**International Conference “20 Years of Russian Statistics Modernisation- Experience and Perspectives”**

**Session 4: Official statistics as viewed by users and scientific communities**

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**Lidia Bratanova, UNECE**

**I. Introduction**

1. The ultimate goal of a statistical system is to satisfy the needs of its “clients”. Therefore, identifying the different user groups and establishing regular relations with them is essential to ensure that the statistical products and services which official statisticians produce evolve in response to the changing needs of the society.

2. In addition, the statistical system needs the support and the trust of the general public. Maintaining trust in the work of official statistics should be our continuous business. To gain public trust in statistical products and services, and to satisfy the needs of major groups of users that are also outside the government, the following criteria should be satisfied:

(a) **Relevance:** statistics should be compiled only if they meet recognised needs for a large variety of users; user groups should be regularly consulted in order to identify and prioritise statistical products and services that need to be compiled and disseminated;

(b) **Impartiality:** statistical products and services should be produced and disseminated in an objective and independent way, without any political influence;

(c) **Ensure equal access to official statistics**: statistical products and services have to be publicly accessible at the same time for all users, including the public at large, and presented in a way that facilitates proper interpretation and meaningful comparisons;

(d) **Transparency and accountability:** make public all information on the sources, methods and procedures, as well as on the laws, regulations and measures under which the statistical system operates;

(e) **Investigate the user needs and set priorities:** to ensure relevance, official statisticians need to investigate the needs of major users’ groups and prioritise those needs in relation to the available human, financial and technical resources.

3. An important mechanism is the establishment of a Statistical Council, an advisory body which should include not only representatives from the government but also from other users’ groups (e.g. media, business community, researchers, academia and civil society).

The global assessments (GAs) of national statistical systems which the UNECE has conducted, together with Eurostat and EFTA, in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECCA countries) show that, in some countries, the composition of the high-level advisory body is restricted to representatives from ministries and agencies. However, it is essential to maintain a broad network with academia, researchers, the business community, civil society and other stakeholders outside the government. Moreover, the GAs show that some countries do not have a formal high-level advisory body representing the users or that the Council is not consulted when the multi-year and annual statistical programmes are designed. It should be noted, however, that most countries carry out user surveys on a regular basis.

**II. Some users view official statistics as too slow to be really useful**

4. Responses to an UNECE user survey show that this is particularly the case for students and users from the private sector. Users are increasingly being offered real-time data from other sources – for example, "Google Analytics" can give us information on who is using our websites, updated every few seconds. So far, real time versions of what we would call statistics are rather limited, the most common examples being in the area of price data. Yet the speed of development in the variety, volume and velocity of data means that ideas that seem crazy now, such as, for example, real-time National Accounts data, could become reality much more quickly than we think.

5. Set against these changes in the real world, most statistical organisations still take over a year to process population census data, and at least a month for most short-term economic indicators. The gap between user expectations regarding timeliness, and what statistical offices deliver, is therefore likely to widen, and as it does so, the number of users turning to other sources will only increase. This is well illustrated by a response to the 2011 UNECE Statistical Database Survey (carried out in autumn 2011): "я не нашла данных по статистике за 2011 год". This respondent seemed genuinely surprised (and disappointed) that we had no data for the current year.

**III. Scientific and academic communities**

6. Among users’ groups, the research community plays a particularly important role in stimulating policy analysis and debate and assessing the effectiveness of government programmes. The research community requires access to good quality statistical data for their analyses to be effective.

7. The scientific and academic communities seem to have a rather mixed view of official statistics. Timeliness, whilst important, is generally less of an issue for them. They want as much detail as possible, and often more than we collect.

8. Researchers also want long time series. We have had requests for data back to 1900. Mechanisms for providing access to micro-data can help, but globalisation is also affecting research, with increasing demands for data covering multiple countries. The lack of standards on everything from legal frameworks to data formats can be very frustrating to researchers seeking access to micro-data. This is one of the main drivers behind the "Data without Boundaries" project in the European Union, which brings together researchers and official statisticians to try to find answers to these issues. This type of collaboration between official statistics and the scientific community seems to be gradually increasing.

9. From the UNECE perspective, we are seeing more representatives of the scientific community at our expert group meetings, particularly regarding topics such as statistical confidentiality, data editing and modernisation of official statistics. The scientific community seems to be genuinely ready to work with us to find answers to common solutions, and we are already seeing an exchange of standards. The research community has adapted the Generic Statistical Business Information Model to their needs, whilst statistical organisations are adopting the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) standard from the research community as a way of describing micro-data sets.

10. A forthcoming seminar in June 2013, at the time of the CES plenary session, will discuss the challenges in providing access to micro-data for research purposes and how to balance the growing demands for access to micro-data for research purposes with the requirements of statistical confidentiality.

11. The methods and technologies to manage confidentiality have developed significantly over the last decade. The CES has adopted two guidelines: *Managing Statistical Confidentiality and Microdata Access: Principles and Guidelines of Good Practice* (2007) and *Principles and Guidelines on Confidentiality Aspects of Data Integration Undertaken for Statistical or Related Research Purposes* (2009).

12. An increasing number of organisations provide access to micro-data for research purposes and the procedures are less cumbersome than before.

On the other hand, the growing amount of freely available raw data from multiple sources (‘big data’) can increase the risk of disclosure through the use of sophisticated data matching techniques, data visualisation and Geographic Information Systems.

**IV. How should NSOs respond to the increased demand for micro-data access?**

13. The answer is by moving from risk avoidance to risk management. We need to re-think the services on micro-data as part of the business strategy of NSOs. Analyses of micro-data are becoming increasingly important for taking adequate evidence-based decisions. How could the production process be streamlined to improve micro-data access for research purposes? Should micro-data be a service in its own right or only a by-product of statistics? Can the research community participate in funding the infrastructure? We need to consider the policies, rules and procedures to be applied and the processes needed to assist the users of micro-data.

14. The Global assessments of national statistical systems in EECCA countries show that some NSOs have gradually allowed access to micro-data for research purposes. Still, in most countries, researchers are denied access to such information. It is important that this access is mentioned in the National Statistical Law and strictly regulated in specific decree to avoid any misuse of micro-data. Access to micro-data should be settled through a standard contract which requires researchers to implement security measures, avoid redistribution of micro-data, use micro-data only for non-commercial research/education purposes, and not make any attempt to identify the individuals recorded.

**V. Communication with users**

15. We need to do more to improve the statistical literacy of the different groups of users, including the media. The perception of official statistics, particularly from casual users and the general public, is greatly influenced by the press. The number of users that see official statistics in newspapers or web sites of press agencies, or hear them quoted on radio or television, is several orders of magnitude greater than the number who obtain data directly from statistical organisation websites or publications.

16. Mis-reporting of statistics is often more likely to damage the reputation of official statistics than the reputation of the media that are responsible for the mis-reporting. It is therefore essential to work with the media, and other users and re-disseminators of official statistics, to increase their statistical literacy, whilst also ensuring that the data we provide them is explained as clearly as possible. These ideas are developed further in Part 4 of the Making Data Meaningful series: "How to improve statistical literacy: A guide for statistical organisations" (Published electronically in draft on the UNECE web site in spring 2013 - http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/writing.html, paper version and Russian translation forthcoming). *The UNECE Statistical Division has published 3 further reference Handbooks on “Making Data Meaningful”: Writing stories about numbers, a Guide to presenting statistics and Communicating with the media.*

17. The development of communication and information technologies is challenging. To meet the increasing information needs, on-line dissemination databases become inevitable as they allow users to select, extract and generate tailor-made tables and figures. According to a UNECE survey, all EECCA countries have at least some statistical data available on Internet. However, in most cases, the data are presented in Excel format and only one EECCA country provides access to the statistical database through Internet.

**VI. Conclusion**

18. A major challenge in recent years for the NSOs in the UNECE region is to balance the increasing users’ demand with tightening budgets. Users’ requirements, including the quality, international comparability, relevance, timeliness and accuracy of statistics, should be the main objective of producers of official statistics. This will be possible in the future only by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of statistical production. More resources should be allocated to enhance the communication with our users.

19. We have to persist with our continuous business - maintaining and further building trust in official statistics. We should strive to be highly professional, communicate the issues and their solutions in a transparent way, accept criticism and learn from problems we have encountered. The “lessons learned approach” will allow us to go ahead and improve the way we work, and also to confront new challenges. When problems crop up, we should take measures to restore confidence and trust. This could be achieved by reacting quickly to mis-reporting of data, within seconds if possible (e.g. blogs are used in Estonia). Proactive public response when reacting to a possible discrepancy in the conclusions drawn by users of official statistics will reinforce the institutional trust in the NSOs. We need to maintain constant dialogue with our main stakeholders and use a targeted approach to the different users. We must learn from the private sector and invest in customer relationship management (CRM).

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