CARIBBEAN DEVELOPMENT AND CO-OPERATION COMMITTEE

THE CARIBBEAN SUBREGION

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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean

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CARISPLAN: Abstracting Manual

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UNITED NATIONS

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean

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CARISPLAN - AN ABSTRACTING SERVICE

Abstracting services are principally responsible for providing condensed versions of publications which have been produced in a particular subject over a given period. The services provide a current awareness function keeping practitioners or researchers up-to-date with new developments and discoveries in their field.

Several abstracting services have been developed in recent years, some by government institutions, others by commercial concerns and international organizations.

The Caribbean Information System for Economic and Social Planning (CARISPLAN) sector has begun to provide such an abstracting service to the policy-makers, planners and other technical personnel in the service of the governments of the region.

The purpose of CARISPLAN as an abstracting system is to record all the locally produced material (published or unpublished) which has been issued by any agencies or organizations in the region, index and abstract these documents and distribute the information produced to all Member Governments. This distribution is in the form of a periodical publication - CARISPLAN Abstracts.

In CARISPLAN special emphasis is placed on the unpublished material which is not normally available through the trade or free distribution system.

Users of CARISPLAN

The Caribbean Information System is a very user-oriented system, which in conjunction with the information units of the Member countries, attempts to meet the specific information needs of the users. This had begun and will continue in the abstracting service by selecting the relevant material, and processing it in language and style which is easily understandable by the principal users.

As the system is decentralized and as the members of the system are sometimes separated by great distances, there is an even greater need for an effective abstracting service so that the experience and developments of Member countries can be shared by other countries in the region.

SCOPE OF CARISPLAN

The type of material suitable for input into the system has been detailed in the Indexing Manual. The general principle of input, however, is based on the inclusion of any socio-economic information produced in any of the CDCC Member countries. These documents might be published or unpublished, official or unofficial.

As many of these publications will not yet have been included in any of the international data bases, or abstracting services, the need for their input into the Caribbean Information System is even greater as this will be the main source of information on such material which might otherwise remain completely inaccessible to those who might require it.

In CARISPLAN the abstracting service must ensure the processing of the information in a manner which will enable the users to identify the:

(a)   leading subject of the document;

(b)   objective of the study, experiment, etc.;

(c)   nature of the problem investigated;

(d)   method of achieving the objective and the activities undertaken;

(e)   results of the findings;

(f)   conclusions reached;

(g)   recommendations for future action;

(h)   point of view from which the document was written and the period covered.

Input into the System

The bibliographic record cards which will contain the abstract will be prepared by the individual information centres which are part of the system. As some of the material might be held only by the national organization where it had been prepared, the information provided in the abstract will be considered as authoritative.

ABSTRACTS

Abstractors are presently the librarian/information specialists of the information centres of the region, as well as planners and project officers in the national organizations. It might, however, be necessary to consult officers who might have been responsible for the preparation of the document or who might be specialists in the subject area.

Definitions

An abstract is generally accepted as a condensed version of the contents of a document. There are, however, various interpretations of the meaning, and abstracts are often considered synonymous with introductions, summaries and precis.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in ISO 214- 1976(E) defines an abstract as:

"An abbreviated accurate representation of the contents of a document without added interpretation or criticism and without distinction as to who wrote the abstract".

A second definition provided by Wersig and Neverling in Terminology of Documentation describes the abstract as:

"The usually non-critical indication of the subject content of a document, aiming to permit the user a decision about the relevance of the document".

From both these definitions it can be concluded, as does W. Ashworth in Abstracting as a Fine Art, that there is in the abstract no loss of substance or clarity.

While there is some relationship with the other abbreviated forms - the précis, the summary and the introduction - the abstract unlike the introduction is intended at least at a preliminary stage, to serve as the substitute for the document rather than introducing the reader to its contents. On the other hand, the

abstract differs from the summary in that the abstract does not include any illustrations, tables or bibliographic references.

Types of abstracts

Within the above definition of abstracting there are several types of abstracts which vary in content, style and readability.

The two types frequently used by the abstracting publications are the informative and indicative abstracts which differ in the type of information contained.

The informative abstract summarized the major arguments and principal data and conclusions which the abstractor considers valuable contributions to knowledge, or which he considers likely to be of use to readers interested in the reported study. It is intended to obviate the necessity of consulting the original work.

The indicative abstract briefly indicates to the reader the scope and content of a document. It describes the actual document or report rather than the work reported.

It is not always desirable to make a clear distinction between the indicative and informative abstracts and in many abstracting services the type of abstract is the indicative informative abstract which is a combination of the two types.

The indicative informative abstract summarizes the major arguments, principal data, and conclusions and briefly indicates to the reader the scope and content of a document.

In addition to the three most frequently used abstracts defined above, there are several others some of which are used in abstracting services, or are included in documents at the time of preparation.

Author abstract

An abstract which has been produced by the author of the document.

At present the majority of material produced in the region does not contain author abstracts. The librarians/information specialists should encourage their colleagues in the organizations to prepare abstracts at the time of preparation of the documents.

The author abstracts which exist in regional publications are to be found mainly in theses. These sometimes have to be modified for input to the system, as they are often an introduction to the work rather than a condensed version of the original as required by CARISPLAN. The author abstract, if available, should however, be examined and modified to suit the requirements of entry into CARISPLAN.

Auto-abstract

An abstract which has been produced by means of an automated system.

Encoded abstract

An abstract not written in natural language but encoded to enable electronic data processing machines to scan it easily.

Structured abstract

An abstract which structures the description of the subject contents of the document by a prefixed scheme of positions or categories.

Telegraphic abstract

An abstract consisting of a set of keywords indicating the subject content of the document. There are no words or phrases linking the descriptors.

Characteristics of abstracts

In well-written abstracts there are certain characteristics which are evident, whatever the type.

(a)   Objectivity

The abstract should not contain any value judgements or any critical assessment of the contents of the document, nor should the abstractor attempt to evaluate the conclusions drawn by the author. Instead the abstractor, like the indexer, should be as impartial as possible in identifying and representing the subject content of the document.

In addition, the abstractor should ensure that the original tone and emphasis of the document are maintained.

(b)   Clarity

As in indexing, the abstractor should aim to avoid any words or phrases which might be ambiguous, or obscure in meaning, as the abstract is the main instrument for communicating the content and orientation of the document.

(c)   User-oriented

In keeping with the objectives of an information system, the abstract should place special emphasis on a particular aspect of a document known to be of special interest to a particular group of users.

(d)   Brevity

As a rule the abstract should be presented in a minimum of words, but in a manner which the users can readily understand. All important content should be included and quotations from the text where suitable can be included as parts of the abstract.

Type of abstract for CARISPLAN

For CARISPLAN it has been found necessary to define the type of abstract which is most suited to the system. The type selected is the informative-indicative abstract as defined above, which is considered most appropriate for a decentralized system including unpublished material of limited distribution.

While principally employing the informative-indicative abstract there are features of other types of

abstracts which are valuable to the system.

The user-oriented abstract which gives special emphasis to a particular aspect of a document known to be of special interest to the users of the system, and the structured abstract which presents the information in a special order are also types of abstracts used in CARISPLAN.

Each abstract is likely to include all these features combined to present the abstract as attractively and functionally as possible.

In the decentralized system of CARISPLAN, abstracts are prepared by:

(a)   Librarians and economists functioning as indexers in the Caribbean Documentation Centre;

(b)   Librarians working in the various information centres of the System;

(c)   Economists or planners or other officials in the Ministries of Planning who might also be responsible for
the preparation of some of the documents or might be technical specialists in some of the subject areas.

An important aspect of the abstracting process, however, is an understanding by the abstractors of the subject areas of the system and a familiarity with the socio-economic developments in the region.

Content of the abstract

The abstract produced by CARISPLAN is required to contain certain important elements. Abstractors should therefore identify the following and include them at the time of preparation:

(a)   The main subject of the document;

(b)   Significant new findings or discoveries which would be offering the users new knowledge;

(c)   The purpose, aim or objective of the author in undertaking the work. This should be gained from the abstractor's careful analysis of the document rather than from the author's declared intention. This will also indicate to users the results which the author is expecting to accomplish;

(d)   The point of view of the author, and any theories on which his ideas might be based should be identified by the abstractor as this will assist readers in assessing the value of the document;

(e)   The methodology employed in carrying out the study. The techniques which were used should be described without any great detail but highlighting any new approaches which might have been employed;

(f)   Numerical data will in some cases present to the reader a more meaningful picture of the research or findings. Such data when included should be summarized and given a condensed form;

(g)   Findings or results of the study or survey should also be reported in the abstract in concise form showing if possible, the relationship between the stated purpose and the findings and including the author's interpretation of the results. The results might sometimes be best reported numerically;

(h)   Conclusions or interpretation of the results which would have been very briefly stated in the opening sentence are fully given with an indication of those which have direct relation to the purpose of the document, and those which contribute new discoveries to the discipline. The author's justification of the results are included;

(i)   Recommendations or suggested solutions to the problem originally proposed for which the

author proposes formulation of future policy;

(j)   The names or oranizations, agencies or places which are treated in the study. In some types of studies, for example, regional planning projects, the exact name of the place should be given rather than the name of the country. The names of organizations should be given fully even if the abbreviation is used later in the abstract.

The abstract should exclude, however:

(a)   Any information already contained in the title or any other part of the bibliographic description;

(b)   Basic information already well-known to the users;

(c)   Information contained in any later editions of the document;

(d)   Obscure abbreviations or jargon which is not familiar to users. Internationally recognized abbreviations should be used, but others should be excluded;

(e)   Graphic displays, tables or other illustrations.

GUIDELINES FOR THE PREPARATION OF ABSTRACTS FOR CARISPLAN

In order to identify the subject content the abstractor is required to examine the document as carefully as possible. In the ideal situation the entire document should be read, but as time constraints are not likely to permit this, a strategy of scanning the document has to be employed.

Examination of the:

Title and title page	Section headings
Introduction	Tables and other illustrations
Table of contents	Author abstract
Summary	Conclusion

will assist in identifying the subject content and the important features.

The abstractor should then determine the relevance of the original title, and if necessary draft a substitute which would be incorporated in the opening sentence.

The next stage is the preparation of summaries for each major topic; these will include statements of the problem, objective and scope. From the notes, the final abstract can be prepared in language familiar to the user, employing short clear definite sentences, and including all essential ideas.

It is likely that in some cases a paraphrase of the author's words rather than an extract might be appropriate for the abstract. In the whole exercise, however, an objective uncritical tone should be maintained, preserving the original tone of the work.

Format and style

CARISPLAN requires a free language abstract written in short clear sentences and using language

familiar to the user.

While aiming to be as clear and concise as possible the style should avoid the use of telegraphic phrases which are sometimes less easy for the reader to understand and are not a significant saving on space.

Verb form and tense

The passive voice aids in maintaining impersonality, eliminates constant reference to the author and reduces metatext constructions, for example, "The authors felt that..." or "It is the author's contention that...".

As the abstract is a condensed form of the original rather than a description of it, the passive voice is used in the indicative or descriptive abstract but is replaced in the informative abstract by the explicit examples.

Example:

Indicative/Descriptive abstract - the usual causes of flooding from bad forestry practices are reviewed (59 characters).

Informative abstract - flooding is usually caused by bad forestry practices (45 characters).

In CARISPLAN the passive voice will be used wherever possible, presenting the important features of the original without any extraneous phrases.

Point of view

In preparing abstracts for CARISPLAN, the abstractor should be completely identified with the author. It is accepted that the abstractor is presenting the point of view, proposals and recommendations of the document of study rather than his own.

Length of abstract

A maximum number of 2500 characters (including spaces and punctuation) have been determined by CARISPLAN as a suitable length for the informative/indicative abstract which is required for the system. As there are various types of publications included in the system, there will be variations in the type of abstracts prepared and their lengths.

TYPES OF PUBLICATIONS

Yearbooks, directories, etc.

These will require only indicative abstracts, describing their contents and the abstract will therefore be relatively short.

Published works

As publications issued by the normal commercial channels and which have a wider distribution are available by purchase to readers, these do not require as long an abstract as other material which might be less accessible.

Unpublished material

A large proportion of the input into CARISPLAN is composed of unpublished material which might have been originally published only for limited distribution and of which there might be only a few copies available for loan. Such material will require detailed abstracting to indicate to the user its potential value to him.

The development plans of the Member governments while usually available to the general public have a small circulation and therefore are sometimes unavailable after the initial publication. Because of the special significance of these development plans to CARISPLAN the abstracting of these publications is done as fully as possible, and might require the full space permitted for the abstract.

Original works and theses

These include new discoveries which should be abstracted in some detail emphasizing the new discoveries and the special contributions to knowledge. Author abstracts will be found to exist in some of the publications which are to be included in CARISPLAN. These are usually author abstracts which have been prepared as the introduction to a thesis or which are intended to serve as the preliminary outline of a conference paper. These abstracts are therefore not likely to be directly transferable to CARISPLAN as their purpose, structure and orientation are likely to be different from that required for an abstracting service.