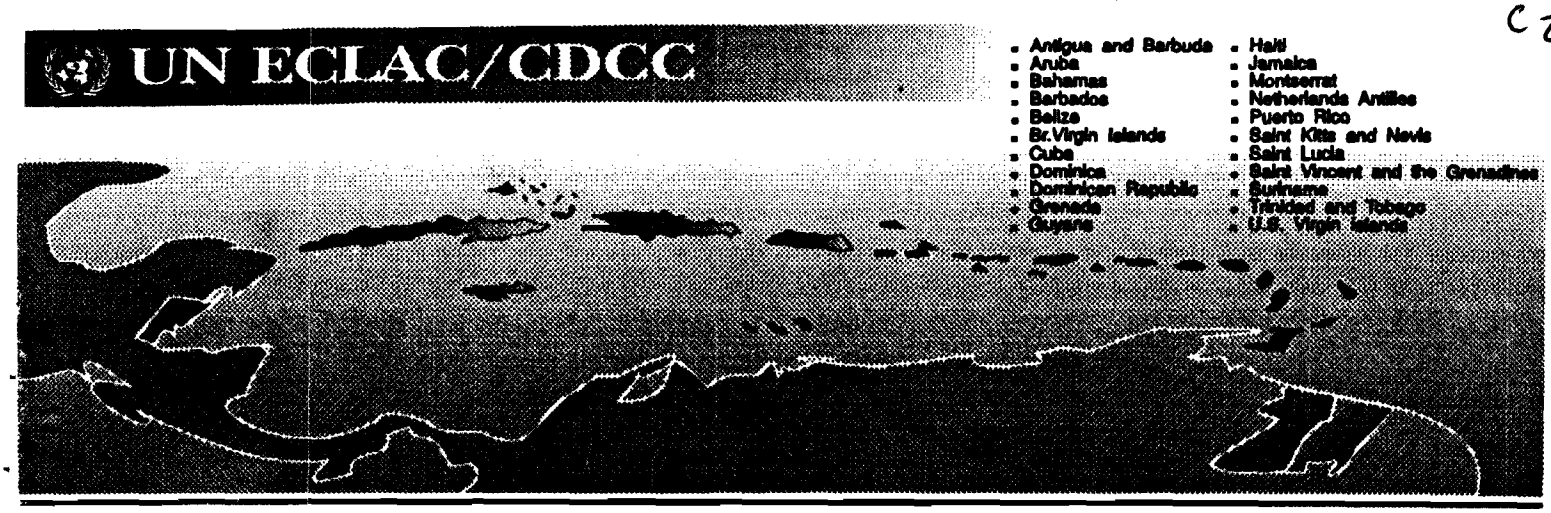

Technical Meeting of Information Coordinators
and Database Managers
Port-of-Spain, Trinidad & Tobago
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REPORT OF THE TECHNICAL MEETING OF INFORMATION COORDINATORS AND DATABASE MANAGERS

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean
CARIBBEAN DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION COMMITTEE

REPORT OF THE TECHNICAL MEETING OF INFORMATION COORDINATORS AND DATABASE MANAGERS

Place and date of meeting

A meeting of Information Coordinators and Database Managers was held at the offices of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (ECLAC/CDCC), in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on 23 April 1998.

Attendance

Data and information managers, systems administrators, librarians and other information specialists attended the meeting. Participants were drawn from United Nations agencies in the Caribbean, other regional organizations involved in Caribbean development, and other institutions whose mandate deals with the collection, presentation and dissemination of data and information. A list of participants is provided at Annex 1.

Opening and objectives of the meeting

Mr. Lancelot Busby, Economic Affairs Officer (Statistics) and Officer-in-Charge of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat, welcomed participants to the meeting noting that the problems associated with the collection and dissemination of data were common to all organizations. He suggested that some level of collaboration could go a long way towards solving these problems. He further stated that information and statistical data were both inputs to and outputs of knowledge-based organizations, such as those represented at the meeting. It was, therefore, important that this information be presented attractively and in a manner which made it easy to use.

The meeting, which was convened in response to a request made at an inter-agency meeting hosted by ECLAC in January, set out to:

(a) Focus on the types of data/information collected, produced and/or organized by the organizations represented, examining each for similarities and overlap and seeking opportunities for future collaboration;

(b) Discuss approaches to resolving the technical challenges associated with presenting and disseminating data, including making data accessible via the world wide web; and

(c) Decide on a way forward towards greater collaboration and information exchange.

Presenting statistical data

Mr. Lancelot Busby, of the Statistics Unit of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat, led this session with a presentation on "Information architectures for social information systems". The presentation focused on social indicators and databases and the organization and design of the associated work processes. With a lack of proper coordination among and within organizations, there were negative implications for both the quality of the data and the cost of collecting and presenting it. One of the main challenges faced by the Caribbean in its task of disseminating data was the duplication of effort resulting in islands of information in various databases. These problems could be worsened by the fact that there was no integrated information policy or system.

Mr. J. L. Liranzo of Caribbean Development Export Agency (CDEA), made a presentation on the trade information databases of Caribbean Export. Among these databases were:

- Trade regulations
- Trade statistics
- Clients
- Consultants
- Business opportunities and trade leads
- Trade information services and products
- Bibliographic

Mr. Liranzo outlined the ways in which Caribbean Export disseminated information and the problems encountered in sourcing that information. Among those problems were the high cost involved in gathering data, the lack of standardization in the electronic storage of statistical data and the non-availability of data in electronic format.

Mr. K. Korporal of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) highlighted UNEP's Caribbean Environment Programme (CEP) databases and documents, the design and content philosophy of the CEP WEB page and the CEP library resources. The CEP databases included:

- Focal points
- Experts
- Contacts
- Marine protected areas
- Various spatial (GIS) databases (under construction)

To date, 37 technical reports series, a quarterly newsletter, meeting reports and various education and awareness materials had been produced by UNEP. The CEP library resources focused on coastal and marine information and regional, environmental information. There were also United Nations, government, regional organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) publications.

A discussion followed, during which a brief outline of the data collected by and a summary of the work of some agencies represented was highlighted. Problems associated with data collection and presentation were also highlighted. A detailed inventory of the data and information activities of each agency will be provided in a separate document. However, a brief synopsis is presented below:

The United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) collects information pertaining to illegal drugs and drug trafficking. Having seen the importance of integrating social and economic data in its work, UNDCP has begun to collect additional data in this area.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Jamaica) relies on the substantial amount of data fed into the Statistical Institute of Jamaica from other sources. While there are no fully established databases produced by this agency, they have developed a programme called the "Development Cooperation Analysis System" whereby various databases from donor agencies are integrated.

The United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) took the opportunity to invite participants to its "Information Advocacy Strategies" meeting to be held at the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean on 24 April 1998. The aim of this meeting was to collaborate and hopefully come to a decision to share human and financial resources, and to unify United Nations agencies so that access to all data could be improved.

The Association of Caribbean States (ACS) informed that the main vehicle for dissemination of its data was its Website, which contained information on all its members and eligible member States and governments. There was also information on the activities of the ACS.

The Caribbean Research and Development Institute (CARDI) informed that agricultural data was collected to assist in development at the national and regional levels. The organization was working to improve networking among its 13 member States.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) collects statistical data mainly in the area of trade. There was also a focus on industrial statistics, especially in the manufacturing sector. The documentation centre maintains a number of bibliographic databases that include documents and reports that emanate from meetings of the region. The representative indicated that the organization was currently experiencing problems with the WINISIS software package for bibliographic data management, and hoped that there could be some measure of collaboration with any other organization which used this package. Another main area of possible collaboration for CARICOM was in the development of full-text databases.

The Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC) informed that its main services were epidemiologic surveillance and lab testing. There was an epidemiology database, as well as statistical databases containing, among other areas, regional information on communicable diseases, mortality rates, AIDS and population data. There was also a web site.

The Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago dealt with banking and financial statistics with some consultation from the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and the Caribbean Centre for Monetary Studies (CCMS). Their Website was in the planning stages. The representative indicated that the Library at Central Bank used WINISIS, and suggested that there could be some collaboration in this regard with the representative from CARICOM.

The Central Library of Trinidad and Tobago (to be renamed "National Library Information System" in the near future) maintained a bibliographic database which was online. Access was available to the national bibliography (a listing of all publications in and about Trinidad and Tobago.) The Library had its own Web page, and the public had access to the Internet through all its Port of Spain branches. An intranet had also been established. This facilitated access among its 22 branches across the nation.

The Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB) gathered its data via data collection forms, and disseminated data via e-mail, fax or mail. The ECCB was working towards developing its Website and electronic databases. There was, however, a problem with data collection due to the logistics involved in gathering data from the large number and variety of banks, credit unions and other financial institutions associated with the Bank.

The Electronic Library at the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean

Ms. Sandra John, Chief of the Caribbean Documentation Centre at the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat outlined the thinking and the methodology that culminated in the establishment of a Virtual Library of Caribbean Socio-economic Information on the ECLAC/CDCC website. (www.eclacpos.org)

The Virtual Library, still very much a work in progress, was the Caribbean Documentation Centre's attempt to respond to and take advantage of the new realities. These she identified as heightened expectations from clients and colleagues, reduced resources, greater competition and technological advances, such as the advent of the World Wide Web. She highlighted some of the managerial and technical problems encountered in establishing the library.

She expressed the view that the Virtual Library Project was one which lent itself naturally to the joint venture, cooperative approach and suggested that other agencies might participate by developing similar libraries in various subjects to which the CDC library could provide links; or by contributing documents on diskette or via e-mail to the Caribbean Documentation Centre. These documents could be hosted on ECLAC's web server.

Minisis and the Electronic Library Catalogue

Mr. Dale Alexander of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat made a presentation on the MINISIS Integrated Library System, which prompted several questions concerning pricing/cost of software, integrating/conversion interfacing tools and other technical matters.

A discussion followed on some key areas of the whole process of data-gathering and dissemination. These included technical aspects, organizational aspects, management of work flow, cooperation/collaboration and socio-economic issues.

One participant commented on the need for management/decision makers to adopt a holistic/integrated approach to the information services function of the organization. It was noted that there was often a mismatch between the availability of resources (financial and human) and the expected quality of service.

Another problem identified had to do with the two-way flow of information between providers and users. In order to make data valid and relevant, providers must depend on feedback from users. There was, therefore, a need to keep the information current and updated. It must also be packaged in such a way that, with minimal effort, the user could access it. It was suggested that in overcoming this problem, a two-pronged approach could be used. On the macro level, there must be coordination and a reduction in the duplication of effort by information managers. On the micro level, the needs of the users must be met.

It was observed that the critical problem of duplication of effort existed, particularly with respect to socio-economic data in the subregion. To address this perceived problem, the situation should first be assessed and a master plan/strategic policy be developed to achieve cohesion of efforts and resources. While it might not be possible to have one large on-line database, those organizations with similar data should link their information and have links to other Websites with specific information on a particular area.

Another participant stressed the crucial need to be committed to the maintenance of the on-line databases. It should be the responsibility of a few to keep reminding those whose duty it was to update and to maintain. Of course, this task would require a tremendous amount of human and financial resources, and since there was an obvious limitation to these, there could be an arrangement among organizations to share resources to update their Websites.

Caribbean Corporate Websites and Minisis Demonstration

During the post-lunch session of the meeting, a demonstration of Caribbean Corporate Websites was led by Mr. Roger St. Hilaire of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat. Despite some technical difficulties, the following websites were presented and/or discussed:

www.acs.aec.org -	Association of Caribbean States (ACS)
www.carec.org -	Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC)
www.caricom.org -	Caribbean Community (CARICOM)
www.cep.unep.org -	UN Caribbean Environment Programme (CEP)
www.ilocarib.org.tt -	International Labour Organisation (ILO) - Caribbean Office
www.eclacpos.org -	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

The following concerns were raised in the ensuing discussion: ownership of data ; integrity of data; and standardization, among other things. It was agreed that another technical session involving webmasters was needed to resolve the problems identified.

As a follow-up to his earlier presentation on Minisis, Mr Dale Alexander gave a demonstration of the ECLAC Caribbean Documentation Centre's catalogue which had recently been made available on the world wide web using the Minisis software.

Conclusions

The final substantive session of the meeting was led by a presentation from Mr José Luis Liranzo of Caribbean Export who summarized some of the key findings of the day's discussion. Apart from the duplication of effort in several areas of information-gathering and presentation, there were other issues such as: ownership of information, who gets the credit for having it; lack of knowledge among both users and providers about some information-gathering efforts; the commercial orientation of some organizations which was at variance with the aims of organizations which provided similar information for free.

As a solution, he proposed a "Caribbean Information Macro Effort" which would involve awareness and training of users, on the one hand, and a two- pronged macro and micro strategy for information providers on the other.

Some of these ideas were accepted and are reflected in the decisions outlined below.

DECISIONS

Following are the recommendations which were taken at the end of the meeting to begin to address some of the problems identified:

1. The establishment of a bulletin board to facilitate an ongoing dialogue. CAREC and the CARICOM Secretariat were requested to coordinate the information to be included. ECLAC would provide the facility. Guidelines for the development of a national information policy should be included.

2. The development of an inventory of data resources would be compiled by ECLAC, based, largely but not entirely, on information collected from participants at the meeting.

3. Investigating the feasibility (technical, financial and legal) of using a satellite for Internet connection in an effort to reduce telecommunications charges.

4. An agreement to consider for the future some system of subject specialization in data collection

5. A follow-up meeting of webmasters to discuss technical issues associated with web design.

Annex

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ECLAC System

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