

From the expression of social needs to the drawing of a program for official statistics

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1. The Statistics Act 51-711 of 7 June 1951 (amended) provides the operating framework for the French system of official statistics. A modification, introduced in August 2008, gave a definition of “Official Statistics”: they cover all data productions originating from:

- statistical surveys, the list of which is established each year by order of the Minister responsible for the Economy;
- the use, for the purposes of general information, of data collected by administrations, public bodies or private bodies with a public service mission.

2. It also gave a foundation to the governance of Official statistics, relying upon three bodies:

- the **Official Statistics Authority**, which is in charge of ensuring compliance with the principle of professional independence during the design, production and dissemination of public statistics, as well as with the principles of objectivity, impartiality, relevance and quality of the data produced.
- the **Official Statistical Service** whose responsibility is to produce and disseminate Official statistics; it is composed of the National Statistical Institute (Insee) and of fifteen Ministry Statistical Offices (MSO)
- the **Cnis** of which Article 1^{bis} of the law says, “*The National Council for Statistical Information shall be responsible (...) for organising consultation between producers and users of public statistics. It makes proposals to draw up a programme of statistical work and to coordinate the statistical surveys carried out by persons mandated with a public service mission.*”

By setting such guidelines for compulsory data-gathering, coordination and confidentiality, the law has fostered the development of a robust and consistent statistical system.

3. The Cnis has a long history. In 1937, a short-lived Higher Council on Statistics and Documentation (*Conseil supérieur de la statistique et de la documentation*) was established. In 1951, a Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Surveys (*Comité de coordination des enquêtes statistiques*) was created by law but its role was confined to preparing an annual program of compulsory surveys. Its scope of consultative procedures was widened up to the establishment, in 1972, of a National Council on Statistics (*Conseil national de la statistique*), which became the National Council for Statistical Information (*Conseil national de l'information statistique: Cnis*) in 1984.

To foster consultations between producers and users of official statistics, France established the National Council for Statistical Information. In the Cnis, statistics-producing services submit their projects – surveys, censuses, registers, panels, processing of administrative data, etc – to the economic and social partners represented in Cnis. The partners assess the projects’ purpose, their place in the information system and their degree of priority. The Cnis also issues opinions on the statistical needs to be met and on the projects submitted. It evaluates their usefulness and ensures that each operation is relevant, serves the public interest and is not redundant with existing information sources.

4. A decree of 20 March 2009 defined the missions of the Cnis, its membership and functional arrangements. It gave a stronger representativeness to the users of official statistics; it transferred the presidency of the Council (and of its Executive Committee) from the minister of economy to a member of

the board, proposed by the latter.

The Cnis is composed of forty-four members, representatives of national and local elected officials (8 members), employers' organizations (10), labour unions (5), non-profit groups (5), academics (2), administration (3), journalists (2) and qualified individuals (9). Its proposals can therefore be considered as an expression of social needs. It provides a forum for producers and users of official statistics. It coordinates government statistical activities and surveys with a view to ensuring their social and economic relevance. For this purpose, Cnis compiles an annual program listing all official statistical surveys, which it communicates to the general public through a variety of media. Every five years it prepares a medium-term program setting the broad guidelines for the development of official statistics.

5. The proceedings of the Council are prepared by an Executive Committee, which also proposes, among its members, the name of the chairman of the Cnis. The proceedings rely on the work of the Council's commissions, each specialized in a particular area of expertise:

- Employment and earnings;
- Demography and social statistics;
- Finances;
- Sustainable development;
- Territories;
- Public services;
- Enterprises.

The commissions meet two or three times a year. They are chaired by persons appointed by the president who do not belong to statistical services and are often not even in government departments. The commission participants are either users (professional and union organisations, membership organizations, academics, etc) or producers of official statistics. In their meetings, they examine annual and five-yearly statistical programs, submit opinions for assessment by the Council and monitor the opinions delivered during the previous year. They must, of course, take into account European requirements for statistics. The Cnis commissions may propose to set up work groups or missions to address specific issues revamping a statistical operation, updating a classification or investigating an unexplored field. The topics examined may be transversal (the phenomena of social inequalities and living conditions, the consequences of decentralization, etc) or have a narrower focus (services, transport, housing etc).

The Council meets at least once a year in a plenary session. The meeting ratifies all the opinions submitted by the commissions and the list of surveys for the following year. This list is then published in the French government journal of record, the *Journal Officiel*.

6. Given that one of Insee's roles is to coordinate the public statistical system, the Cnis General Secretariat reports to Insee's Director of Statistical Coordination and International Relations. It prepares and implements the Council's decisions. It organizes the work of the commissions and publicizes Cnis activities through a range of media.

The missions of the National Council for Statistical Information include preparing the annual program of national and regional official statistical surveys.

For a survey to be included in the annual program, the Cnis must have issued a favourable opinion twice:

- first, a commission needs to assess the project's usefulness;
- second, the Quality Label Committee needs to assess the proposal's quality.

If so requested by the producer service, the Committee also rules on whether the survey should be compulsory or not. If the committee rules in favour, it will recommend that the survey be assigned an approval number (visa) by the ministry or ministries with relevant authority.

The output of the Cnis is thus a list of surveys to which it gave a "public interest and statistical quality label" and a number of opinions that are considered as the expression of social needs.

7. The Official Statistical Service is in charge of producing information meeting these needs, through

statistical surveys and through the use of data collected by public bodies.

The French Official Statistical Service (*Service statistique public*) is composed of the French national statistical institute (*Insee*) and of the Ministry Statistical Offices (MSO).

The decision to establish a decentralized structure was taken very soon after Insee was created in 1947. Since then it has gradually evolved, adapting in response to changing administrative structures, emerging needs and new methods of processing data, an ongoing process that demands continuous adaptation.

8. Insee coordinates the Official Statistical Service as a whole, and now has grouped around it fifteen statistical services, each located within a ministry. Together, these Ministry Statistical Offices (MSO) cover almost the entire spectrum of government action, besides producing the statistics for the areas, for which they have primary responsibility. Insee, for its part, produces general statistics or statistics covering areas that are broader than those dealt with by individual ministries. As well as compilations such as the national accounts and major indexes, it mainly produces statistics concerning prices, population and households.

Insee is also in charge of several registers used mainly for administrative purposes: the national register of physical persons, the electoral roll and the register of enterprises and establishments, all three of which are used for the application of official regulations. Insee is thus in overall charge, a position from which it benefits by being able to extract reliable sampling bases for the statistics system as a whole.

9. All major ministries run their own statistical services: labour, health, education, research, sustainable development, agriculture, defence, interior, justice, culture, immigration and sport. The Ministry of Economic Affairs, Employment and Industry is different, to the extent that Insee is attached to it. It does also run a statistical service for foreign trade. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the only major ministry that still has no statistical service; its statistical material is not considered sufficient to warrant the establishment of a full service. There are also statistical services for certain other areas within the public domain, which constitute subdivisions of ministries, such as fisheries and the civil service.

The number and the scope of the MSO may change, as the needs of the society expand to new fields of interest or as the government structure changes. On recent times, a MSO for immigration statistics was created as a government department, devoted to this field of interest; in 2010, the new organization of ministerial departments between education and research lead to a split between the two corresponding MSO. In 2011, four services (in charge of statistics on taxes, civil servant pensions, industry and tourism, criminality) asked to be considered as MSO; their case will be examined by the Official Statistical Authority, which has, by law, the power of giving such a label.

10. The MSO employ 2,300 staff in all, as compared to Insee's 5,700. In staffing terms, they thus account for nearly one third of the Official Statistical Service.

Six MSO (social affairs, agriculture, foreign trade, education, sustainable development, and labour) employ more than 100 staff, while six others (interior, defence, civil service, immigration, sport and fisheries) have fewer than 20 employees. The largest is the statistics service of the Ministry of Agriculture (nearly 500), which expanded during the 1960s as the common agricultural policy gained in importance. Such variations in size naturally give rise to differing concerns in terms of personnel management;

Five MSO are territorially decentralized (agriculture, sustainable development, social affairs, labour, and education). This means in practice that a few statisticians work at the regional level (there are 26 regions in France) within the regional office of a ministerial department. The fact that some statisticians work at regional level naturally raises the problem of coordinating their work with that of the other statistical services in the same region and, particularly, with Insee's own regional office.

11. The rationale underlying this type of structure is the idea that statistical data are more needs-oriented and more reliable if they are prepared in close proximity to the principal administrative sources and the most authoritative users, i.e. those responsible for policy implementation. Thus the budget devoted to statistics is run by the ministries themselves and, in the long run, is likely to be better distributed across the various areas according to requirements. Similarly, the proximity of users and producers is essential for maintaining and enhancing the quality of statistics.

The advantages of such a system manifest themselves both upstream and downstream of statistics production:

- upstream: the statistician is involved in setting up information systems and can influence their design and implementation. He (or she) is close to sources as they become available and can thus exploit them directly and without delay;
- downstream: the statistician is in direct contact with the originator of the inquiry, who in most cases is located within the ministry itself or even in the same section as the statistical service. This makes for a quicker response and, generally speaking, a better understanding on the statistician's part of the political and institutional context of the inquiry.

The benefits of proximity and enhanced capability may, however, be partly offset by a loss of autonomy for statisticians. One of the tasks of coordination is therefore to enable MSO to remain independent in their production and analysis work.

Another drawback of that situation is that there is not one single unit deciding which part of the social needs expressed through the Cnis will be taken into account, and who will be in charge of the consequences of each opinion that it formulated.

12. Thus, it is necessary to set priorities among all the needs and determine which part of the Official Statistical Service (Insee or MSO) will be in charge of the work.

Until now, the setting of priorities and sharing out of the work was done in a rather informal way. Each member of the Official Statistical Service decided by himself the surveys and the statistical work that he was "naturally" in charge of.

As a consequence, it appeared that some high priorities in the needs might not be taken into account. It was also clear that some parts of the work were done twice by different bodies of the Official Statistical Service.

13. For that reason, it was decided to create, since the year 2011, a "**Committee for statistical programs**", to set the priorities and share the work inside the Official Statistical Service.

This committee takes into account the opinions of the Cnis, which are supposed to reflect the priorities corresponding to the social needs. But it also evaluates the cost of each project or of the current works. It is indeed necessary to compare the cost of each project to its own interest. The costs are based on declaration of the producers for the new projects, and on a system of observation for the ongoing works.

14. A set of meetings between Insee and the MSO is organised. Two main meetings deal with the social and demographic statistics on one hand, and economic statistics, on the other hand. In these meetings, the persons in charge of the corresponding fields discuss of the possible distribution of the work, mainly between Insee and MSO, but sometimes also between two different MSO. For instance, it was decided that some indicators on the rents for housing would no longer be calculated by the MSO in charge of Housing (Sustainable development), but by the Insee; as a counterpart, the future survey on housing would be prepared and organised by the MSO and no more by the Insee.

After these meetings, a plan for the whole Official Statistical Service is established for the next year. It is officially decided in a meeting chaired by the Director General of Insee, who is by law in charge of coordinating the Official Statistical Service.

15. Beyond this plan for the next year, the "Committee for statistical programs" is in charge of setting the repartition of work inside the Official Statistical Service on a medium-term period. For some important works, like surveys or use of important administrative files, it is in fact necessary to prepare the work some years in advance. The Committee is in charge to coordinate the projects in different services.

16. In fact, this Committee has not a legal power to force a MSO to do or not to do a special work. As it was mentioned above, the MSO are dependant of the Ministry they belong to. All that the Committee can do is to help the MSO and the Insee to meet to discuss the programs, and to make proposals for a better repartition of the work among different services.

2011 is the first year of functioning of this Committee. The future will say if it is really efficient.

17. At the end of the year, the Director General of Insee presents an annual report at the Official Statistics Authority, describing how the annual statistical programme was implemented and how it met the needs expressed through the opinions of the Cnis.

This will be the opportunity to assess the activity of the Committee.

18. Thus, the setting of priorities of statistics across the Official Statistical Service is now assumed in France in two steps: first, the Cnis gives an expression of the social needs for statistical information, to be produced by the Official Statistical service; second, taking these proposals into account, the Committee for statistical program distributes the work between the components of the Official Statistical Service.

RÉSUMÉ (ABSTRACT) — optional

The governance of Official statistics in France relies upon three bodies: the **Official Statistics Authority**, which is in charge of ensuring compliance with the principle of professional independence during the design, production and dissemination of public statistics, as well as with the principles of objectivity, impartiality, relevance and quality of the data produced, the **Official Statistical Service** whose responsibility is to produce and disseminate official statistics; it is composed of the National Statistical Institute (Insee) and of Ministerial Statistical Services (MSS), the **Cnis** (National Council for Statistical Information) which is responsible for organising consultation between producers and users of public statistics; it makes proposals to draw up a programme of statistical work and to coordinate the statistical surveys carried out by persons mandated with a public service mission.

The Cnis is composed of representatives of national and local elected officials, employers' organizations, labour unions, non-profit groups, academics and qualified individuals. Its proposals can therefore be considered as an expression of social needs.

The Official Statistical Service is in charge of producing information meeting these needs, through statistical surveys and through the use of data collected by public bodies. Thus, it has to set priorities among all the needs and determine which part of it (Insee or MSS) will be in charge of the work.

Until now, the setting of priorities and sharing out of the work was done in a rather informal way. Each member of the Official Statistical Service decided by himself the surveys and the statistical work that he was “naturally” in charge of.

As a consequence, it appeared that high priorities in the needs were not taken into account. It was also clear that some parts of the work were done twice by different bodies of the Official Statistical Service.

For that reason, it was decided to create, since the year 2011, a “Committee for statistical programs”, to set the priorities and share the work inside the Official Statistical Service. This committee is chaired by the Director General of Insee, who is by law in charge of coordinating the Official Statistical Service.

He presents an annual report at the Official Statistics Authority, describing how the annual statistical programme was implemented and how it met the needs expressed through the opinions of the Cnis.