

The Value of Public Sector Information as a Strategic Resource for Socioeconomic Development Research and Policy Activities in South Africa

Raed M. Sharif

Ph.D. Candidate in Information
Science and Technology at the
iSchool of Syracuse

3 Lowry Sq. Scarborough, ON.
M1B1N7. Canada.

+1-647-567-2212

rmalshar@syr.edu

ABSTRACT

Although it has always been an important asset to those who possess it, in the current knowledge society, information is considered as one of the most important goods in our daily life (Machlup, 1962; Porat, 1977; Mueller 1995; Stiglitz, 2000).

At the same time, the public sector is the biggest single producer and owner of a large variety of information (e.g., health and geographic information, financial reports, social and economic statistics, legislation and judicial proceedings, food and water resources information, and many other kinds of data and information, collectively referred to as Public Sector Information). Public Sector Information (PSI) represents an important resource with vast socio-economic potential to different communities.

According to Horton (2002) diffusing public information and knowledge resources efficiently and effectively is essential to:

- “Sustaining the competitive competency of the country’s businesses and industries, in both domestic and global marketplaces;
- Attaining the highest levels of educational excellence for all the nation’s children and adults in a lifelong learning context;
- Enabling citizens to participate more effectively in all facets of a democratic society;
- Informing public officials at all levels of government so that they can enact better laws, formulate and enact enlightened public policies, monitor the programs they authorize effectively, and govern fairly, equitably, and wisely; and,
- Enhancing the quality of life of all a country’s citizens, including responsibility to the special government information needs of disadvantaged and disabled individuals.” (p.3)

For example, governments can use this strategic resource to make sound policies and to promote transparency and accountability; and private sector can use it to produce innovative products and services, which in turn can contribute to the nation’s economy. As for citizens, PSI is essential for exerting their civic rights and enabling democratic participation. For civil society organizations, PSI can be a strategic resource for their work, especially in areas such as poverty eradication, public health, food security, disaster

management, and governance, where the combination of different types of PSI (e.g., geo-spatial, economic, and health data) can be of tremendous value for successful targeting and support of marginalized communities.

Finally, scientific and policy research communities benefit tremendously from the PSI. The list of benefits to the community includes the promotion of interdisciplinary, inter-sector, inter-institutional, and international research. It is especially important for these communities when their research and activities are focused on socioeconomic development issues. My study focuses on this last community.

In this poster presentation I share and discuss the preliminary analysis and initial findings from the data I collected during my six months fieldwork in South Africa for my dissertation titled: The Value of Public Sector Information as a Strategic Resource for Socioeconomic Development Research and Policy Activities in South Africa.

In this study I investigate whether, and if so how, PSI is utilized by South African organization working in the area of socioeconomic development research. More specifically, my study aims to answer the following questions:

- To what extent and in what ways is PSI utilized by research organizations?
- What characteristics and conditions of the PSI facilitate or hinder its acquisition and assimilation?
- What organizational conditions enable successful exploitation of PSI by these organizations?

Employing a qualitative, multiple-case approach (Yin, 2003), I draw upon literature from the fields of economics of information and organizational studies. I use literature from economics of information to understand the differences between public vs. private information and the importance of external information to organizational innovation; and literature from organizational studies, particularly about absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), to understand the organizations’ processes to identify, acquire (including factors that facilitate or hinder access and acquisition), assimilate, and exploit this strategic resource. My case studies explore how these organizations transform PSI

from a source of potential value to a source of actual value to their socioeconomic development research.

I also use ideas from organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Huber, 1991) and organizational innovation (March & Simons, 1958) literatures to help me better understand the organizational conditions (internal and external) for successful utilization of the PSI. Mainly qualitative data were collected from these research organizations through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and document analysis over a period of six months.

My initial analysis suggests that the PSI represents a very strategic resource to the development work of these organizations (especially for what purposes and in what areas this resource is being used), uncovers very important obstacles facing these organizations in identifying, acquiring, and utilizing the South Africa PSI, and documents some best practices and organizational factors that facilitate these processes. It is expected that the discussions and findings of this study will have theoretical and policy contributions, and will be of special importance to organizations working in the area of socioeconomic development research, the government of South Africa (and hopefully governments in other developing countries), and subsequently to the people of South Africa.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

eGovernment: information policy, economics, ethics, law, technologies of privacy and trust

Keywords

Public Sector Information, Socioeconomic development, Absorptive Capacity, South Africa, Developing Countries

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