



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
14 March 2014

English only

Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Sixty-second plenary session

Paris, 9-11 April 2014

Item 3 of the provisional agenda

What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?

Marketing the national statistical office's value proposition – a call to action and examples of good practice

Prepared by the Modernisation Committee on Products and Sources

Summary

This paper contains the reflections of the new Modernisation Committee on Products and Sources, a group of experts from 10 national and international statistical organisations, overseen by the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Statistical Production and Services. It reflects on strengths and weaknesses, describes selected national practices, and proposes a collaborative approach to understanding and marketing the value of official statistics.

The paper is presented for discussion to the Conference of European Statisticians seminar on “What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?”

I. Introduction

1. As a collective, national statistics organisations share a value proposition that is almost certainly under-exploited. National statistical offices (NSOs) offer a point of difference that data consumers can rely on when trying to make sense of the volumes of data of varying quality available worldwide. As a global statistical community focused on producing independent statistics of an enduring quality, we can and should do a better job of explaining our point of difference to the wider public. We can do better when explaining the quality of the information we produce and how it can be used to make decisions. And we can do a better job of describing the unique values of our collective assets as a statistical community. These include: shared international standards; our standards of independence; our methodologies and practices; regular cooperation across borders; and intellectual capital that includes shared knowledge and tools.

II. Why marketing?

2. The explosion in freely available data worldwide presents both threats and opportunities for NSOs and signals the need for collective work to address those as a wider statistical community. If NSOs cannot articulate their value proposition collectively, we risk losing our relevance in a sea of data producers.

3. We note that there are various approaches to the concept of “marketing” among NSOs – some are more commercially oriented than others and this may influence their approach to marketing. Many countries consider official statistics as a purely public good and do not seek to gain commercially from their outputs, while others may have a funding model that encourages them to seek revenue-earning streams and therefore could be more aggressive in their marketing policies.

III. Our unique values

4. The official statistics community possesses unique values and strengths that set us clearly apart from many other players in the field of statistics. Although these values are likely obvious to those within the statistical community, upon closer inspection none of them are self-evident to those outside our community.

5. As NSOs seek to open up their traditionally closed approach, we are finding that many commercial and not-for-profit organisations are eager to work with us as partners. That means we have something to offer – whether it be data, expertise or reputation.

6. Perhaps the greatest strength and point of difference for NSOs is our quality focus. We rely on sound methodologies to collect, process and analyse data. We explicitly define target populations, design efficient sampling schemes and make sure we correct for coverage errors and selectivity issues. We are transparent about our processes and products, which are accompanied by descriptive metadata. We publish our release calendars so that our users know when new information becomes available. We make sure that our statistics are comparable over time, such that both levels and change rates are reliable indicators. Our consistent long time series are greatly appreciated by policy makers, who feed them into sophisticated analytical models. All in all, we go to great lengths to guarantee the quality of our statistical products and services.

7. The international network of official statistics organisations is another area of strength. Through this network, best practices are shared and coordinated development

activities are carried out. In the past, these efforts concentrated mostly on concepts and methods, but increasingly tools and resources are being shared, too.

8. Official statistics usually have a firm legal basis that defines the institutional context and tasks, including unique data collecting privileges. The worldwide official statistics community has formulated its Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, a set of ten principles that shows we are very aware of our role in the information system of a democratic society and that we know how we want to play that role.

9. We share standardized concepts and classifications that are designed to capture economic and social phenomena in a harmonised and comprehensive way, and these are revised in a coordinated manner. Examples include the System of National Accounts (SNA 2008), which is used worldwide as the statistical framework for summarising and analysing economies; and the International Standard Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC rev.4). The worldwide standards are flexible and may be adapted for specific purposes, such as the SNA 2008, which is elaborated into the European System of National and Regional Accounts (ESA 2010) because of the very important role of statistical indicators for policymaking in the European Union.

10. A strict confidentiality regime is another key value of our community. We make sure that we never reveal information about individual units – whether persons, households or enterprises. Data protection techniques include both anonymization algorithms for microdata and statistical disclosure control methods for aggregates. And data collected for statistical purposes is never used for any other purposes, like supervision or fraud detection. This is a basic prerequisite to maintain public trust.

11. We sit on top of huge, well-documented microdata sets, particularly in countries that have access to administrative data sources such as tax records and population registers. To increase public utility, many statistical offices have decided to grant restricted access to their data vaults. Only selected user groups like academic researchers are eligible, under very strict confidentiality and security rules. Being in a position to enable this type of scientific access to data provides another unique value.

12. Apart from restricted access to microdata, we aim for maximum accessibility of our statistical outputs like tables, visualisations, press releases, yearbooks and web publications. They are a public good that must be accessible for all end users, both for power users and those more casually interested in our data. Statistical offices are therefore among the frontrunners in adopting open data strategies. The G8 Open Data Charter prominently identifies statistics among its areas of high value data. This can only serve to further increase the value of our products.

13. Our independence is another key strength. While industry groups may publish statistics more quickly, because they have a vested interest users tend to approach the data with greater caution than they might with official statistics produced by an independent NSO.

14. Finally, an often forgotten asset is that most official statistics agencies have a very good reputation and a positive public image. Even when our work is being criticized and our reputation seems to suffer, this happens in a way similar to the criticisms of the weather forecast. Obviously people don't like to be surprised by a shower when a sunny day was predicted. The trust in official statistics becomes particularly apparent when analysts present alternative approaches for compiling statistics: they compare their results to official statistics figures as a benchmark.

IV. Our weaknesses

15. Every rose has its thorn: in addition to the many strengths presented above we suffer from a number of weaknesses. To be able to address them it helps to identify them.

16. One regular criticism concerns the timeliness of our products. In some cases annual statistics are produced with a delay of several years, which can reduce their usefulness and they are published only “for the record”. Similar situations apply for some quarterly and monthly statistics. This lack of timeliness is a growing concern for two reasons. First, the pace of society is increasing and users are becoming impatient. Second, the amount of alternative information sources (even of dubious or uncertain quality) is growing. Significant progress in this dimension means that compromises have to be sought in other important quality dimensions that are also in great demand, like accuracy and level of detail.

17. A further complaint is that our responsiveness to new user needs could be better. Here one of our strengths even turns against us. Regular statistical information sets are specified in formal work programs, international agreements or even legislation. This leads to stability in production and reliability over time. To change specifications, however, depends on cumbersome procedures, which hampers flexibility and responsiveness.

18. Once we decide to develop a new statistical product, the time from design and development to production and publication of results can take several years. This is partly caused by our quality focus, but for the reasons given above we must reduce our time to market. This is particularly true in the area of big data. If we are not quick enough to exploit these sources others may jump in and start to compile statistics. The volatility of some big data sources also means that a design may become obsolete even before it reaches the production phase.

19. We are also struggling to translate our core values to the world of web surveys and big data. Traditional survey methods no longer apply – we have to find new paradigms to extract quality statistics from new sources. We may have to redefine our statistical concepts and solve selectivity or bias issues. We may even have to reconsider how to supply society with relevant and meaningful information.

20. Finally, our statistics have often limited appeal for individual users with specific questions. People and enterprises may want to know how they compare to their peer group. Local governments may require information at neighbourhood or street level for policy and planning decisions. Often such needs can be easily satisfied on request. But in some cases, we have the data needed but are still unable to answer the questions, due to either lack of resources or lack of powerful estimation methods. The standards that make us so trustworthy – including our confidentiality obligations, use of sample surveys and the need to minimise respondent burden – sometimes mean that we are not able to publish data to a sufficient degree of detail to meet user needs.

V. Current practices – examples from the national statistical offices’ community

21. In order to deal with the challenges presented above and to explain or improve their value proposition, many individual NSOs have developed different approaches. Below we present a number of practices that seem worthwhile to share in this context.

A. New Zealand

1. Valuing the New Zealand Census

22. Statistics New Zealand recently commissioned a report that sought to measure the value produced by its five-yearly census. It sought to measure and quantify the benefits to New Zealand from the census and population estimates – essentially, it sought to place a dollar value on the information derived from the census and its associated population estimates. Its executive summary makes a firm statement: “The conclusion is clear: despite significant difficulties in developing a rigorous quantification, it is reasonable to conclude that the census delivers benefits well in excess of its direct costs.” Author Carl Bakker noted that there are no agreed models for measuring the value of such statistics, so the process of estimation was complex. Bakker concluded that information provided by the census and its associated population statistics provided a net present value of close to \$1 billion for New Zealand over a 25-year period.

2. Measuring use and trust

23. Statistics NZ surveys its users to determine their attitudes towards official statistics. The Use and Trust in Official Statistics Survey (2) has been conducted twice – in 2010 and in 2011, following guidelines developed by the OECD Committee on Statistics. It measures: awareness of government statistics, their importance, how they are used, the trust people have in them, and how they were accessed. The report has been conducted by Research New Zealand to ensure independence of the results.

B. Denmark

1. Sales and marketing at Statistics Denmark

24. In recent years, Statistics Denmark has moved toward a more specialized division of labour, including the creation of a new Sales and Marketing department. This department aims to create optimal conditions for data suppliers and increase income by professionalising its interactions with data consumers. It is comprised of four divisions – Interview Services, Research and Methods, Customer Centre and International Consulting. Its marketing and promotional activities include:

(a) Free introductions to Statistics Denmark that outline its service offering – what is available at no charge, and what kind of data might incur a charge;

(b) Free courses in how to find great stories in all the published statistics for students at Denmark’s Media and Journalism College and other universities where journalists are educated;

(c) Direct mail to potential customer;

(d) Direct e-mails to people who have agreed to receive material from Statistics Denmark;

(e) Analysis days where potential customers of data can outline their data needs. Statistics Denmark can then show them what data can be purchased from their registers to meet their needs, and the customers are charged a fee for the day;

(f) Direct phone calls to potential customers;

(g) A promotional magazine “Statistisk Perspektiv” (Statistical Perspective) is sent to former customers and other interested people three to four times a year. The articles are about customized tasks that customers have paid for, providing an appetizer of what they can get from Statistics Denmark.

C. The Netherlands

1. Supplying customised statistics

25. The Centre for Policy Related Statistics compiles tailor-made statistics based on research questions from paying customers. It draws on a wide range of available statistical (micro)data sources and the expertise of Statistics Netherlands staff. If necessary, external datasets supplied by customers are linked to the existing datasets. The work is carried out for a fixed rate per hour and leads to a research report with the stamp of Statistics Netherlands, without exclusive rights, however. The results of the study are published on the Statistics Netherlands website, meaning they're available to the wider public. This service is very successful: It started some ten years ago with a handful of researchers, and has now grown into two teams (with a third being established) of altogether 30 researchers whose expenses are fully covered by payments for the research they carry out. This service helps to increase (re)use of previously collected data and adds flexibility and responsiveness to customer demands.

2. Advisory boards

26. Statistics Netherlands maintains closer ties to its stakeholders through the use of a number of advisory boards for subject matter areas and methodological research. Members are external stakeholders, and the chairs of the advisory boards together form an overall board. All boards meet several times per year and discuss topics of interest to their areas.

D. Ireland

1. Improving statistical literacy

27. In May 2007 the Irish Central Statistics Office embarked on an Education Outreach Programme, a long-term investment driven by the desire to increase the awareness and effective use of statistics in Ireland. Educating CSO data customers is seen as a key driver toward this goal. To develop and implement a number of key projects, the CSO has fostered key partnerships at a national and international level. The three broad target areas that were highlighted include:

2. Primary and post-primary education

28. Census At School is an international non-profit project funded by organisations interested in promoting good use of statistics and data handling. It involves collecting and disseminating real data for use by teachers and pupils. CSO Ireland worked with the UK Royal Statistical Society Centre for Statistical Education to develop the program in 2009. Census at Schools Ireland was promoted by the CSO with the Irish education authorities and has been used in trialling a new maths curriculum.

29. On World Statistics Day 2010, the CSO launched a statistics competition for post-primary students. It is now run annually and is combined with the International Literacy Project Poster Competition.

30. Online educational tools have been developed to guide pupils and teachers about how to collect, process and discuss data surrounding the national cycling race 'An Post Ras'. Lessons related to the school curriculum across a range of subjects (e.g. history, geography) have been developed around the Census of Population. 'Census Charlie', a cartoon character, was created to promote the 2011 Census of Population to younger primary students.

3. Third level and continued professional development

31. A Professional Diploma in Official Statistics for Policy Evaluation was launched in 2012 by the CSO in cooperation with the Institute of Public Administration. It is a one-year diploma targeted at existing and future policy makers to help them appreciate the importance of Irish and international official statistics.

32. The CSO runs a seminar series across a range of topics (e.g. transport, enterprise statistics) to promote the use and availability of data to relevant users.

4. Media and wider society

33. The CSO engages with the media via press releases, press conferences, statistical releases and thematic reports.

34. The CSO has established statistical liaison groups (e.g. in areas such as agriculture, enterprises, transport, energy, tourism) that bring data providers together with the users and producers of these statistics. These groups improve communication, cooperation and play an important role in agreeing common objectives and priorities as well as highlighting the value of official statistics.

35. CSO launched a series of formal briefings to the national parliament to improve the flow of information to this key group of policy makers.

36. All the initiatives described above are individually worthwhile but collectively they help to market and strengthen the brand of Irish official statistics. The CSO does not have the resources of skills to take on these initiatives singlehandedly. Collaboration with other agencies is the key to success.

E. Other

37. In this short paper, the enumeration obviously cannot be exhaustive: we could equally well have included the Run That Town app developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, a strategy game which lets the player run their town using Census 2011 data to inform decisions; or the Homo Statisticus website developed by the Korean Statistical Information Service, where users can explore their current status easily by obtaining customized statistical information. And probably there are many more examples that could be included for inspiration and sharing.

VI. Conclusion

38. To build on our considerable strength as an international statistical community, we believe now is the time for shared activity to improve how we market the value of official statistics. We propose that collective work be done through the UNECE Modernisation Committee on Products and Sources or other forums to define our value proposition as NSOs. This could include developing shared strategies for ways to measure and communicate the value of official statistics.

39. We propose a survey of NSOs to gather information about their strategies or campaigns underway or planned to communicate the value of official statistics, and to gather information about any research NSOs have done to explore attitudes towards their statistics or to measure the effectiveness of their marketing efforts. This should include a stocktake of marketing and communication activities at the UNECE level. We propose that the information gathered through this work could then be used to create a shared resource for best practice examples so that others can benefit from the work being done elsewhere and progress across the statistical community could be made more quickly. For example, sharing knowledge about the development of apps for statistical releases is an especially

ripe area for potential collaboration, as the development language is standard worldwide. As shown here, ample opportunities exist for collaboration with partners outside an NSO that can increase an NSO's value proposition – this includes reaching out to the research community to add value to our data, collaborating with external developers of data apps and engaging more broadly with our stakeholders, users and respondents to better understand their needs so that our products and services, and interactions with them, can be better tailored to their requirements.

40. While the current environment presents us with many challenges, there is also no better time to seize the moment as an international community of statistical organisations and show the value we offer and the very real difference good data can make to informing decision making at all levels – from a family's choice about their mortgage to where to build hospitals, roads and schools. Our expertise, our quality focus and our commitment to long-term, enduring and independent statistics places us in a uniquely strong position to lead the next wave of data production to inform critical decisions around the world.
