

CHALLENGES IN OFFICIAL STATISTICS

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“An initiative launched to increase public awareness of the power and impact of statistics on all aspects of our society “

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“Official statistics inform decisions right across society, and those decisions affect the lives of us all. They are also essential to the public understanding of our society, economy and of the performance of government.

It is therefore axiomatic that good official statistics are essential to the proper functioning of a democratic state”

Bumpstead, R and Aldritt, R, U.K. Statistical Authority

In order to perform their role as instrument of policy making and political debate in a democratic society, the credibility of official statistics must be preserved/enhanced

This arises a number of challenges, that can be faced differently in different countries /societies

Challenges can be faced differently in different countries/societies depending on

- The institutional and cultural setting
- The statistical literacy of the public at large, and particularly, of the media
- The organization of the statistical system
- The availability of resources (human and budgetary)

The cornerstones of credibility

- The perception of impartiality
- The perception of quality

Perception of impartiality/quality
=impartiality/quality + something
else

Enhancing the perception of impartiality

- A good legislation
- Good practices
- Other: Councils of users, good relations with the media, improving the statistical literacy, emphasizing the “brand” of official statistics...

A good legislation

- Specifies the independence of statistical authorities from policy authorities and other administrative bodies, as well as from the private sector
- Establishes rules for the recruitment of staff and for the appointment and dismissal of senior statisticians
- Guarantees the preservation of confidentiality

A good legislation is very convenient, but not sufficient

Usually practices are more visible

A E.U. framework for good practices

- The European Statistics Code of Practice
- ESGAB
- The Peer Reviews

The European Statistics Code of Practice

- Establishes a number of principles (15) concerning the rules to follow on institutional behavior, production processes and output, together with a set of indicators that provide a reference on the implementation of the Code.
- A milestone in public administration
- A worldwide reference

European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB)

- Provide an independent overview of the European Statistical System as regards the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice
- Produce an annual report to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Code of Practice
- Review and update the Code

Peer Reviews

- A team of external experts
- Interviews with the responsible authorities, senior and junior staff, stakeholders and users
- Report, public
- Improvement actions SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-scaled)

Still, some challenges

- Preserving the perception of impartiality in decentralized statistical systems
- The increasing amount of statistics produced by non-statisticians, with low quality standards

Decentralized systems

- Decentralized on a thematic or regional basis. Some units under the control of the related policy department
- Perception of impartiality at jeopardy if: not all senior staff are statisticians, policy authority disseminates the data, premises shared with staff from the policy department...

“Creating a separate statistical identity is the most demanding challenge for statistical producers that are embedded in policy departments”

Tim Holt

Presidential Address, Royal Statistical Society

Statistics produced by non-statisticians

- Usually produced by civil servants or scientists that are not statisticians. Sometimes private companies.
- Very often relevant topics, which can get wide coverage in the media
- Eventually of low quality standards
- Public perception tends to be global concerning statistics: public credibility undermined
- Information loaded in the web without any control is an added risk to the credibility of statistics.

How to face these challenges

- Councils of users/producers
- Increasing the statistical literacy of the citizenship and the media
- Establishing a “brand” for official statistics so that they can be clearly distinguished from other statistics.
- Disseminating clarifying messages in the media when appropriate

Enhancing the perception of quality

- High standards of quality
- Transparency on quality issues
- Satisfying user's needs

High standards of quality

- The usual quality indicators
- From “data collectors “ to re-users of data”

Challenges for re-users of data

- New indicators for quality assessment
- Unconstrained access to administrative registers
- Quality of the re-used data
- Confidentiality issues

Do we always need the very best quality for every statistical operation?

- Trade-off between quality and cost
- Trade-off between quality and response burden
- A more differentiated approach to the concept of quality
- Experimental statistics

Transparency on quality issues

- Disseminating structured reports
- Quality assessments (self-assessments or with external experts)

Satisfying user's needs

- New needs
- Stronger pressures
- New segments of users

Some examples of new needs

- The measurement of well-being (Stiglitz report)
- Information on small areas

The Stiglitz report

- Measuring the progress of societies
- Well-being: a complex multidimensional phenomenon
- A search for good indicators on new fields
- A more systematic approach to the statistical production process

Information on small areas

- Increasing need at level NUTS 3 and smaller
- Combined with geo-spatial information
- Specific methods
- Linking and matching. Identifiers
- Confidentiality problems

Stronger pressures

- Timely information
- Good access to information
- Budget restrictions

Timely information

- Trade-off between opportunity and quality
- Flash indicators
- Intelligent interpolation

Good access to information

- Comprehensive
- Equal
- Friendly

Budget restrictions

- Re-use of data
- A more systematic approach
- Optimal use of new technologies
- International cooperation

New segments of users

- Being pro-active
- Striving to develop statistical literacy in all segments of users
- Preventing wrong or sensationalistic interpretations of the data
- Public access to micro-data: advantages and risks

Official statistics, from “public good” to “public service”

A new field to explore: Big Data

- Identifying relevant issues
- Setting a structure (definitions and classifications)
- Quality issues