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for Dissemination to Information Media**  
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Topic (b): Methods of statistical dissemination,  
policies and techniques

STATISTICAL DISSEMINATION TO INFORMATION MEDIA IN  
DEVELOPING AND TRANSITION COUNTRIES

Submitted by ISTAT<sup>1</sup>

**Invited Paper**

**Foreword; beyond the “Handbook”**

Statistical advocacy and statistical dissemination are an important part of statistical capacity building in the developing and transition countries.

Statistical advocacy<sup>2</sup> means promoting good standards in public statistics through correct information not about the data but about the statistical activity itself. It focuses the attention of policy makers on the need of financing public statistics and of complying with international rules that guarantee quality and independence.

Statistical dissemination<sup>3</sup> increases awareness of the importance of statistics among opinion leaders, media, respondents, and helps improving the “numeracy” (numerical literacy) of the country and the quality of future data.

Today, however, there is no effective initiative to support statistical advocacy and improve the techniques of dissemination in developing countries. This short paper, based on some recent experiences<sup>4</sup>, aims to draw a picture of the situation and to stimulate new initiatives.

The UNECE group of statistical communicators to the media might have an important role in this field. It is participated by people who share best practices but also “tacit knowledge”; who know each other personally and are used to working together; and who are able to produce international working material, like the ‘Handbook on best practices’. Even if the handbook could be refined and brought up to perfection,

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Giovanni Barbieri and Donato Speroni

<sup>2</sup> For a definition, see [http://www.paris21.org/html/TT\\_Advocacy.htm](http://www.paris21.org/html/TT_Advocacy.htm)

<sup>3</sup> In the Internet age, the boundary between “dissemination to the media” and “external dissemination” is fuzzy. While in the past the traditional media were the only way to disseminate statistical information to the public, now statistical data are immediately available on the web. So, the production of most non-technical statistical information that goes on the web requires the same editorial capacity as press release and many concepts presented in this paper apply also to dissemination *tout court*.

<sup>4</sup> Speroni’s company Odysseus (see [www.odysseus.it](http://www.odysseus.it)) is active in the field of statistical communication. It won the bidding on statistical advocacy by Paris21, it is consultant for communication to the Italian Statistical System (Sistan) and is presently working in Tanzania with Oxford Policy Management ([www.opml.co.uk](http://www.opml.co.uk)) and the Tanzanian National Bureau of Statistics.

it would just be a shade of the experiences of the group that produced it. Now this group can contribute to a world network of people and institutions dealing with statistical dissemination.

### **The evolution toward a global statistical system**

Statistical advocacy and dissemination are professional activities<sup>5</sup>, as much as organising a census or analysing a survey. They require a specific capacity in the field of communication: this is well known in Europe and in North America, where all the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) of the industrialised countries have staffed a dissemination department with professional people: journalists, experts in marketing and publishing, web specialists.

The exchange of experiences between different countries is considered very important<sup>6</sup>. Beside UNECE, statistical communicators of European countries work together in Eurostat, which has created a “Reflection group on the future of statistical dissemination in Europe”. OECD has recently redefined its policy on dissemination<sup>7</sup>. Common standards are under development for statistical databases and for marketing issues like pricing. IMF’s Bulletin boards (that were presented in one of these meetings in Geneva in 1995) have played a very important role in improving international dissemination standards.<sup>8</sup>

The creation of new international dissemination standards is just part of a more general process that aims to promote a new international statistical system<sup>9</sup>. In a few years, we can foresee a set of international databases provided by international agencies in joint venture, that will provide comparable data from the advanced countries: a set gradually extending to the rest of the world.

This global process requires qualified statistical communicators all over the world. A few steps have already been taken in this direction. One of the working groups of the Paris21 Consortium<sup>10</sup> is targeted to

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<sup>5</sup> In this framework, one may identify an area of co-operation between the dissemination departments of statistical institutes and the media operators. On this issue see our other paper “Statistical literacy: the case for co-operation between disseminators and media professionals”.

<sup>6</sup> Most of the innovations introduced in statistical dissemination by the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) from 1994 to 1998, have been inspired by international experiences discussed at the UNECE meetings: the fixed calendar of press releases, the “lock up system” for sensitive data releasing, the principle of “electronic first” in statistical publishing are just some examples.

<sup>7</sup> See “The OECD dissemination policy for statistics”, <http://www.oecd.org/EN/document/0..EN-document-notheme-15-no-20-29985-0.00.html>

<sup>8</sup> The IMF Dissemination Standards Bulletin Board (see <http://dsbb.imf.org/index.htm>) include SDDS for countries who want to be part of the global financial markets and GDDS for countries that are just improving their statistical systems. Both standards are more generally aimed to improve quality in public statistics, but the effects are of course important for dissemination. IMF, with the World Bank, also supports “the continued provision of technical assistance to countries interested in GDDS participation, as well as to help existing participants fulfil action plans for improving their statistical systems”.

<sup>9</sup> “In Europe, Eurostat is developing the European Statistical System, a network of the EU-NSOs; the pre-accession countries will join the System in a few years' time, while countries of the former Soviet Union are receiving technical assistance from Eurostat to develop their own statistical systems. In the Balkan countries co-operation in statistics is a tool to help those countries to develop their own governance. In Asia, the development of emerging economies and greater openness in China is increasing the demand for good statistics for those areas. The same tendency is emerging in Latin America, while many African countries are now developing their statistical systems, asking for help from international organisations. The globalisation of the world economy is creating several new challenges for statisticians”. (from a conference by Enrico Giovannini – OECD Chief Statistician and Director of Statistics Directorate)

<sup>10</sup> Paris21 (Partnership in statistics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) was launched at a meeting held in Paris in November 1999 of senior statisticians and policy-makers. The meeting was an initiative of the United Nations, OECD, the World bank, IMF and the European Commission in response to an Economic and Social Council resolution on indicators and statistical capacity building, see [www.paris21.org](http://www.paris21.org)

statistical advocacy in the developing and transition countries. In 2001, a hypertext<sup>11</sup> on statistical advocacy was organised with the support of an international group of experts<sup>12</sup> working on line.

The hypertext is called “*Why statistics?*”. It is divided into five main chapters:

- 1) Good statistics, a tool for development presents the case for good statistics, examples of the use of statistics taken from documents, speeches and pamphlets of different NSOs and their managers. It also explains why statistics are important to attract foreign investment and meet international obligations.
- 2) Setting priorities insists on the meaning of establishing a national statistical system and of developing a statistical master plan and explains the importance of different kinds of statistics.
- 3) How to produce and disseminate good statistics contains material about role and ethos of official statisticians, quality, relations with respondents, the media and dissemination.
- 4) Paying for official statistics not only gives marketing suggestions but also informs on the role of international aid in statistics.
- 5) Statistics for poverty-reduction policies deals with a theme that has a particular importance for Paris21.

Too much in too little? The “*Why statistics?*” website was just intended to be the backbone of a website that should gradually have collected information on best practices from developing countries.

The “*Why statistics?*” working group has also produced a poster<sup>13</sup> and a pamphlet<sup>14</sup>, but the hypertext was the prevailing choice in the Paris21 advocacy investment of 2001. For people dealing with international aid, it is sometimes difficult to understand why an Internet solution was chosen to communicate with people in countries that still can afford a very low per capita use of Internet. But it must be remembered that the “*Why statistics?*” hypertext had a specific aim and a specific target: it was supposed to collect non technical material about statistical advocacy and dissemination that NSOs’ officers from developing countries could have adapted to their needs.

“*Why statistics?*” was not intended for people producing statistics (IMF, UN and others have their own websites on statistical best practices<sup>15</sup>) and not for the public opinion of developing countries, but for people in the statistical bureaux that, often without any experience in this field, are in charge of advocacy and dissemination. This explains the choice of Internet for countries under the so called line of “electronic divide”: even in the poorest countries statistical disseminators can have some access to internet and can use electronic material, while it is much more difficult and expensive to adapt paper material to local needs.

The “*Why statistics?*” website was developed in the first months of 2001 and its development was delayed, as many other international activities, by the new world situation. Up to now, it has not been

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.odysseus.it/sfabw/HomePage.html>

<sup>12</sup> The task team convenor for Paris 21 was Graham Eele, an economist from the World Bank. The Odysseus team that produced the hypertext was led by Donato Speroni, assisted by John Wright in Oxford, who had final responsibility for editing the English material. The web-site section on poverty was written by Ben Kiregyera, First Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Ugandan Bureau of Statistics. Additional material and comments were provided by: Petra Kuncová, Director of the Electronic Dissemination Department, Czech Statistical Office; Audrone Miskiniene, responsible for reorganisation and development of information management strategy, Statistics Lithuania; and Tuulikki Sillajoe, Head of the Marketing and Dissemination Division, Statistical Office of Estonia. In Rome, Sheila Chapman (an economist) and Cristiana Conti (ISTAT) prepared some of the pages, while Roberta Roncati (ISTAT) assisted in revising and editing the texts, providing new links. In America, **La Verne Vines Collins**, from the US Census Bureau, **Daniel Scott**, from Statistics Canada, **Sandra Smith**, from the US National Center for Health Statistics, and **Martin Vaessens**, from Macro International, gave assistance and/or organised useful contacts in their organisations, but of course do not carry any responsibility for the final product.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.odysseus.it/sfabw/parisposter2Cor.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.odysseus.it/sfabw/Paris21XPdf.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Beside SDDS, see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/statorg.htm>

transformed in a website constantly updated, as planned. A revision of the advocacy material is currently under way by Paris21, but it has been announced that the Advocacy Task Team will be “wound up”. The reason is not the lack of need for statistical advocacy, but the excessive width of the scope: the Team in fact recommends that “The World Bank Trust fund and other donors be encouraged to finance projects in statistical advocacy”<sup>16</sup>.

The work that has been done is however giving some results. Some of the new countries are already taking initiatives. For example, looking at Africa, Uganda’s Bureau of Statistics, under the direction of professor Ben Kiregyera, has just hired a professional communicator<sup>17</sup>.

But much remains to be done: dissemination to the media, in many countries, meet difficulties that originate from lack of statistical training of the journalists or from constraints to the possibility of NSO (National statistical offices) representatives to release data to the press or the public without approval by government officials. It is difficult to overcome these problems without specific experience and communication know-how.

### **Conclusions: a few steps for the future**

We think that statistical disseminators all over the world must become a network: know each other, train each other, and benefit from each other’s experiences. The positive experience that has been started by UNECE must be extended to countries that are beginning today to deal with the problems of statistical dissemination.

What can we do to help? As a UNECE group, we have no funds to spend, but starting with the “Handbook”, a collection of best practices for dissemination to the media, we can make proposals to our own NSOs and to international organisations in order to organise such a network. The subject, for instance, could be a topic for the 34th session of the UN Statistical Commission, in New York in March 2003<sup>18</sup>.

The most important aim would be to transform the Handbook in a website constantly updated with news about statistical dissemination techniques. With the agreement of Paris21, the initiative could benefit from the “Why statistics?” hypertext. The website could also have a news system<sup>19</sup>.

It would also be important for our group to manage to invite selected statistical disseminators from developing countries. Too often, the international meetings involving these countries are “open” to subjects that vary from NSO’s chairmen or DG to representatives of NGOs. It’s difficult to have continuity. To help NSOs in developing countries to train professional statistical disseminators with special attention to media dissemination – and to interact with them in order to extend our network - should be one of our purposes for the future.

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<sup>16</sup> See Graham Eele, Advocacy Task Team Convenor, on Paris 21 Newsletter <http://www.paris21.org/pdf/v1n2en.pdf>, July 2002.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.ubos.org/job.html>

<sup>18</sup> See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/commission.htm>

<sup>19</sup> An example of a weekly news system for statisticians, in Italian, can be seen at <http://www.sistan.it/news/news.php>, in the web site of the Italian Sistema Statistico Nazionale, the public body which co-ordinates the statistical offices of national and local public agencies.