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Topic (i) Communicating effectively on the Web

**MOVING INTO THE 21ST CENTURY:
THE IMF'S TRANSITION TO NEW ENVIRONMENT FOR THE
WEB DISSEMINATION OF ITS STATISTICAL DATABASES**

Submitted by the International Monetary Fund¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This paper discusses the experience of the International Monetary Fund's Statistics Department as it attempts to move, somewhat belatedly, from a focus on the preparation and dissemination of print publications to a focus on the release of its statistics via a web-based, on-line environment. Important lessons have been learned from consulting studies and from reviews of the web sites of other statistical organizations. With the benefit of the consulting studies and collaboration among several IMF departments progress in being made. Much work remains to be undertaken but the foundation is now firmly in place.

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II. THE CURRENT SITUATION

2. The IMF's Statistics Department (STA) disseminates a considerable number of databases offering a broad range of economic and financial information. Some databases are released via multiple forms of media—print publications, CD-ROMs, online—and some are released only on the IMF's web site (<http://www.imf.org>). Other statistical information such as manuals and guides, methodological information, newsletters, etc. are also available on the IMF's web site. In addition extensive country-specific metadata is released via the Data Dissemination Standards Bulletin Board (<http://dsbb.imf.org>) under the Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS) and the General Data Dissemination System (GDDS).

IMF Data and Metadata Products
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Traditional” products in print and on CD-ROM<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Balance of Payments Statistics (BOPS)– Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS)– Government Finance Statistics (GFS)– International Financial Statistics (IFS) • Online products, different formats<ul style="list-style-type: none">– International Financial Statistics (modeled after the CD-ROM)– International Reserves (static tables)– Coordinated Portfolio Investment Statistics (static tables) • IMF Data Dissemination Standards Bulletin Board<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Special Data Dissemination Standard– General Data Dissemination System

3. Released over a period of many years, each offering is presented in the format that was deemed appropriate at the time. The users of today are confronted with a rich but confusing collection of statistical material widely dispersed across the IMF's web site or available only in print or on CD-ROM. It has become painfully clear that the result is a compilation of material difficult to access, not terribly coherent, and lacking in an holistic view of statistical data and its supporting information.

III. FIRST STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

4. The Statistics Department in collaboration with the IMF's External Relations Department (EXR) determined that the first step would be to learn more about the perceived shortcomings of the existing data arrangements. In spring 2005, two studies were commissioned: the first conducted qualitative usership research² on STA's four major products (IFS, DOTS, BOPS, GFS) and the second reviewed best practices for web dissemination across a large number of national statistical offices, international organizations, and private business.³

5. The findings of the usership research were disquieting but provided a realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the databases and their modes of access. Not surprisingly, within the Statistics Department the prevailing view was that we were providing important products of high quality

² Conducted by David Oser, Research Perspectives, London, UK.

³ Conducted by Angus Robertson & Lou Ann Sabatier, Sabatier Consulting, Falls Church, VA & New York, NY.

and that while some updating of our products was needed that what we were doing and how we were doing it were fine. The usership review revealed that while our clients placed great stock in the IMF imprimatur and highly valued the extensive country coverage and comparability of our data, the products themselves were flawed by a lack of timeliness, poor metadata and other supporting documentation, confusion about the coding structure, and dissatisfaction with the responsiveness to data problems and queries regarding the data. Being confronted with this reality took many by surprise. It has, however, created a commitment to change. The studies sent a clear message that a significant effort is needed in order to move towards electronic dissemination of data as rapidly as possible and to redesign the interface to the data and metadata in all forms of media.

6. With the results of the best practices review, STA and EXR are moving towards creating the foundations for a fresh, web-based environment that will facilitate searching for and access to all statistical databases. It is a daunting task but one that must be undertaken if the IMF wishes to remain a key player in the provision of statistical data and metadata to the world community.

7. The following key recommendations from the two studies are currently in the process of being implemented:

- Develop and offer all IMF data products online
- Focus on timeliness and accuracy
 - Maximize the quality, consistency, and timeliness of IMF statistical data.
- Improve accessibility and ease of use
 - Make statistical data more visible and accessible on IMF website.
 - Provide references from the IMF website to all partner offerings of IMF databases.
- Expand availability of metadata
 - Ensure all online statistics are linked to relevant metadata.
 - Offer information on series descriptions, footnotes, economic topics, definitions of terms, sources, series codes.
- Broaden and deepen user support
 - Use RSS feeds to alert users to data updates and new reports.
 - Expand online help, including context sensitive guidance, FAQs and examples.
 - Establish means for updating and expanding online help based on user feedback.
 - Consider charging users for extensive support or specialized data requests.

IV. IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

8. While the recommendations above provide the guideposts for renewal and renovation, many important decisions remain to be taken and acted upon in order for the IMF to realize its goals of not only disseminating its data but communicating to many groups of users about its data.

9. The challenges that remain:

- Designing the user interface. This will be perhaps the most important component of the entire effort. Rather than yet another entry in the beauty contest of web sites, the goal is create a simple and friendly environment that users will wish to return to and to subscribe to.

- Selecting of the tools that will deliver access to and retrieval of the data. Candidates for consideration include Beyond 20/20, PC-Axis, and a version of the Economic Data Warehouse currently being developed (see the attachment).
- Establishing an effective means of communicating with and supporting users against a backdrop of increasing resource constraints.
- Aligning this effort with the implementation of an economic data warehouse within the IMF.

10. Clearly much work remains to be done by many contributors. While I had hoped to be able to show more concrete examples of our future design, I hope that this paper will arouse a continued interest in the forthcoming developments at the IMF. Next year at this time I hope to be able to unveil the new IMF environment for the dissemination of statistical data.