequency and protocols for interaction with the media and for ad hoc communication. It is good practice to conduct regular outreach activities aimed at helping users better understand data and put them to the most effective use. Such activities should include efforts to improve the statistical literacy of users and to prevent misinterpretation within the context of a broad public relations strategy to deepen the general public's understanding of the importance of statistics. The following outreach activities could be encouraged: (a) conducting regular user group meetings or seminars; (b) conducting user satisfaction surveys; (c) offering tutorials and user guides explaining how to find data on the dissemination website; (d) organizing press conferences and including contact information in press releases to assist users in the correct interpretation of the statistics; (e) participating in annual conferences of user groups, as well as book fairs and other suitable events; and (f) launching awareness campaigns, such as a national statistics day/week/month. It is also good practice, in all relevant outreach activities, to raise users' awareness of the importance of metadata for correct data interpretation and effective use.

20.35.   **Working with the media** It is also in the best interest of the agency responsible for disseminating external sector statistics to build a strong working relationship with the media, to make it easy for journalists to report on statistical information in an accurate, timely and informative manner and to take steps to increase media coverage as a way of reaching the broader society with important statistical information.

20.36.   The capacity of users to pay for data is a factor to be considered in the selection of the best data dissemination method. If users have a limited capacity to pay, especially in cases in which the broad dissemination of data is desired, making data freely available electronically or making hard copies available at libraries would be useful. Regular data dissemination should satisfy most, if not all, user needs. However, some users might have special needs that would require complex data extraction that the users might not be able to perform themselves. Countries might consider offering such users premium data extraction services for a fee. In any case, compilers should ensure that users are made fully aware of all available options for obtaining the required data.

20.37.   Both data and metadata can be disseminated in various formats and by various means. In light of the diversity of user groups, it is good practice to adopt several formats and means of dissemination to ensure that data and metadata are effectively delivered. For example, press releases aimed at the general public should be disseminated in ways that facilitate redissemination by the mass media, while more comprehensive or detailed statistics intended for researchers should be disseminated via online databases, with hard-copy publications used as reference materials. Similarly, an individual data set with a range of features may be presented using multiple dissemination methods (e.g., data in a spreadsheet format and the explanatory notes as a PDF file). (See chapter 21, section C, for more information on the use of information technology in data and metadata dissemination.)

20.38.   The method of dissemination should also give consideration to the maintenance of links between data and metadata, classifications and explanatory material so that clients can understand and easily access all publically available statistical information.

20.39.   Statistical organizations may choose to publish a standard data set of statistics on the international supply of services that meets the needs of most users via the most readily accessible means or technology (e.g., spreadsheets or printed or electronic documents). For example, in areas in which access to the Internet is limited or lack of bandwidth would make downloading the data too slow, publishing some data sets in a printed format could be preferable to publishing everything online. However, countries are advised that it is generally no longer necessary to issue paper publications containing many detailed sets of tables. A better practice is to focus such publications on the main features of the statistics, presenting data in a more user-friendly way by resorting to enhanced visual elements, such as colour charts, and by adding more analytical information.

20.40.   Statistical organizations can also provide more sophisticated data sets via different dissemination methods to more demanding users, if necessary, and possibly with the ability to query the data and create customized data sets. For example, data may be published at a national level as a PDF file on the statistical organization's website, with more data available (which could or could not be free of charge) for more detailed service categories or for more detailed geographic areas through a custom request for data and supplied to individual clients directly. For such an instance, it is worth considering creating interactive tools, such as an online table-building facility, with a user-friendly interface.[1] It is important that any customized, automated or interactive systems be designed to correctly apply the compiling agency's confidentiality rules before the data are released.

20.41.   There are a number of processes and mechanisms for the exchange or dissemination of data and metadata between different organizations. Bringing together output in a single repository, supported by standard services for loading and extracting content and managing associated metadata, is a good way of ensuring consistency and coherence and can facilitate dissemination to different users with different needs. In that context, the present *Guide* encourages countries to cooperate with regional, supranational and international organizations to identify and apply the most efficient means of disseminating their data on the international supply of services and related metadata, in particular through a relevant use of SDMX. Also, a new dissemination format for BOP metadata uses standardized web forms accessible via the Integrated Correspondence System (ICS), developed to provide reporting countries with an easy-to-use and efficient system for reporting data and metadata to IMF.

---

[1] See chapter 21 for more information on the use of information and communications technology.