



# ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND THE ECONOMY IN NAMIBIA



By

**Robin Sherbourne**  
Economist

In order to understand what is going on in any economy, it is essential to have data on a wide range of sectors and issues including the following:

1. National accounts (providing estimates of GDP and other important variables)
2. Money and banking statistics
3. Balance of payments statistics (including reserves)
4. Trade statistics
5. Inflation statistics
6. Labour market and wages and salary statistics
7. Population and housing census
8. Household income and expenditure statistics
9. Government finance and budget information (including Auditor General reports)
10. State-Owned Enterprise annual reports
11. Private company information
12. Asset price and volume data (especially the housing market and stock exchange)

“Over the years Namibia has made improvements in the production of the macroeconomic accounts ... questions of accuracy, credibility and timeliness still exist.”

The presence of such data can assist in economic policymaking and underpin an on-going dialogue of economic policy and performance between policymakers and other economic stakeholders including the general public. The hope is that the more and better data that exists, the more informed policymakers and stakeholders will be, leading to better policies and better economic performance. In a similar vein, the less accessible important information is to policymaker and stakeholders, the harder it will be to make good decisions.

Over the years Namibia has made improvements in the production of the macroeconomic accounts (national accounts, money and banking, balance of payments, government finance statistics, trade statistics, inflation statistics) which have been produced by a combination of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and the Bank of Namibia. However, questions of accuracy, credibility and timeliness still exist. The CBS website lacks content and users are often faced with having to go in person to pick up hardcopy documents. Documents are the preferred means of distributing data rather than in less processed form (such as in spreadsheets or SPSS files). In addition to this, it is often hard to pin down someone at both institutions who can convincingly answer detailed and often technical queries. It is hoped that these issues will be addressed through the creation of the new arms-length Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA).

Labour market data has generally been collected only every four years and there is usually a two year lag before data is finally disseminated. Again dissemination takes place in the form of compiled reports rather than data. The publication of the most recent Namibia Labour Force Survey 2008 (which revealed that unemployment had reached 51.2% and was compiled by the Ministry of Labour) led to an almost unique public discussion over data quality and credibility and led to a significant response by government in terms of policy (TIPEEG) and the establishment of the NSA. Given that reducing unemployment has long been a critical policy objective, it is heartening to see that something is finally being done to improve the quality and regularity of labour force data. The NSA has promised annual labour force data. Virtually no public data exists on wages and salaries.



NAMIBIA HAS JUST COMPLETED ITS THIRD POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUS AND ITS THIRD HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND EXPENDITURE SURVEY.

Namibia has just completed its third Population and Housing Census and its third Household Income and Expenditure Survey. Both provide critical information on the state of the population. Again dissemination has been through final reports

rather than data. Accessing data to undertake independent research is extremely difficult. Timeliness has also been a problem and there has generally been a two-year lag before data is released (the 2011 PHC is an exception).

Government budget data has improved markedly since 1990. The budget document and the accompanying MTEF document provide a wealth of information on Government's plans at the beginning of each year. The Ministry of Finance generally makes these (rather large) documents available on its website soon after the budget has been tabled. However, the MTEF document has deteriorated in quality in the last few years and much important information on government and SOE activity and performance is now missing. Despite promises to the contrary, in-year data on revenue and expenditure remains conspicuous by its absence.

Despite promises to the contrary, in-year data on revenue and expenditure remains conspicuous by its absence

Audited budget information is produced by the Auditor General but it is produced often with a significant lag and more recent reports are not available electronically. Some time ago comprehensive reports covering all of central government were abandoned in favour of reports by ministry making it hard to pin down an overall picture. Virtually no information is provided on what has actually been achieved by Government in a particular financial year although the MTEF and the more recent Government Accountability Report strive to provide exactly this kind of information. It is thus very hard to determine the efficacy of Government's activities with any degree of certainty. Data from the Inland Revenue is impossible to obtain.

## State-owned enterprises

State-owned enterprises are a very mixed bag when it comes to providing information despite often statutory requirements to produce annual reports. Some are excellent and produce detailed quality reports in a timely manner and post them on their websites. The majority, however, produce reports only occasionally, with long delays and short print-runs, and do not make them available electronically. There is generally little pride taken in the results achieved and rarely a proper announcement or press conference where SOE management can be grilled by journalists or members of the public. They generally give all the appearance of being private fiefdoms of particular individuals or ministers. The SOE Governance Act seems to have made very little difference to this situation.

## Private companies

Private company information is extremely scarce and this is primarily due to the nature of the economy. Larger enterprises are mostly either SOEs (see previous paragraph) or subsidiaries of larger multinationals who report across the group rather than on Namibia in particular. The exceptions to these are those companies listed on the Namibian Stock Exchange which are required by NSX rules to provide key information. Unfortunately, only a handful of companies are listed on the NSX. The vast majority of companies are smaller privately held operations (Pty Ltd, close corporations, or sole proprietorships) under no obligation to provide information to the public. Only the larger Limited companies with more than 50 shareholders are required by law to produce an annual report for the public. Over the past years, the Chamber of Mines of Namibia has gone out of its way to provide more financial and operational information to the public in its Chamber Review which is available on the Chamber's website. No other industry body does this kind of thing.



DR JOHN STEYTLER WAS APPOINTED TO THE POSITION OF STATISTICIAN GENERAL OF NAMIBIA IN FEBRUARY 2012. HE HEADS THE NEW NAMIBIA STATISTICS AGENCY (NSA).

With the possible exception of the livestock market, the country's two most important asset markets are the stock exchange and the housing market. The NSX produces detailed information on trading prices and volumes as well as a comprehensive annual report. Only FNB Namibia produces a House Price and Volume Index which measures prices and trading volumes in the housing market nationwide. The Index, which is based on national house prices from the Deeds Office, is released on a monthly basis but lags by four months or so. It is available electronically on the FNB mailing list.

A number of non-government players go out of their way to try and make public what should be easily available. These include the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the Legal Assistance Centre (whose website contains all legislation passed since 1990). Individuals such as myself, publish reports and books which help to disseminate information as well as run a data bulletin service available free of charge to anyone.

In all economies, there remains a substantial amount of information and data hidden from the public for reasons of public or private confidentiality. This is no different in Namibia where the culture of free and open disclosure remains in its infancy. For example, how much wealth key policymakers hold (onshore and offshore) is not available (although parliamentarians have committed themselves to maintaining an open asset register). Large amounts of pension and life insurance fund money flows out of the country but this is mostly legal and understandable.

Generally speaking, data in Namibia is often available but it is generally more a question of getting hold of the right person who can provide it. Most organisations, public or private, are simply not geared to deal with data requests and queries and most are reluctant to put themselves in the public spotlight for any reason. Over the years many of Government's statistical initiatives have been allowed to fizzle out. It is to be hoped that the newly established NSA will breathe new life into official and public statistics and information making data easily available electronically and being ready and able to explain and justify the data produced.

## The need for information

**“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” – George Santayana**

I am constantly amazed by people's attitudes towards information and freedom of information. Of course it is not possible or desirable to make every piece of information available to everyone – there will always be a need to keep a certain amount of information secret because it is commercially sensitive or involves national security or whatever. But most of the time this is not the case. What is very clear is that it is just not possible to run a modern economy well without information: surely the default position should be that information should be made publicly available unless there is a good reason to keep it secret (and I mean a good – not just to cover up people's mistakes). Yet most of the time the contrary is true. The most innocent of information can be gained only by writing letters to busy permanent secretaries who enquire what you want to use it for. And Namibia has not taken advantage of the Internet to make economic information freely available to the masses.

*Extract from 'The cry of the anguished economist' by Robin Sherbourne, IPPR Comment No.2, March 2009*



#### **About Robin Sherbourne**

Robin Sherbourne holds a BA in physics from Oxford University and an MSc in economics from the London School of Economics in the UK. He was the first Overseas Development Institute fellow to be placed in Namibia starting in 1991 as a researcher at the Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit and as an economic advisor in the National Planning Commission until 1995. He then spent two years as an economic advisor in the UK's Department of the Environment before returning to Namibia. Robin became well-known as a newspaper columnist and commentator on local economic affairs in his weekly column 'Economic Eye' in The Namibian between 1998 and 2000. He introduced a course at the University of Namibia on the Namibian economy and as an economic and business analyst helped develop the research programme of local stock-broking firm IJG Securities. In 2000 he established the Windhoek-based Institute for Public Policy Research, where he is still a board member, and in 2004 the current affairs monthly Insight Namibia magazine. He worked briefly as an advisor to the Research Department of the Bank of Namibia in 2008 before becoming the first Group Economist for Old Mutual, Nedbank and NedCapital in Namibia. He is now an independent economist. He has a long list of publications on the Namibian economy to his name including the Guide to the Namibian Economy IPPR (2009 and 2010).