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Worldwide Adoption of Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSAs) Spells Good News for Researchers

*World Tourism Organization (WTO) takes lead
on issue, encouraging countries to adopt data tool*

In October of 2005, I had the chance to present a paper at the conference being held by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), in Iguazu Falls, Brazil, on tourism satellite accounts (TSAs). I gave a summary of the story of the adoption of TSAs around the world, which is worth reproducing here. While the significance of this development may be less than well understood outside research circles, it is nevertheless appreciated by the research community, and after all it is good news for researchers.

The WTO set out this year to update its knowledge of the extent of adoption of the TSA in countries around the world. Since the TSA is the main data instrument which allows a portrait of the tourism industry to be drawn, and permits comparisons between tourism and other industries, it was recognized by the WTO as an important exercise to carry out. The purpose was to help countries review their TSA experiences, to assess the possibility for comparisons from TSA results, to evaluate its usefulness and propose future amendments.

More than 60 countries were identified as having a TSA, either in development or in use. This in itself is a major achievement, when you consider that the TSA is a data instrument that is less than 20 years old. Countries in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East were included. Countries were quizzed on the degree of TSA implementation and grouped according to whether the implementation was on the level of concepts, classification, or fuller implementation.

Some 24 countries indicated that they have a full fledged TSA, showing the interface of tourism demand and supply, and eight countries have a TSA work-in-progress. (these numbers do not add up to more than 60, owing to the fact that some countries did not respond to the questionnaire sent to them on TSAs). On a country-by-country basis, 10 countries say they compile the TSA entirely every year, and for 11 more it can only really be described as a projection exercise.

One of the main difficulties experienced by countries, especially countries new to TSAs, was with the measurement of same-day visitors, both resident and non-resident. Anyone who has ever been caught in a crowd at Rainbow Bridge at Niagara Falls, at the entrance to Epcott Centre in Orlando or on the bridges into Venice can imagine the challenges involved in getting reliable measurements of the traffic flows of people. And this was indeed reported as a challenge.

Other methodological challenges surround the definition of “visitor,” and include: the inclusion of in-transit visitors, the exclusion of students and the measurement of outbound tourism. As

well, a few other measurement issues were identified, which include sorting out visitors from business travellers, second home owners and partial owners, and time share clients.

A lot of progress has been made, and for most countries who are developing a TSA, a tourism ratio has already been established for demand and supply, and moves are being made toward developing a reliable tourism value added measurement for participating countries.

It is heartening to see that the key elements of TSAs have been embraced by so many countries. As well, it is encouraging to see the leadership role being undertaken by the WTO on this issue. The WTO has a few challenges over the next few years. It will have to provide guidance on TSAs for countries who are considering adopting the TSA, and will likely have to help the countries go through the steps of adopting it. Some technical assistance will have to be extended to some countries who lack the expertise available to the WTO. And finally, I would say we cannot make too many demands on countries as they try to build a TSA. After all, in Canada it took us a few years to get the TSA up and running.

The story of TSAs is continuing. When we look back 20 years from now, we may very well see the first few years of this century as the time when international standards in tourism research were really established. With any luck, by that time tourism researchers will have a whole world of data to grind, and a whole world full of organizations to sell that information to. Now that sounds like good news to me!