

High Level Forum on the Statistical Commission and the Global Statistical System – The Way Forward

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Introductory Remarks

Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the UN Statistical Commission. Eurostat is a comparative newcomer to this forum, having represented the European Commission, alongside the autonomous participation of the EU member states, for a little over thirty years. Although I myself joined the global family of statisticians rather more recently, I have been personally involved in statistical developments for some time, including the 1990s when the role of official statistics in general and Community statistics in particular, changed dramatically. Therefore I especially welcome the chance to address this meeting today.

Development of European Statistics

We in the EU also have a significant birthday to celebrate this year: the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome. However Eurostat started life before that: in 1953, as the statistical office of High Authority of Coal & Steel Community. With the Treaty of Rome and the European Economic Community came an expansion of its responsibilities into areas such as agriculture, external trade and energy. The development of standards and harmonisation were the major tasks during the 60s & 70s. However in the late 80s early 90s there were some more interesting developments. They started with the decision to allocate regional cohesion funds according to regional GDP. Then there was the Directive on the calculation of GNP, now known as GNI. Up to then, the main interest in GNP was the growth level, but when it was decided that a large proportion the member states' contribution to the EU budget was dependent on GNP, then the politicians sat up and took notice of the relative levels.

With the Treaty on European Union and the introduction of the Euro the demands on the European Statistical System accelerated. The Treaty stated that in order to qualify for the Euro inflation rates and budgetary debt and deficit needed to converge. But until then there was no common definition of a Consumer Price Index or definitions of debt and deficit. So the statisticians throughout Europe toiled long and hard – and argued! - to resolve the differences. As a result, the European System of National Accounts and the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices have now developed into politically sensitive instruments.

Enhanced role / Ethics

This has meant that statistics has evolved from being an information tool to assist with decision making to the key to the decision making process itself.

So what difference has this made to our work? Whereas previously we might have been happy to collect, harmonise and publish for the benefit of a limited number of users, there is now a

more universal audience needing sufficient metadata enabling them to understand fully the information. The statistics need to be accessible, available to the user at the time he wants and in the format he wants. But most importantly we need to be able to guarantee the quality of our statistical service, meaning that it has to be, amongst other things, credible, timely, coherent, accurate, transparent and complete.

In order to guarantee the quality of European Statistics, the European Statistical System adopted, in 2005, the European Statistics Code of Practice. This is very closely related to Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics which were adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 1994 and the Principles governing International Statistical Activities were drafted by the CCSA in 2005. Indeed there is a document showing the direct links between the latter and the European Code of Practice on our web site.

A comprehensive programme of monitoring adherence to this Code of Practice is underway. All national statistical institutes, as well as Eurostat, have undertaken self assessment and there is now a series of peer reviews under way. By the end of this year, all member states of the European Statistical System will have been visited and assessed, the results being published in a transparent way on the Eurostat web site.

The UN Statistical Commission has a vital role to play in the ethics of the global statistical system and I can guarantee that we will support its endeavours to promote the fundamental principles.

Changing role of Eurostat

As I have explained, in its early days, Eurostat was primarily concerned with the compilation and harmonisation of national statistics. Aggregates were merely the sum of the six, nine, ten or however many member states there happened to be. The total often had to wait for the last country to report. This meant that a great deal of effort was put into improving the statistical systems of the less advanced member states, but it also meant that publications were sometimes so out-of-date as to be laughable.

As our users need the statistics as the keys to decision making, we need to have them available much quicker. Is it really necessary to wait for the 27th country to report, especially when the reason why that country takes so long is that it is least able to provide the statistics, or that it has no national need for them?

In an increasingly competitive market place, are the economic operators going to be able to willingly give their time to provide yet more basic data to us? The increasing demand for statistics on the one hand and the need for reduction of burden on the other need to be reconciled.

This is why in 2006 the European Commission adopted a communication on simplification, proposing a strategy to reduce the response burden on enterprises and to simplify statistical requirements. This foresees studies on reducing the burden on economic operators in the fields of statistics on trade, business and agriculture. It also puts an emphasis on European aggregates, leading to the possibility of Europe-wide sampling. Increased use of administrative and accounting data is also foreseen and even more savings due to technology. We also need to prioritise within our work programme better. We have also introduced

significant improvements through "flash estimates" of retail trade, new orders, GDP and inflation.

Strengthening of European Statistics, looking outwards

Europe is not an island. The European Statistical System consists of the 27 member states of the European Union, plus four EFTA countries (Switzerland having joined the fold this year). In addition European statistical legislation is being followed by three EU candidate countries and four potential candidates in the Western Balkans. Then there are the sixteen countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy with whom we have close links in statistics. That makes over one quarter of the total UN membership.

In addition, there are many other groups of countries throughout the world, in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean who, in varying degrees, wish to adopt European-type models of regional integration and statistical standards. The effect of EU enlargement has had a larger impact on the global system beyond the borders of Europe.

The European Union is the biggest development partner. It is also the largest donor of the relatively the small proportion of the total which is devoted to statistical development. If the latter is to render value for money, co-ordination is key. Here, the United Nations Statistical Commission and the Committee for the Co-ordination of Statistical Activities both have vital roles to play at the global level, together with Paris21. Eurostat has set up the Advisory Group for the co-ordination of EU technical cooperation on statistics in Africa which co-ordinates donor activities at the EU level, feeding into global co-ordination level. This European Advisory group can feed directly into global co-ordinating efforts.

The UN Statistical Commission also has a clear mandate to co-ordinate in order to set up standards. It is the over arching body in this field. When we in Europe make standards which develop, after the well established democratic process involving the European Parliament and Council, into legislation and are then adopted by the wider European Statistical System, there is a knock-on effect on the countries that are not members of our club. An example is the European System of National Accounts which is a legal act, and as such is difficult to amend, but it has to be consistent with the SNA. In this respect it is vital that we keep other countries informed of developments and we do this mainly through bodies such as the OECD and the UN Statistical Commission and its constituent intersecretariat groups and "city" groups.

Most of you here today will have had to address similar problems to those I have just mentioned. The UN Statistical Commission provides a unique opportunity for different regions of the world to exchange best practices. It can support existing networks, such as the EU, and at the same time provide a crucial link between them. In some respects the debate on the SNA has stimulated this process, giving the heads of the national offices the platform for debate to resolve their differences.

The Statistical Commission must also play a co-ordinating role. Since the early 1990s Eurostat has been working successfully with OECD and UN-ECE in order to reduce the overlap of work programmes and the duplication of data requests to countries and meetings in Europe. We feel that we are well placed to go one step further and advise the global system on the co-ordination and possible streamlining of all these constituent groups.

In this respect Eurostat remains an enthusiastic and totally committed partner within the global statistical system.