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**CHALLENGES AND TRENDS IN THE MODERNIZATION OF NATIONAL
STATISTICAL SYSTEMS**

Marketing and dissemination policies

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“Alice never could quite make out, in thinking it over afterwards, how it was that they began: all she remembers is, that they were running hand in hand, and the Queen went so fast that it was all she could do to keep up with her: and still the Queen kept crying ‘Faster! Faster!’ And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, they stopped. The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly, ‘You may rest a little now.’ Alice looked round her in great surprise. ‘Why, I do believe we’ve been under this tree the whole time! Everything’s just as it was! In our country, you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.’ ‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, if you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’”¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Dissemination policies and marketing procedures for statistical production have reached very different levels of development in the region. Yet there is general agreement that high priority should be given to these issues, as they directly affect attainment of the substantive objectives of the organizations producing statistics and have significant implications for their public image.

Sharing the knowledge and experiences of institutes in the different countries, particularly those which have a greater level of development in this area, will surely help to improve the procedures which are being started in some countries and are underway in others. The transfer of detailed and specific information between countries is in any case a prerequisite for further progress on these issues, as part of the process of regional statistical harmonization to which we are committed.

In order to move forward, and not stay “under this tree the whole time”, some mechanisms which obstruct, or at least slow down, the processes of change will have to be deactivated. The main difficulties do not lie in the great complexity of the problems to be faced, but rather in the lack of flexibility of the tools available. Efforts of imagination and initiative will have to be applied “at least twice as fast” in order to create new tools or adapt existing ones in the shortest time possible, if some degree of success is to be achieved. This is almost always the case in this work that is so full of risks.

The description that follows below is very brief, and naturally can only refer to the situation in Uruguay. The experiences described are probably very different from those of other institutes in the region, and in some cases these problems will already have been resolved to a large extent. Nevertheless, these brief notes attempt to draw attention to some factors which in our opinion merit a frank exchange of opinions and a greater study of the subject.

¹ An abridged extract from “Through the Looking Glass”, a book that is more often quoted than read, written in 1872 by Lewis Carroll. This was the pseudonym used by the British mathematician and logician, Charles L. Dodgson, of Christ Church College, Oxford.

2. THE NOT-SO-DISTANT PAST

Statistics were produced in accordance with a basic plan agreed between the producers and a small number of users which were mainly governmental. The work was financed by funds assigned in the National Budget every five years, and adjusted in the annual accounts.

The products were almost all in printed form and were provided to the users entirely free of charge or were “for sale”. The amount collected by the latter method was quite insignificant, as the price covered merely some printing costs and could only partially be used to finance specific components. The statistical authorities of the time naturally gave priority to disseminating the result of their work as widely as possible and promoting the use of statistics in accordance with their practical goals, rather than seeking to recover their costs. It was a common practice to take items from the “for sale” category and make them available “free of charge”. No doubt these were pioneering efforts of development, but, without intending to do so, they reinforced the ingrained attitude that statistics should be freely available at no charge.

Later, demand grew rapidly. The number of Government users multiplied, as did those from public agencies, private organizations and the public in general. They were no longer content with the combinations of variables chosen unilaterally by the producers. Understandably, they would request specific tabulations and often asked for special statistical research to be carried out. It should be recalled that at that time, there was hardly any access to computers and it was very rare to have personnel with programming knowledge. The capacity of statistics producers, which depended on their limited resources and was bound by bureaucratic rules, was soon completely overwhelmed.

3. MORE RECENTLY

The fantastic growth in computers, which has brought microdata processing within the reach of many, has transformed communications between statistics producers and users. Paper publications have become smaller and less important, and are no longer the major tools for dissemination.

At the same time, unpredictable expenses are acquiring disproportionate importance. The amazing advances in technology have meant that, at ever shorter intervals, there is a need to expand and renew equipment, purchase new software licenses and update existing ones, provide personnel training and adapt working methods to the new tools. The vigorous process of regional statistical harmonization also requires vast resources in terms of finance, human resources and time.

The truly explosive growth in the demand for statistical data has not been accompanied by proportionate changes of a similar nature in the provision of resources for production. On the contrary, the producers have been severely affected by the processes of state reform and by budgetary cuts, which have significantly reduced their capacity to respond.

On the other hand, the principle of providing statistical information entirely free of charge is now being questioned. It does not seem reasonable that organizations with insufficient financing should offer resources indiscriminately without receiving anything in return.

There is thus a situation of conflict, with difficulties which could become serious obstacles to the proper fulfilment of the commitments for statistics production assumed in accordance with a basic plan of general interest. It is clear that, leaving aside the most basic tasks which require sufficient budgetary provision, possible solutions might include, as an obvious complementary option, the improvement of

procedures for securing resources from users by marketing special services, digital cartography and even certain types of information that are available. Of course, the procedures relating to the relevant legal and administrative aspects are very important, as they ensure that the funds are available on an unrestricted and timely basis.

4. THE PRESENT

The practice of providing statistical products for a fee is expanding steadily, although there are still cases of users, both individual and institutional, national and international, preparing project budgets and making commitments to produce results, without budgeting any amount for the statistical components.

The adoption of this policy has led to some very positive results. After some initial resistance to the change, and apart from a few exceptions, the users have shown a willingness to pay, and have taken on that responsibility, while also making the additional demands that are appropriate to their status as clients.

Services to users are improving noticeably, and the marketing process has had a positive and significant impact on some aspects of the final quality of the products.

The difficulties which persist are connected with the authorizations required within the public administration for the functioning of an official account with such particular characteristics. We are making progress, but it is clear at the current stage that we are still up against some obstacles that prevent action being taken in the spirit of Lewis Carroll's message.

Another central issue that should be mentioned is the pricing policy. In seeking an adequate solution to this difficult problem, it would probably be very useful to know what procedures are used by other countries in the region, particularly with regard to the categorization of users and the resulting tariffs for different products. In view of the progress made on integration policies, price harmonization is also essential in the case of statistical products.

Particular attention has been given to developing a procedure to prevent unauthorized transfers of statistical products to third parties, by those who receive them in the first instance. To date, a formal acknowledgment of receipt has been used, in which the user declares that means are available to protect the material, and makes a commitment not to transfer it in any way to third parties. In fact, it is the right to use the material which is acquired. Of course, if legal action is to be taken in response to a case of non-compliance, it is essential to be able to demonstrate what right has been acquired.

On the other hand, this open door to special requests from users means that requests may be made which go far beyond the acquisition of products or the results of special processing of data already available. Very often there are requests for the design, implementation and processing of statistical research that is designed to satisfy specific information needs. The comparative advantages offered by an official institution, in relation to private sector corporations involved in the same area of activity are very significant, in view of its experience, its infrastructure, and its legal backing. A lot of work will have to be done on the inherent regulatory aspects, so that the offer of services is entirely transparent and can in no way be interpreted as unfair competition by such corporations.

Finally, it is also very important to increase the sharing of knowledge and experience in this area, and to take advantage of the many opportunities for meetings between the statistics producers that are currently offered by the ongoing processes of regional harmonization.