

OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS IN THE ENGLISH SPEAKING CARIBBEAN: ADVANCES IN THE OECS SUBREGION (1992-1994)*

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Abstract: Instruction is one of main resources used in making major decisions and as key actors in the development process, governments are responsible for collecting, organising and disseminating a great of information; hence the importance of official publications. Against the background of a 1984 survey on official publications in the English-speaking Caribbean, this paper examines recent development in the area of official publications within the OECS - a sub-region of the English-speaking Caribbean. The paper makes some observations and recommendations on official publications and notes that change will only come when informed decision making becomes a societal norm.

Introduction

Information is one of the key resources used inmaking major decisions as well as carrying out day-to-day activities: the extent to which informed decisions are made depends on access to relevant and timely information. As key actors in the development process, governments are responsible for collecting, organising and disseminating a great deal of information, hence the importance of official publications.

For the purposes of this paper, official publications include any print or non-print items produced by an official department, or other agency of government. It includes both published items as well as materials not available through normal book channels (grey literature) commissioned or sanctioned by the respective organisation. These include statistical data, legal information, research papers, feasibility studies, and a variety of reports of ongoing activities.

While not being agencies of central governments, the Caribbean Community,

* The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the position of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States.

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(CARICOM)¹, the economic community of English speaking Caribbean countries, and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS)¹, a similar grouping of Windward and Leeward Islands, are two key regional institutions which work jointly with the Member Governments on economic and social policies for development. I will draw on some of their experiences and activities in discussing official publications in this paper.

Although the OECS sub-region may not be representative of all of the islands in the English speaking Caribbean, I will be examining the state of official publications in the OECS and this could form the basis for later comparisons or discussions.

No survey was undertaken in preparing this paper, but discussions were held via telephone, with Documentalists in the National Documentations Centres of the OECS region, in order to obtain an up-to-date picture on the state of official publications in their respective countries.

Official Publications - Historical situation

A major contribution to the literature on public documents in the English Speaking Caribbean is the study commissioned by UNESCO and prepared by Daphne Douglas in 1984. Ms. Douglas noted "... the area of government publishing in its entirety is one which has not yet received priority treatment in this region."²

The UNESCO study outlined many problems such as the overall lack of publishing policies and comprehensive listings of public documents. In addition to the absence or non enforcement of legal deposit legislation, there were no controlling centres for official publications, a general lack of publication standards, poor quality and limited numbers of items being produced.²

These problems resulted in very limited access to government publications both on the part of the general public and the government itself.

Official Publications 1992-94

Production

Douglas noted that in pre-independence times control of government printing and

¹ CARICOM is made up of **Antigua and Barbuda**, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, **Dominica**, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Monserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. The **British Virgin Islands** and the Turks and Caicos Islands are associated members.

The Countries in **bold** are member of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

publishing was the responsibility of the government printery. However, even in 1984, "the growth of publishing activities greatly outstripped the capabilities of printing offices."²

Today, with the availability of desk-top publishing, some government printing departments seem to have been relegated to the role of binding, printing of covers, or coordinating the sub-contracting of materials to private printers. With the exception of items such as gazettes, laws, and estimates of revenue and expenditure, the responsibility for the preparation, printing and distribution of government documents seems to have been almost entirely taken over by individual government departments. Documents may be sent camera ready to private printers, or prepared 'in-house' using desk-top publishing facilities. In some cases the Government Printery now functions as simply a printer and does not play a role of sanctioning items for publication. In at least one OECS island, (Antigua & Barbuda) control over the reproduction of laws and the gazette by government officials outside of the Government Printery, is still enforced. Recently the Ministry of Labour was prevented from reproducing copies of the Labour Code, even when the Government Printery had historically not been able to supply copies of same. In light of the capabilities of desk-top publishing the legal department there is considering stiffer penalties for violators.

Publication standards have not been developed by most of the islands, and while official publications such as Budget Speeches, Estimates and Statistical reports seem to be generally of an acceptable standard, 'in-house' research reports or studies still suffer from poor document identification. While the potential exists for improved document quality as a result of the printing and publishing technologies available, with a myriad of amateur printers getting into the act, the need for publication standards is probably more critical at this time. Timeliness has been identified as a key factor in the provision of information to users and this applies of course to official publications. Discussions reveal that in many OECS islands, official publications, such as statistical reports may have gaps ranging upwards of two years to as much as over five years. Hence it is not merely the issue of availability of government publications that should be considered, but also the issue of timeliness. This is particularly critical for socio-economic data.

In addition, the number of copies of official publications in many of the OECS countries still fall short of demand; efforts to identify potential demand for certain official publications should continue. It has also been observed that the publication of some government documents such as Annual reports seem to be on the decline for various reasons, including financial constraints. At the same time, it is generally agreed that with access to word processing, desk-top publishing and

photocopying facilities, much more material is being generated than ever before. However, there is no evidence that this phenomenon has been translated into increased diffusion and distribution of official publications.

Diffusion and distribution

The majority of OECS Governments do not have national coordinating agencies responsible for official publications. The distribution of government publications is often limited to senior public and private sector officials, as well as regional and international organisations. The material is often placed on files or in private collections from which retrieval is difficult. Even where Documentation Centres or Public Libraries have expressed a willingness to organize the material, there seems to be marked reluctance by many public officials to give up control of documents.

A limited range of official publications is usually available at Public Libraries and National Documentation Centres within the OECS, where they are usually treated as reference material. Some islands may also provide loans to government officials.

Legal Deposit

A search of the most recent Consolidated Index of Statutes and Subsidiary Legislation revealed that most of the OECS islands still have on the books the West Indian Publications Legislation of pre-independence times, and have not adopted the model legal deposit legislation drawn up by CARICOM in the 1970s.

Some islands such as the British Virgin Islands (BVI), Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica, have included provisions for legal deposit in the Public Libraries Act, although in most cases there is still very limited enforcement of these laws. Where items are printed 'in-house' or by private printers it is expected that a copy should be lodged with the Government Printer. However, this requirement is seldom met. Even where there is a designated legal depository, access can quite often be provided only to official publications such as some basic legal documents, budget addresses and estimates of revenue and expenditure.

However, information professionals are conscious of this state of affairs and are constantly battling to correct this situation. For example at this time BVI is currently in the process of drafting a separate Legal Deposit Act aimed at upgrading the clause on legal deposits in the Public Libraries Act. Montserrat is also attempting to upgrade provisions under the Public Libraries Act, as well as examining the issues involved in legal deposit.

Since the establishment of the OECS National Documentation Centres in 1987, as part of the OECS Information Network, these centres have been functioning as

depositories for official publications in respective OECS countries, in a limited manner. The mandate of the National Documentation Centre is to collect material produced locally, including official publications. However, constraints of staffing, space and other resources have often limited this role to collecting materials produced by the Ministry within which the Centre is located.

The Documentation Centre databases are currently the only source of bibliography lists of official publications in the respective OECS countries, but can hardly lay claims to being comprehensive.

Classification and access

Another issue of concern with respect to official publications is the classification of documents. Classifications range from restricted to confidential. The nature of the restriction is sometimes not easy to identify and may vary with the type of document. None of the National Documentation Centres reported a set criteria for classification and there were no declassification policies or guidelines in place. The declaration of a document as classified has traditionally been done by the Government department responsible for preparing the item or it is sometimes done at the discretion of the information professional.

The CARICOM Secretariat, however while having no official policy uses a set of guidelines to assist their handling of restricted materials. Paper presented at meetings of officials are usually declassified after three years, although the specific institutions may declassify the material at their discretion. However, papers presented in caucus, papers discussing member states' contributions, particularly defaulting members, and papers deemed to be of a politically sensitive nature are never declassified.

In order to ensure future availability, classified materials should be handled in light of its ultimate status; hence the necessity to develop not only declassification but also classification policies. Of course policies formulated should ensure "an acceptable equilibrium between the claims for secrecy and the demands for public disclosure". Every effort should be made to ensure that agencies or groups responsible for making decisions on classification are as objective and non-partisan as possible.⁶

Official publications - a few observations and recommendations

There is still the growing concern that developing countries are not utilizing the available information technology to organize their local information and make it accessible to users. In the English speaking Caribbean, Governments have a major role to play in the information sector and this involves not only collecting and dis-

seminating information, but also formulating policies to guide developments in the field.

Modern technology has placed the printing function within the reach of anyone with access to desk-top publishing facilities, therefore, the control of official publications is now more than ever a major issue. The process by which items become official publications will need to be clearly identified. Member states could go through a process of discussion and approval at the departmental or Ministry level then at the policy level, before any document is officially published. This is currently done in the BVI. A publications committee could be appointed at the departmental level to be responsible for selecting or commissioning items for publication, implementing local publication policies and standards, cost and pricing, printing, promotion and distribution.

Even with policies in place at the departmental level, it will be necessary to have a central body responsible for updating and policing publication policies at a national level, including the enforcement of legislation or initiating of actions to get the necessary legislation in place.

While central control of official publications has been stressed, the concept of centralized collections may now be outdated, since information technology can allow access to the relevant information without physical control of the material.¹⁰ However, the resources necessary to manage centralized collections must be weighed against the management and co-ordination of a series of departmental collections form a central point. In the OECS sub-region, decentralized collections may contribute to the development of more comprehensive bibliographic control since government agencies, often reluctant to relinquish control of their publications, may be more easily persuaded to have the item included in a central database.

The technology revolution facilitates the storage and retrieval of large amounts of data at minimal cost. All OECS islands have some basic hardware and software, which with a certain amount of upgrading, would provide the facilities to organise local networks. But central bibliographic control will still be necessary and another issue of concern, particularly with ongoing regional integration efforts, is the availability of bibliographic data for official publications on a regional and sub-regional level. Based on the experience of the CARICOM bibliography, Gorman and Mills observed that "the CARICOM Bibliography falls short of its avowed aim to treat publications in all of members the Caribbean Community, ... most adequate coverage is achieved for those countries which already possess national bibliographies."⁵ Hence a regional information system will only be as

good as the information systems existing at the local level. The CARICOM Bibliography ceased publication in 1990.

The introduction of ECLAC/AMBIONET in 1992, provides the opportunity for the distribution of official publications across the region online. A major deterrent to online communication had been the high cost of intra-island telecommunication. However, it was revealed in January, 1994, that Cable & Wireless, the regional telecommunications facilitator, was currently making provision for inter-island links, within the OECS and wider English speaking Caribbean, it is anticipated that these facilities would be available by early 1995.

The infrastructure already exists for linking local networks into the existing information system, both at the level of the OECS as well as CARICOM, although further investment in human resources and equipment may be necessary. Regional institutions such as CARICOM and OECS could continue to assist with the coordination of activities at the sub-regional and regional levels.

Over time, as collections of official publications increase in size, the problem of providing access to current items while still maintaining easy access to historic information, will need to be addressed. The use of CD-ROM for storage of retrospective information, including the feasibility of joint publication of the volumes of conference papers which form part of the OECS and CARICOM collection, should be examined.

The possibility of editing classified materials to improve access to information from official documents should continue to be explored. This was the thrust behind the launching in 1993, of the OECS Occasional Paper series, since quite often when materials are declassified they may only be of historic importance. The CARICOM Secretariat also ensures distribution of information on key regional issues such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the banana issue, regional integration and trade relations, through the use of serial publications such as, the CARICOM Perspective, the CARICOM Press Release and CARICOM News.

In 1993, CARICOM began the co-ordination of the International Research Centre (IDRC) sponsored project on information for decision making. This project is designed to conduct research on the information seeking habits and needs of a wide cross section of regional policy makers, researchers and other users of information. Project results will be used to make recommendations for tailoring information systems and services to meet the needs of the majority of users. Preliminary analysis of results points to a relatively high demand for locally generated infor-

mation and data, such as current socio-economic and trade statistics which is usually generated by the government and would be found in official publications.

Conclusion

A review of the literature, including a follow-up paper by Daphne Douglas in 1991³, and discussions with information professionals in the OECS sub-region as well as CARICOM, confirmed that in the OECS sub-region, the situation with respect to official publications, was similar to that of 1984. It is likely that countries such as Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados and Guyana, with more developed information sectors may have advanced further with respect to the drafting and implementation of policies relating to official publications and compulsory legal deposit.

There have been major advances with respect to the potential created by the technology available to assist the physical printing process and reproduction of official publications. However, there needs to be a clear distinction made between the printing function and the process by which documents become official publications and move into the public domain. The publication of official documents needs to be coordinated to ensure access to timely, accurate, high quality, user friendly government publications by a wide cross section of users. Computer and telecommunications technology have made it possible to provide access to official publications at the local, regional and international levels in a variety of formats.

Efforts have been made for some time now to sensitize senior decision makers about the importance of developing our capability to access information, as well as the potential opportunities and technology available to assist this process. Discussions with many senior policy makers have led one to believe that they are at least aware of the issues involved. But, until they are ready "to put money where their mouth is" (according to a local proverb) and commit the necessary financial and human resources to implement policies and programmes in the information sector, we have to assume that they still have not been convinced. Information professionals will need to continue their efforts to build strategic alliances with professionals in other sectors, and lobby for the necessary actions to improve the publication and access to official publications in the English speaking Caribbean.

Change will only come when informed decision making is the norm and the society recognizes that a deficient decision support system is expensive and often results in lost opportunities, particularly in the very dynamic global environment in which we find ourselves today.

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