

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

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ABSTRACT

In most countries, the public sector is the biggest single producer and owner of a large variety of data and information. Health, geographic, food, water, financial reports, socioeconomic statistics, legislation, and many other kinds of information produced by/for governments are collectively referred to as Public Sector Information (PSI). PSI represents an important resource with vast scientific and socioeconomic potential to different communities.

In this paper, I share and discuss the analysis and findings from the data I collected during my six months fieldwork in South Africa for my dissertation. I investigate whether, and if so how, PSI is utilized by South African organizations working in the area of socioeconomic development research and policy activities. More specifically, my study aims to answer the following questions:

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

Employing a qualitative, multiple-case approach, I draw upon literature from the fields of economics of information and organizational studies 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 and policy activities. I also use ideas from organizational learning and innovation literatures to understand the organizational conditions (internal and external) for successful utilization of the PSI. Mainly qualitative data were collected from these organizations through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and document analysis over a period of six months.

My analysis and findings suggest that the PSI represents an important strategic resource to the development work of these organizations, uncovers important obstacles facing them in identifying, acquiring, and utilizing the 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, the government of South Africa (and hopefully governments in other developing/developed countries), and subsequently to the people of South Africa.