

Statistics as a national identity

“Statistics Norway has helped shape our national consciousness over the past 135 years”, states the Deputy Director General of Statistics Norway, Olav Ljones. In this interview he talks about the past, present and future role of statistics.

In order for a democracy to work, the facts must be laid bare. Statistics Norway counts people, money and companies, and ensures that politicians and others have accurate information to make decisions. The Deputy Director General of Statistics Norway, Olav Ljones, also believes that figures on Norway are important in themselves, and help illustrate who we are as a nation.

“Statistics Norway has helped shape our national consciousness over the past 135 years. During Statistics Norway’s lifetime, figures have shown that we are characterised as one of the richest nations in the world. This in turn has played a role in forming how we perceive ourselves in comparison with others”, says Ljones.

Massive media attention

Every year, Statistics Norway publishes well in excess of 1 000 statistics and makes 200 publications available at www.ssb.no, something which many, including the media, find beneficial. We are referred to more than 40 000 times in the media in Norway and abroad every year, something which Olav Ljones finds extremely satisfying.

“Statistics Norway has a strong media presence. A large number of articles in the media are based on our statistics”, says Ljones.

The content and quality of the statistics and the way they are used have also changed over the years.

“For instance, where our statistics show high unemployment, policy will be shaped accordingly”, informs Ljones, and adds that the importance of economic statistics in particular has increased and changed over time. For example, the consumer price index was mostly used in pay settlements and to regulate rents in the past. It is now also used in connection with the setting of interest rates at Norges Bank.

“When Gjedrem is setting the interest rate level, his desk is covered in our statistics”, observes Ljones.

However, despite the increase in importance of economic statistics, Statistics Norway’s website is also used for completely different purposes.

“The name statistics are our most popular statistics measured in number of website hits. Expectant and new parents use these when trying to find a name for their child. This indicates the large diversity in the way our statistics are used”, adds Ljones.

Most things, but not everything

Statistics Norway is required to compile statistics on all key areas of society.

“We want to know something about everything; no subject should be disregarded. The Statistics Act also imposes an obligation on us to cover all needs”, says Ljones. However, although we compile statistics on areas ranging from names to national accounts, this does not mean that Statistics Norway must compile statistics on absolutely everything.

“We produce around 85-90 per cent of all official Norwegian statistics, but some statistics areas are covered by other government agencies, e.g. many of the statistics on health and most of the research

statistics. The cooperation with the other statistics producers is carried out via the Statistics Council, which has 25 members and coordinates guidelines and requirements for official statistics”, explains Ljones. He also likes the fact that private companies conduct various opinion polls.

“I see it as positive that some areas are covered by parties other than the Statistics Council, including private companies, e.g. pre-election polls, which are carried out by various private companies. It goes without saying that the results of these can vary somewhat, so I believe it is beneficial that someone other than Statistics Norway conducts these surveys. A great deal of resources would be used up if a government-financed institution such as Statistics Norway was to carry out these polls. I also don’t think we should conduct opinion polls such as “Who do you think will win the Eurovision Song Contest”, or “Do you think the government has done a good job this year?”. There are many types of surveys like this that are not our responsibility”, confirms the Deputy Director General, and adds that the need for statistics is constantly changing.

“There is reason to believe that there will be a need for new types of statistics in the years ahead. For instance, a recent report by the Stiglitz Commission recommends that indicators are developed for quality of life”, says Ljones. However, he does not envisage a statistical revolution in the next few years.

“We are on a path that we will continue to follow in the years ahead. The most crucial factor for us is that we remain current and comparable over time”, adds Ljones. He believes there is a willingness in the organisation to change when needed.

More interactive

In Norway, our use of administrative registers as a basis for producing statistics has increased considerably, and Statistics Norway has also been a driving force behind the use of register data in the international arena. This has revolutionised the production of statistics, but Statistics Norway is nevertheless always on the lookout for more effective ways of compiling statistics.

“For instance, we now collect information on grocery prices directly from the scanner data of the major grocery chains. Previously, an extensive system was used to collect price data whereby the individual stores had to send information to us, and where interview teams were often dispatched to help the data collection”, explains Ljones. Although he acknowledges the benefits of the registers, he nevertheless does not believe they will replace direct data collection from companies and individuals.

Strengthened by international cooperation

The days of Norway working in isolation and Statistics Norway only collecting figures for internal use are long gone. Many of the statistics nowadays are produced as a result of requirements and legislative decrees by the EU through the EEA agreement. Ljones does not consider this to be problematic.

“I don’t think this is a problem at all, on the contrary, the fact that we can compare ourselves with other countries, e.g. in relation to unemployment, price growth and greenhouse gas emissions, adds substantial value. Our users also want our statistics to be more comparable with other countries, and we endeavour to be a driving force behind this”, says Ljones. Although the EU has formalised the cooperation to some extent in recent decades, Statistics Norway has been a driving force behind international cooperation ever since the start of the 1980s. Furthermore, the international cooperation does not stop at the EU borders.

“Statistics Norway has also given impetus to the international cooperation. Anders Kjær, who was Statistics Norway’s first director general, was a major international pioneer and the first person to recommend using sample surveys in official statistics. I believe we are one of the countries that has taken a proactive approach throughout the years”, says Ljones, who finds cooperation to be a stimulant.

“Our international contribution acts as a stimulant to the professional environment in Statistics Norway. The fact that we are in demand in various international connections is also a good quality indicator”, adds Ljones.

What about third world countries?

Statistics Norway is also involved in improving the production of statistics in a number of third world countries. Ljones believes it is vital for all countries to take part in the international statistics cooperation.

“Statistics make the processes of change easier; among other things, a place in the international cooperation is achieved. Statistics also help create an identity for these countries”, explains Ljones. He believes that, for the most part, the cooperation is successful, but also acknowledges that there is a risk that the requirements imposed on third world countries are too high.

“Progress is being made in all areas, but expectations are constantly growing for things such as equipment and software. The statistics production in third world countries is improving, but as the quality improves, the requirements increase. It is sometimes easy to forget that the basic requirement is accurate and comparable statistics, not what software is used to compile them”, points out Ljones.