

SECTION F : SOCIAL SCIENCES

IMPLICATIONS OF ERRORS IN GOVERNMENT-DECISION-INFLUENCING DOCUMENTS AND SUGGESTED REMEDIES

J. Diandas

(Macan Markar and Co., Colombo)

Errors of fact, mainly in the presentation of statistical information, creep into documents used as basis for government decisions. Sometimes they do and sometimes do not influence decisions. The paper describes examples of such errors in some published and unpublished documents.

One such example is the data regarding the country's vehicle population where the number of vehicles on the register exceeds by 50% the number of vehicles licensed. Despite this Census Department Publications analyse and discuss the "on the register" figure authoritatively without apparently being aware of the discrepancy. Other examples deal with misunderstanding the weight ratios of urea and Naphtha, overstatement of electricity consumption for 1981 in a World Bank advisory report which uses the overstatement as base for a ten year forecast, and a ministerial speech wrongly depicting hydro-electricity as providing only 10% of the country's commercial energy.

The paper postulates that these errors arise either from the lack of independent evaluation of the document, or because its compiler has no feel for the subject matter, or from both these causes. The paper recommends a system of audit of such documents where important decisions are involved.