

DGINS 2005/91/3.3/EN only

91ST DGINS CONFERENCE

COPENHAGEN, 26 + 27 MAY 2005

Official statistics – can they be used more efficiently?

Gunnar SAHLIN
National Librarian, Sweden

Official statistics – can they be used more efficiently?

Gunnar Sahlin
National Librarian, Sweden

Official statistics as a resource should be put to far greater use than is the case today. Professional users are more prone to facilitate official statistics in their assignments than the non-professional user; to the detriment of the latter category. By increasing the application of official statistics a surplus value is created, eventually leading to an improved usage of society's resources and its growth rate. Official statistics assures its worth when related to information extracted from individual organisations and used in comparative and planning estimates with the aim of improving our daily tasks. A problem nevertheless is due to the fact that official statistics are often founded on extensive series and the various statistical areas are seldom adapted to current requirements. No doubt, statistical institutions and other mediators of statistical information can contribute to an increased usage by supplying the user with analysis and commentary. Consumers and producers need to share responsibility to stimulate improved usage of these resources. Both parties surely stand to benefit from such collaboration.

Official statistics are, to a certain extent, unexplored territory for "non-professional users"

This paper considers that the field of official statistics is, to a great extent, unexplored territory. As an individual citizen participating in public bodies or working in the public or private sector, I generally have nothing to do with them. I rarely take a statistical yearbook down from the bookshelf and it is easy to count the number of times I look for statistical information on the web. Why this should be so is not the subject of this paper, and there may well already be some treatise in the field of psychological statistics which deals with the matter. If not, it is a topic which should arouse some interest. Society invests heavily in compiling official statistics and this activity is not just an end in itself – the value added is only obtained when the basic data are compared or processed in some other way.

I basically think that official statistics constitute a resource which should be exploited more intensively than is currently the case. These statistics can provide value added which, when coupled with information obtained from within an organisation, is indispensable for planning purposes and for drawing comparisons. My experience is, admittedly, limited to those sectors in which I am, and have been, involved nationally, although from the international contacts I have made it would not appear that the situation is any different in other European countries.

I am not saying that nobody uses official statistics. The example given above describes the use of official statistics by the “non-professional user” – or perhaps I should say prospective user. “Professional users” make extensive use of basic official statistical data. As a non-professional user, one comes into frequent contact with statistics, but only indirectly after the data have been studied and processed by the so-called “professional users”. Both in our working lives and as individual citizens, the statistics then reach us via promotional material, media or other channels. Economic journalists keep a close eye on statistical data relating to economic trends, GDP, growth, unemployment etc., and report upon them. Politicians and their officials make use of statistics for their own purposes. Academics use the material for their research projects. This information is also sometimes passed on to us, not least when we need to focus on some research area which requires more resources. Official statistics are also, of course, used in education. Other actors who appreciate the value of statistics are those who order data directly from the statistical authorities for subsequent use in their own organisations or for further distribution.

As someone responsible for a government body, I obtain statistical information when a common problem has to be solved and general measures need to be taken. This can relate to sick leave, unemployment measures, etc. In this case, the statistics have been processed by the professional users and the data are of a general nature. The data can be used for comparisons with our own data and can lead to measures being taken in our own field. The main purpose is not then the development of our own activities, but to gain an overview and, in this case, perhaps to develop measures for the whole public sector.

The problem is not therefore that nobody is using official statistics. My point of view is rather that they should be more extensively used by those of us who have no tradition of using official statistics. In doing so, this could create value added leading to the better use of society’s resources and thus contributing towards growth. The statistics produced by each individual organisation have a life of their own or can, at best, be linked to and compared with those from similar organisations through benchmarking. It should be possible to increase the value of an individual organisation’s statistics by coordinating them with official statistics.

The better use of official statistics can also help satisfy my curiosity as a citizen. As an individual citizen I can find out how common a name my newborn grandchild has been given. I just go directly to the statistical website rather than receive the information via the media. It may well be the case that we are spoon-fed so much data by the media, brochures and other channels that we quite simply cannot manage, or have no need, to go directly to the source to find interesting facts. When I browse through a statistical office website I am struck by how much interesting information

is available, whether it be useful or not. Statistics are essential in telling the story of our lives, whether we are talking about the number of cars per capita, living area per family, or students going on to university.

Statistics are a key source when planning for the future, as is clearly understood by professional users, e.g. certain authorities and companies which are in the habit of using statistical data and depend upon them for planning their activities.

Statistical authorities do not therefore feature on my list. The responsibility for not making more use of these statistics lies primarily with me as a non-professional user who should recognise their potential and appreciate the value of using statistics. But there is also a responsibility on statistical authorities to make their valuable data stand out from the abundance of information which characterises our current knowledge-based society. This is an exciting challenge. By making proper use of the official statistics available, it should be possible to make better use of the resources offered by society and different organisations. There is, however, an in-built problem in this, insofar as official statistics are generally based on long series and the different fields of statistics are often not adapted to current requirements.

What requirements do I as a “non-professional user” have of official statistics?

In my own field of activity, the statistical data used is almost entirely that produced by the organisation itself. There are, however, areas of my own activity which could be developed with the aid of other statistics, above all by combining internal information and statistics with public statistics. This could provide opportunities for improving day-to-day activities and creating a better basis for decision-making.

It is admittedly already the case that our own statistics are, to some extent, combined with official statistics. One example of this is that our own statistics on absences due to illness can be compared to the general statistics and thus provide the basis upon which measures are taken.

My organisation’s crucial statistical requirements become evident from annual financial reports and reflect normal information requirements. Statistics are also needed in the area of budgetary planning; financial figures, the number of employees, absences due to illness, etc. Statistics are also needed to clarify and provide information to responsible authorities, not just to explain developments but also to influence decisions.

The statistics produced within the organisation itself also form part of a culture of quality, providing key figures, benchmarking and performance indicators. Quality requires statistics compiled by the

organisation itself. I feel, however, that valuable and relevant information can be obtained from other sources and this could provide a broader basis for ensuring quality.

In the libraries sector, individual libraries supply information which then forms part of official national and international statistics. Within the libraries sector, these figures – the number of visitors, books loaned, books purchased, turnover as a percentage of the whole organisation's turnover, etc.– are used as comparative data to identify trends and problems and, of course, to influence the responsible authorities. We can certainly say that we are thus making full use of official statistics, even if we have supplied the data ourselves. My point, however, is that we do not forge close enough links between the data from our own sector and other official statistics from outside the sector.

One area in which better use could be made of official statistics is the field of prospective analysis. Web services are well developed in the libraries sector, for both information and communication purposes. In 2003, for example, as much electronic full text material was downloaded by research libraries as was lent in the form of printed matter. When planning the future development of library web services, official statistics on the number of PCs per household, Internet use etc. could be crucial.

Key decisions on investment are currently being taken, particularly in the field of IT, and these involve significant costs which can be a burden on operations over a good number of years. They also, however, involve technical and labour-related choices which influence the organisation's ability to perform various tasks. The organisation conducts comprehensive in-house statistical processing tailored to specific requirements, but how often does it open its eyes to the world outside its own sector and make use of the statistical information available? There is always a degree of uncertainty involved in taking major future investment decisions, but a better basis for taking these decisions can be created if a broader range of statistical material is used.

Our inflow of information and ideas is often restricted to the sector in which we operate. At the same time, modern society is becoming more and more complex and investment decisions in one area also have an impact on other sections of society. We need to be even more active within the networks we are building between different sectors, not least in the field of statistics. In this context, taking advantage of statistical information from other fields can provide one's own organisation with a solid foundation for planning future developments and taking direct decisions.

How can official statistics attract more “non-professional users”?

Official statistics are currently available for use, even for those of us who are not habitual users of statistics – the so-called “non-professional users”. How do we find out what information is available? What is the demand or desire for these data? How do we stimulate interest in this information? How do we come up with ideas about how the statistical information can be used and how do we reach out to non-professional users? These users do of course have the same opportunities as professional users and can click on to the main statistical websites. But, as far as I am concerned, there are still far too few who take advantage of this opportunity. Despite the abundance of statistics available, official statistics remain, for many of us, a vastly under-utilised resource.

People do of course know that there are interesting and useful statistics out there, but they rarely think of the possibilities they offer, and, as I said before, these rarely appear on anybody’s wish list. How can the contact between data producers and non-professional users of statistical information be improved?

It is necessary to find ways of drawing the attention of citizens and institutions to suitable applications for official statistics. Despite the fact that IT obviously opens up new opportunities for the dissemination of information, several years have now gone by without any noteworthy progress being made.

The aim is to bring together producers and consumers. Everybody should be able to combine their statistical requirements – and clearly not just those of the professional users – with the statistics available on statistical office websites. As the director of a library, I can envisage libraries becoming more and more important as information hubs in our knowledge-based society. How can libraries be used in this context to disseminate statistics to non-professional users? This is a task which we who are active in the sector need to reflect upon. The statistical institutes can certainly play their part in ensuring that statistics are used more widely by helping out with analyses and comments, but there are undoubtedly other actors too who could play a role in the transmission of statistical information in the same way as intermediaries in many other sectors of society. First and foremost, however, it is the responsibility of both us, the prospective users, and the producers of official statistics to ensure that better use is made of this resource. Both parties would certainly benefit from such an approach.