

DISCUSSION PAPER: THE USER PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

PAUL ALLIN; SECRETARY, SUC

1. Introduction

1.1 The Labour Part's manifesto included a pledge to create an "independent National Statistical Service". We have yet to see fuller details of what is proposed by this, but one model being talked about is for the Office for National Statistics to report directly to Parliament, as does the National Audit Office. ONS may have additional responsibilities, but Government departments would continue to have their own statisticians, as part of the wider Government Statistical Service. With these possibly far-reaching developments getting under way, it is important to identify, agree and register user views.

1.2 This paper is being widely circulated through the Statistics Users' Council and the topic based statistics users' groups. We hope that they in turn will circulate this widely and channel comments back. We are arranging a meeting of user group representatives on 23 September and this paper will be the main item on the SUC's annual conference on 11 November, which has the theme "Official Statistics Beyond the Year 2000"

2. Which statistics count as official national statistics?

2.1 Ivan Fellegi, Chief Statistician of Canada, has summarised the objective of national statistical systems as being "to provide relevant,

Radical Statistics 66

comprehensive, accurate and objective (politically untainted) statistical information". Within the UK, the mission of the GSS is:

"to provide Parliament, government and the wider community with the statistical information, analysis and advice needed to improve decision making, stimulate research and inform debate".

2.2 Most official statistics are provided by the Government Statistical Service (GSS), which comprises the Office for National Statistics (ONS) working in partnership with statisticians and their colleagues and agencies. Expanding on the mission, the aims of the GSS are:

- To provide government at all levels with a statistical service to support the formulation and monitoring of economic and social policies;
- To inform Parliament and the citizen about the state of the nation and provide a window on the work and performance of government, allowing the impact of government policies and action to be assessed;
- To provide researchers, analyst and other customers with a statistical service which assists their work and studies;
- To promote these aims within the UK, the European Union and internationally, and to provide a statistical service to meet European Union and international requirements.

2.3 This potentially - and in practice - generates a huge volume of statistical information. ONS has announced that they will establish and maintain a central database of key economic and social statistics drawn from the whole range of government statistics and will establish common classifications, definitions and standards.

2.4 Points for discussion:

- I. How important is it to have a clear understanding of what are official statistics and what are not?

- II. Is it important to have a core set of key statistics and, if so, what is the user role in determining which statistics are key statistics and in drawing up agreed classifications, definitions and standards?

- III. Is it feasible to have, within each topic area, a more detailed list of the official statistical information that users would expect to see?

- IV. How does statistical information routinely collected from administrative sources, rather than from statistical surveys, fit into all of this?

3. What do we mean by independent?

3.1 The need for an independent, or objective, statistical service seems generally to mean one in which the definition, collection and publication of statistical information is "politically untainted", to use Fellegi's phrase. There are a number of possible ways of ensuring this independence, including through institutional and legal frameworks, the protection of core values and a number of other policies and practices, especially involving budgeting and running.

3.2 One aspect of this is the role of a National Statistics Council, which the UK doesn't have. The Canadian National Statistics Council, in common with similar bodies in other countries, provides high level policy guidance to the statistical system and serves as another protection against politicisation. Its members include eminent people from business, universities, research institutions, provincial government, labour unions and the media - but not from federal government. While their explicit mandate is to advise the Chief Statistician about broad policies and priorities, members of the Council are appointed by the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada and therefore have access to the Minister should they think that the agency is threatened, either because of political intervention or lack of adequate funding. The Council's very significant influence and standing derives from the eminence of its members.

3.3 Points for discussion:

Radical Statistics 66

- V. How can independence be assured without restraining the National Statistical Service's ability to be responsive to user needs?
- VI. What role would a UK National Statistics Council play, if at all?
- VII. How can users build links with the existing ONS advisory committee?
- VIII. Increasingly statistical information is gathered across the European Union, so should we be giving greater attention to the user involvement at the European level, especially through CEIES, the EU statistics advisory committee?
- IX. How can we best build on the experience and detailed knowledge held in the existing user groups and in the SUC?

4. Funding for an Independent Service

4.1 A national statistical service may be "independent" but it still requires funding. Fellegi argues that the full allocation of authority within an overall budget is an important safeguard against undue political influence. In Canada (except for the content of the quinquennial census, which require Cabinet approval) the Chief Statistician does have such authority. He is, of course, held to account for his judgements by his Minister, Parliament, data users and the public (via the media).

4.2 Fellegi notes that the range of non-government client groups is, of course, varied so a large variety of mechanisms have to be used to gain an understanding of their needs. Statistics Canada uses the following approaches:

- a. Professional advisory committees, which are linked to the National Statistics Council which, by design, includes at least one member from each of the advisory committees;
- b. Client oriented programme evaluations;

- c. Interactions with professional and business associations, including an explicit goal of seeking out the views of actual and potential clients about their statistical information needs;
 - d. Market feedback;
 - e. A strong internal analytical programme, which contributes to an improved understanding of the needs of external analysts.
- 4.3 Points for discussion:
- X. How can users have a say in the overall budget granted from public sector funds to the National Statistical Service?
 - XI. How can users make their views known on charging policies, which may increasingly provide a source of income alongside of, or possibly substituting for, public funding?
 - XII. Crucially, how are priorities assessed and how can users' priorities be determined?
 - XIII. How can essential long term priorities be determined and maintained, particularly in the face of budget reductions?
 - XIV. Do any of these proposals deal with the long-standing issue of maintaining the right balance between the demand for statistical information and the burdens that are placed on the providers of statistical information, especially in small and medium sized enterprises?

Paul Allin Secretary, SUC

Sources

IP Fellegi, 'Characteristics of an effective statistical system', International Statistical Review, Vol. 64, No 2, August 1996

ONS, 'The Government Statistical Service 1995/96'