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Theme 3

**USERS ARE NOT A HOMOGENEOUS GROUP AND MUST BE APPROACHED  
DIFFERENTLY ACCORDING TO THEIR BACKGROUND AND NEEDS**

Supporting paper submitted by the Office for National Statistics<sup>1</sup>

1. It has been said that the statistical transition, by which most people mean the introduction of new statistical series, is the easiest of the three transitions necessary for the complete change of the statistical system. The second, and more difficult transition, is the change of the statistical culture within the national statistical office, which is necessary to support the new methodologies.
2. But the third transition is by far the most difficult. The new modern statistical office presents its new modern product to a world of users, many of whom are unprepared, who do not see what was wrong with the old system and who certainly do not want it changed. The user transition is equally important and I believe has been the most ignored up to now.

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Phil Crook, Statistics Adviser, UK Department for International Development.

*These views are those of the author and not necessarily of DFID.*

3. Edvard Outrata recognised the challenge a few years ago in Budapest, when he warned that the day he stopped producing the old-style statistics and only gave his customers the new, would be an awkward day for Czech statisticians!

4. Accepting that the user transition is necessary (and inevitable) what can statisticians do to make it more comfortable and inclusive, and how can the wider statistical community help?

5. It is clear that we must identify and engage with all the users. It might be helpful to introduce a typology of user groups for this analysis, which can conveniently be summarised as:

- traditional users under the old system who continue to want statistics, for example Government;
- new institutions who know they want statistics, such as the Press, opposition parties and the private sector;
- the general public, who on the whole have had little contact with statistics (mainly as providers of information) and none as users, and do not know what statistics can do for them;
- the international users, who know what they want and how to get it, and in some cases can pay for it.

6. Government are the traditional users of transition country statistics and have one of the more difficult relationships to disentangle especially as they pay for most statistical production. Of course governments differ in their attitude towards statistics and one cannot generalise too far, but the previous style of using statistics as part of the control mechanism for the command economy must have left behind a group of users who are reluctant to drop their demands for any of the series and level of detail they received before. It must be hard to accept that in the market economy you may very well receive less than before, that the market means a reduction in the staff of the statistical service, an increase in the number of entities to be covered, a decrease in response rates, a replacement of full coverage by samples, a dropping of certain series and their replacement by new and unfamiliar ones.

7. So the task for the statistical offices is one of continuous dialogue and education, which can be supported by external partners. It will take many years before the truth is accepted and during that time the statistics office will be subject to constant criticism. User groups must be an important tool in developing understanding, as will be education and training about for example what data derived from samples and seasonally adjusted actually means. Partners of the NSIs can help enormously by demonstrating to both statisticians and users that these issues are live in other countries and by showing how the market can be made to work for statistics as well as against it.

8. The new institutions most probably did not exist 10 or 15 years ago, or did so with a very low profile. They therefore have less historical baggage as regards using statistics, but may have a greater

mistrust of the role of the statistics office within open government. For these people it is crucial for the statistics office to demonstrate independence from state control (or at least an ability to publish data which criticise or contradict government statements). This is part of the education process for government users too, who will gradually get used to the idea of waiting until data are published before making statements.

9. It is clear that the existence of these new groups is a great opportunity for the statistical services to build a user community with fewer preconceived ideas but probably at the moment a healthy degree of scepticism. These communities are likely to be in touch with counterparts outside the country and will demand the same service - they need to be engaged in open debate about the very real problems faced by the statistical systems and let into some of the secrets, perhaps, about the way in which data were handled in the past.

10. The general public are a vital part of the statistical system, whether as individuals or as employers and employees. Either way, they are a prime source of data and with the new freedoms and disappointments no longer feel they need to participate in surveys and form filling. Response rates are declining markedly, and having inherited a system whereby people expect to be paid for participation in surveys, statistics offices can no longer afford the bills. At the same time, like many of their fellows in other countries, the public see no real use for statistics. Transition countries have an opportunity perhaps of developing a public user community which is different to that which we have, for example, in the UK. Here, statistics are quoted daily, often in a provocative way, to prove and disprove contradictory arguments, and one can sense a weariness amongst the public for sensationalist figures lacking solid analysis.

11. What can be done to alleviate this boredom with figures, or lack of involvement. In the UK, one of the most popular publications of the ONS is Social Trends - or perhaps it is more accurate to say the publicity which surrounds it - to which many people can relate. I am sure that this is a positive advertisement for national statistics. The public also know that the national calculations for inflation, for example, are very relevant to pensions and welfare benefits. The ONS also seeks every opportunity to popularise their products - the children's census, for example, and the year of mathematics (and statistics). I should mention that the recent census campaign of the Kyrgyz statistics office was exactly in this spirit. Offices can set aside a little of their resources to comment on popular issues of the day, which can be done by simply taking a different view of existing data, rather than doing new work. Exchanging imaginative ideas, through exchange of publications, can show all of us how the public can be persuaded into a more positive frame of mind towards statistics. It is also important that statisticians themselves and the interviewers they employ are models of integrity. Maintaining a productive relationship with the press is important, as they are the usual intermediaries with the public.

12. The international users, in my view, need a different approach. The problem here is one of a vocal user community whose needs are very well articulated and often backed up with funding. I should state right away that international reporting (for example to the IMF, to Eurostat, FAO) naturally benefits the country too and I am not advocating ignoring these needs. But they must be put into context. While the statistical office is trying to develop the national user community, which requires more

time and resources than will be needed to maintain it later on, requests from international agencies, whether or not backed up by funding, need to fit within an overall work plan and priorities. There will be occasions when international demands will have to be pushed down a level or two. No transition office can be expected to have available every statistic for a particular topic - it is more important that statistical development addresses all sectors equally, can be developed through carrying out an assessment of users needs, followed by a prioritised work programme which is nationally owned, and places the international user in context.

13. For this group, then, I urge restraint. External partners, particularly the bilateral ones who are not in the main users, can help the statistical offices to resist some of the pressures and put the international community into perspective.

## Conclusion

14. The above is not an earth-shattering diagnosis. Most recently, in the 1999 Geary lecture, Tim Holt spoke about "getting statistics used" and it is worth reiterating some of the points he made. For Tim, the user community divides along three different lines:

- experts and novices
- those who want aggregated data and those who want micro-data
- those who want regular series and those who want ad-hoc analyses

15. Each dimension requires the statistics office to respond in a different way. But the countries in transition, I believe, have the added challenge of building up the internal market for statistics, and in some cases changing the mindsets of traditional users.

16. In summary, therefore, this short paper argues that the user community is not a homogeneous group and therefore the way it is approached by the statistical service should be tailored when addressing particular members of the community.

17. Secondly, education and training of users is not only the preserve of statisticians and their development projects. Training in the correct use of data needs to be built into as many projects as possible. Certainly, we in DFID are trying to do this more systematically than in the past, for example in health, education and social sector reform programmes.

18. Finally, there is no correct way of approaching users and users groups, there are only experiences which have worked or failed to work. All statistical offices have experiences and this conference is an excellent opportunity for sharing them.