QUALITY ASSURANCE, ARRANGEMENTS WITH COMMON QUESTIONNAIRES AND
CONFLICTING STATISTICS

Report prepared by Statistics Directorate, OECD

Introduction

The main output of the OECD comprises policy recommendations to government. However, much of this work is underpinned by an extensive range of statistics from both Member and non-member countries. The primary purpose for collecting such information is to provide statistical databases for use by various Directorates in the OECD Secretariat and the large number of Committees which form the basis of the Organisation’s activities. The OECD also publishes much of the information gathered in a large range of paper and electronic publications. These range from statistical bulletins (produced primarily by the Statistics Directorate) such as OECD Quarterly National Accounts, OECD Main Economic Indicators, to statistical tables included in analytical publications such as the Economic Outlook, Employment Outlook and OECD Economic Survey publications.

The collection of statistics in the OECD is decentralised across a number of Directorates of the Organisation although the collection activities of the Statistics Directorate probably accounts for the largest share of on-going contacts with national sources, etc, in the area of economic statistics. The other units in the Organisation also involved in collection activities include: the Economics Department (the primary user of data supplied by the Statistics Directorate); Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs; Directorate for Financial, Fiscal and Enterprise Affairs; and the Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry.

Data are collected by the OECD using a variety of mechanisms. These include:

1. direct access by OECD to member country databases (e.g. Canada’s CANSIM; New Zealand’s INFOS; United Kingdom’s STATBASE). This is OECD’s preferred means of obtaining data. With the expansion in the number of Member countries with such databases the OECD is currently exploring possibilities to expand this type of on-going data collection. Around half of the 29 Member countries have such databases;

2. national sources forwarding an on-going electronic file to the OECD containing the data required by the Organisation. In some instances the one file contains data required by a number of different OECD users, in others data are tailored to individual OECD users;

3. the use of a questionnaire.

The first two mechanisms are generally used for the regular on-going collection of monthly and quarterly data (subject to only periodic changes in content) from national sources whilst questionnaires are commonly used for the collection of annual or ad hoc statistics.

There are no doubt advantages for both national agencies and international organisations to be had from the more systematic use of recent developments in database technologies by national statistical institutes, both from the perspective of reducing respondent load of national sources and the publication of more consistent data by international organisations.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The OECD relies heavily on the use of methodological information related to the statistics collected to enable an assessment to be made of data quality, in particular, the comparability of the data (both between countries and within the same country over time). Most of the metadata collected are also published to provide appropriate transparency to
users. Metadata are disseminated to users in the form of footnotes and explanatory notes in the statistical publication and in sources and definitions published either in specific publications or with the data on CD-ROM.

Data collected by the OECD are subjected to the normal quality checks to identify missing and inconsistent data and where appropriate referred back to national source for an explanation.

ARRANGEMENTS WITH COMMON QUESTIONNAIRES

The OECD has entered into a number of arrangements with other international organisations for the joint collection/sharing of data derived from national sources. Some of these arrangements have been outlined in papers prepared by other organisations for this topic at this meeting and include:

- use of a common mechanism for the collection of national accounts data with Eurostat, UNSD, UNECE
- co-ordinated collection of statistics on international trade with UNSD;
- joint questionnaire with IEA, UNSD, Eurostat for the collection of energy statistics;
- co-ordinated collection of annual structural industrial statistics with UNIDO.

CONFLICTING STATISTICS

Within the OECD

Given the decentralised nature of data collection within the OECD progress is being achieved to reduce the inherent risk of the publication of inconsistent data by different parts of the Organisation. Mechanisms used are: the compilation by the Statistics Directorate of an inventory of on-going regular statistical collections conducted by different parts of the organisation to identify areas where duplication in data collection exists; and joint use by different parts of the Organisation of data obtained from national sources – in particular internal dissemination of data via the statistics intranet. The Organisation is also currently exploring the feasibility of developing a browser facility for internal that will highlight data inconsistencies within existing OECD databases.

With other international organisations

The OECD has entered into a number of arrangements with other international agencies for the presentation of consistent series. Examples of such arrangements include:

- direct use of data from Eurostat and the European Central Bank for data for the euro area;
- direct use of comparable unemployment series from Eurostat for the OECD Member countries that are also members of the European Union;
- use of exchange rate data from the IMF.

Given the importance of providing transparency to the statistics published and used by the Organisation, the OECD is currently working with the ILO, Eurostat and the IMF both bilaterally and under the auspices of METIS to bring about better co-ordination in the collection of metadata and the development of international standards in the content and dissemination of metadata.

With nationally provided data

As a rule the OECD does not modify data provided by official national sources, the main exception being for presentation in comparison tables with data from other countries. An example of this practice is the publication of data in the monthly Main Economic Indicators (MEI). The bulk of the statistics in MEI are contained in the country pages in Parts 2 and 3 of the publication. These are essentially data as published by national sources themselves. At the front of the publication are a series of subject tables containing data for each of the key short-term indicators
(unemployment, CPI, PPI, etc). Some transformation is undertaken here in the interests of uniformity, e.g. conversion to index numbers.