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Topic (ii): Sketching out the future of statistical publications

REVIEWING THE CONCEPT OF THE ECE STATISTICAL YEARBOOK

Supporting Paper

Submitted by UNECE¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has been publishing a statistical yearbook *Trends in Europe and North America* every second year for the past 10 years. The publication is a compilation of basic socio-economic statistics for the member countries of the UNECE. It endeavours to paint a broad picture of recent social and economic life of countries in the region and covers 14 statistical areas: population, families and households, education, employment, economy, health, housing, transport, tourism, energy, environment, communication, participation and crime and safety.
2. The *Trends* yearbook is accompanied by a small, pocket-book publication *Mini-Trends* which includes a page with some basic data for each UNECE member country (country profile). *Mini-Trends* is used as promotional material for the UNECE and is distributed free-of-charge at different meetings organized by the UNECE.
3. The UNECE also maintains several statistical databases, some of which are accessible via Internet (e.g. gender database) and others that will be made accessible in the near future (e.g. macroeconomic database). For the last issue, the *Trends* data are also available on Internet. In connection with the increased accessibility of our data via the web, the question is raised whether, and in what format, to continue the UNECE Statistical Yearbook. The concept of the yearbook is currently being reviewed and some of the considerations for developing the new concept are presented here.

II. USER SURVEY ON *TRENDS*

4. As a basis for developing the new concept, a reader survey was carried out in 2003/04 to obtain information on the users of the *Trends* data and their preferences. The survey was done through Internet, so the results are not representative for all users². Regardless of that, the survey provided some answers that help us in considering the future of the publication.

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² There have been user surveys with earlier issues of the publication targeting the readers of the paper version: a card with some questions was attached to the publication with the request to fill it in and send to the address printed on the other side of the card. Although the respondents were offered a free copy of *Mini-Trends*, very few replies were received. This can be partly due to the fact that often the publication goes to the libraries and it is difficult to reach the final user.

5. About 1500 of the *Trends* readers were asked to fill in the questionnaire during a 3-month period. About 250 replies were received (as an incentive, the respondents were sent a free copy of the *Mini-Trends* after completing the questionnaire).
6. To obtain ideas for marketing *Trends*, we asked from where the readers got information about the publication. Three out of four readers had found it via Internet (through search engines, link from another website, etc.) and about one quarter via a paper publication (in library, bookshop, *Mini-Trends*, etc.). The share of readers using the paper version was greater than we expected and shows that even for Internet publications, we should not rely only on Internet for users to find it. Some form of marketing through paper (a leaflet, web address in a publication, etc.) might be useful.
7. The biggest group of users comes from education (41%) – both students and teachers. This is quite a large share. Perhaps there is a special audience for compendium type publications that is somewhat neglected. The next biggest groups are research and industry/commerce/services. All these together cover about 86% of the readers. The share of the media is very small (3%) which is not surprising as the data in a yearbook-type of publication are not very fresh. However, television has shown some interest in using the data as background information for programs about different countries. There have been also requests for data from authors of other similar publications.
8. To the question on the intended use of data, the most frequent reply was ‘to use it as background material for an article/paper/presentation’ (55%), next ‘for improving knowledge’ (44%) and then ‘for making further analysis, graphs, etc.’ (34%). For the last group, it is important to get the data in such a format that it can be further processed. For the first two, the paper version might also be sufficient.
9. Concerning topics of interest, economy and population were on the top of the list. For economic data we did not expect such a great interest as the data are not very recent. It probably reflects the great interest in this topic in general. Also, the macroeconomic situation of countries does not change very rapidly and for a country comparison, 1-2 year old data might be good enough.
10. **Preferred media:** about 90 percent of users wanted to have the publication on Internet, but about 30% still wanted to have the paper publication (and about 30% also the CD-Rom). 83 % preferred the data in the format of Excel tables, other options (graphs/maps, database, text) were chosen in a little more than 50% of cases. It seems that the audience of this kind of publication prefers a ready-made selection (as Excel tables are) to the link to a database where they have to go themselves through the selection-making process, learn to know how it works, what kind of data can be selected, etc. Databases allow much more flexibility but also require much more effort and time to get the data. The users of compendium-type publications may not require this flexibility.
11. About half of the users qualified themselves as experts or researchers who use statistics frequently in their professional work. About three quarters had at least some statistical training. The users also considered data quality quite important, only 3% replied that they just need some data and quality does not matter much. As *Trends* is an international publication, comparability was considered the most important aspect of quality. When asking about the positive impressions, users liked most the wide variety of topics and information in one place and the possibility to compare countries. On the negative side were mentioned lack of timeliness, need for more detail (but the areas where the detail was required were different), longer time-series, etc.
12. What did we learn from the reader survey? We learned that the concept of a publication offering general level comparable (as much as possible) data on different countries from a wide variety of areas is in general on track – it has its target audience and seems to meet the users’ expectations. There is enough interest to justify its preparation but not enough to make it a commercially viable project (which was not also our aim).
13. There is a demand for a compendium type data release - that is, for a ready-made selection of data, in either a paper or electronic format. This kind of demand cannot be entirely met by offering a link to a

database; the time and effort required for searching data in statistical databases may scare away some users.

14. The yearbooks are often a promotional publication: if there is a statistical office, division, institution, etc., it feels obliged to produce a yearbook. However, at present this function may be taken over by the website. A statistical office needs to have a well-prepared website to be visible, to be taken seriously and to convey an image of a professional institution.

15. To fulfil this kind of flagship publication role, a combination of paper and CD-Rom/Internet can be used. The paper publication may be slimmed down considerably to contain only a selection of data serving as an example of what the statistical office can offer. The paper publication can be complemented with a bigger volume of more detailed data on a CD-Rom or website. Having a “hard” reference to the website, e.g. in a book (in libraries, shops, on your bookshelf) is quite important.

III. NEW CONCEPT FOR *TRENDS* – OPTIONS AND QUESTIONS

16. The classical version of *Trends*, issued every odd year since 1995, contains about 300 pages issued as a sales publication. The accompanying *Mini-Trends* of about 60 pages is considered as advertising material and distributed free-of-charge. This promotional material is updated and published annually. There is a considerable workload behind these publications representing approximately 15 work months in a year when both the *Trends* and *Mini Trends* are issued, and about 6 work months the other years. The zero growth regular budget and decrease in extra-budgetary resources used for publishing *Trends* led the UNECE to consider various options for the future. This process is currently underway.

17. These considerations take place within the broader framework of a changed data dissemination policy in the UNECE. In the past, the data collected by the Statistical Division were made available to the users/readers through various publications, often published by other UNECE Divisions. While these publications had statistical tables annexed to them, readers still did not get the full picture of data collected. Therefore, the UNECE Statistical Division plans to make available most of its database to the public from 18 February 2005. For this purpose, the UNECE has implemented the PC-AXIS family of data dissemination products³.

A. Internet-only option

18. A logical and economically suitable option would be to focus only on electronic dissemination. As the majority of *Trends* was based on data already available at the UNECE for other purposes, it would be simple to let the users look into data available in the database. This option has two possible versions:

- ❖ To leave the data within the original database contexts (macroeconomic database and database on socio-economic aspects of gender statistics);
- ❖ To create new cubes within the PC-AXIS which would pull together statistics originally presented within *Trends*.

19. The second variant would be preferable, as it would ensure some continuity with the previous publications and greater usefulness for the users. It is very likely that this possibility will be implemented in the near future.

B. Internet and a printed publication simultaneously

20. The database-only solution may, however, not satisfy the former readership of *Trends*, and the UNECE may, therefore, choose a combination of both the virtual publication on Internet and a printed publication. This option would permit a reduction in the size of the printed publication, and consequently a better alignment of the workload and available resources. The printed publication would guide the

³ PC-AXIS was originally developed by Statistics Sweden. At present it is maintained by a consortium of 26 statistical offices. More information can be found at <http://www.pc-axis.scb.se/>.

reader to additional data available on the Internet, and hopefully thus would not create a major disappointment among the readership.

21. It should be emphasized that a part of *Trends* was always published on the Internet. There was, however, a different relationship, because the Internet version was considered as an advertisement for the extended printed version. The user comfort of the Internet version was quite limited as the published material was in HTML and PDF formats. In 2003 all data from *Trends* were published as Excel files that permitted a re-use of data by the readers. The philosophy of the PC-AXIS solution would be quite the opposite of the original relationship, as the printed publication would be advertising for the extended PC-AXIS version.

22. Bearing in mind such a complementary approach, we may still wish to decide on what format the printed publication may have. The classical solution would be to publish a book with a reduced number of pages referring to the data cubes available on the Internet. This could be an acceptable solution - the resources for the preparation of a printed publication would be reduced.

23. This obviously raises the question whether or not it is still justified to publish both *Trends* and *Mini Trends*. Therefore, as a trial, the 2005 issue of *Trends* took the form of "*Midi Trends*". The publication contains significantly extended country profiles compared to the previous editions on *Mini Trends*. This is the only version of *Trends* issued in 2005.

C. Printed publication with CD-ROM

24. On an experimental basis, part of the 2005 issue will be accompanied by a CD-ROM. The expectations of the authors are that the CD-ROM will provide some sort of a bridge between the printed and the Internet publications. Data are available as Excel files. CD-ROM users may use it with or without the Internet connection, and in the latter case they will benefit from links to all original data sources used for the publication.

25. The value added of the CD-ROM is the cartographic presentation of data. This is again a trial, as the UNECE Statistical Division has never prepared such a product. The *Thematic Atlas of Europe and North America* was prepared in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Statistical Office using the freeware product Mapresso⁴. This, in our view, justifies the CD as a value added to the publication, not only repeating or slightly extending the data tables.

D. Future Steps

26. A Task Force was created to come up with a concept for the future *Trends*. The Task Force is expected to conclude its work in 2005.

IV. SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF YEARBOOKS AND COMPENDIUM-TYPE PUBLICATIONS

27. First, we have to define what is meant by a yearbook or a compendium-type publication. Although called a publication, it does not have to be in a paper format, there can be also electronic publications. So, what are the characteristics that make it a publication, even when it might exist only in electronic format? What makes it different from other data dissemination methods, e.g. databases on Internet?

28. We can say that a statistical publication contains:

- a ready-made selection of data (as opposed to databases where the user has to select the data);
- a specific release date (is not continuously updated);
- wide coverage of data (different areas) – provides a one-stop shopping place for different data;

⁴ See www.mapresso.com for further detail.

- clearly specified content (e.g. focusing on a specific area or, on the contrary, covering a wide range of areas on a general level);
- different data presentation formats (tables, charts, maps);
- tight package with a common visual design.

29. The general move is away from paper publications towards electronic presentation. Often the paper publications are discontinued altogether. However, when thinking about the future, we have to take into account both the positive and negative sides of the “hard”-copy format in developing a product that combines the good sides of both paper and electronic formats.

30. There are some obvious disadvantages to the paper publication:

- it takes long time to produce, therefore data are not fresh;
- it does not allow updating;
- correction of errors is complicated;
- page size is limited, therefore can not accommodate large tables and many dimensions (more than 4 dimensions are already difficult to produce and understand, e.g. if there is a time and regional component, there is only space for 1-2 breakdowns of indicators);
- bulky and more expensive to produce and reproduce.

31. However, there are also advantages:

- it is more comfortable to browse;
- can be used in environments where computer technology is not available or comfortable to use;
- there is no problem with archiving;
- the structure and navigation do not change;
- the authors can take pride in having produced something tangible;
- it can be used as promotional material;
- it can make the authoring institution more visible as an information producer (via libraries, bookshops, etc.).

32. The compendium publications are good for a certain type of audience, e.g. in education. For teaching purposes, the data do not always necessarily need to be the most recent.

V. CONCLUSION

33. The statistical yearbooks/compendium publications have a future but they should change to make use of their advantages and minimize the disadvantages. They allow using much more the storytelling and picture-showing principle and therefore should be tailored to a specific audience who can appreciate that. The use for educational purposes is a good example. Educational use is not limited to use in schools and universities. We all appreciate a more user-friendly presentation as we cannot be experts in everything. The publications could be less bulky, use more graphic presentation and analysis and include a reference to more detailed data on a CD-Rom or Internet.