

OECD Work on Measuring Trust in Official Statistics

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Introduction

In June 2008, the OECD Committee on Statistics held its annual meeting in Paris; one of the topics for discussion was „How to Monitor Trust in Official Statistics?“ As a result of the 2008 OECD meeting, an electronic discussion group (EDG) was formed and charged with developing a model questionnaire for measuring trust. Once the draft questionnaire was developed, countries were invited to conduct cognitive testing activities.

Cognitive testing was carried out up until the early part of 2011 and involved six OECD member countries.

There is an understanding that the possibility of having an internationally undertaken survey on measuring “Trust in Official Statistics” and the general image of National Statistics Offices is small. However, the present work will enable the development of an international approach to compilers of official statistics on how to measure trust in official statistics in a survey if they wish to; with the aim of providing internationally comparable data.

This paper will present the process launched by the OECD and the progress to date. It draws very heavily on the work of Dr Ivan Fellegi (former Chief Statistician of Statistics Canada) and mostly his and the EDG work presented to the OECD’s Committee on Statistics (CSTAT).

June 2008 CSTAT Meeting

The session “How to monitor trust in Official Statistics” at the June 2008 CSTAT Meeting was followed by lively discussion and highlighted to the committee that there is a good deal of interest in this topic. The session saw presentations from Canada, Finland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The Committee agreed that the CSTAT Bureau should discuss how an initiative aimed at identifying good practices in this field could be established by the OECD.

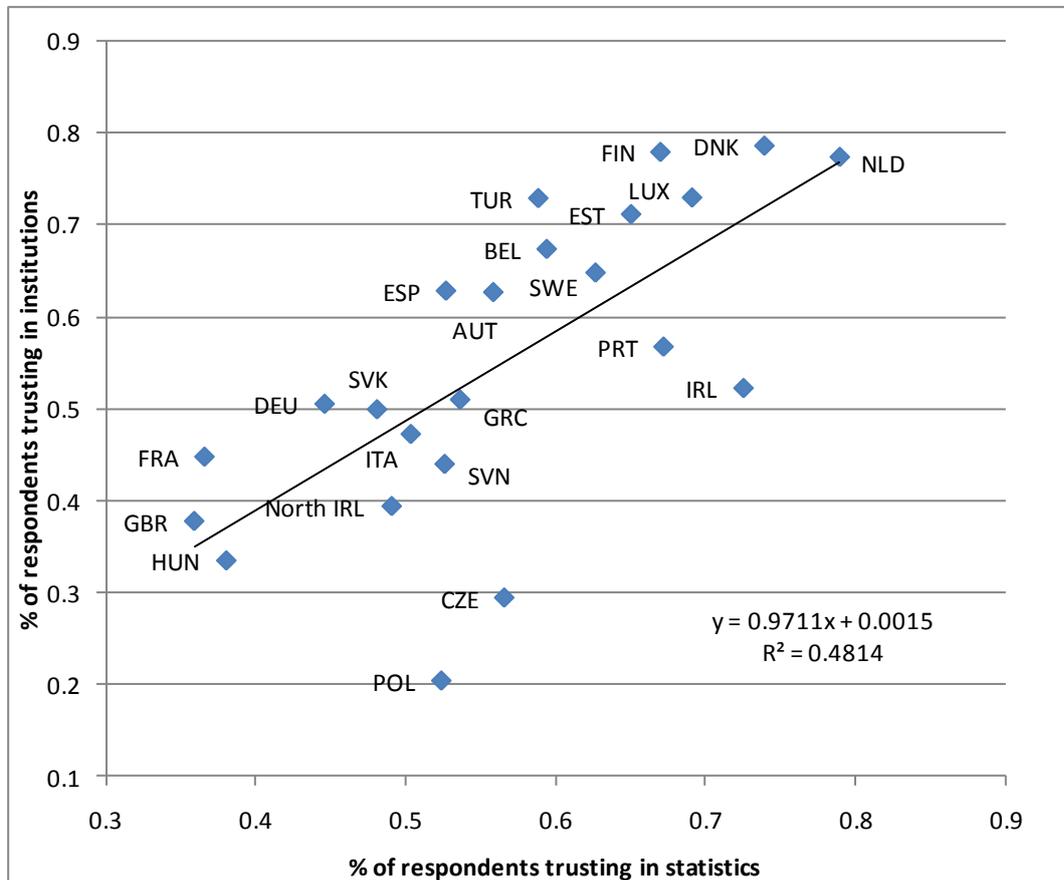
This initiative resulted in the then OECD Chief Statistician asking Dr Fellegi to prepare a note for the CSTAT Bureau meeting in February 2009

February 2009 CSTAT Bureau Meeting

A general theme to come from the 2008 meeting and which needed to be impressed on the CSTAT Bureau was that trust in official statistics is crucial. From the outside it is almost impossible to verify the information provided by National Statistics Offices (NSOs), therefore as a prerequisite there has to be a general trust in the statistics themselves (quality, objectivity etc.) for their acceptance and use. This is also a major factor in getting respondents to cooperate and participate in NSO surveys. From this logically follows that NSOs should have an understanding of the level of trust in their institution with a possible explanation of this level.

A good example of this was covered in a 2008 OECD paper which, using 2007 Eurobarometer data, examined the relationship between trust in statistics and trust in government institutions. Figure 1 is from this paper.

Figure 1. Trust in Statistics vs. Trust in Institutions



Source: Eurobarometer Survey

The note presented to the Bureau gave a very short overview of the country presentations made in 2008, mostly focusing on the questions that countries had used in assessing trust in official statistics. It was noticed that the questions to respondents on trust asked by the NSOs was similar. It was felt that while there might not be much demand for international country comparable data on trust in official statistics, it was certainly important that NSOs know the perceived level of trust in their organisation. In this regard, there is an opportunity for NSOs to learn from one another methods that could help improve trust in their statistics or at least avoid a decline.

The conclusion from the Bureau note was because of the large country variation in what countries want to know about how their statistics are perceived trust wise, different priorities in what should be measured, and cultural differences, it isn't feasible to generate a one fit trust survey. However, it could be feasible to generate a set of standard questions that countries could ask that would measure public awareness of the NSO and provide a measure of the importance, reliability and credence of the statistics they compile.

It was recommended that to take this topic forward an electronic discussion group (EDG) be established, composed of interested countries that would look to formulate a "recommended

approach” for measuring trust in official statistics. The OECD would host the EDG site and provide support.

Electronic Discussion Group on Measuring Trust in Official Statistics – Report

The „Report of the Electronic Working Group on Measuring Trust in Official Statistics“ was prepared for the February 2010 CSTAT Bureau meeting.

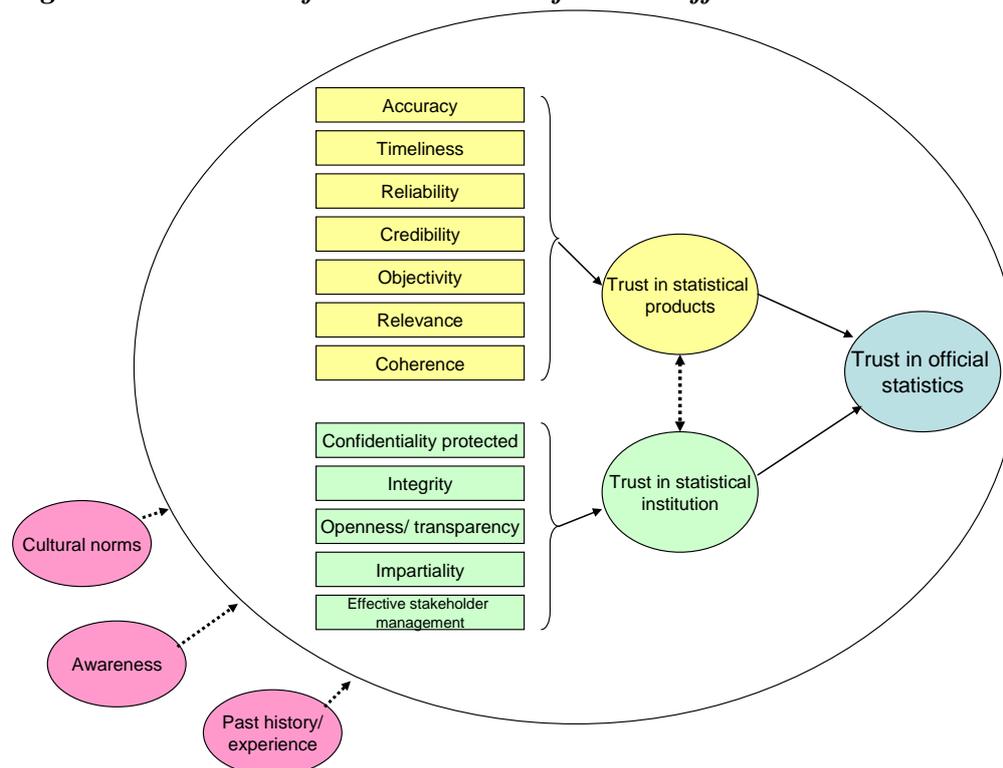
The group was established and started to function in early June 2009, it consisted of 16 OECD member countries and 3 other international organisations. As a start, group members were asked to provide relevant materials from past and current national attempts at measuring trust, the report was based on this material, and subsequent input and discussion from the group members.

After analysis of the initial material provided by group members, 8 key boundaries were established in which to take this work forward by establishing a model questionnaire:

1. *General population* – questions on trust in statistics should be addressed to everyone not just interest groups
2. Important to identify people who are *aware of official statistics*.
3. Distinguish between *centralised and decentralised systems*.
4. *Routine monitoring of trust instead of specific trust restoring measurement programs* – A general generic view is sought.
5. Basic information, *minimum population variables*, should be collected.
6. *Interpretation of trust* – trust in terms of providing credible, reliable and free from political interference statistics.
7. *Any questionnaire needs to be short and concise*.
8. *Optional question* – NSOs should be able to added country specific questions to the questionnaire.

In trying to establish exactly what trust is in the context of official statistics, the group decided to accept as a working model a conceptual framework outlined in figure 2.

The pink ovals are external factors only somewhat partially or not under the control of official statisticians. The main ellipse represents activities largely under the control of the NSO. Yellow rectangles represent those characteristics of statistical products determining public trust. Green rectangles show specific characteristics of the NSO relevant to generating and maintaining trust in statistical institutions. Finally, trust in statistical products and trust in institutions that produce them, result in trust (or the lack of it) in official statistics as a system.

Figure 2. Framework for measurement of trust in official statistics

This conceptual framework and the key boundaries were adopted by the working group and used in the development of the model questionnaire proposed. The following assumptions were then added into the mix when deciding on the questions for the questionnaire:

- I. The survey is run by an outside group, i.e. not the NSO.
- II. Interviewer administrated, i.e. telephone or person.
- III. Any national official statistical organisation should be able to utilise the questionnaire.
- IV. Cognitive testing is required.

The report concluded by thanking the working group, and urging OECD countries to adopt the questionnaire. The report included an Annex containing the “Proposed Questionnaire for the Measurement of Trust in Official Statistics”. The proposed questionnaire had the following format:

- Module 1: Awareness of <NSO> or Official Statistics (All respondents)
- Module 2: Trust in National Organisations (All Respondents)
- Module3: Trust in Official Statistics (All Respondents)
- Module 4: Assessment of <NSO> or <Official Statistics> (All Respondents)
- Module 5: Trust in Selected Statistical Series (Regular Users)
- Module 6: Demographics (All Respondents)

The Bureau agreed that cognitive testing should be undertaken and asked the EDG to continue. It stated that the testing would need to be self-funded and should be done in more than one language.

Cognitive Testing and Final Draft Report

Over the last six months, cognitive testing of the questionnaire has been undertaken by various OECD member countries, including:

- The United States (National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Korea (Statistics Korea)
- Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand)
- Turkey (Turkish Statistical Institute)
- Canada (Statistics Canada)

The OECD continues to support this function of this EDG. In this context, it should be noted that the 58th World Statistics Congress of the International Statistical Institute, held in Dublin, Ireland, from 21 to 26 August 2011 will include a session on „Trust in Official Statistics“.

Not long after the CSTAT Bureau meeting in February 2011, the draft final report was uploaded to the EDG website. Group members were then invited as a next step to discuss the draft and to agree on a set of recommendations. Members were encouraged to pay particular attention to the issues for "discussion"; and "recommendation" at the end of the section devoted to each question of the original draft questionnaire. The aim of this final round of discussion was to secure buy-in from participating countries, and to identify major faults with the proposed questionnaire (general comments were not sought as the proposed questionnaire is now be considered as a tested instrument). The expectation was that countries should proposed specific changes to the questionnaire, individual questions and their wording in the light of the results from the cognitive testing phase. A further reminder was sent to countries in late April.

Responses to the Draft Final Report

At the time of writing this note, six countries and Eurostat had responded:

1. Slovenia – No specific comments.
2. Turkey proposed specific suggestions regarding the education levels asked in Module 6.
3. Germany informed the EDG that it plans to use this questionnaire when designing the next „image“ survey planned for 2012. Experiences will be shared with the EDG after the evaluation.
4. Eurostat provided some comments regarding a number of questions in different modules. The general point raised by Eurostat is why questions are always asked in the positive sense, with the suggestion that there should be some variety.
5. Korea suggested that the questionnaire should seek more information on distrust of official statistics; have a more rounded description of “Political interference”; and, capture the respondent’s employment situation better.
6. Australia split their response into two comment components
 - a. Key comments
 - b. Detailed comments to questions and response category recommendations.
7. United States Statistical Agencies; they felt that as the proposed questionnaire had not tested well in the United States some review of the basic concepts involved should be

undertaken, in other words another round of cognitive testing. This would require extending the life of the EDG.

It is felt that the final and agreed to report “Measuring Trust in Official” should be ready in late 2011. However, this is somewhat dependent on incorporating the comments received into the draft report and getting a final agreement.

Next Steps

This short note has attempted to outline the process, including the motivation, which led to the OECD creating an EDG on Measuring Trust in Official Statistics. The process was largely managed through the OECD Committee on Statistics while the work was undertaken by those countries that participated in the working group. It was clear from the beginning that there are a wide range of ways and means of measuring trust in statistics and the group has tried to cover as many of these as possible, but as stated a number of times during this note, the model questionnaire allows for a reasonable degree of national adaptation.

The next step should be straight forward, countries have been asked to comment on the draft report that is in essence the questionnaire. As cognitive testing has already been completed the questionnaire should be viewed as a tested instrument and comments are expected to focus on wording etc and it is expected that the questionnaire will not change substantially unless major faults are identified. However, considering some of the comments received to date further discussion may be required.

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