ESTABLISHING SOCIAL STATISTICAL DATABASES FOR EVIDENCED-BASED SOCIAL POLICY FORMULATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

Abstract

The paper presents the challenges and lessons learnt from the Project *"Development of Social Statistical Databases and the Methodological Approaches for a Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) for Small Island Developing States"* (NET/00/035), which was undertaken by the Social Development Unit of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat. The Project aims to make available to social planners and decision makers in the Caribbean, a body of social statistics comprised of data sets being generated by national central statistical offices of the ECLAC/CDCC member States. The paper situates the Project within the context of the changing notions of social policy globally and critiques the processes of Caribbean social policy.

It highlights some of the challenges of a technological, statistical and logistical nature, raised by the process of establishing a fully searchable subregional database. Recommendations are advanced for the enhancement of national statistics and for the promotion of evidenced-based social policy in the subregion.

The paper concludes that for the Caribbean, which has allocated significant resources to social development since the post-independence period, evidenced-based social policy in this rapidly changing global environment, is possible. It recommends *inter alia:* (a) improving the technological capability of national statistical offices; (b) promoting evidenced-based social policy formulation among policy makers and technocrats; (c) the institutionalisation of monitoring, appraisal and evaluation of national social policy initiatives; (d) building capacity at the national level in analysis, monitoring and evaluation in the social sector; and (e) sharing best practices.

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I.   Introduction

In January 2001 the Social Affairs Unit of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (ECLAC/CDCC) embarked on a project entitled *Development of Social Statistical Databases and a Methodological approach for Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) for Small Island Developing States*. The project, funded through a United Nations Mechanism of the Dutch Government, has a two-year duration and has as its development goal, to improve the social conditions of persons living in ECLAC/CDCC member States by strengthening the capacity of policy makers to formulate, implement and evaluate social policies.

The project has a two-fold purpose, one of which is to establish fully searchable databases of socio-demographic statistics for all ECLAC/CDCC member and associate member States, housed/linked through the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat and the other is to explore the methodological approach for a social vulnerability index within the parameters of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) framework.

The process has its limitation, in that it does not directly address the development of national level statistical systems. However, as a by-product of the construction of the subregional databases, it is expected that issues will arise that will ultimately lead to the improvement of the statistical systems at the national level.

There are however a number of initiatives underway in the subregion which have as their specific aim the improvement of the statistical systems at the national level. Among those are the General Data Dissemination System (GDDS) introduced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to assist countries in the development of their overall statistical systems. Although socio-demographic data was not initially the focus of the initiative, the GDDS now includes such data. Another undertaking in the subregion, the Caribbean Regional Education Management Information System (CREMIS), spearheaded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is intended to not only link the countries of the subregion but allow educational information to be collected and/or retrieved at the school, district, national and subregional levels. The assumption is that this will improve the quality, timeliness and accessibility of education statistics in the subregion. Another initiative is the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States/Caribbean Development Bank/Inter-American Development Bank (OECS/CDB/IDB) project which has as its goal, the strengthening of statistical offices and departments in the OECS. This project provides technical assistance to

statistical offices in the development of their national databases. The United Nations Statistics Division and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) project on social/gender and environmental statistics is also geared to supporting statistical offices in the improvement of their statistical systems.

During the first year of the ECLAC/CDCC Social Statistical Databases project, a number of issues regarding social policy in the Caribbean have come to the fore. Some are issues regarding the data which are used to inform social policy and others have to do with the processes of collection and use of those data. This paper seeks to highlight these issues in such a manner that they may be of use to social planners and those responsible for the collection, storage and use of social statistics. Ultimately, this paper seeks to add to the stock of information on social policy in the Caribbean.

II.   Social policy in the Caribbean

Policy has been defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, as an organized or established form of administration in the conduct of public affairs. It has also been described as a purposive set or course of actions (Brown, 1996). Social policy, on the other hand, has evolved, with differing meanings and usages. For some, social policy is used to refer to the policies which inform social welfare or social work and, for others, that which guides the delivery of social services (Kabeer and Cook, 2000). Thandika Mkandawire, Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), takes this definition one step further when he states that social policy is "collective interventions directly affecting transformation in social welfare, social institutions and social relations". The purpose of social policy is also viewed differently. On the one hand, social policy is considered as that policy which looks after the causalities of economic growth, while others view social policy as being integrally and equally necessary for the achievement of sustainable development and growth. Mkandawire supports the latter view when he says "social policy should be conceived as involving overall and prior concerns with social development and as a key instrument that works in tandem with economic policy to ensure equitable and socially sustainable development".

Criticisms of social policy in the Caribbean have been in both the methodological and the ideological realm. At the methodological level, the criticisms have revolved around the disjuncture between the objectives of social policy and the programmes designed to meet the stated objectives, often termed the 'planning, implementation gap' (Brown, 1996) and the lack of cohesiveness within the implementation processes itself (Pujadas, 1996) often demonstrated by the number of public institutions involved in similar tasks with little or no connections, resulting in inefficient use of limited resources. At the ideological level, criticisms have been directed at the continuance of social policy in a welfare mode and its sluggishness in shifting towards a more development

orientation (Green, 1999, Duncan, 1999, ECLAC, 1996). It has also been criticised for the manner in which it is derived being too top-down instead of more bottom-up.

Regardless of the differing nature of the criticisms, there is general agreement that a fundamental weakness in the social policy arena in the Caribbean has been its inadequate and often inaccurate information base. It has been suggested that this often leads to misguided policy formulation. This weakness has been defined to be not only at the root of the problems of formulation but also analyses implementation, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation of social policies and programmes (Lucas, 2000, Brown, 1996). The notion that there is a need for more evidenced-based social policy formulation in the Caribbean has been supported by leading researchers in the subregion (Henry, 1998, Green, 1999, and Thomas, 1995). Correcting for the data insufficiencies of social policy formulation is not a panacea for the social policy formulation process itself, but should enhance efficiency and lead to greater transparency, accountability and relevancy of social policy in the subregion.

III.   Globalisation and social policy

In a study on social policy and a global society, Morales-Gomez and Torres suggest that social policies are increasingly becoming vulnerable to the effects of globalisation. Just as trade liberalisation and globalisation have brought with it rapidly changing social structures, so too, it has brought with it new social problems and exacerbated old ones. In a recent UNRISD paper on globalisation, it was suggested that although the manifestations of social ills - growing poverty and insecurity, crime, extremism, violence and gender-based violence, child labour and other social problems occur at the local or national level, the sources of these ills involve global problems.

The impact of these global problems has been felt almost immediately in small open societies, such as the Caribbean. Countries have responded by strengthening the regional integration processes and have arrived at a critical stage of that process, especially regarding the free movement of people, international competitiveness and human resource development. The deadlines for removal of restrictions with respect to the movement of persons under Protocol II are within the period 2003 and 2005. Many activities, such as the arrangements for the free movement of University graduates, are to be completed by June 2002 and that of cultural, media and sports personnel by December 2002. In light of this quickened pace of integration, the CARICOM Secretariat has suggested that among the major challenges in elaborating its Human Resource Development Strategy is the imperative to access and assess relevant research and data. This, it has indicated at the Fifth Meeting of the Council for Human and Social Development, Georgetown, Guyana 3-5 October 2001, is an essential requirement to inform decision-making, evaluation of progress and future planning.

Policy makers, in trying to cope with the challenges of regional integration and trade liberalisation and its socio-economic impact on their populations, have articulated the need for more evidenced-based social policy at a number of Caribbean meetings. Most notably, at the Caribbean Ministerial Meeting on the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS/POA), Barbados, 1997, governments recommended, inter alia, that "Governments in collaboration with international and regional organizations, NGOs and civil society ...establish a programme which would strengthen the capacity of the countries to apply methodologies and to collate, disseminate, analyse and use indicators within the context of guiding the sustainability of current development."

And once again at the eighteenth Session of the CDCC, at the ministerial level and commemorating its twenty-fifth anniversary, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 30 March to 1 April 2000, governments adopted resolution 52(XVIII), sponsored by Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Kitts/Nevis and Aruba, which noted, inter alia, "the importance of economic and social data to the planning and policy formulation process in the CDCC countries".

But for countries to arrive at a point where evidenced-based social policy could be adopted as the norm rather than the exception, it is acknowledged that certain fundamentals must be put in place. Significant among those is the central role of information in social policy. In that regard, relevant data must be made available, accessible and be placed in a format that is useable.

The Social Development Unit of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat took up the challenge to make available to social planners and decision makers in the Caribbean a body of social statistics comprised of data sets being generated by national central statistical offices of ECLAC/CDCC member States.

The following section highlights some of the challenges which are faced by this process. Recommendations for the advancement of promoting evidenced-based social policy in the subregion will be discussed in the final section.

IV. The process of establishing social statistical databases in the Caribbean

At the expert group meeting convened by the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat on 12-13 February 2001, in Port of Spain, to discuss the establishment of the social statistical databases, experts endorsed their establishment and recognised that they filled the need which existed in the subregion for a repository for census and other social statistics. They also noted that the creation of such subregional databases could, in the long run, provide some guide to the taxing problem of the lack of agreed upon data collection protocols,

common definitions, categories and classifications, which continue to beset the subregion.

Collection of data from the national central statistical offices was seen as the heartbeat of the process and it was also recognised as its greatest stumbling block. The starting point for data collection was identified as 1990 and the key datasets for collection were the census data, the labour force surveys and the survey of living conditions (or poverty assessments as they are referred to in some countries). Data were to be collected at the micro level as it was acknowledged that aggregated data would prove unsuitable for the generation of custom-based indicators or indicators which the client wished to generate. Aggregated data, could also limit analyses based on gender or ethnicity which are both essential to understanding the Caribbean social landscape. The collection of micro-data has become necessary, as the area of social analysis must be able to match the dynamics of changing social structures and relations. Static social indicators will no longer be sufficient for analysis.

The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat undertook the task of informing all member States and national central statistical offices of the initiation of the project and sought their cooperation. The response has been better than expected, debunking the notion that it is often difficult to translate the political will, evidenced by the resolutions passed at the ministerial level, into action at the technical level. Where difficulties arose, these were due to time and personnel constraints, as many countries were engaged in some manner in the 2000 round of census. The other constraint had to do with national level capacity in the central statistical offices, due to the high turnover rates of skilled and experienced statisticians. This is an issue which governments in the subregion will need to address urgently as they seek to come to grips with the overarching issues of improving national statistical systems. It was agreed that data for the databases would be collected in groups of six countries, comprising five member States and one associate member State. Data from the first group has been secured and negotiations have begun with the second group.

Activities in three areas of the process were undertaken: the data collection; the information technology component of the project, that is, the design and construction of the databases which involved the harmonisation of the data sets; and the development of the website.

The databases would allow for electronic retrieval, access and update, thus fulfilling the mandate of the project of providing member States with fully searchable databases. The appropriate hardware and software for this aspect of the project was commissioned and it was agreed that the software for the storage of the data would be Microsoft SQL Server 2000. This was selected for its suitability to the task, cost benefits, ease of use and because it met the

security concerns of member States. The software selected for front end use was SPSS as it is in common use by statisticians and social scientists across the subregion.

To ensure that ease of access to the databases would be feasible, additional bandwidth has been secured at the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat. The Derek Gordon Data Bank, University of the West Indies (UWI), and the CARICOM Secretariat has been invited to become hubs for the databases. These will come on stream later on in the project as administrative and technical arrangements are finalised.
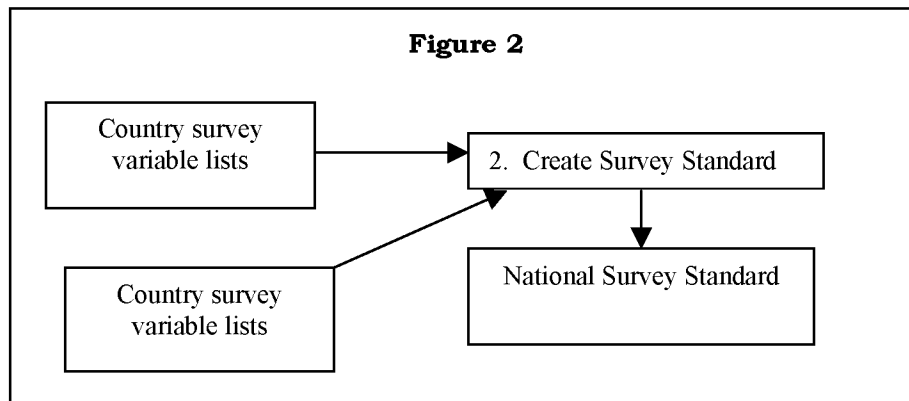
V. The challenges

The challenges to the success of the process can be categorised in the main, in three areas, technological, statistical, and logistical.

The technological issues arose because the datasets that were received from central statistical offices came in diverse formats. In the main, they were SPSS, IMPS and REDATAM. All needed to be converted into Microsoft SQL Server 2000 – the target database as illustrated in Figure 1. The conversion process was described as a five-stage process which brought to light more clearly the statistical challenges. The technological challenges were as follows:
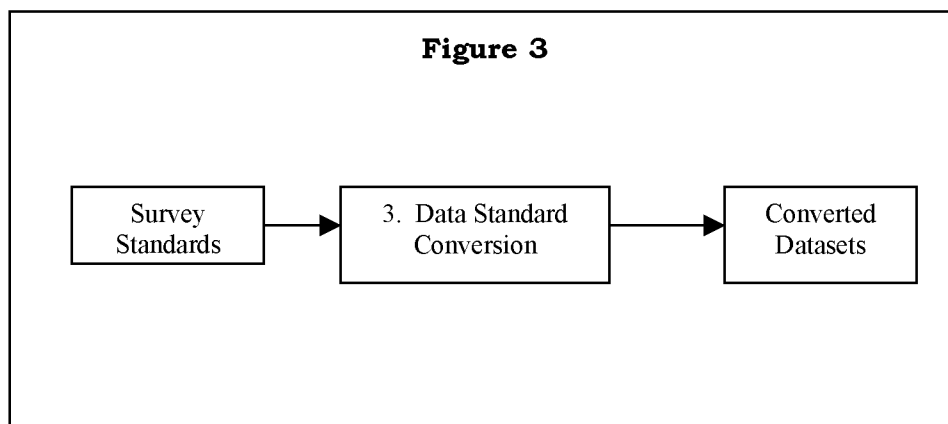
(a)   **Generating a variable list.** The technical issues that arose at this stage came about because differences existed, in some instances, in variable names among surveys within the same country.
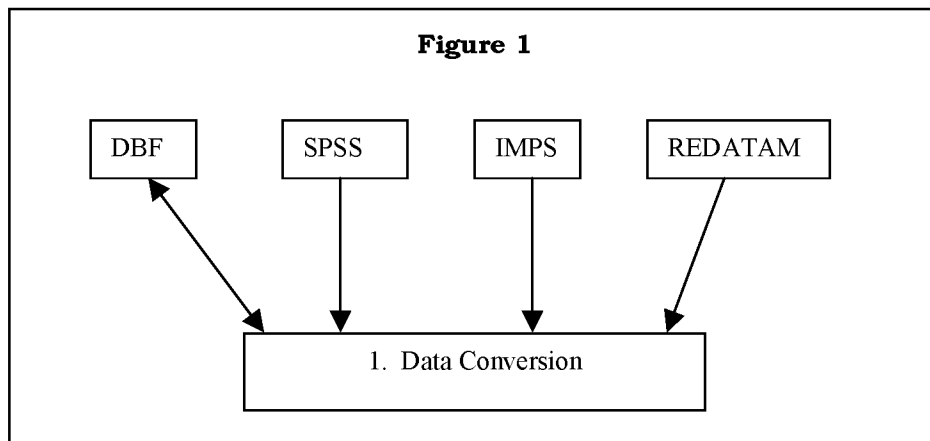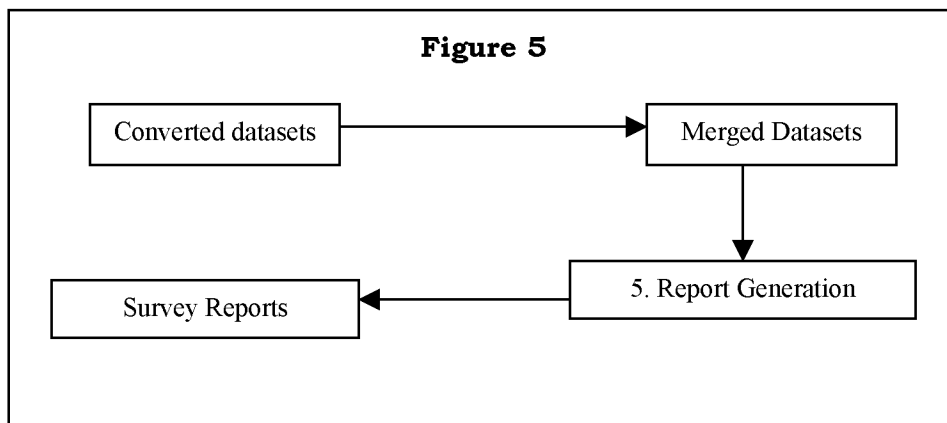

Figure 1

(b)   **The creation of a survey standard.** Many challenges arose in the exercise to harmonize survey data across countries. Figure 2 illustrates the process involved in creating a survey standard.   These included the differences in meaning of variables that had the same names; the similarity in meanings of variables with different names; and the need to harmonize value labels and responses in such a way so as to allow for comparative research within the subregion.

Figure 2

Country survey variable lists	→	2. Create Survey Standard

Country survey variable lists

National Survey Standard

(c)   **Data Conversion.**   The conversion process included using the harmonised data to arrive at the final output illustrated by Figures 3, 4, and 5 - the merged data sets of the social indicators of several countries.

Figure 3

Survey Standards	→	3. Data Standard Conversion	→	Converted Datasets

Figure 4

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┌──────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────────┐
│   Datasets   │ ─────────────────▶ │  Converted Datasets  │
└──────────────┘                    └──────────────────────┘
                                                │
                                                ▼
                           ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                           │   4. Merge Country Surveys    │
                           └──────────────────────────────┘
┌──────────────────┐      ◀
│ Survey Standards │ ◀─────
└──────────────────┘
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Figure 5

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┌────────────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐
│ Converted datasets │ ───────────▶ │  Merged Datasets │
└────────────────────┘              └──────────────────┘
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┌──────────────────┐          │   5. Report Generation   │
│  Survey Reports  │ ◀─────── └──────────────────────────┘
└──────────────────┘
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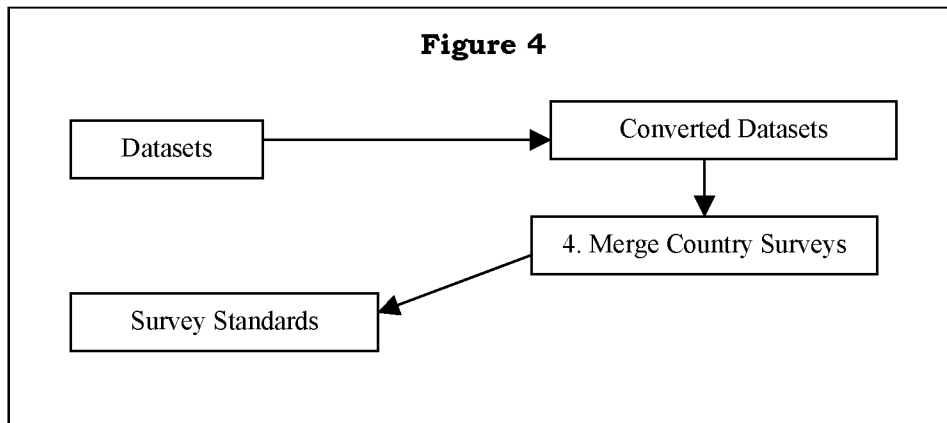
The statistical challenges were varied and this paper will not speak to those which address the broad issues of data production such as coverage, periodicity and timeliness; quality; integrity; or access. It addresses only those specific issues that became apparent in the process of building the databases. These were embedded in the documentation and methodology of the data collection processes at the national level and impact on data quality. An example is that of clear and precise definitions agreed upon by all countries.

The importance of harmonizing and merging the datasets of the specific countries became very clear. In the process of building the databases, it was discovered that in some instances same variable names had different meanings in the data sets of different countries and different variable names could mean the same thing. Also, modifications that might have been made to national surveys within countries, from year to year, had to be addressed. This aspect of the task required careful attention and liaising with the Directors of Statistics from the various countries as metadata dictionaries were not always

available or up to date. To facilitate this task it became apparent that hard or electronic copies of questionnaires with mapped variable lists from countries were necessary.

The process of building the databases brought two issues to the fore, one was that in the process the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat, did not wish to lose any data which a country had collected and, in light of the many different variables being captured, the best approach to handling merging the datasets would be to harmonise the data rather than to standardise the data which could result in data loss. The second issue, was the great value which could be garnered in the subregion from the replication of best practices, the elimination of not so good practices and the sharing of expertise. In regard to the latter, sharing information has become a central task of the project.

Making the data available via the web proved to be both a technological and a logistical challenge. In order to develop a suitable website, an analysis of websites that presented statistics on Caribbean indicators for social development was undertaken. Thirteen such websites were examined. This was not meant to be exhaustive in any way but was meant to assist in identifying the best practices for web site development. The sites were examined and analysed for ease of use and level of interactivity; use of graphics; format; and layout. These, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) were rated highly in their adherence to the rules of proper Human Computer Interface Design (HCD). Those that were found to provide a wealth of data and information, while maintaining an appropriate image and providing a level of interactivity and ease of use for visitors to the site, were considered as good models.

The analysis of other websites led to the conclusion that the website for the Caribbean subregional social statistical databases needed to provide a single location where most, if not all, of the social development indicators could be found. It would need to ensure that data already existing on other sites did not conflict with data on the website and that data should be presented dynamically. Last, but by no means least, the website would need to use images, which reflect the Caribbean reality and relate to the type of data to be displayed.

The key logistical challenge has to do with ownership of the data. Although it is clear that the data housed or linked through the databases, would remain the property of the respective countries from which the data was obtained, making that known, understood and operational is still a challenge. Embedded in the concerns of ownership of data, are issues regarding mechanisms of cost recovery. All of these issues make more evident the need in the Caribbean for the establishment of data dissemination standards.

VI. Recommendations and conclusions

The search is on for new models for social policy in order to meet the rapidly changing needs of both developing and developed countries. Although facing the same globalising processes, the contexts of each group of countries is different and so too should be their responses. Caribbean SIDS are seeking entry into this process with their unique vulnerabilities but with their own capacities and resilience.

For the Caribbean, which has allocated significant resources to social development since the post-independence period, evidenced-based social policy in this rapidly changing global environment need not be an unreachable goal. Embarking on the process of establishing the Caribbean social statistical databases a number of recommendations have become evident:

(a)   Improving data sources at the national level as well as the conditions of personnel with responsibility for the collection, storage and analysis of social data is essential. Technological barriers have to broken, despite the cost, to bring all national statistical offices up to minimum standards in the use of electronic systems for data collection, retrieval and analysis;

(b)   The promotion of the greater need for and benefits that can be derived from evidenced-based social policy formulation among policy makers and technocrats needs to be increased;

(c)   Monitoring, appraisal and evaluation of national social policy initiatives must be institutionalised. Such undertakings must not only be completed to fulfil donor requirements, but must be undertaken to assess the extent to which a country's own development goals are being met;

(d)   The subregion requires greater skills in analysis, monitoring, appraisal and evaluation in the social sector. Capacities exist in the University and in other regional institutions and these ought to be utilised. However, this does not preclude the necessity for building capacity at the national level; and

(e)   More theoretical research is required to critically assess the formulation and use of social policy within the subregion, so as to be able to replicate the best practices and disengage from the least beneficial ones. There are countries in the subregion that have successfully engaged in evidenced-based social policy initiatives for some time and others could learn from their experience.

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