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**CRITERIA FOR THE EFFICIENT COORDINATION OF THE ACTIVITIES  
FOR DATA COLLECTION AND THE DESIGN OF INSTRUMENTS FOR  
MAPPING AND DATA COLLECTION APPLICABLE  
TO COUNTRIES OF THE CARIBBEAN**

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## **Abstract**

The paper highlights the importance of good economic and social data to measure the change in the economy and the society in the light of external stimuli. It also highlights the need for governments to base policy decisions on good data. The paper discusses the issues of design and coordination of data collection mechanisms in a manner that optimizes the limited resources available for data collection and ensures that the data collected fit into an information mosaic that enables planning. To the extent that knowledge of self is the first step towards self-actualization, the success of any self-development paradigm will depend on the content of the data and information that are input into the development plan.

**Key issues:** Data collection  
Coordination  
Design of instruments for mapping and data collection  
Harmonization  
Ownership of data that result from an inter-organizational team effort

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**Data collection**

The efficiency in the coordination of data collection has grown in Caribbean countries in inverse proportion to the growth in complexity of the economies and societies. When the economies were simple and unsophisticated, the development problem of the countries was growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This was perceived to be the main plank that would lead to economic growth. The issue of distribution of wealth would be taken care of through the anabolism of wants through which new areas of demand would emerge and new categories of economic activity would secure the distribution of the wealth. At that time (as it is now) data were collected in response to the data demands of the planning machinery of the countries. The simplicity of the range of data allowed the identification of the central statistical office as the official disseminator of government data. It placed the chief statistician in the position of being the technical filter to data produced by all data collecting agencies.

With the increasing sophistication of the countries, data collection became more varied and urgent in response to emerging economic and social concerns. The need for a widened variety of data resulted in a proliferation of survey activities undertaken by ministries and agencies, without reference to the statistical office. The reason for the proliferation was that the data being sought were outside the technical scope of the statistical office. Coordination of activities with the statistical office was either extremely weak or did not exist. The resulting situation placed a heavy response burden on the data providers that comprise households and business establishments, for the most part. In many cases the respondents have been burdened with questions that refer to the same measure that approximates to data already sought some two weeks before by another agency. Different standards of questionnaire design and survey administration have, in many cases, confused the data collection activities and have led to a lack of confidence and usefulness of some of the data collected.

Data are collected in response to demand for the numbers and the information surrounding the numbers. The purpose of data collection is to inform decision-making. One can identify three main groupings in society that require data to make decisions. They are:

- (a) Government sector;
- (b) Private (corporate) sector; and
- (c) The household sector

In a society that is oriented towards social equity, all three groupings are the main actors that create the demand for data and should exert influence on the data that are collected. Data collection is therefore demand driven. However, it must be managed in such a manner as to maximize the data take while minimizing the burden on the respondents. The approach to the respondents must be planned and not be allowed to be spontaneous. The increased demand for data must be monitored in order to gain an appreciation for the trends in data demand. Such analysis should lead to a re-design of the data collection regime in the interest of efficiency and effectiveness.

Data collection should be viewed as the mid-point of the planning process. It comes at the end of the process of identification of economic and social issues that should be addressed and the enunciation of a strategy to gather the information. While it can be viewed as the end of a process, it is also the beginning of another in that it initiates contact with the data suppliers and explains the purpose of the entry into the field. That contact will provide feedback that will be processed and fed up to the decision-making levels. The decisions made are in turn passed back down the hierarchy and affect the economy and society.

Questionnaire design and data collection are areas of specialty that must be recognized. Whereas large numbers of organizations may be able to articulate their data needs, one organization should control the quality of questionnaires being imposed on the public and should maintain an overview of all of the data-collecting activities that are being undertaken in the country. In the final analysis, the response rate will reflect the public's feelings of being over-pollled.

The design of data collection instruments is not at present done in an organized manner in which a total picture is held up and the survey of current interest is planned. While this is a fact when one considers the public sector–private sector divide, it is equally true within the public sector where different ministries collect their own primary data without reference to the lawful data authority, which is the statistical office. What is needed is a return to a forum such as the Statistical Priorities Committee that convened at the beginning of the year to gain an oversight of the statistical activities being contemplated in the year. The Committee attempted to streamline those activities.

A specialist Meeting on European Data Strategic Review, held in Malgrate, Italy, in 1994<sup>1</sup> listed a number of major problems of data accessibility at the European level. The report from that meeting highlighted a number of key problems that included the following:

- (a) Lack of integration
- (b) Poor coordination of large-scale research
- (c) Incompatibility of measurement instruments and data representation
- (d) Data access
- (e) Availability of meta-data.

Most of the above observations have been made in the case of the Caribbean in the many papers presented by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to forums of statisticians and planners. Priority in the management of data resources will be the turning point in the data situation in the Caribbean countries. Close examination will reveal that the problems of lack of adequate statistical coverage have little to do with the lack of training of statistical personnel. The real problem seems to lie in the hiatus in the management of the statistical resources in the countries. The mechanics of arriving at such a position have been enunciated in more than one of the ECLAC papers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> European Data Strategic Review, Malgrate, Italy, 30 June – 3 July 1994

<sup>2</sup> See “The Production of Statistical Data and Information in the Caribbean ...Proposals for increasing efficiency in this sphere” Document No. LC/CAR/G.701 (2 October 2002). See also “Information, Information Management and Governance” LC.CAR.G.677 (3 December 2001).

### **Harmonization of the approach to data collection**

The reason for collecting data has been established. Every attempt should be made to ensure that the data being collected could be used by a wide cross-section of users, subject to issues of confidentiality. There is a tendency to collect data to answer a conceptual or philosophical position. The temptation is to ask for data that are value-laden. Once data are collected in this manner the usefulness of the numbers to a large set of data seekers is lessened. The approach to data collection should be to collect elemental data that are “value free” or free of “polemic influence”. This type of data can lend itself to a multiplicity of uses. In the design of data collection modalities, one should observe the need to separate the method of data collection from the use of the data.<sup>3</sup>

Periodicity of collection of data is an issue that should be factored into the design of data collection structures. If all researchers and decision makers required annual data to the exclusion of all other, there would be no data collection problem except the challenge of collecting all annual data and placing them at the disposal of researchers. The real-world situation is that different groups of people require data with differing degrees of frequency. One may wish to factor in annual, quarterly, monthly and weekly data into the data collection imperative, but one must recommend quality and discipline in the collection activities.

In order to facilitate harmonization in the approach to data collection, agreement should be arrived at in respect of the framework within which data are to be collected. There should be little difficulty in recognizing the System of National Accounts (SNA) as being the integrating framework, but this position, or indeed any other integrating framework, should be arrived at through the process of discussion. Any system selected should be hierarchical in the sense that global estimates are arrived at by distilling the more disaggregated data sets. This feature provides a development path for countries that at present do not possess the datasets at the low levels of disaggregation that are recommended by the SNA. More aggregated datasets may satisfy on a temporary basis the imperative of gaining an appreciation for the macro aggregates,

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<sup>3</sup> Enrico Santos in “European Linear Type Traits Harmonization in Brown Swiss Dairy Cattle” makes the point. The aim is to capture as much data as possible before classifying.

but would suggest the need for the development of disaggregated datasets. In addition, the SNA 1993 can be used as the framework through which issues of current interest, such as environmental accounting, tourism satellite accounts and other emerging concerns, may be addressed. The achievement of these datasets may have implications on staffing or the reallocation of human resources. There is a distinct possibility that reallocation of human resources can be effected without a significant impact on government's recurrent expenditure.

### **Consistency in sample selection and survey design**

Survey design is an area of specialty that must be recognized and taken on board. Harmonization across government ministries should acknowledge the advantage of establishing a central unit that would examine draft questionnaires for quality and, at least, assist in the selection of the sample. This proposed unit would be able to exercise oversight over the data collection activities across the public sector and minimize duplication of effort. Closely allied to that unit should be a central registry – a unit that maintains a register of business establishments of all economic activities. This unit would be at all times able to provide a list of establishments engaged in a given economic activity that would be an input into sample selection.

### **The “people” side of harmonization**

The inter-ministerial requirement of harmonization introduces another element into the equation. The need to convince the other ministries of the need to unify the coding schemes and classifications employed would require some effort. In this regard, a layer above the head of ministry rank would be able to perform this task. A senior minister, preferably the Prime Minister, would be able to lend support to harmonization by openly sponsoring such a move and therefore being seen to support it. In addition, the process of harmonization is a social one in that the new modality may take some time before heads of ministry become accustomed to subjecting their processes to review by a body external to the ministry.

**Who owns the networked product?**

The social process involved in cultivating cross-ministerial teams to work on data collection is readily appreciated. The sharing of data among the team should not pose a problem as provision would have been previously made to this effect. One issue would surround the storage of the data and its release or sale to third parties. Who would collect the revenues and will they be shared among the organizations that fielded the team? What would be the formula for dividing the revenues?

The value of integrated datasets is readily appreciated. The harmonized/networked approach to the design and collection of datasets will undoubtedly impart rigour to the data and increase their value. Information is a resource as important as any other in the conduct of business and beyond a certain level of generality, must be paid for on account of its value to the decision-making process of the organization seeking it. Discussion among the team will lead to agreement on the cost of storage of the data for retrieval and the calculation of the share of revenues collected that will go to the contributing parties. Issues such as this should be referenced in a policy that should be developed to guide data collection and provision.

**Transparency of the statistical process**

A dataset is as useful as the information that it provides the researcher on its quality and on the concepts and definitions that lie at the base of the numbers. The availability of meta-data must be a priority as it may mean the difference between the correct interpretation of figures and their absolute misuse. The statistical and information infrastructure should provide qualifiers of data quality, production dates and methodologies for public use. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has provided a framework for such reporting in its General Data Dissemination System (GDDS) and the Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS). Countries are being assisted to report on their statistical series and systems through this initiative in a manner that provides the transparency that is required.

The Caribbean countries that have not, to date, signed on to one of the frameworks are advised to do so.

## **National representativeness**

It is all too easy to conduct a survey that throws light on the situation of subgroups of the population to the exclusion of the ability to extrapolate the survey findings to address a national total. Apart from striking a total for the area under research, the survey should be used to address the contribution of the situation to the national canvas. A survey taken of any subgroup of the population should be representative of that subgroup nationwide.

If the representativeness of the sample is understood to be important, the national data collection mechanism should emphasize the creation of a filter through which survey instruments must pass. This filter will consist of a census and surveys unit that is staffed by persons with expertise in the conduct of censuses and surveys, questionnaire design and development, sampling, field operations and their supervision and imputation for non-response. No official census or survey should be allowed to go into the field without the technical review and approval by this unit that the organization conducting the survey can in fact do it with competence. This routing will have the effect of ensuring that duplication of survey activity is kept to a minimum. This unit can be used as a transfer point of knowledge to other departments on the clear understanding that the transfer of knowledge is meant to assist in the preparation of a better submission to the census and surveys unit that would be the case without the transfer of knowledge. The transfer of knowledge should not be interpreted as being a form of preparation for independent survey initiation in the future.

## **Coordination**

### **Coordination between ministries and within ministries**

The idea of coordination assumes that there will be a coordinator. The choice of coordinator of data matters should logically be the chief statistician – the official with the best claim to possessing an overview of the data needs and situation in the country. In order for the coordination to be effective, the coordinator should command the respect of the government and should be consulted from time to time. The coordinator should be included in the planning consultations and not be brought in after a group of officials have decided that they need a certain dataset and have determined that they will produce a report including the identified

dataset by a certain date. Coordination is not a natural *modus operandi* and would need sponsorship at the highest level of government if it must succeed.

Attempts should be made to ensure that the national data needs are known throughout the administration. Technical meetings may be used to drive the realization that ministries should collaborate with each other horizontally and as a matter of course. They should not have to wait until a crisis occurs to work as a team. Meetings at both the technical and administrative levels are suggested to bring about inter-ministerial coordination and collaboration. Care must be taken to institutionalize the coordination modality as a means of building sustainability of the relationship beyond the period of tenure of the present heads. A culture of inter-ministerial collaboration would be a major enabler of the coordination mechanism. Coordination, if extended to classifications, definitions and coding schemes, will set the stage for integration of data sets.

### **Coordination of donor activity**

Coordination is as effective as is the sharing of information between the two parties. It is the case that agencies offer governments, in direct project interaction with Ministries, attractive gifts such as computers and other elements of hardware and software that are not compatible with the rudimentary backbone of information systems being put in place. Government policy may be geared towards ensuring that such gifts are compatible with official hardware and software configurations and that they will indeed be useful. The receipt of gifts, even if obtained under project funding, should be subjected to screening by a government department qualified to do so. Indeed, hardware acquisition plans under projects should be examined by such a unit for compliance with the existing hardware configuration of the government.

### **Achieving efficiency and coordination in data collection**

The foregoing discussions have highlighted the main issues to be addressed in achieving coordination in data collection. The process toward this goal will have begun when heads of departments and ministries see themselves as working for the same government in a manner that seeks the maximization of government services for the input of resources, both human and

financial. The government that fails to pay attention to its data collection regime will fail to obtain critical data and will thereby fall short of understanding its own issues through the lack of a mechanism that monitors all data collection initiatives. A positive and proactive stance in this regard will over time graduate the Caribbean countries from their present state of inefficiency in data collection, management and use.