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Coordination of national statistical systems

Soft coordination and broad cooperation: implementing principles and guidelines across the system of official statistics

Note by Statistics Sweden

Summary

Official statistics in Sweden are currently produced in a decentralized system of 27 different government agencies. A Council of Official Statistics was established in 2002 with the purpose of improving coordination of the system of official statistics, primarily concerning the availability of the official statistics, quality and usefulness, and the response process.

The paper presents some of the successes and challenges of implementing principles and guidelines in a decentralized system, where soft coordination and broad cooperation are the main tools for implementation and follow-up. The decentralized system of official statistics is currently the subject of a government inquiry, to determine whether the system works as well as it can.

I. Decentralization and review

1. Sweden has a system of official statistics, produced by government agencies, which are to be available free-of-charge for general information, analytical activities and research. According to a decision by Parliament, the government determines the subject areas and statistical areas for which official statistics are to be produced, and which agencies are to be given responsibility for the statistics. The statistical agencies decide on the content and scope of statistics within the statistics area(s) for which they are responsible. It is recommended that each area should be covered by at least one statistical product. Official statistics are identified by a special symbol¹ attached to all publications, webpages and tables with these statistics. Official statistics are also regulated by a number of laws, regulations and guidelines² which do not apply in the same way to statistics which are not classified as official.
2. In the middle of the 1990s, a statistical reform was carried out and responsibility for official statistics in Sweden was decentralized. The main purpose was to give the users more influence over the statistics.
3. In a 1999 government report which evaluated the statistical reform, it was shown that the transfer of statistics from Statistics Sweden to other agencies had by and large gone smoothly, but coordination and the overall view of the statistical system needed to be strengthened.
4. The evaluation report recommended that a council be established for Sweden's official statistics to improve coordination and the overall view of the statistical system. A Council for Official Statistics was duly established at Statistics Sweden in 2002.

II. Development of a system for coordination

5. The Council, which is an advisory body, has the task of dealing with matters of principle concerning the availability, quality and usefulness, as well as considering issues of facilitating the response process for data providers. The Council was regulated in an ordinance³ which outlined the coordination role for Statistics Sweden and the establishment of the Council, which was to be managed by a secretariat at Statistics Sweden, and the chair of the Council which was to be Statistics Sweden's Director General. This ordinance was key in outlining the areas of activity of the Council and in explicitly giving Statistics Sweden the coordinating role in the system.
6. During the ten years of the Council's existence, activities have been carried out and progress has been made in each of the areas mentioned above. Some examples of these activities are given here.

A. Availability of official statistics

7. The lack of availability and accessibility for users of official statistics was one of the primary reasons for the establishment of the Council. Therefore this was one of the areas of

¹  Sveriges officiella statistik

² Primarily the Official Statistics Act (2001:99), the Official Statistics Ordinance (2001:100), the Personal Data Act (1998:204), and Statistics Sweden's regulations and general guidelines (SCB-FS2002:16) for the official release, publishing etc. of official statistics.

³ Ordinance (2007:762) with instructions for Statistics Sweden.

key importance from the beginning. With many different agencies producing and publishing official statistics on their own websites, in their own formats, it was difficult for users to find the statistics they needed, unless they had wider knowledge of which agency was responsible for the statistics, exactly when they were to be published, and so on.

8. Ordinance 2007:762 explicitly states that the Council shall compile an annual publishing calendar for all official statistics, an annual report and a list of all agencies and their statistics. As a result, a working group under the Council was given the task of developing a strategy for electronic publishing. Research showed that the majority of users still began their search for statistics with Statistics Sweden and it was therefore decided to use this website as the “hub” for all official statistics. Statistics Sweden now publishes a calendar⁴ in December of each year with the publication dates for all official statistics for the coming year. In this way, users can easily get an overview of all forthcoming publications, regardless of agency or subject matter. The calendar is interactive so that users can go on to find the relevant agency and the statistics they need when published. Statistics Sweden also maintains a list of all agencies and their respective areas of responsibility, and this is also available on the website.

B. Quality of official statistics

9. The second area of the Council’s activity relates to quality. The ordinance recognized that coordination with regard to quality was an important aspect of ensuring confidence in official statistics as a whole. A working group under the Council was given the task of focusing specifically on methods and quality. The group drafted *Guidelines for sufficient quality and criteria for official statistics*⁵ in 2006 to try to introduce common standards and a comparable level of quality across all official statistics. How the different agencies are working with and following the guidelines is followed up by the Council every year. In 2011, 3 agencies have declared that they follow the guidelines for all official statistics while 17 agencies are working to implement the guidelines.

10. Statistics Sweden has also outlined specific instructions to the agencies responsible for official statistics regarding quality declarations and supporting documentation. It has even made available templates and support for such declarations. In 2011, around 95% of all official statistics had a quality declaration in accordance with the instructions.

11. The working group has also discussed and worked towards the harmonization of common variables, such as age, sex and region. Some progress has been made in these areas.

C. Usefulness/coherence of official statistics

12. As mentioned above, the agencies responsible for official statistics have considerable freedom to decide what statistics to produce in their respective areas. The reforms in the 1990s aimed to ensure that the production of statistics would be carried out in close proximity to the users, by agencies with the expert knowledge to be able to identify the right and relevant statistics in their area.

13. However with so many agencies producing statistics in often overlapping areas, coordination and cooperation are key to a coherent system of official statistics. To this end,

⁴ http://www.scb.se/Pages/PublishingCalendarStartPage____259922.aspx

⁵ http://www.scb.se/Grupp/OmSCB/Verksamhet/ROS/Dokument/kvalitetsrapport_eng.pdf

the Council maintains a database of all official statistics and publishes a list from this database in the annual report on official statistics⁶. Agencies are also required to inform the Council and all agencies of any changes to existing statistics, if they plan to cease to produce statistics in a particular area or are planning new statistics. In this way, agencies have the opportunity to identify any overlaps or gaps in official statistics.

III. Coordination – the practical tools

14. Coordination can be carried out in many ways, using a variety of tools. This section will explain some of the tools used by the Council for Official Statistics in its coordination role and explain the differences between “soft” coordination and stronger coordination as seen in other countries, such as the United Kingdom.

A. Coordination secretariat

15. A secretariat with the role of coordinating the system is managed by Statistics Sweden. However it is explicitly stated in the objectives of the secretariat that it should not represent Statistics Sweden but should be consider and speak for the entire system, i.e. the other statistical agencies as well. The secretariat supports many of the key aspects of the coordination function; the meetings of the Council, the database of official statistics, the information channels between the Council and the statistical agencies; and the tools for coordination outlined below.

B. Working groups

16. The Council consists of six heads of statistical agencies, as well as the chair. As such it does not carry out any practical work but discusses and decides on matters of principal. The practical work, such as the drafting of guidelines, is carried out in various working groups appointed by the Council, and it is within these working groups that the true cooperation between agencies takes place. There are a number of permanent working groups as well as several temporary groups dealing with specific issues. The working group for methods and quality for example drafted the guidelines on sufficient quality and has been working continuously on the harmonization of variables. The working group for electronic publishing ceased after the drafting of the guidelines for electronic publishing. The groups are open to all agencies who wish to participate and can have anything from 5 to 15 members. It can be hard however for smaller agencies to find the resources to participate in different groups, even if they are interested in the work being done.

C. Guidelines and templates

17. An important aspect of coordination is to ensure coherence of official statistics and ease-of-use for users of the statistics. This can be achieved by producing guidelines for various aspects of statistics production and templates for all agencies to use so that users can recognize the statistics, documentation and other material. With a soft approach to coordination, as in Sweden, these are not usually binding. As mentioned previously, agencies have great freedom to produce what statistics they deem appropriate, how and when they like. The Council has produced a number of guidelines, for example, on the

⁶ http://www.scb.se/Pages/List____259941.aspx

scope of official statistics, on sufficient quality, on electronic publishing, and on preliminary statistics. The agencies are generally in agreement that these guidelines are necessary although, without any legally binding status, it can vary greatly how they are followed.

D. Skill sharing and skills development

18. Another important practical aspect of coordination is the exchange of experiences, skills sharing and skills development. Within the remit of the Council, a number of seminars are organized every year, as well as an annual conference for all statistical agencies. The working groups mentioned above generally contribute to planning and subject matter of the seminars and these are usually well-attended, proving that there is a need for joint competence development. Many of the statistical agencies in Sweden have only a few staff working with (official) statistics and do not have the resources of capacity to ensure statistical skills development. Many agencies are also struggling with similar issues despite their different circumstances and subject matter areas. In 2011, for example, seminars were organized on non-response and on the presentation of statistics on websites and other media.

E. Regulation and legislative requirements

19. The nature of the soft coordination in Sweden means that the legislation is by its nature fairly sparse. Official statistics themselves are regulated in the Official Statistics Act and Ordinance. The coordination role is only regulated in Statistics Sweden's instructions. Statistics Sweden may regulate further on issues of coordination but has only done so on one occasion, due to the requirement to consult with all agencies. There is no mandate within the legislation for the control or scrutiny of statistical agencies. In this sense the term coordination must be understood as having a very different meaning to the terms scrutiny and monitoring.

20. This can be better understood by looking at another country with a reasonably similar system for production of official statistics but with a very different governance structure. The United Kingdom can also be said to have decentralized statistical production but has explicit legislation providing for a scrutiny function with an independent authority to carry out this role.

IV. A limited role based on consensus

21. Ordinance 2007:762 which outlines the role of the Council does not go into any detail about how the Council should accomplish its tasks and does not mention a mandate to follow up or ensure compliance with any standards decided upon. As a purely advisory body, any guidelines drafted by the Council are not legally binding. The Official Statistics Ordinance states that Statistics Sweden may issue further instructions, but only after consultation (and, implicitly, agreement) by all agencies. It has as mentioned been done so on only one occasion, to establish Statistics Sweden's regulations and general guidelines for the official release⁷, publishing, etc. of official statistics which, as mentioned before, regulates the documentation, release and accessibility of official statistics.

⁷ SCB-FS 2002:16

22. The limitations of the Council's role and coordination of official statistics in general is particularly apparent with regard to aspects of quality, data collection and coherence.

A. Lack of common standards and reported quality across all official statistics

23. The guidelines on quality established by the Council are comprehensive but, as noted earlier, they are not binding. The guidelines are based on consensus among the agencies but the Council, and Statistics Sweden per se, have no mandate to enforce them. As a result, the implementation and consideration of the guidelines varies greatly between the agencies. Only three agencies of the total 27 have stated that they follow the guidelines in their entirety. The majority work with the guidelines in some manner although several agencies do not claim to be working with quality in any way.

24. Similarly, there is no mandate to follow-up the availability of documentation. Unlike with the quality guidelines, the instructions for agencies to publish quality declarations and supporting information alongside official statistics are binding in a legal sense. However the Council cannot scrutinize how other agencies are producing their official statistics; it can only report on the status of implementation of the instructions in the annual report.

B. Coordinating data collection

25. Each agency producing its own statistics may of course decide how to collect the underlying data. Sweden has a long history of using administrative sources as a basis for statistics and many agencies have their own registers which are used to produce their statistics. A recent study of data sources among a number of agencies indicated that registers are shared among agencies frequently, although there can still be issues of confidentiality, cost, definitions and even technical obstacles to sharing these administrative sources.

26. In an attempt to reduce the burden on respondents, particularly on companies and organizations, Statistics Sweden has established a register of respondents, which monitors all requests to companies and can highlight a particularly high burden. However this register only contains details of Statistics Sweden's requests for data. There is currently no formal coordination between agencies with regard to data collection. Some controls do exist however, outside of the Council and Statistics Sweden's coordinating role. All new requests for data to companies must, for example, be reported to the Board of Swedish Industry and Commerce for Better Regulation. The Swedish Companies Regulation Office is also currently investigating and mapping requests for data to companies from a selection of agencies, with the objective of coordinating and reducing the burden of responding to these requests.

C. Producing coherent and comprehensive official statistics

27. The Official Statistics Ordinance outlines in an annex in which subject areas official statistics shall be produced and which agency shall be responsible for these. This list provides an overview of all official statistics and should ensure that statistics are produced in all key policy areas. However, as mentioned before, the areas are sometimes vague and can often relate to a wide subject area. This can lead to overlapping statistics being produced or gaps in the official statistics, where no agency takes responsibility for an area. There are also some areas named in the Ordinance with no official statistics product, due to a lack of resources or incentive in the agencies in question.

V. Conclusions and lessons learned

A. A system under review

28. The system of coordination of official statistics in Sweden has now been in place for over ten years, with the system of decentralization having been established almost twenty years ago, before Sweden entered the European Union. The previous review was carried out in 1998 and the government initiated during 2011 a new review of the system of official statistics and Statistics Sweden's role in particular.

29. The current review is ongoing and is due to report at the end of 2012. The directive for the review explicitly mentions quality, documentation, accessibility and the sharing of administrative data as areas of specific importance. The review is gathering evidence from all the statistical agencies and other interested parties, as well as looking further afield at the coordination systems in countries such as the UK.

B. Different circumstances require different approaches

30. It is important to remember that the 27 statistical agencies have very different circumstances when it comes to the production of statistics. This can be seen most clearly in the annual report on official statistics, which lists the agencies in relation to the number of statistical products they produce and their statistical staff and financial resources. The Swedish Board of Agriculture had, for example, 29 products in 2011 and a statistical staff of around 13 full-time equivalents. This, compared to the Swedish National Courts Administration, with 1 official statistics product and 0.1 full-time equivalent staff. Furthermore, it varies greatly which agencies have statistics regulated by the European Union and therefore which must comply with European legislation as well.

31. Many agencies also outsource their statistics production, to Statistics Sweden or other statistical producers, even within the private sector which can make follow-up of quality and documentation even more challenging.

32. With this in mind, it is of key importance to pool resources for development of methods, tools and skills to ensure that all statistics are produced to a high quality, regardless of the responsible agency's size or resources. The largest statistical producer (Statistics Sweden in this case, with 127 official statistics products and 601 full-time equivalent staff working with official statistics) is often looked to to provide guidance and best practice, even if this agency does not have an explicit statutory role to do so. It is therefore important the largest agency has the mandate and the resources to provide such guidance.

C. Clarity of standards and guidelines

33. The job of coordinating different agencies becomes doubly challenging when there is a lack of clarity about the standards to be coordinated. In Sweden, there are currently a number of quality standards that different agencies adhere to. The Council has established guidelines for sufficient quality which have already been mentioned in this paper, EU-regulated statistics should comply with the European Statistics Code of Practice⁸ and, in

⁸ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product_details/publication?p_product_code=KS-32-11-955

addition, agencies have their own initiatives and requirements to improve quality, such as Statistics Sweden's work to become certified under ISO 20252.

34. Certainly for smaller agencies who must focus their efforts, it is important to have clear legislative guidelines and practical standards that can be followed up and monitored. Examples of good practice in relation to these standards from across the statistical system are also a key to the implementation of guidelines.

D. Independent monitoring and control

35. In Sweden the coordination function is currently managed by the largest statistical producer. This can create difficulties of perception, especially when putting forward guidelines and standards. Smaller agencies do not appreciate being dictated to by larger agencies, even if they see and accept the benefits and necessities of coordination. In Sweden it is, for example, important to distinguish between Statistics Sweden's standards and suggestions, and those of the Council for Official Statistics.

36. This becomes even more important when there is a scrutiny or monitoring role. It is perhaps preferable that such functions are independent of statistical production in order to ensure objectivity and confidence that the same rules are being applied to all. The function needs to have a clear mandate and the resources to follow up and develop standards.

37. This paper has aimed to point out the benefits and shortcomings of a system of soft coordination and follow-up, such as that in Sweden. There are plenty of other examples of coordination and follow-up in the statistical systems across the world. Systems where self-assessment and peer review are a key component of following up standards can be effective, especially when these assessments and reviews are publicly available, such as the programme of peer reviews carried out by Eurostat. Formal assessment by an independent body, such as in the UK, is another way to improve compliance with common standards but it is also time-consuming and resource-intensive.

38. In Sweden, with its culture of agency cooperation and trust in public institutions, soft coordination has proved a successful tool in moving along the path towards a coordinated and coherent system of official statistics. However this form of coordination would not suit all statistical systems and has a number of limitations which are important to consider in today's climate of increasing demands for high quality, reliable official statistics.
