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CARIBBEAN INFORMATION SYSTEM  
FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PLANNING  
AN OVERVIEW - FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

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**UNITED NATIONS**

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA Office for the Caribbean

Honourable Minister, fellow librarians, ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed a pleasure for the ECLA Secretariat to have such a wide representation of colleagues from member states of the Caribbean Development and Co-operation Committee (CDCC) meet here in Port-of-Spain for the remainder of the week to evaluate the performance of the Caribbean Information System for Economic and Social Planning and make recommendations for its improvement in order to provide a more effective service to policy-makers, planners and their technical personnel.

The Caribbean Information System for Economic and Social Planning (CARISPLAN), as many of you are aware, is the first sector network to be developed in a comprehensive decentralized information system foreseen for the entire Caribbean region which covers not only the English-speaking CARICOM countries but Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles and the Bahamas.

CARISPLAN is implemented within a framework of horizontal co-operation and a policy designed to strengthen national institutions in order that they may participate more fully in and benefit from the regional programme. The System is decentralized and ensures that the national participating centres retain full responsibility for the collection, systematic organization, analysis and dissemination of their country's literature, and for its input to the regional system.

The decision to begin with the socio-economic planning sector reflected a need strongly expressed by the first meeting of Caribbean Planning Officials and the nature of the work of the ECLA Secretariat itself. But it was the financial assistance provided by the International Development Research Centre of Canada, to supplement the regular programme budget of the Secretariat, which really enabled the activities to be undertaken.

What I propose to do in this brief presentation is to provide you with an overview of the existing situation indicating some of the achievements and constraints, and to suggest a proposed framework for the evaluation of the System and its products.

The main objective of CARISPLAN is to support social and economic planning research and development at the national and sub-regional levels by making timely and relevant information available to each country according to existing and potential user needs, and to promote the optimum use of information resources available in the region by planners, policy-makers and other technical personnel.

### Achievements

During the past four years, the Caribbean Documentation Centre, as regional co-ordinating centre for the system, concentrated its activities on promoting the establishment and strengthening of information centres in the national planning agencies as focal points for the System; securing technical compatibility in the processing and retrieval of Caribbean information; establishing mechanisms for the flow of information; promoting the use of information and creating the computerized Caribbean data base of socio-economic information and its by-products.

In 1979, when the System was initiated, of the six national planning agencies which had organized collections, only three were professionally staffed. Today there are twelve organized information units in the national planning agencies of the 18 countries which participate in CDCC activities. Nine of these centres are professionally staffed and the other three are supervised by trained librarians. In addition to this strengthening of information units to serve as national focal points, the Centre staff worked systematically towards increasing participation at the national level and today, four years after initiation of the System, 150 participating centres provide bibliographic input for their countries' documents to the CARISPLAN data base and, like many other libraries in the region, use the products and services of the System to provide access to a wider range of documentation produced by the Caribbean countries.

The provision of advisory services and technical assistance missions by the ECLA Secretariat contributed to these developments and is also beginning to have an impact on the co-ordination of socio-economic information services at the national level.

Some measure of success has also been achieved by the Secretariat in its efforts to link funding agencies with national institutions with a view to developing national projects for library development. Scholarships were awarded by IDRC to focal point staff in Guyana and St. Vincent and in 1982, Barbados received financial assistance for the development of its national information system. More recently project proposals have been submitted to IDRC by Grenada, St. Vincent and Dominica. This means that additional human and material resources will be available to provide a more effective information service to the planners and policy-makers of those countries and the subsequent development of the focal points as national documentation centres. Other proposals are expected to be submitted in 1983. The development of these project activities may be viewed as CARISPLAN's contribution to the national information plans of these countries.

Two regional and ten national workshops have been conducted in modern documentation techniques for participation in the system. Four focal point librarians have been brought to the Caribbean Documentation Centre for periods of three to six weeks for in-service training.

The use of a common indexing vocabulary and the preparation and distribution of three manuals of practice as basic tools to be used by indexers working in the system have led to the introduction of standardized techniques for processing, subject analysis and retrieval of Caribbean documents. The tools used in the system are compatible with those used by the UN regional economic commissions and other international information systems, thus providing for an easy exchange of compatible data bases. The worksheets which were designed by CEPAL/CLADES ensure compatibility with INFOPLAN, the Latin American system for planning documentation.

The Secretariat has also been concerned with achieving better standardization and compatibility among existing and projected bibliographic systems in the region and supported a UNESCO consultant mission to design a common format for existing and proposed computerized bibliographic information systems in the Caribbean. <sup>1/</sup> The Secretariat proposes to hold a technical meeting later this year to discuss the Consultant's report, which has been circulated to national focal points and some national libraries.

In an effort to eliminate under-utilization of the region's information resources, the Secretariat convened a one-week regional workshop in Jamaica with a view to identifying appropriate programmes which could be adopted by the CARISPLAN national focal points to promote greater use of information. The participants of that workshop recommended the preparation and dissemination of publicity material focusing on the scope and services of the system to support the efforts of national librarians to sensitize policy-makers and to undertake user education programmes. A poster and a brochure have now been prepared, copies of which will be distributed during the meeting.

### Services

The Centre continues to place emphasis on access to information by providing dissemination and referral services and responding to requests for factual data and subject searches. A document delivery service is a major activity.

Seven issues of CARISPLAN Abstracts have been published and a list indicating geographical and type of user distribution is available. An analysis of the results of the questionnaires to evaluate the use made of the Current Awareness Bulletin, CARISPLAN Abstracts and some specialized bibliographies is also available to assist participants in their evaluation. Increased printing and postal charges are affecting the timeliness of the service.

### Major Constraints

We come now to a major area of difficulty, and that is, the creation of the Caribbean data base and dissemination of its by-products. While over 6,000 records have been prepared for entry to the data base, only 4,000 have been entered into the computer, and of these 4,000 records, only 1,531 have been published in the seven issues of CARISPLAN Abstracts which have appeared so far.

You are aware that, for reasons of international compatibility, the ISIS software is used to process CARISPLAN data. This package is designed to run on an IBM main frame or IBM 4300 series computer and its use requires employment of a programmer/systems analyst. Since the Centre's resources do not permit local access to this type of computer, the processing of CARISPLAN data is done at ECLA's head office in Santiago, Chile. Inevitably, there are delays in this type of arrangement.

In an effort to resolve these problems, Phase II of the CARISPLAN project included a consultant mission <sup>2/</sup> to examine the feasibility of access to computer facilities in Port-of-Spain for the creation, maintenance, retrieval and output in a variety of formats of the CARISPLAN data base.

In the opinion of the experts there is no immediate complete solution to the problem. They however recommended use of a Radio Shack TRS-80 Model II computer at the ECLA Office in Port-of-Spain for interactive data entry and data editing functions, with data processing continuing at ECLA, Santiago or the Caribbean Development Bank in Barbados. The recommendation for data entry was implemented last September and has eliminated delays which resulted from having the data entry done in Santiago.

In view of continuing advances in microcomputer technology and reduced hardware costs, ECLA is of the opinion that plans for future development of computerized activities should be oriented towards the use of micro-computers. The Caribbean Documentation Centre supports this policy decision since it can provide considerable benefits, especially to the smaller Caribbean countries. The Centre therefore acquired a TRS-80 Model II, an additional disk drive and a letter-quality printer. With this minimal equipment and a commercial software package, 1800 CARISPLAN records were transferred to a diskette and can be interactively searched using any, or a combination, of five basic data elements. A search demonstration was conducted at a recent Trinidad and Tobago workshop. The local Radio Shack agents have provided a TRS-80 on site to enable participants of this meeting to interactively search the demonstration diskette.

#### Future of the System

Based on this experience, the Centre has ordered a 12 megabyte hard disk drive which can accommodate a storage capacity equivalent to 50 diskettes. All CARISPLAN records will be transferred to hard disk, using ten basic data fields, including the abstract, and will be periodically updated. In this way, a tentative solution has been found for the search constraint but in-house data processing is still not possible.

There have been some encouraging developments in the preparation of micro-computer software which may be functionally compatible with ISIS and MINISIS and which has the ability to be used on different makes of microcomputers. Unfortunately, the package may not be available for another 18 months.

Phase II of the IDRC-funded project with the Centre was scheduled to end on July 31 but a supplemental grant has recently been approved for a 15-month extension. Funding for training activities during this period has been reduced but ECLA has taken steps to incorporate some of the System's activities in the regular United Nations budget and it is expected that essential training activities and technical assistance would be provided by the Centre's staff and supplemented where necessary by consultant services.

#### Evaluation Framework

This, ladies and gentlemen, is a brief overview of the operations as seen by the co-ordinating centre. Delegates will, later today, report on the national situation. I have refrained from attempting to present you with a cost analysis of operations because the decentralized nature of the System makes such an exercise impractical. Perhaps the focus of the evaluation could be oriented towards a critical examination of the key issues identified in the presentations of the various sessions and recommendations to improve the performance level of the System. Some of the issues relate to the activities of the System, promoting the development of national information infrastructure; measures to expedite the technical processes; requirements for preparing input and possible modification; consistency of indexing in the data base; selection policy for inputting documents; training methods adopted and tools provided; effectiveness of the products in meeting the information needs of the community served; format of the products; coverage and currency. An examination of the papers and subsequent discussion will reveal other areas for consideration.

I look forward to a fruitful meeting and I wish the overseas participants an enjoyable stay.

REFERENCES

- (1) Dierickx, Harold. A proposed common format for existing and projected computerized bibliographic information systems. Paris, UNESCO, 1982. 78p.
  
- (2) Valantin, Robert L. and Packer, Abel. Report on the feasibility of computerizing the CARISPLAN System at the Caribbean Documentation Centre, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. Ottawa, IDRC, Nov. 1981.