

The future role of international organisations: enhancement of relevance and quality of official statistics

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Abstract

The authors analyse in the paper the future of official statistics, focusing in particular on how the international organisations through changes in governance or standard setting could contribute to increasing its relevance and quality.

Official statistics are faced nowadays with a multitude of challenges (e.g. shrinking resources, improvement of timeliness, need to give responses of greater relevance to the specific requests of users, use of new data sources) and have to provide an effective answer through high quality official statistics in many domains at global level (e.g. SDGs, globalisation). Under these rapidly changing circumstances, it will however be essential to enable Official Statistics to play their important societal role through appropriate adaptation of the rules, the principles and resources, which frame their working conditions.

Enhanced cooperation and communication between the main stakeholders at global level is essential for improving the credibility and relevance of official statistics. However, in order to be able to face the current challenges the global statistical system needs to go a step further.

The authors will discuss the feasibility of the application of the European Statistical System model to the global statistical system by considering the application of the ESS standard setting model and the transfer of aspects of the ESS governance and cooperation structure to the global statistical system. Is this possible without an underlying legal framework, as it exists in Europe? Is there room for strengthening the agreements at global level and establish new cooperation mechanisms?

In this context, the authors will argue for a change in international statistical governance and address issues such as the new role of international organisations.

Keywords: Future official statistics, cooperation with international organisations, relevance, ESS

1. Introduction

Democratic societies do not function properly without a solid basis of reliable and objective statistics. On the one hand, decision-makers in countries, in local government and in business need statistics to make those decisions. On the other hand, public and media need statistics to build an accurate picture of contemporary society and to evaluate the performance of politicians and other stakeholders. In an increasingly global world, the general community is showing a growing interest in international statistics, describing international developments as well as data that allow a comparison of nations, regions and other groups. The internet developments have made access to these statistics far easier. This need for global measurements is one of the reasons why the global statistical system has a responsibility to help improving national statistical systems especially the least developed ones. A prerequisite for consistent global measurement is a strong global statistical system. New developments of large relevant data sets becoming available via other sources, like big data, change the role of national statistical systems and the focus on national data that are internationally comparable.

Official statistics are faced nowadays with a multitude of challenges (e.g. shrinking resources, improvement of timeliness, need to give responses of greater relevance to the specific requests of users, use of new data sources) and have to provide an effective answer through high quality official statistics in many domains at global level (e.g. SDGs, globalisation). Under these rapidly changing circumstances, it will however be essential to enable official statistics to play their important societal role through appropriate adaptation of the rules, principles and resources which frame their working conditions. Official statistics are at a crossroads: responding to the new developments will require modernisation of the statistical work and its legal and institutional frameworks. There are opportunities presented by these developments which, if they are wise, official statisticians will take in order to build on previous successes. In this context, international organisations and the global statistical system might profit from a change in governance that ultimately will lead to an increase in the quality of their statistics.

In the next sections we will have a look at the main elements of governance of the Global and European Statistical Systems and will conclude by making concrete proposals for a change in governance.

2. Global Statistical System

It is widely acknowledged that the apex entity for world statistics is the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC)¹. There is no other body that assembles such a large number of official statistical organisations on a regular basis with a mandate to promote official statistics. It brings together the Chief Statisticians of Member States from around the world. It is the highest decision making body for international statistical activities, especially the setting of statistical standards, the development of concepts and methods and their implementation at the national and international level. The Statistical Commission oversees the work of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), and is a Functional Commission of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It assists the Council, inter alia, in promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability; in the coordination of the statistical work of specialised agencies; and in promoting the improvement of statistics and statistical methods generally.

However, because it is a United Nations body, it must conform to United Nations procedures resulting in what can be considered as shortcomings. In the first instance, only sovereign states can be members of the UN, and thus the UNSC, so international organisations cannot be members. Secondly, its membership is generally confined to National Statistical Offices (NSOs), not national statistical systems. Whilst NSOs can, and generally do, speak on behalf of the other producers of statistics (for example, employment ministries might collect unemployment data, agriculture ministries might collect crop production data, health ministries might collect data on communicable diseases) in their countries, this is not always the case. Thirdly, only 24 countries are actual members of the Statistical Commission; the other UN member states are classified as observers.

¹ <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/>

The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA)² was set up in 2002. This group brings together 45 organisations regularly attending its meetings under a joint chairmanship (currently UNDOC and OECD). An annual report on ongoing Committee activities is made available to the United Nations Statistical Commission.

The CCSA focuses its work on the following six main activities: efficient functioning of the statistical system; common standards and platforms; development of methodologies; inter-institutional support; outreach; and advocacy for statistics. Its members comprise international and supranational organisations, whose mandate includes the provision of international official statistics in the context of the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities, and which have a permanent embedded statistical service in their organisation and regular contacts with countries.

The CCSA promotes interagency coordination and cooperation on statistical programmes and consistency in statistical practices and development. To ensure a global statistical system which can tackle the new challenges, it can be argued that some elements of this work would need to be enhanced on a medium and long term.

3. European Statistical System (ESS)

Some aspects of the ESS Governance are presented below, followed by the underlying quality assurance in this system.

The European Statistical System (ESS) is a partnership between Eurostat (the EU Statistical Office), the national statistical offices in member states, and other national authorities responsible for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics. The primary objective of the ESS is to guarantee that European statistics, compiled in all the member states of the European Union, are comparable, reliable, relevant and usable. Eurostat has the central function in the cooperation, and leads the work by developing statistics across country borders and ensuring the availability of harmonised, high quality European statistics.

² https://unstats.un.org/unsd/accsub-public/workpartner_ccsa.htm

Eurostat does not collect statistics from respondents, but compiles and quality controls national statistics that are collected and reported by the national statistics producers.

The nucleus of the ESS is the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC)³, which consists of the Heads of Eurostat and of the national statistical offices. The ESSC discusses and decides on issues that are pivotal to the development and production of European statistics, such as the priorities of the multiannual European Statistical Programme and the annual work programme, response burden, cost effectiveness, statistical confidentiality, guidelines on statistical production, etc.

The Partnership Group (PG) is the Bureau which helps the ESSC in its work. The PG is composed of an elected Chair from a Member State, while Eurostat's Director General is Deputy Chair. Other Members of the PG are the Deputy Director General of Eurostat, the Heads of the NSOs of the previous, current and next Council Presidencies, and four elected Heads of NSOs. This configuration meets three times yearly and its main task is to further the development of the ESS by identifying strategic issues for discussion at the ESSC and assisting in the coordination and cooperation between the NSOs and Eurostat at strategic level.

Official statistics need to stand out from other statistics as being of the highest quality. Quality should become the decisive factor when choosing a data source. It is essential that users consider statistics to be 'fit for purpose': i.e. relevant, timely and accurate, produced in compliance with principles such as professional independence, impartiality and objectivity. This is achieved in the ESS via its quality assurance framework, which is a standardised, formal governance system that documents structures, responsibilities and procedures put in place to ensure continuous improvement of data and processes for satisfying users that statistics are fit for purpose. This must apply to the ESS as a whole, including Eurostat.

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-statistical-system/ess-governance-bodies/essc>

In recent years, the governance of the ESS has been improved, in particular with:

- The adoption of a European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) in 2005, updated in 2011 and 2017,
- The establishment of the European Statistics Governance Advisory Body (ESGAB) in 2008,
- The Commission Decision on Eurostat in 2012,
- The Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 on European statistics (for short referred to as the Statistical Law) and its update in 2015,
- The ESS Quality Declaration in 2016.

The European Statistics Code of Practice builds upon a common ESS definition of quality in statistics and targets all relevant areas from the institutional environment, the statistical production processes to the output: European statistics.

The ESGAB⁴ provides an independent overview of Eurostat and the ESS as regards the implementation of the CoP. Application and monitoring of the CoP has relied to a large extent on a self-regulatory approach (self-assessments, peer reviews and national implementation plans).

Another building block of quality in European statistics is the Commission Decision on Eurostat adopted in September 2012. Through the Decision, the Commission pledges to uphold the independence of Eurostat and its Director-General in their tasks, and to ensure that high-quality standards are respected for European statistics. The credibility of statistics relies on their impartiality, objectivity and freedom from political interference or influence. The independence of statistical offices is therefore of paramount importance.

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-statistical-system/ess-governance-bodies/esgab>

The European Commission revised the statistical law (Regulation 223/2009) to ensure that statistics are developed, produced and disseminated in an independent manner, free from any pressures from political or interest groups, regardless of the existing institutional settings. The revised regulation on European statistics also indicates provisions for "Commitments on Confidence in Statistics", which provide a way of formally committing national governments to adherence to the CoP. They should be signed by the government at the highest level and identify specific actions within the governments' responsibility, which are aimed at improving compliance with the CoP according to agreed deadlines for implementation.

The ESS quality assurance framework, based on the Code of Practice standards for statistical processes and outputs, identifies different practical methods and tools which national statistical offices can use to implement the CoP and which are appropriate to their organisational environment. Examples are the use of service level agreements with the owners of administrative data, procedures for consultation with users, a public policy on how data are released, and so on.

The quality assurance framework is an important reference document when compliance with the Code of Practice is being assessed, either through self-assessments in statistical offices or through external assessment such as peer reviews. A third round of peer reviews for the ESS (Eurostat and Member States National Statistical Offices) is planned to be launched in 2019.

4. Way forward

4.1 Governance

To be equipped to face the current challenges of official statistics at global level mentioned in the introduction, the right balance between international organisations and UN structures needs to be struck to warrant a system where the respective members communicate and cooperate more and are in a position to provide effective guidance to countries where needed.

The international and supranational organisations are increasingly involved in setting standards for harmonisation, playing a key role in most of the statistical projects as well as cooperation and capacity building work. In groups established by member states of the UN, a country is normally asked to take the lead but the support of the international organisations is essential. The formal role and position of the international and supranational organisations needs to be adjusted by allowing the international organisations to more effectively contribute to the system.

To face developments in society, statistical standards and classifications need to be regularly updated. For example, issues such as globalisation, climate change and migration ask for very quick updates of the relevant definitions, standards and legislative framework, with subsequent implementation also required within a short timescale.

To face these challenges, all players in the system will have to cooperate on the introduction and harmonisation of new standards. This holds true not only for the revision of standards, but also when accommodating new developments. Other examples of this are the implementation of the revised SNA (2008), the ICP project, SDGs and Census 2020. A large amount of effort and resources is needed for achieving these results. Preparation and implementation are based on input from both international organisations and national statistical systems.

To facilitate this work and to allow as many countries as possible to be involved, increased funding and stronger governance are necessary. Compared to earlier times, a greater number of countries and regions are now concerned.

The implementation of theme-oriented type of Partnership Groups or reinforced Friends of the Chair to follow these developments at strategic level, including both countries and international organisations, could be the means to achieving stronger management of the key global projects. This would also have a positive role on standard setting and implementation by clearly identifying the issues to tackle, recognising synergies, increasing coordination, enhancing implementation and perhaps better focusing the funding necessary for implementation. In Europe, we are able to give standards a legal basis; as this possibility does not exist at global level, other means such as stronger governance structures need to take over.

There are many international projects on the agenda of the global statistical system and the workload for the statistical offices and international organisations to follow these developments is high. Resource limitations, exacerbated by reductions in public budgets following the current financial and economic crisis, as well as reconsideration of tasks, result in large international projects having to be planned carefully and with strong management to reach the agreed objectives.

To follow the developments, a permanent awareness of possible changes is needed. The challenges for the system are enormous, the costs very high. Wasting resources is evidently unacceptable. Therefore, the main stakeholders have to cooperate very closely together and inform each other openly on all new developments.

The CCSA could enhance its role as a network that allows organisations to share new developments at an early stage. Statisticians need early access to information and to participate in new developments within the global statistical system. The CCSA meeting structure should facilitate the exchange of ideas, the decision making process and the standard setting process.

A step in the right direction has been the creation, last year, of a CCSA Bureau. This should enable the Committee to play an enhanced role within its sphere of influence in increasing coordination and support towards stronger leadership in the global statistical system and, more specifically, in facilitating the adherence to the quality principles and respect of guidelines on quality assurance.

The recognition of some overlap between the global projects and the use of finite common resources of the global statistical system should lead to a permanent dialogue between the main stakeholders via a forum linked to, or part of, the CCSA.

4.2 Quality

The authority and credibility of statistics has become a main issue for evidence based policy making. Transparency on methods used, quality, and meta information are needed to guarantee this credibility and authority.

A self-regulatory system of norms and values based on a commonly agreed set of principles and operationalised via a quality framework is essential for maintaining credibility. Examples are the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities

and the European Statistics Code of Practice. The UN also developed in 2010 a template for National Quality Assurance Frameworks⁵.

As mentioned previously in the context of European statistics, in the future other data sources will also play an increased role in the production of statistics at global level which poses specific challenges to ensure adherence to common quality standards. On the global level there will be room to mirror the European experience with the development of a quality framework and other tools to this wider context, also taking into account the new data sources that do not stem from the National Statistical Systems.

With the use of other data sources, statistical offices and international organisations will no longer master data collection but still need to assess the fulfilment of quality requirements. There is thus room for CCSA to grow into a body performing quality checking, promoting the quality standards and translating quality standards to enable their application in other environments.

The creation of an ESGAB-type body (whether or not associated to the CCSA) could also be considered, so that implementation of global principles and frameworks would be assessed in an independent way.

Taking into account the role of international organisations in the global statistical system and in the current situation of scarcity of resources, a more effective CCSA could actively contribute to the implementation of the objectives of the global system.

5. References

European Commission (2017): European Statistics Code of Practice.

European Statistical System (2016): Quality Declaration.

⁵ <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/QualityNQAF/nqaf.aspx>