

# LAUNCHING SOCIO-ECONOMIC DATABASE IS ONE THING...

**T**HE National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) recently launched a database that, under certain conditions, can be crucial to national development. Formally known as the Tanzania Socio-Economic Database [TSED], the web-based facility is for what it is worth) reportedly the second of its kind in the world, the other being for Malawi to the south of Tanzania.

Simply put, a 'database' is a structured set of data that is normally held in a computer, and that is readily accessible in various ways. It is really an organized networked store of data upon which researchers, planners and other decision makers can draw and utilize in their day-to-day tasks.

TSED is designed as a tool for the dissemination of information that is considered useful to those who will need it. These range from theoreticians/pure researchers and educators to practitioners who are bent over down-to-earth tasks in the various fields of their chosen activity. Boasting more than 500 indicators aggregated by assorted groupings, the Database should ideally be a good server, a saver and a saviour of all those who will use it, serving them and their needs well even as it saves them time and unnecessary hassle. However, whether the facility will come to scratch – and remain useful – is another kettle of fish all together.

It is not always the case that the best intentions are translated into stark reality on the ground. Even when the 'intention tremors' have

been overcome, and all the teething troubles seen off into the past, it still remains a major and endless task to keep databases alive, dynamic and even growing.

Tanzania has never been famous for the accuracy or adequacy of its official data. Indeed, the Government and many of its institutions have regularly been accused of churning out mountains of reports for the consumption of its development partners in the international donor and creditor community.

But, perhaps with TSED now in place, things might change for the better. This is assuming that servicing and maintaining the Database will be subjected to the same (or more) enthusiasm that was associated with its creation. The Government of Tanzania conceived TSED in 1996, working through the National Bureau of Standards and relevant government ministries/departments. The immediate objective of the venture was to bring

forth a creature that would itself be a readily accessible and accurate bank of useful information as far as it was humanly and technologically possible. In that onerous but otherwise noble task, Tanzania was ably aided in cash and in kind by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Britain's Department for International Development (DfID). The initial task has finally been completed and now comes the hard part. The medium and long-term objective of building the Database is to facilitate – nay: to accelerate – meaning-

ful and sustainable socio-economic development for Tanzania. In effect, this would be putting the country on the fast track to social and economic emancipation through the attainment of the Government's own Development Vision 2025 in particular, and the UN Millennium Goals in general.

As already noted herein above, launching a socio-economic database – in fact, any database for that matter – is one thing ... Making it work on a sustainable footing is quite another. There are so many factors that must be taken into account for a database to continue to be meaningfully useful. These include the collection and placement of the right facts and figures in the bank, as well as updating those that are already held therein. There can be no shortcuts in this if the database is to be valid and reliable at all times.

At the end of the day, stakeholders will hold the TSED managers, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), responsible for the operations of the Database. Any credit that TSED might merit should be directed at the Bureau – as should any brickbats. But the Bureau will not be alone in this. The Government must ensure that it gives NBS all the support it needs for the successful operation of the Database. Especially, it should not unnecessarily stint on its budgetary allocations for TSED operations, a factor that has been the Government's foremost failings in its projects in the past.

[lylmokari@hotmail.com]