

A 360° Assessment of Trust in Official Statistics - an Example of Statistics Finland

Jeskanen-Sundström, Heli
Director General
Statistics Finland
P.O.B 9A
FI-00022 Statistics Finland, Finland
E-mail: heli.jeskanen-sundstrom@stat.fi

Mikkela, Heli
Director, Department of Information Services
Statistics Finland
P.O.B. 3C
FI-00022 Statistics Finland, Finland
E-mail: heli.mikkela@stat.fi

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Introduction

Organisations earn their legitimacy by accomplishing their mission and by fulfilling the needs of their stakeholders. For a statistical office, this means producing the reliable, accurate and timely information that is needed by the users, and disseminating and communicating this information as efficiently as possible. In order to execute these tasks, national statistical offices have to ensure that the information they produce is exploited and utilised, and to build strong and active relationships with their various stakeholders: data providers, methodological co-operators, end-users of information, financiers, members of statistical systems, citizens - to name but a few. The question is whether the stakeholders acknowledge the legitimacy. This is very closely intertwined with the concepts of reputation, trust and corporate image.

The importance of legitimacy is clearly shown in the mission, values and basic operating principles of Statistics Finland: our task is to provide society - those who need information - with reliable statistical data. This legitimacy formed by the accessibility, quality and use of the statistics compiled by Statistics Finland is continuously evaluated both nationally and internationally. Corporate image surveys reflect the perceptions of the users of statistics. Direct feedback and comments about Statistics Finland and its products and services reflect the views of the customers and other data users. The European Union regularly evaluates the success of its Member States in statistics production.

In this paper, a general overview will be presented of the stakeholder surveys, questionnaires and other monitoring methods applied by Statistics Finland. The corporate image survey and the user survey will be described in more detail, and the main results related to the trust in and the profile of official statistics are discussed.

The stakeholder monitoring system of Statistics Finland

At Statistics Finland, trust in official statistics and in the organisation is considered as a fundamental basis for legitimacy and operating conditions. The strategic outlines and operating principles of Statistics Finland are also based on the needs and expectations of its stakeholders. Therefore, stakeholders' opinions about Statistics Finland are regularly monitored with a number of different methods. These include the corporate image survey, the user survey, the personnel survey, and questionnaires to the users of specific

statistics or products, as well as feedback questionnaires to all individual customers who have ordered and received large, tailored information services. A summary of the various stakeholder surveys and other feedback methods is presented in Table 1.

The monitoring of both external and internal stakeholder views is considered necessary. The personnel's expectations and needs are identified by means of an annual personnel survey, the daily management process, personal appraisal discussions and a participatory planning and monitoring system. Broad, regular and systematic co-operation with domestic and international stakeholders is the central tool for identifying the needs and expectations of external stakeholders. This includes both annual high-level meetings with strategic stakeholder groups and continuous interaction at the operational level. Information about the operating environment is also obtained with corporate image surveys, customer satisfaction surveys, customer feedback and media monitoring, and with a Strategic Intelligence system tailored for Statistics Finland's needs.

Stakeholder expectations and views are also gained via co-operative projects, steering and working groups, seminars, and co-operative networks. The compilation of the strategy for economic statistics in 2007 serves as a good example of this kind of co-operation: the stakeholders were engaged in the process through seminars, user surveys and continuous communication and dialogue.

All these surveys and questionnaires, as well as the strategic stakeholder meetings, are co-ordinated within Statistics Finland. All the questionnaires include some elements related to the basic concepts of official statistics (e.g. objectivity, impartiality, credibility, clarity, confidentiality, accessibility, etc.), and to the main strategic aims, the service principles, and the general image and user-orientation of Statistics Finland. With the co-ordination, we want to ensure that we can get as reliable 360-degree view of our organisation and its functions as possible.

Corporate image survey

The origins of the survey. The oldest of the various stakeholder surveys and questionnaires is the corporate image survey conducted among the general public in Finland. Statistics Finland's first corporate image survey was carried out in 1975. At the beginning, it was taken at variable frequency: two surveys were carried out in both the 1970s and the 1980s. In the 1990s, the image survey was established as part of the scanning process of Statistics Finland's operating environment and was scheduled to be carried out every few years. Recently, it has been conducted every second year, the latest in spring 2011.

The motivation for collecting information on the public's familiarity with Statistics Finland and its corporate image stemmed from the establishment of Statistics Finland's permanent interview organisation in the 1970s. As an advance notice of the interviews was sent to the respondents, it was important to know what kind of an image Statistics Finland had among them. That image partly defined the manner in which the respondents reacted to a message from Statistics Finland.

Another reason for conducting the survey was the renaming of the agency from Central Statistical Office of Finland to Statistics Finland in 1970. The change in the name partly explained why the familiarity with Statistics Finland was very low in the first survey; only some 50 per cent of the respondents recognised Statistics Finland.

In the 1980s, the survey was also linked to the dissemination of data. As the results indicated that Statistics Finland was fairly unknown to a large part of the population, the conclusion was made to promote knowledge about it, and develop marketing and services.

Table 1. An overview of the various stakeholder monitoring systems and surveys applied at Statistics Finland

	Target group	Aims	Frequency	Comments
1. External stakeholder surveys				
1A. Corporate image survey	Finnish residents aged 15-79	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To monitor familiarity with and attitudes to Statistics Finland, and its products and services; main elements of CoP and principles of official statistics included To monitor opinions about the usefulness and necessity of official statistics/Statistics Finland 	Every second year (odd years)	Outsourced Omnibus method
1B. User survey	Users of statistical information, products and services. Contact information picked from various user registers of Statistics Finland.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To monitor familiarity with and attitudes to Statistics Finland, and its products and services To monitor opinions about the usefulness and necessity of official statistics/Statistics Finland To obtain feedback about the realisation of the service principles of Statistics Finland To monitor special topics as considered necessary To gather feedback for the development of services 	Every second year (even years)	Outsourced Main elements of CoP and principles of official statistics included
1C. Special surveys on certain topics, services, products, etc.	Sample of relevant stakeholder groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain information for improving products and services To promote stakeholder co-operation To support partnerships 	As considered necessary	Recent examples 1. Compilation of strategy for economic statistics 2. Questionnaire to data providers 3. Questionnaire related to certain products and services
1D. User panels	Sample of relevant stakeholder groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain information for improving products and services To promote stakeholder co-operation To support partnerships 	As considered necessary	To be piloted in 2011
1E. Surveys provided by others	Varies		Occasionally	E.g. general VIP surveys and media surveys
2. Internal surveys				
2A. Personnel survey	Staff of Statistics Finland	To gain information from the corporate image perspective about, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realisation of service principles Fulfilment of CoP and principles of official statistics 	Annual	
3 Other monitoring channels and methods				
3A. Feedback on tailored customer services	All tailored services within certain price range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain immediate feedback about services for quality assurance and development purposes 	Continuous, reported regularly	
3B. Direct contacts with stakeholders	Varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain information for improving activities To promote stakeholder co-operation and interaction To support partnerships 	Continuous, reported regularly	
3C. Kaiku (Echo) Feedback channel	All stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide stakeholders with an easy-to-reach feedback possibility To gain immediate feedback about services for quality assurance and development purposes 	Continuous, reported regularly	Web service
3D. Media monitoring	Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To monitor publicity received by Statistics Finland To enable fast reaction to e.g. misuse or misinterpretation of statistics To identify weak signals and user needs 	Continuous, reported regularly	Outsourced

Implementation of the corporate image survey. The corporate image survey is carried out every second year in March-April. The survey questions have been designed by Statistics Finland, but the implementation of the survey has been outsourced since the very beginning. The implementation is put out to tender at regular intervals; the current contract covers the surveys in the 2010-2014 period (corporate image survey and user survey in alternate years). The reasons for the outsourcing include cost-effectiveness, know-how and ready infrastructure of specialised organisations for poll surveys, as well as the need to ensure the impartiality and credibility of the survey – Statistics Finland cannot survey its own corporate image. The contractor organisation implements the survey and delivers the materials to Statistic Finland in an agreed format.

The target group of the survey consists of Finnish residents aged 15 to 79, the Åland islands excluded. The survey is carried out as a computer assisted face-to-face Omnibus interview. The representativeness of the sample is ensured with the same methods the contractor research organisation applies to other surveys they carry out. The sample is drawn by three-stage sampling. In the first stage, a sample of some 100 municipalities is drawn by region and type of municipality. In the second stage a so-called address-based system is used in which clusters of five interviews are formed around randomly selected addresses. In the third stage, discretionary allocation by age and gender is applied to the sample to make it correspond to the population distribution. The size of the sample is around 1,000. The respondents are asked for certain background variables, on the basis of which the results are grouped and presented.

The questions and how they have been revised. The content of the survey has remained mostly unchanged. In 1999, the structure of some of the questions was revised to better allow for time series comparisons, but the actual content was kept unchanged.

The survey has always consisted of two main parts. The first part has looked at the extent of familiarity with Statistics Finland with questions that have stayed nearly unchanged, and the second part has concerned the views ordinary people have of the activities of Statistics Finland. At times, additional questions on, for instance, people's perceptions of key statistical concepts (inflation, unemployment, etc.) have been annexed to the survey. In recent years, the respondents have been asked where they would look for statistical information if they needed it.

An international framework for a corporate image survey of a statistical organisation was drafted within an OECD working group in 2009-2010. Even though the general guidelines of this work are still to be formally acknowledged, the main elements of the work were implemented in the 2011 corporate image survey of Statistics Finland to ensure international comparability of the results. The changes required to the previous survey were mainly quite small, and thus we could maintain the comparability of most of the results with previous surveys. The main changes included e.g. new questions about the usage of statistical information. As yet, we have not applied the suggested, more detailed questions about the use of and opinions about some specific fields of statistical information, as these would better apply to our user survey.

The corporate image survey contains a total of 12 questions (excluding the background variable questions) which concern

- Familiarity with Statistics Finland
- Familiarity with the data, products or services produced by Statistics Finland
- Statistics Finland's role in society and its general corporate image (necessity, openness)
- Quality of Statistics Finland's data (reliability, objectivity, relevance, clarity, timeliness)
- Quality of communication; are ordinary people given enough information about what different statistical data mean?
- Mode of searching for data; where would you begin to look for statistical data? (open-ended)

For example, the general level of familiarity has been examined with a card given to the respondents with the names of some 10 organisations and an associated question of which of the organisations they recognise. As regards Statistics Finland, the respondents have also been asked what they think Statistics Finland does. The list of the organisations has been revised somewhat over the years as the names of the

organisations have changed. For the purpose of control, one non-existent organisation has been included in the list. Roughly one-third of the respondents recognise that as well. The remaining questions are, for the most part, multiple choice questions.

The results and reporting on them. When the results are ready, they are reported in Statistics Finland’s management group, which also discusses the backgrounds of the results, the reasons for any changes and eventual measures to be taken.

The results and a concise summary based on them are accessible to the entire personnel on the intranet. In addition, the results and surveys are reported on in the personnel magazines (general personnel magazine, field interviewers’ magazine).

The results are used in communication with internal and external stakeholder groups when informing them about Statistics Finland’s position in society and its corporate image, the public’s view on the quality of statistical data and their reliability, as well as the general significance of statistical data.

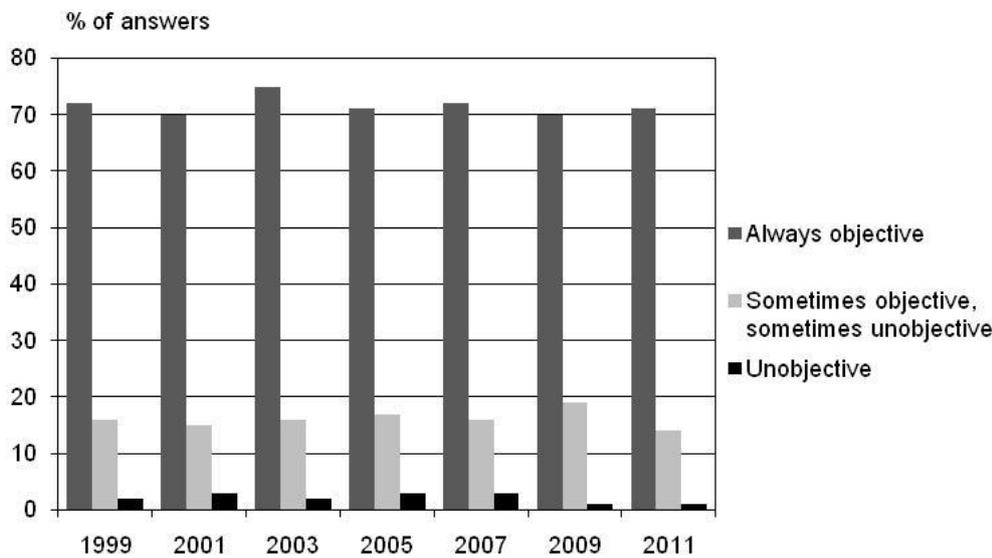


Figure 1. The objectivity of information produced by Statistics Finland according to corporate image survey 1999-2011.

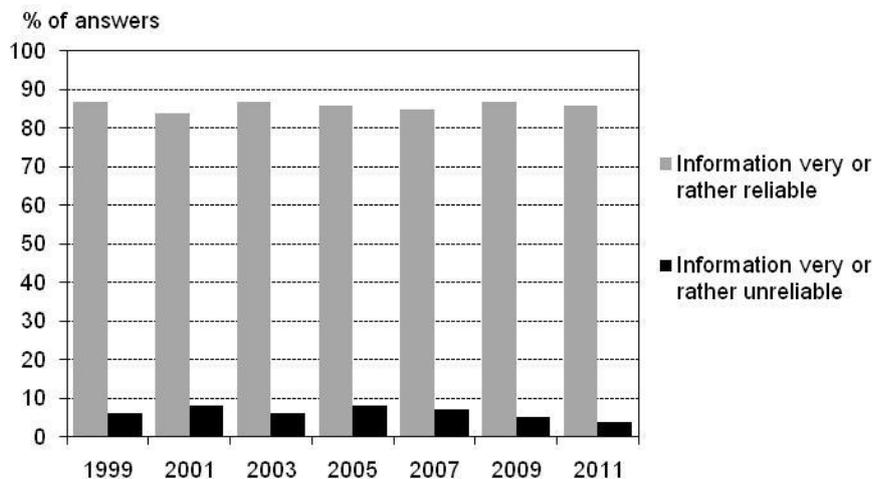


Figure 2. The reliability of information produced by Statistics Finland according to corporate image survey 1999-2011.

The results have remained very similar from survey to survey. The changing of the contractor organisation has not had a significant effect on the results. The long-term trend has been that the proportion of the respondents who are familiar with Statistics Finland has grown and the respondents' confidence in Statistics Finland has increased (Figures 1 and 2). A significant rise in the educational level of the population during the survey years has contributed to this.

User survey

The user surveys started from paying customers. The user survey of Statistics Finland was first carried out in 1991, and was then conducted annually until 2003. During these years, as well as also in 2005, the questionnaire was sent out to all paying customers meeting some pre-set criteria (e.g., value of annual purchases within a certain range). The customer information was extracted from the CRM system of Statistics Finland. The questionnaire was sent to more than a thousand persons, and the response rate was around 50 per cent.

The customer survey differed from the corporate image survey quite distinctively. It focused on the customers' opinions on the quality of the personal service they had experienced, and their satisfaction in the received purchase/information/product. It also included traditional customer survey questions, like willingness to recommend Statistics Finland's services to colleagues, and perceptions about promptness of the service.

Extension of the target group to all user categories. From 2008 onwards, the customer survey has been extended to cover all information user groups, not just paying customers. The change was made due to the ever growing role of the Internet and the rapidly growing share of information supplied free-of-charge to the users.

The challenge was how to identify the potential respondents as more and more of the use is channelled via the Internet and thus the users are more or less anonymous to Statistics Finland. Fortunately, at this stage we had started to draft our stakeholder policy, and during this process systematically identified the various stakeholder groups as well as the various kinds of lists and registers kept of them. On that basis we combined user information from diverse lists and registers, such as

- Applix CRM system
- User register of the Library of Statistics
- Subscribers to our newsletter and daily release alerts
- Members of co-operative groups of various statistical fields and projects
- Other internal sources.

At the same time the questions were revised quite considerably. Some of them were kept to maintain the comparability of the results, but the questionnaire was simplified and new elements were introduced into it. A new, direct feedback system for tailored information services was simultaneously under construction, and some of the elements from the previous user survey could be embedded into it.

The questions related to the services and products of Statistics Finland were to include the same elements as in the general corporate image survey: reliability, independency, timeliness and objectivity of the information produced and services provided, to mention but a few of them. These were included in the survey to find out whether the results would vary significantly between the general public and those more familiar with Statistics Finland.

Other questions focused on the customers' opinions about the service experience, such as satisfaction with the service provided by the personnel, readiness to use our services again, promptness of the service, etc. Issues like accessibility and usability of the information were also covered, and the usefulness of the website was monitored specifically.

Special topical questions were included in both surveys. In 2008, they concentrated on the principles of official statistics. In 2010, the respondents were asked to identify the themes or topics they thought would be

the most essential from their perspective in the coming years.

Implementation of the revised user survey. The first user survey of the new model was carried out in 2008, followed by a second one in 2010. The survey was conducted via the Internet. The questionnaire was sent out to over 2,000 recipients, and the response rate was around 25 per cent in both surveys – this is considered quite satisfactory in these kinds of surveys.

The user survey has been outsourced from the very beginning. The current contract covers the surveys in the 2010-2014 period (corporate image survey and user survey in alternate years).

In the survey, the respondents were asked to categorise themselves into a certain user group (e.g. researcher, student, ordinary person or representative of a central government organisation, local administration, entrepreneurial or business life, political party or organisation, the media), and to list the services they had used during the previous year. The frequency of use was asked about, too. For those chosen from the Applix CRM system, the information about being a paying customer was considered as a classifying background variable. These and some other variables were utilised in the classification when the results were being analysed.

The results show that frequent users of statistical information have an even more positive image than the general public about the reliability and usefulness of statistics (Figure 3). The paying customers are somewhat less satisfied with the service than the non-paying ones; they probably have higher expectations, too. A positive result from the latest survey was increased satisfaction among researchers, a group that conventionally has been quite critical especially of the availability of data; we assume this to reflect the investment made to improve the services for researchers in recent years.

Most of the respondents also give voluntary verbal feedback. This information is most valuable, and is analysed carefully by Statistics Finland. Often just the open questions as well as the verbal feedback received from the users – either in connection with the surveys or on other occasions – are extremely valuable when improving processes and service activities.

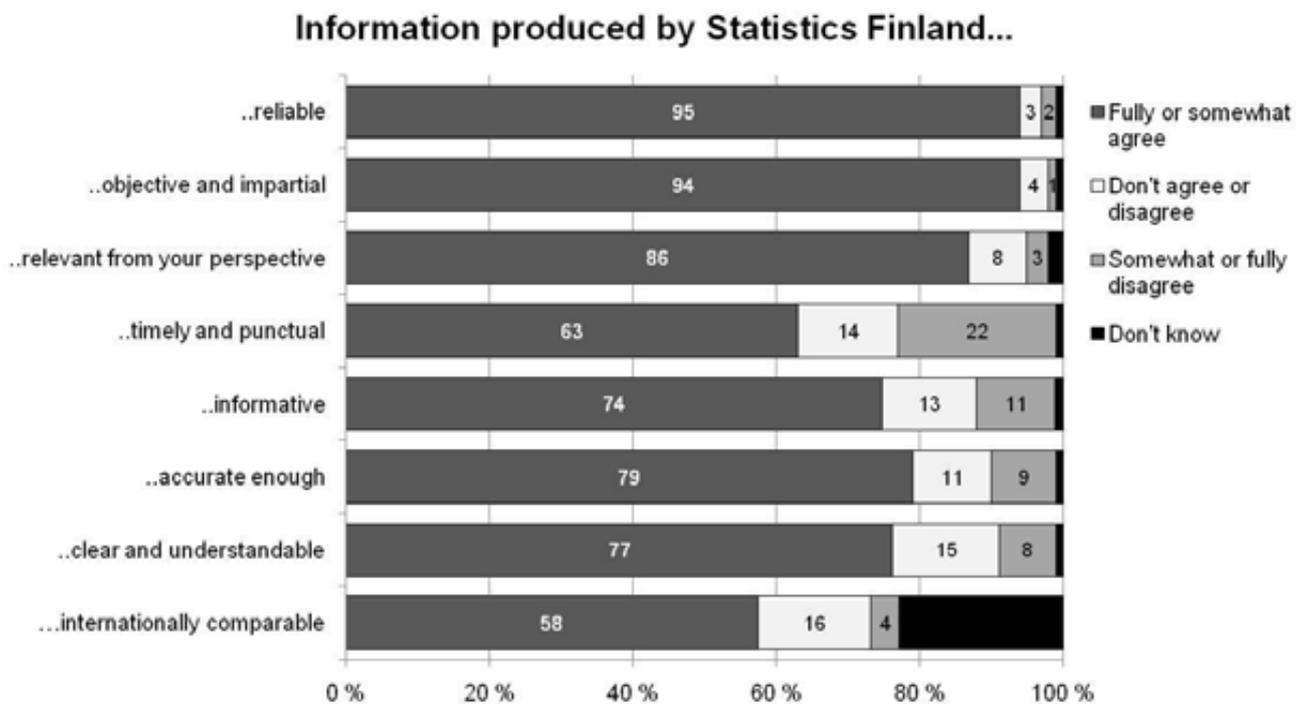


Figure 3. Opinions of the information users according to the user survey 2010.

Other surveys and feedback channels

As shown in Table 1, the monitoring system of Statistics Finland includes additional means and measures to those described above. The management of the feedback information system has been co-ordinated by the Information Services Department for some years now. During recent years, some of the surveys have been updated to better fit into the entity. Some new elements have also been included, such as a channel for systematic feedback on charged tailored services (since 2009). Various targeted user surveys have also been better co-ordinated; in principle, they are conducted when considered necessary. Systematic utilisation of user panels is currently under discussion.

In addition to these office-wide solutions, work-related dialogue and interaction with different stakeholder groups are crucial. Broad, regular and systematic co-operation with stakeholders is the central tool for identifying their needs and expectations. This includes both annual high-level meetings with strategic stakeholders and continuous interaction at the operational level. Networking and co-operation with stakeholders produces proactive analyses of future information needs in society and nurtures partnerships, as well as spreads knowledge about Statistics Finland's products, services, aims and operating principles. Co-operation also promotes the use of statistics in society, and profiles Statistics Finland as a knowledge-intensive organisation. It ensures that the needs of the users and suppliers of data are taken into consideration when statistics are revised and developed. One of the main challenges is to find proper ways to share the information received within the organisation to be able to genuinely benefit from it.

Apart from the external surveys, the personnel survey provides us information for assessing trust and attitudes. The personnel survey is carried out annually. Every second year it includes questions related to the role of Statistics Finland as an information producer. It also reflects the employees' opinions about the implementation of the fundamental principles of official statistics.

Concluding remarks

The corporate image surveys and customer satisfaction surveys indicate that public knowledge about Statistics Finland as well as the agency's image as a producer of impartial and reliable statistics have remained good. Statistics Finland is one of the best known organisations within Finnish general government, and over 80 per cent of people in Finland consider its statistics always or usually reliable. The respondents to the customer satisfaction surveys are quite pleased with the service they receive. The results reflect to a certain degree the general cultural atmosphere and attitudes in Finland, but can also be interpreted as a result from systematic work to build and maintain trust in official statistics, and to build interactive relationships with the different stakeholder groups. The impressions of the data users and ordinary people in Finland equal the results from various international evaluations (e.g. Eurostat Code of Practice Peer Review 2007).

In a study of Finnish government organisations, the researcher put a special emphasis on a group of especially faithful, content stakeholders - so called faith holders (Luoma-aho 2005). They form an important social asset for the organisation, and can act as a "reputation shield" in crisis situations. The identification of these faith holder groups might be important also for a statistical institute. These faith holders can prove invaluable in cases where e.g. the media question the reliability of statistics. In these kinds of situations the faith holders often speak up for the organisation.

To maintain "the trust capital" is a challenge we are continuously facing and must not underestimate. It is essential to actively co-operate with the stakeholders, to openly and actively communicate with them and with the general public. We need to carefully listen to and analyse the signals from society, and to proactively react to them, whether they be related to general attitudes towards official statistics, future information needs or our current products and services.

It is important that the entire staff are aware of Statistics Finland's principles and practices as regards dealing with stakeholders. The staff are also the main contributor in the implementation of these principles in everyday work. As the world is changing rapidly, it is essential that the feedback and monitoring systems are developed continuously. The stakeholder policy of Statistics Finland has been prepared for these purposes.

After a wide and open discussion with the staff, the policy was confirmed in 2010.

The toolkit for the monitoring of and communicating with society and the stakeholders can be developed even further. An important opportunity for this is continued co-operation within the national and international statistical communities – keeping in mind that, due to cultural differences, it is essential to identify those elements that can reliably be compared and shared.

It is important to develop proper and efficient ways of utilising the information received from the various monitoring systems to maintain and further improve our functions and processes. In the end, relevant and high quality statistics is the only way to sustain and improve user satisfaction and, thus, trust in official statistics.

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