

Official statistics caught between two stools: why a truly European stool might be more comfortable

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1. Introduction

In this STCPM, I would like to share with you some thoughts that might help national statistical institutes (NSIs) to better achieve their mission in an ever more demanding and ever more rapidly evolving society. We all know that statistical information needs are becoming more complex and broader while respondents are less willing to participate and NSIs face legal and other constraints as well as a shortage of resources. Official statisticians are apparently caught between two stools, and in several regards at that. This is by no means a very comfortable position, but I am convinced that we can make it a much more comfortable one. My conviction is based on my many years of experience as a user of official statistics and now as Eurostat's DG in charge of Community statistics and a main player in the European Statistical System (ESS).

2. Current situation

Let us to begin by looking a little more closely at the main types of demand and their inherent contradictions. First, there are our users. There are, however, different types of users, and their demands differ too.

- The public at large, normal citizens so to speak, have fairly general interests. What they need is easily accessible and interesting statistics that cast light on key political and social topics and are of relevance to daily life.
- The same applies to a large extent to the media. They are natural partners for official statisticians when it comes to disseminating statistics, albeit with their own agenda as they are always on the lookout for statistics that will allow them to tell a story that will sell or at least attract attention.
- Professionals, in contrast, have very specific interests. They need statistics for their forecasting, planning and decision-making. Timeliness is of the utmost importance, and so is readability, as these individuals have to draw their conclusions as quickly as possible, and hopefully more quickly than their competitors. Reliability and detail are certainly also highly valued, as professionals strive to outdo their peers by being faster, having more detail or being more robust in their conclusions.
- Empirical researchers are usually interested in detailed statistics, and often also in long time series. They need broad coverage and methodological stability, as these increase the analytical value of statistics. They like to look for linkages with other

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sources, and in some fields of research they are interested not so much in statistics as in (anonymised) individual data.

- Policymakers have a need for politically useful statistics. The political process has become ever more numbers-based. Statistics set the perception framework and accompany the whole political process, from the identification of a politically relevant issue through public debate and the testing of alternative solutions to the monitoring of the implementation of policy decisions. Sometimes the decisions themselves are more or less automatically tied to statistical values.

It is obvious that official statisticians have to serve very different masters, but they do so with a lot of energy. We know from Goldoni's Truffaldino that this means a lot of stress, and he had to serve only two masters. Worse, there is no such thing as a "passepartout" statistic; it does not exist, has never existed and will never exist. Instead, each of our masters is entitled to, and will have to be given, all the attention they require. Everybody will have to be served according to their legitimate and publicly/officially recognised needs.

Second, there are our respondents. They are asking – and this has become almost a ritual – for their statistical reporting burden to be reduced. However, this cannot and does not automatically imply a reduction in the reporting volume, as official statisticians attempt to design reporting obligations in such a way as to allow respondents to draw on information already held for other purposes. Businesses, and increasingly also households, are getting more numerate, and many of their files are kept electronically. However, as there are limits to such a conceptual accommodation, it should be borne in mind that official statistics account for only a minute share of the general administrative burden and their significance should thus not be exaggerated.

Third, there are various legal authorities. They can impose limits on the type of questions asked and even the methods used. The data protection authorities' insistence on absolutely watertight data protection, however justified and necessary this is, does not make life easier for official statisticians. In addition, as access to and the linkage of administrative sources might well be hampered by confidentiality concerns, there are also data protection costs. However, these costs cannot be borne by the official statisticians themselves, but are passed on to either their respondents or their users.

Finally, there are the fiscal authorities. Almost all NSIs have seen a considerable reduction in their budgets. Staff numbers had to come down and did come down in recent years, while staff qualifications had to go up and did go up. However successful this austerity policy may have been in the past, it has its limits, and these now seem to have been reached, at least as long as official statistics have to be produced as a public good by NSIs linked through the ESS network.

This pressure has almost always been present in the past, and will persist into the future. Technology and methodology, however, have hitherto enabled official statisticians to cope quite successfully even with often contradictory demands and constraints. Statisticians will in all likelihood continue to draw on that form of support, but it might not be enough. Moreover, such support, both technological and methodological, also has its often overlooked darker side. The objectives of official statisticians and methodological researchers do not necessarily coincide. Sophistication and elegance, decomposition and adjustment, flash estimation and back recalculation all have their scientific value, but give rise to the risk of overburdening both users and producers of official statistics. Similar trade-offs might also apply when it comes to technology, albeit not to the same extent. Technology will definitely help official statisticians reduce the burden on quite a number of their respondents, especially the technologically more advanced ones, but not necessarily all of them. It will also help statisticians to enhance the service they provide to quite a number of their users, but not necessarily the technologically less advanced ones. However, NSIs in their capacity as a public service have to treat their partners equally, irrespective of the latter's sophistication as users or their technological advancement as respondents.

3. The significance of the European Union and the European Statistical System

Some might think that the European Union generates an extra burden both on NSIs and on their respondents. This might be true in isolated cases, but my perception is different and my overall assessment even more so.

The European Union with its ESS network of NSIs offers quite a lot of advantages, especially in handling the many pressures involved. Official statisticians are stronger (politically more robust) and thus better positioned to cope with these pressures:

- when they are united – and the European Union does provide a context that allows them to come together and pursue their needs jointly, enabling their national institutions to profit from this unity;
- when they work from a strong legal base – as is once again the case with Community statistics, but it also applies indirectly to statistics that are mainly national; and
- when they agree on key methodological choices – which is, of course, also the case with Community statistics.

The very success of Community statistics – and a by now firmly established five-year statistical programming process – provides a framework for official statistics in the European Union.

Moreover, you are aware that EU statistical requirements in most cases do not represent an additional burden, but a legally anchored commitment to continue in a harmonised manner with the production of statistics that would in any case be produced for national purposes. This, admittedly, does not make NSIs more flexible; on the contrary, there is a danger of introducing a certain rigidity since they are bound by a legal obligation and have to continue doing their work in the manner agreed upon even if new ways might be more promising (eg more cost-effective or less burdensome).

Finally, the decision-making structures (the Statistical Programming Committee and other committees) supported by a communication infrastructure (miscellaneous working groups, task forces and advisory bodies such as CMFB or CEIES) have helped official statisticians present a united front and work together.

Having said all this, it should be quite clear that other institutions using official statistics (OECD, UN, IMF, etc) have profited from the collective drive of official statisticians in the European Union. No doubt there are cases where they would have preferred us Europeans to have taken our decisions early or differently, but by and large it would have been much more difficult for them to keep their even bigger flock of statistical offices together.

4. Conclusions

What could or should we do now in view of this overall very positive EU experience? From what I have experienced over the years first as an observer and now as a manager of official statistics, I would suggest the following in order to obtain some relief from the pressures outlined above:

- Be more European in our thinking and working

I am convinced that a formally agreed European work programme (annual as well as multiannual, at European Commission, Council of the European Union and European Parliament level) combined with legal obligations offers highly effective protection against both budget cuts and excessive demand.

Moreover, I believe that the EU-wide comparability of official statistics is their most attractive feature, but one which has perhaps not been sufficiently exploited by professionals, and certainly not by the public at large or the media.

- Be more official in our understanding of our role

Our core business should be statistics that can only be produced officially (with a legal reporting obligation, register-based sampling framework, legally shaped access to administrative records, etc). We should be very cautious when it comes to opinion polls. Even voluntary surveys have to be handled with care. The reason for this stance is quite clear, at least to me. We should at all costs avoid the risk of being seen as casting “subjective” information into “objective” statistics.

- Be more statistical in our adequation

Our permanent challenge is to bridge the gap between what is theoretically meant and what is statistically measured. This is what is usually called “statistical adequation”. However, the more complex the bridge becomes, the higher the risks will be. We should therefore be aware that it is the observational content that counts in the end and refrain from excessively complex imputations or all too abstract transformations.

- Be more communicative in our work

Official statisticians have learned that they have to put their statistics into context. Statistics do not speak for themselves; they have to be explained, and their usage has to be guided.

And when speaking about statistics, we should also have the courage to talk about the negative consequences of statistics that are not available, the so-called “cost of non-statistics”.

- Be more legal/official in our actions

Official statisticians seem to have the tendency to promise everything to everybody, not necessarily for now but at least for later. It is the competitive pressure from all sorts of institutions and businesses that makes them do this, but this is quite dangerous because it might taint the image of official statistics. We should therefore make the carrying-out of statistical work as contingent as possible on explicit political support – and not just development work, but also ongoing work.

- Remain pragmatic in our approach

Finally, we should avoid overselling our results. They are not absolute truths; they are conventions cast into numbers. This feature is only all too clear for us, the European statisticians, because it is part of our core business, reaching consensus on conventions and on ways of casting them into numbers. We should therefore also allow pragmatism to prevail. A convention is simply what it is: a convention, hopefully the best available. Excessive sophistication, so it seems, can become a kind of disease. Instead, we should remain as close as possible to data and be prudent with excessive condensation through composite indicators or other high-wire acts.

All in all, I am convinced that, despite all our recent difficulties and considerable stress, our profession has a bright future. Our societies are becoming ever more numerate, and this has consequences not only for the economic and social sphere but also for the political sphere. And the European Union is particularly numerate in what it is doing. No doubt others will also come up with statistics, but we, the official statisticians, have by the very nature of our statistics a privileged position, and rightly so. Only if we fail to do what we are supposed to do, namely provide statistics that can be supplied only officially, will we get into real difficulties. So let us recall at all times what we have to do: come up with truly official statistics. And if we manage to do that jointly at European level, we will be all the more attractive and thus much stronger.