CARIBBEAN DEVELOPMENT AND CO-OPERATION COMMITTEE

THE CARIBBEAN REGION

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERIA
Subregional Office for the Caribbean

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EVALUATION OF PRODUCTS OF THE SYSTEM WITH SPECIFIC
REFERENCE TO CARISPLAN ABSTRACTS AND THE CURRENT
AWARENESS BULLETIN OF THE CARIBBEAN DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

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UNITED NATIONS

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA Office for the Caribbean

EVALUATION OF PRODUCTS OF THE SYSTEM
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Since systematic access to the data base has been, up to now, through the printed products, it is necessary to evaluate them and their effectiveness in meeting the information needs of the community served. Such an evaluation is in fact a measure of user satisfaction and it is necessary to determine:

The information needs of users in relation to the stated objectives of CARISPLAN;

Why the system performs at the present level and what may be done to improve the performance level in the future.

It might also be desirable to have a cost-effectiveness evaluation but in a decentralized system such as CARISPLAN it would be a major undertaking of questionable valuable.

The objectives of CARISPLAN are: "Supporting social and economic planning, research and development at national and sub-regional levels, by making timely and relevant information available to each country according to existing and potential user needs, and by promoting the optimum use of the information resources available in the region, by policy-makers, planners and other technical personnel."

In evaluating the success of CARISPLAN in meeting these needs, it is also useful to identify the various types of information need which could be experienced by CARISPLAN users. Lancaster [1] identifies four categories of needs, all of which seem identifiable with users of CARISPLAN: They are:

The need for a single item of factual data.

The need for a specific document of which some or all of the bibliographic reference is known.

The need to have one or more documents discussing a particular subject, but less than the total literature published or available.

The need for a comprehensive search, one that will retrieve as
much as possible of the literature published on a particular
subject in a particular time period.

The subject categories can also be sub·divided into:

The need for information to aid the solution of a particular
problem, or to facilitate the making of a particular decision.

The need to be kept aware of new developments in a particular
field of specialization.

These information needs are undoubtedly experienced by users of
CARISPLAN whether they are conveyed to the librarians or not.

Measuring the satisfaction, or the capabilities of satisfying these
needs, can be done according to certain criteria and examination of the pro-
ducts of the CARISPLAN in relation to, satisfaction of these criteria.

The main and overall criteria would be the accessibility of information
to users, and the following areas mainly identified by Lancaster _2/_
determine areas in which accessibility can be measured, They are:

Selection policies and procedures

Coverage of the universe of publications

Coverage by individual issues

Currency of coverage

Access points

Ease of use and response time

Layout format and size

Distribution

Speed of production and distribution

Searching methods required

Quality of indexing as reflected by:

    recall

    precision

    novelty or dynamism

    accuracy or consistency

The availability of on-line access

Quality of abstracting

Selection Policies and Procedures

It is the aim that all information produced in or about the region, and which is of a level to provide new information to policy-makers and planners, will be collected by the Caribbean Documentation Centre and therefore, should appear in the Current Awareness Bulletin. A selection of socio-economic information likely to interest policy-makers and planners is then included in CARISPLAN Abstracts.

A complementary activity is the input by each national focal point and participating centre of the documents produced, published or unpublished by the parent organization.

The Current Awareness Bulletin also aims to cover new technical and socio-economic information in areas relevant to policy-makers, planners and other technical personnel in the region. Its scope is wider therefore than CARISPLAN Abstracts, but it is limited to the holdings of the Caribbean Documentation Centre. Initially this bulletin included bibliographic references to recent publications of relevance to the CDCC Work Programme but not existing in the Documentation Centre. This section was eventually elimated due to human resource constraints. Current abstracting and indexing journals as well as current awareness lists of relevant systems, are checked to provide a basis of selection.

Coverage

Recognized gaps exist therefore as relevant documents which have been produced by organizations which are not yet participating,have not yet been included in the data base and therefore, do not appear in CARISPLAN Abstracts. It is expected that the national focal points will take steps to cover the material produced by agencies which are not yet able to contribute directly.

Another area in which there are obvious gaps is in the coverage of unpublished documents. As no definitive listing exists it is impossible to measure the percentage coverage by CARISPLAN, in the interim national focal points and participating centres are increasing in their access to and coverage of the documents, and in relation to exercises of declassification have been able to cover a greater percentage of the documents.

Currency of coverage

The most up to date coverage of information is highly desirable. This has been achieved only partially, and is therefore recognized as an area in which:

input needs to be more current

the technical processes need to be more speedily expedited.

Access points

CARISPLAN Abstracts provides access points of:

DEVSIS categories

Subject descriptors (for post-coordination) countries (as subjects)

Authors (including institutions associated with the intellectual content of the work)

Conferences

Symbols.

These seem to include most of the areas relating to information needs. An access point by Projects might also be useful.

The Current Awareness Bulletin on the other hand provides a classified sequence with more general subjects sub-divided by subject descriptors. As the bulletin is not yet computerized the author and other potentially useful indexes have been omitted in the interest of speedier compilation for regular monthly production.

Ease of use and response time

The workshops and meetings as well as suggestions from the CDC staff have provided proposals for making the printed products easier to use. It has already been possible to implement some of these proposals although it is recognized that the existing products are still not perfect.

CARISPLAN Abstracts

A more detailed introduction in English and Spanish has been added since No. 3. This helps users who might not be familiar with the system to be immediately aware of the scope, coverage and layout of the journal. Current lists of national focal points and participating centres are also included as well as a sample entry in which each element is explained.

The Current Awareness Bulletin has also been amended by numbering of each
entry so that documents can be quickly requested simply by the number of
the bulletin and the mumber of the entry. A list of producers of documents
has been appended to improve access to documents not available from the CDC.
More detailed subjects have been added to the bulletin since the start of
the system.

Layout, format and size

This is related to the ease with which both products can be used by
librarians and non-librarians to provide access to the information held
by CARISPLAN and the CDC.

CARISPLAN Abstracts

Issues contain 200-300 entries approximately with the main sequence
being the DEVSIS categories. Some users might be interested in consulting
regularly announcements and descriptions of new projects. This could be
done by consulting DEVSIS category D30 where these are listed. The in-
dexes follow then this main sequence with 3 language versions of the subject
and country indexes. The full record is reproduced only in the main sequence
while indexes contain title and or numerical references to the main sequence·
An evaluation of this aspect would be related to a determination of the
section which the majority of users are most likely to consult, and whether
there is adequate infomation provided.

Format of the Current Awareness Bulletin and CARISPLAN Abstracts

The question arises of the users ability to quickly recognize the
elements in the print out of each entry, and whether the format of each
entry would need to be modified.

Size: As with most current awareness services the size of both products is
dictated by the number of documents received over a given period. Recom-
mendations for changes in size would therefore be related to changes in
frequency.

Distribution: Both products are distributed to national focal points,
participating centres and to individual researchers, policy-makers,
planners and other technical personnel. In order to keep the mailing
list current, copies of each country's list were sent to the national

focal point with a request that names be added to or deleted from the list
as appropriate. A breakdown of the mailing list by country and by the type
of user is provided as an appendix to this paper.

Speed of production and distribution

The Current Awareness Bulletin is an ongoing compilation of entries re-
ceived. At the end of the month this list is stenciled and sent out by mail.
Feedback on the gap between the date of despatch and the date of receipt of
both the Current Awareness Bulletin and CARISPLAN Abstracts would be useful
in determining future distribution policies.

The production of CARISPLAN Abstracts is on the other hand, a longer pro-
cess, which involves checking of entries, data entry, processing on a computer
in Santiago, Chile, and reproduction. The final product is sent by mail.
Initially there were technical difficulties in synchronizing the various stages
of production, and now that several of them have been solved, and the data
entry is being done online at the CDC, rather than by batch processing, it is
expected that the production time will be greatly decreased.

Searching Methods required

One of the objectives of distributing the Current Awareness Bulletin and
CARISPLAN Abstracts to individual users as well as to libraries is that it is
envisaged that users would be able and willing to consult the abstracting
journal directly. In an evaluation it is therefore necessary to determine
whether the search methods required are oriented to users or whether they
would have to be dedicated to librarians and information specialists.

The number of steps which a user would have to take to arrive at the
information required is also an important consideration in this evaluation.

Quality of indexing

As the descriptors are the main search keys in both the Current Awareness
Bulletin and CARISPLAN Abstracts, it is consequently of great importance that
they provide reasonable recall, but precise results, that they reflect new
developments in terminology and are also accurate and consistent.

An appropriate measure of the precision recall ratio is the difference between the number of entries located on a particular topic, and those which are correctly and accurately indexed.

Novelty and dynamism are desirable features in indexing, and this is provided for by the ability of the system to include terms outside the controled vocabulary. Are enough of these terms used or should there be more?

The availability of online services would be expected to increase access to the contents of the data base. Would this cause users to consult it more often and would the search strategies be manageable by individual users?

You will have seen the sample of the CARISPLAN data base which has been established. If the entire data base were available it would be possible to do searches more rapidly, and to take advantage of the post co-ordination permitted by the indexing.

Abstracts have been included in all entries to save the users consulting unwanted or irrelevant documents. An extensive abstract can sometimes help the user to gain information from a document which is not immediately available. Do the abstracts in CARISPLAN Abstracts achieve this?

These seem to be the major areas in which an evaluation of CARISPLAN Abstracts and the Current Awareness could take place. It is not however, considered to be exhaustive and your views and recommendations on each area based on your experiences should greatly help to determine future policies and procedures.

1/ Lancaster, F.W. Guidelines for the evaluation of information systems and services. Paris, UNESCO, 1978.

2/ op. cit.