

Institutional statistical cooperation across borders – the case of the Nordic countries

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1. Background

Nordic cooperation in the field of statistics has a very long tradition. It was first initiated by national statistical societies in the late 19th century, and institutional cooperation among the national statistical agencies of Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark was launched after the Second World War, with funding from the governments of the Nordic countries. At the initiative of the Nordic Council of Ministers, a special Statistical Secretariat was established in 1969 to oversee the cooperation and publish, among other things, a statistical yearbook. To support the development of statistics, standing committees were set up for various areas of statistics, with the Secretariat being responsible for overseeing the preparatory work of these committees. The heads of the statistical agencies met once a year to define the focus of the cooperation and to evaluate progress. A Nordic statistical conference met in a different Nordic country once every three years. A regular report was written on the cooperative efforts.

The forms of cooperation underwent radical changes in the early 1990s. A shift in orientation towards broader European cooperation contributed to the withdrawal of government support for the functioning of the Nordic Statistical Secretariat. National statistical agencies were faced with deciding whether to continue Nordic cooperation alongside cooperative efforts taking place within the European Union framework. Many doubted that the statistical agencies would have the drive and will to contribute to this regionally limited cooperation. The Directors General of the statistical agencies decided, nevertheless, to continue cooperative activities and backed this up with a willingness to dedicate their own resources to the undertaking. The modes of action, however, were modernised and streamlined.

The positive experience of the past ten years has confirmed the importance of Nordic cooperation. New topics and forms of cooperation have continued to arise, while some long-established forms have remained significant. Above all, Nordic cooperation in the field of statistics involves sharing best practices among countries that are highly advanced statistically, while working jointly to develop the field of statistics.

2. Basic elements of cooperation

The basic foundation of Nordic cooperation is, of course, the histories that, in part, these countries share, and the similar ways in which their societies have developed. In addition to cooperation on statistics, formal and informal cooperation has been extensive in many spheres of life. Nordic political decision-makers have learned from each other in developing national legislation and creating administrative structures. In many areas, the countries have competed, in a positive way, in the quest for excellence.

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Official statistics hold a prominent position in the Nordic countries. Throughout their history, statistics have been important in supporting societal decision-making on policy issues ranging from general economic conditions and labour to education, social affairs and health. Benchmarking against other – especially Nordic – countries has been regarded as important. Ultimately, the key objective of statistical cooperation has been to improve comparability. Especially in the early days, efforts were devoted to defining classifications so as to improve comparability, and statistical methodologies were harmonised. Another fundamental objective has been the development of entirely new statistics. The Nordic countries are relatively homogeneous in their levels of development, cultural backgrounds and administrative structures, and have therefore found it easy to cooperate, benefiting in many ways from each others' innovations and experiences.

Naturally, the need for comparability covers a much broader area than merely the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, they remain a good place to pilot new methods or statistical concepts, and to test their functioning. If a method or classification cannot be applied in such homogeneous countries, it is unlikely that it will provide comparability among much more heterogeneous countries.

Nordic statistical cooperation is based on all parties benefiting, in what is a “win-win” situation. Cooperation is carried out on a highly professional basis. All parties contribute resources, and all can be certain of receiving benefits, with experts learning from each others' good practices and solutions. One excellent example is the development of a register-based statistical system in all Nordic countries. These countries are the leaders internationally in utilising register data in statistics production, and this is due partly to their long-term cooperation.

Cooperation is voluntary, and is based on principles of equality. While not all parties participate in each cooperative activity, all are permitted to join in. Countries are not distinguished according to size or other characteristics. Many statistics experts consider Nordic cooperation to be the first forum of international cooperation.

Cooperation among these countries is also characterised by regularity and continuity. One key reason for this is the sense of certainty that the cooperation is directed and strongly supported by top management at the statistical agencies.

3. Forms of cooperation

Although cooperation between statistical agencies currently involves a very light administrative structure, it includes many forms of cooperation, as described below.

3.1 Meetings of Directors General

Each country acts as chair for one year. In addition to serving as chair, it functions as the secretariat for the meetings of the Directors General. A one-day meeting is held each year in the chairing country. In addition, the Directors General meet when necessary, generally in connection with the meetings of the EU Statistical Programme Committee. Once every three years, the top management of the statistical agencies comes together for a two-day meeting. Here, the agenda generally includes 4 or 5 different topics, which are prepared jointly. The substantive discussions are conducted during the meeting. On the basis of the issues discussed, the Directors General may decide to launch special studies considered strategically important, defining resources, timetables and tasks for the studies. Examples from the past few years include studies on the use of microdata, the registration of multinational enterprises located in the Nordic countries, and the organisation and costs of interviewing activities.

3.2 Contact networks

In addition to the statistical committees, 40 networks have been set up to cover different statistical areas, with representatives from each Nordic country. The convenor/chair is selected for three years at a time. Most of the networks deal with substantive issues in a particular area of statistics. In addition, there are networks dealing with horizontal issues such as dissemination, databases, quality management, web-master collaboration and research. Most of the time, the members of the networks communicate virtually, ie via email. Joint meetings are also arranged occasionally in connection with a meeting of one of the Eurostat working groups. The networks propose separate meetings or seminars as the need arises. Such expert meetings take place several times a year.

3.3 Seminars

Some of the networks have adopted a habit of arranging a special seminar every other year or every five years. The number of participants is generally capped at 40-50. Significant future-oriented seminars have been organised, on subjects such as labour market statistics and the use of registers. A seminar dealing with methodology and quality issues connected with the use of administrative registers in statistics production will take place in 2007. In addition to the Nordic countries, representatives have been invited from other countries that use government data in compiling statistics.

3.4 The Nordic Statistical Conference

The Nordic Statistical Conference, which convenes once every three years, is a traditional meeting. Nordic countries alternate in hosting it, and local statistical societies participate in the arrangements. In the summer of 2007, the 24th Nordic Statistical Conference will meet in Reykjavik, Iceland. The topic will be measurement problems in statistics. The two-day conference is divided into several sessions, and a joint Nordic group has been overseeing the preparatory work. Roughly 250-300 statistics professionals from all of the Nordic countries are expected to attend.

The practice during the past few years has been to arrange a course on statistical methodology before the conference, targeting, in particular, the younger professionals in the field. Nordic experts have acted as lecturers, and have often been joined by other internationally known experts. This time, the one-day course deals with sampling theory and its applications.

3.5 Joint projects

One project with a long tradition is the Nordic Statistical Yearbook, which is compiled by Statistics Denmark. Its costs are covered entirely by the Nordic Council of Ministers. Other projects funded jointly by the Nordic countries include a project to compile and develop statistics on the information society, and a project on commuting.

Perhaps the result of Nordic cooperation that is best known in the statistical world is the development of the PC-Axis software family. The software is designed for those who maintain statistical databases in statistical agencies, as well as in other organisations offering database services. The project began in Sweden, with Denmark, Norway and Iceland joining later. Statistics Finland began participating in the development work at a subsequent stage. The cooperative effort has since expanded greatly, and development work is now being carried out in over 30 organisations.

Over the years, there have been other projects as well, resulting in products that have found users outside the Nordic countries. Most typically, such projects have dealt with a specific issue, where there was a need to describe methodology and disseminate information on best

practices. The most recent example, a handbook on register-based statistics systems, will be published in the spring of 2007. The authors of the manual are Nordic experts in their field. As there is increasing interest in register-based statistics systems, the handbook will also be published in English by the ECE.

Another type of project investigated the future challenges of the statistical service, and resulted in a booklet entitled, "What Counts in the Future – Challenges of Official Statistics". The project supported strategic management and planning in Nordic statistical agencies. Many of the future challenges identified were and remain relevant for the broader development of official statistics.

3.6 Export of know-how

Sweden, Norway and Denmark have long been active in development work in the field of statistics, especially within national development assistance programmes. They have their own projects, as well as projects involving two or three countries, which draw on experts from all participating countries. Statistics Finland has participated in EU-funded technical cooperation projects, primarily with the former Soviet republics, new EU member states and the Balkan states. Denmark and Finland have also undertaken several EU-funded twinning projects, in which one country is the leader and the other is a so-called junior partner. Statistics Sweden has also participated in some of these projects. Although the aim of the projects has always been to assist the beneficiaries in developing their own systems, the participating Nordic experts have, in the process, learned about each other's best practices as well.

The background for this cooperation is the Nordic network, which has functioned in a highly flexible and practical manner. Seamless cooperation in projects targeting third countries has been especially important in cases where a particular country is unable to provide experts at a certain time or for specific tasks. In such situations, experts have been recruited from another country, through the contact persons in the network involved. This practice was agreed upon by the Nordic statistical offices as early as the 1990s.

4. Concluding remarks

Institutional cooperation is often based on agreements, and is therefore sometimes relatively formal in character. Nordic statistical cooperation is based first and foremost on common interests and the importance of sharing good practices. The statistical agencies of the Nordic countries can, and want to, learn from each other, and are also involved in jointly developing new tools. The cooperation is, by its nature, flexible and effective.

The fact that Nordic cooperation continues, despite the many types of international cooperation that are available, is proof of its importance and effectiveness. It is clear that the future of these cooperative efforts depends very much on the commitment and interest of management within the Nordic statistical agencies. As long as the cooperation offers opportunities for think tank-type sessions with colleagues, Directors General appreciate it and see it as beneficial for the development of their own agencies. The relative benefits gained from joint development projects are also significant.

The rise of a new generation of experts at statistical agencies is going to influence the future of cooperation, as the strong international experience among the younger generation may be moulded more by European than by Nordic cooperation experiences. Thus, the new incentives for Nordic cooperation may be different, eg the opportunity to gain work experience with another country's statistical agency, the benefits of joint training events and the opportunity to participate in joint projects with third countries.

Many areas of statistics offer substantive challenges for the future, and meeting them requires ongoing Nordic cooperation. Borders in the traditional economic sense have lost their importance. What, then, are the regional entities best suited to deal with economic statistics and analysis? The increased integration of economies – especially changes in business, as well as changes in the cross-border labour market – are among the great statistical challenges now facing us.

Nordic statistical cooperation has produced great value added, both in the European context and in the broader international setting. It might be useful, internationally, to draw lessons from many of the forms and models of this cooperation, which have fostered the development of the Nordic statistical agencies.