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History of statistics in Belgium

The precursors of the current statistical institutions were set up at Adolphe Quetelet's instigation in early Belgium. The Statistical Bureau (1826) was the executive body and the Central Statistical Commission (1841) ensured the coordination of all statistical initiatives in Belgium.

The first census in Belgium was taken on 15 October 1846. An agricultural and industrial census was organized simultaneously. Census and surveys became more and more numerous and resulted in many publications. However, after Quetelet's death in 1874, the interest in public statistics weakened. It was not before after World War I that the public statistics were thoroughly reorganized in Belgium.

The Bureau of General Statistics became the Office of General Statistics in 1925. This name changed in 1932 already and new missions were assigned. The Central Bureau of Statistics was from then on empowered to carry out large-scale censuses and surveys, to edit all statistical publications and to produce statistics. The law of 18 December 1936 introduced the obligation for private persons to respond to some surveys.

A second major reorganization took place after World War II. The National Statistical Institute (NSI) was created in 1946. In the same year the Central Statistical Commission was reformed and renamed to Higher Council of Statistics. The NSI produced a growing number of statistics within the framework created by the Statistics Act of 1962.

The federal government set up the Institute for National Accounts in 1994. This institution gathers representatives from three important institutes, that is the NSI, the National Bank of Belgium and the Federal Planning Bureau.

The NSI rapidly understood the importance of the Internet and launched its successful website in 1998.

As a result of the Copernicus reform the NSI was converted into the Directorate General Statistics and Economic Information (DGSEI) and became one of the Directorates General of the Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy. With the new Statistics Act of 2006, the DGSEI became the key player in the statistical scene of Belgium.

This Act has established a modern framework for the collection, the production and the dissemination of high quality economic and statistical information.

Before 1830: under Dutch regime

Under Dutch regime, the official statistics were in hands of the Statistical Bureau. That Bureau was established in 1826 and was dependent upon the department of Home Affairs in The Hague. The Royal Statistical Commission was set up in the same year.

Two important publications were issued in this period. The first one deals with the evolution of the population between 1815 and 1824. The second publication includes figures on foreign trade from 1825 to 1828, public health, agriculture, meteorology, fishery and mining.

In 1829, a census was organized in order to determine the level of the population on 1 January 1830. This census was prepared by a team of scientists including Adolphe Quetelet.

Lambert Adolphe Quételet is known as the “founding father of the Belgian statistics”.

1830-1840: Start of the Bureau of General Statistics

The Bureau of General Statistics was created within the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1831 (by decree of the Provisional Government of 24 January 1831). The mission of the Bureau was to identify “all statistical facts which could be important for the administration in general and for the development of science in particular”.

The Bureau of General Statistics published the results of the census in 1829. Moreover, five volumes including statistical data on the country collected by other departments were also published.

1841-1874: charter, tasks and competencies

At Quetelet’s request the Central Statistical Commission was created by the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Liedts, on 16 March 1841. As from that date Quetelet was given an official position within the administrative statistics. He became the chairman of the Commission and occupied this position till his death in 1874.

The task of commission was described as follows:

- To gather all the information collected by the different departments.
- To point out gaps and redundant information in existing publications.
- To create table models to gather data from these publications.
- To see to it that the same data are not collected and published several times.

- To draw up a comprehensive plan as regards the statistical information of the Kingdom.
- To take a leadership role in the general statistics within the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The Central Statistical Commission played therefore a centralizing, coordinating, stimulating and advisory role.

It coordinated the censuses of 1801, 1806, 1811 and 1829. The commission was put in charge of the organization of the first population and housing census and of the first agricultural and industrial census in independent Belgium. These censuses were taken on 15 October 1846. They are worldwide recognized as the first general censuses taken according to a scientific method. These censuses resulted in the setting-up of the population registers in the municipalities.

In the meantime the Bureau of General Statistics was assigned additional tasks:

- To produce and to publish statistics on the evolution of the population and the civil registers.
- To take the general censuses and to implement the law of 2 June 1856 on the keeping of the population registers.

The Bureau also issued several important publications

- The Statistical documents on the Kingdom (up to 1869)
- The Statistical Yearbook (from 1870)
- The Overview of the situation of the Kingdom (1841 – 1850 and 1851 – 1860)

1874-1914: hard times

The death of Quetelet in 1874 was a hard blow for the Belgian statistics. The interest for statistics diminished and the results were distrusted.

From the administrative point of view the activities were more and more carried out in a decentralized way which resulted in inaccuracies. The Bureau of General Statistics declined to a small department of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Nevertheless, the Statistical Yearbook continued to be published in this period and two issues of the Overview of the Situation of the Kingdom came out: 1861-1875 and 1876-1900.

1915-1940: Far-reaching reforms

After World War I, the government recognised the need for a rationally organized statistical institute. The issue of the centralisation of the statistical departments which had been established in various ministries such as Home Affairs, Industry and Labour, Agriculture, Justice, Finance, etc. was tackled. The processing of the statistics also had to be modernized. This reform took a long time coming.

The Royal Decree of 10 June 1925 defined the tasks of the Central Statistical Commission and of the Office of General Statistics (formerly Bureau of General Statistics) in order to plan and coordinate the statistical activities.

The Office of General Statistics became the Central Bureau of Statistics by Royal Decree of 2 December 1932. It had the following missions:

- To take large -scale periodical censuses and surveys and to produce all national statistics except those surveys and studies, which belong to the ordinary administrative activities of a national office, with which they are inseparably linked because of their specific purpose that is limited to the immediate needs of the concerned national office.
- To centralise all activities related to the publication of statistical information.
- To study, from the scientific and technical point of view, the statistics that, on the basis of the aforementioned exception, it wasn't empowered to produce; these statistics are produced under its supervision.

The law of 18 December 1936 introduced the possibility to carry out statistical studies involving an obligation for the enterprises and the individuals to respond. The collected data could only be used for statistical and not for administrative or fiscal purposes.

The centralisation was officially proclaimed in 1939 (Royal decree of 7 August 1939). The small statistical departments of the Ministry of Agriculture and of the Ministry of Justice were first taken over. The transfer of the foreign trade statistics from the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Home Affairs came next. This involved extensive staff movements.

Despite this large-scale reorganisation, the statistical work simply went on in the period 1920-1940. The following censuses were taken: the general censuses in 1920 and 1930, the general agricultural census in 1929, an economic and social census in 1937. Household budget surveys were organized in 1921 and 1929. The foreign trade statistics were made more efficient and the statistics on industrial production and the social surveys were launched. The Statistical Journal was published for the first time in 1936.

The Central Bureau of Statistics was eventually transferred from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Ministry of Economic Affairs in 1940 (Royal Decree of 5 January 1940).

1940 – 1997: birth of the National Statistical Institute (NSI)

During World War II, the Central Statistical service did not develop any new initiative. After the end of hostilities, a new development of the official statistics could start. In order to emphasize the scientific character of its mission, the Central Bureau of Statistics was renamed to National Statistical Institute (NSI) in 1946. In the

same year the Central Statistical Commission was reformed and renamed to Higher Council of Statistics.

The list of new statistics grew year after year under pressure of modified economic and social circumstances and of the resulting new needs. In the most various areas had gaps to be filled and corrections to be made: demography, agriculture, industry, foreign and domestic trade, wages and salaries, employment, finances, law, education, etc. The fast development of the production statistics and of the statistical activities regarding then national accounts and the input-output accounts is worth noticing.

General censuses were taken in 1947, 1961 and 1970. Sample surveys like the household budget survey became more and more frequent.

Official statistics were gradually internationalised both in Belgium and in other countries. This was stimulated by organisations like Benelux, EC, OECD and various UN institutions. The development of new and common statistics and publications according to uniform nomenclatures was - and still is - regularly on the agenda at international level.

The evolution in computer science opened up new prospects for the processing and the dissemination of statistics as from 1960.

At legal level, the Statistics Act of 4 July 1962 further specified and built up the activities of the NSI.

- A regulation on the provision of individual data to some public administrations was drawn up.
- The legal obligation to respond to the sample surveys organised by the NSI mostly applied to the randomly selected respondents;
- The right to consultation and control of the Higher Council of Statistics was further specified.

Five decentralised offices were established in April 1977. For a number of statistics, those offices still collect, check and register basic information and transfer it through teleprocessing to the central computer in Brussels. [Infoshops](#) have also been established in these offices in order to disseminate statistical information. Previously, this information was available for statistics users only in Brussels.

The federal government set up the Institute for National Accounts in 1994. This is no additional statistical department but an institution which is made up of representatives of the three major institutes: the NSI, the National Bank of Belgium and the Federal Planning Bureau.

It is legally responsible for the national accounts and the foreign trade statistics which formerly belonged to the exclusive scope of competence of the NSI.

From 1998: modernization and participation

The information highway provided new dissemination methods. Therefore, the NSI launched Statbel, its successful web site, on 18 December 1998.

By Royal Decree of 20 November 2003 the “National Statistical Institute” was renamed to “Directorate General Statistics and Economic Information” (DGSEI). The Ministry of Economic Affairs became the FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy.

The new Belgian Statistics Act came into force in 2006. This act brought the functioning of the DGSEI in line with the most recent evolutions as regards privacy protection, administrative simplification and data exchange for scientific purposes. The FPS Economy also developed a new logo in 2006 that is also used by the DGSEI. It is a recognition tool that also stands for renewed dynamism.

The modernization also had repercussions on the data collection. Nowadays, the interviewer enters information immediately on a computer (Computer Assisted Personal Interview) or transmits it by phone through CATI (Computer Assisted Telephonic interview). Moreover, new software ensures optimal support in the data management.

In 2007, several initiatives were taken together with the Administrative Simplification Service so as to simplify some statistics as regards both contents and frequency. The response burden has also been reduced through extensive use of external administrative sources (Crossroads Bank for Enterprises, National Social Security Office, land register, national population register).

Thanks to all these reforms the DGSEI is now able to play a key role in the statistical scene of federal Belgium in a modern and efficient way.