

Debate organised by the Krakow Working Group

**Increasing official statistics' engagement with users,
addressing misuse and misinformation**

6 June 2023, 15:00-17:00 CEST - via Zoom

The aim of this debate organised by the IAOS Krakow Working Group is to exchange views on how Official statistics are currently engaging with users, how they address the issue of data and statistics misuse and whether they should take up new tasks to bring more value to users in the context of increased diversification of providers of data and statistics.

The IAOS, as an independent association that is not bound by a specific institutional mandate, brings together a diversity of actors from the data ecosystem and is thus well placed to facilitate exchange of views, advance possible solutions and add specific value to make progress on these issues.

This conversation is part of a series that will provide inputs for recommendations, in particular as regards trust, misuse and ethics, that the IAOS will present at a later stage. These recommendations should be for the benefit of all the actors in the data-ecosystem that aim to contribute to quality information for the common good.

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The engagement with users covers several dimensions, including knowing better who (current and potential) users of official statistics are; involvement and consultation mechanisms; access to and documentation of statistical products; dissemination, communication and use of official statistics; and statistical literacy in connection with misuse and misinformation.

Generally speaking, **NSIs do not have a sufficient knowledge of who the users of official statistics are**, with the exception of government actors. Admittedly, the range of users of official statistics is potentially quite large. They typically include citizens, civil servants in relevant ministries, policymakers, academic researchers, data scientists, business and labour organisations, NGOs and the media. There is however a lot of heterogeneity among these broad groupings. People increasingly use data and statistics in their daily operations and to make decisions. But their distinct requirements and evolving needs call for a customised approach. Having a good knowledge of the different user groups and their characteristics is essential to provide them with the relevant quality information they need in a context of increased diversification of available data from private data providers and a general decline of trust in public institutions.

The involvement of users and consultation mechanisms can increase such knowledge, thus contributing to ensuring that statistical production appropriately reflects society's information needs, and that statistical outputs are relevant and effectively used. Many countries and international organisations interact one way or another with users; several have set up official consultative bodies but their role, number and composition vary widely. In some countries, there is a single formal body with representatives from a large number of institutional users (e.g. members of Parliament, territorial authorities, business representatives, trade unions, researchers, NGOs, invited experts, etc.). In others, there may be several bodies representing particular constituencies. The role played by these bodies may vary from direct involvement in the identification and endorsement of new and emerging areas that deserve investment from the part of official statistics in order to address information gaps, to simple advice on new projects proposed by the NSI. It is also worth noting that in some countries, especially those with less developed statistical systems, users' consultation mechanisms or bodies do not exist. In these countries, where a significant part of the production of basic or reference statistics is often left to the private sector, involving users' groups could help re-define the respective tasks of Official statistics and private providers.

Very few countries have set up mechanisms that engage **users at all stages of the statistics life-cycle** (from needs assessments, to programme planning, data collection, dissemination, analysis and use). It is important to think about this complex issue the more so in the context of diversification of actors contributing to the production and dissemination of statistics. While there is a broad consensus on the basic content of what official statistics should cover (and how), a general concern to be addressed is the requirements for participation and consultation of users across the broadest spectrum in arrangements that aims at giving a mandate and licence of official statistics to be produced so that they can work for the good of the community (and not only for specific constituencies).

- **The discussion will be an opportunity to share experiences on the knowledge NSIs and other official statistics producers have of who the users of official statistics are; what are the different mechanisms in place to effectively engage with users; and whether improvements are required to increase social licence, promote use and increase trust.**

Easy access to official statistical products and clear documentation are another important way to engage with users. NSIs and other official providers need to pursue their efforts so that statistics are easy to find, in different formats, along with clear metadata and documentation regarding their quality and limitations. In particular, researchers should get access to micro-data (with all the required obligations and safeguards) while the media should be able to easily and speedily reach expert contact persons in NSIs when they have specific queries or a need for clarification. The situation on these fronts varies a great deal across countries.

Effective dissemination and communication are also key. There too, there are various experiences. Some countries have invested in social media communication to reach out to wider audiences, in data visualisation tools and have revamped their websites. Some have gone further by producing their own media supports (blogs, videos, TV shows, etc) and publishing articles in the press on timely statistics relevant for the public debate.

A number of NSIs are also investing in programmes aimed at increasing **users' statistical literacy** by developing effective tools to help them interpret statistics correctly. Today, social media bubbles, "alternative facts", emotions and beliefs often prevail over facts. Several NSIs are combating **misuse and misinformation** by developing new ways of interacting with users who disseminate and/or analyse/comment official statistics (e.g. media, fact checkers, researchers ...). Some NSIs no longer hesitate to speak out in case of **fake news, false information, outright manipulation or errors of interpretation**. They are also increasing their presence in social media where opinions are formed.

- **The discussion will offer the opportunity to share experiences on what actions NSIs are taking with regards to access, dissemination and communication, as well as what they are doing to improve statistical literacy and address the thorny issues of misuse and misinformation.**

Consulting more with users, facilitating access, providing documentation, improving dissemination and communication, along with investing in statistical literacy should all contribute to increase the take up and use of official statistics. However, in the current datafied society, a potentially controversial question is **whether official statisticians should take up even more tasks**, and in particular do more to connect their statistics with what matters to people. Today, in regard of the new practices by non-official data providers, it would seem relevant for any producer to increase the value of their data for users by also providing analysis. This would call for NSIs to conduct their own research and publish dedicated analyses that use the richness of their data, while ensuring that such work is done in an independent, non-partisan manner. Some NSIs have a long tradition in this field. Others have recently created research groups often combined with data science labs to produce experimental statistics (e.g. in areas such as subjective well-being, inequalities, climate) and combine and analyse them. As maintaining and reinforcing trust in official statistics is essential, the direct use and analysis of their own data and statistics by official statisticians is a way to demonstrate show that they trust what they produce.

- **The discussion will be an opportunity to exchange views on whether NSIs should take up new tasks such as conducting research and analysis of their own data, to increase the value of official statistics for users.**

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Chair:

Professor Denise Lievesley, Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Science, former Chair of the European Statistical Advisory Committee, former Director of the UK Data Archive

Panellists:

Misha Belkindas, IAOS President

Graciela Marquez, President of INEGI, Mexico

Lynn Barr-Telford, Canada's Assistant Chief Statistician, Strategic Engagement, Communication and Dissemination Field

Rafael Diez de Medina, ILO Chief Statistician

Andrew Dudfield, Head of AI, Full Fact

David Rios-Insua, Member of Spain's High-Level Council on Statistics

Rapporteurs:

Martine Durand, IAOS Krakow Working Group co-Chair, Member of the European Statistics Governance Advisory Board and of the French Official Statistics Authority, former (retired) OECD Chief Statistician

Jan Robert Suesser, IAOS Krakow Working Group co-Chair, Member of the IAOS Executive Committee and of the ISI Advisory Board on Ethics