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Implementing the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Implementing the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Note by the Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom

Summary

The paper provides an overview of the challenges in implementing the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, focusing on the top five challenges that particularly resonate in the United Kingdom. The paper also gives a short historical background of the development of the statistical system in the United Kingdom and describes its current setup.

I. Evolution

1. Official statistics in the United Kingdom (UK) have a long history, dating back to the Domesday Book as the first attempt at producing a definitive record of land-holding and the population living on it. During the Middle Ages, more extensive records of church baptisms, marriages and deaths, and judicial and administrative proceedings were developed. Modern official statistics date back to the collection of data on imports and exports in the 17th Century, and the first Census of Population took place in 1801. The centralised collection of statistics relating to births and deaths began in 1837. The Central Statistical Office (CSO) was created in 1941 and the Office for Population, Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) was established in 1970. The CSO and OPCS were merged in 1996 to form the Office for National Statistics (ONS), an Executive Agency that reported to Her Majesty's Treasury of the UK Government.

2. Between 2000 and 2008 the statistical system in the UK was governed by a non-statutory Framework for National Statistics. The Framework introduced a number of key structures and concepts, including the post of 'National Statistician', the Government's chief statistical adviser, with operational independence from Government Ministers; the concept of 'National Statistics', which aimed to provide an accurate, up-to-date, comprehensive and meaningful description of the economy and society of the UK, underpinned by professional standards as set out in a 'Code of Practice'; and the independent 'Statistics Commission', which advised on the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics.

3. Following a decision by the UK Government's Chancellor of the Exchequer to create an independent statistical system and by a public consultation, legislation was introduced into Parliament in November 2006 and passed onto the statute book in July 2007. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (the Act) came into force on 1 April 2008 that embodies fundamental reform of the UK's statistical system.

II. Current system

4. The Act provided for the creation of a new body, the UK Statistics Authority (legally known as the Statistics Board), with a statutory responsibility to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The Act established the Authority as a Non-Ministerial Department, acting at arm's length from Ministers. The Authority's responsibilities cover the whole UK statistical system - England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Authority is accountable, and reports, to each of the four UK legislatures – the UK Parliament (at Westminster), the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly – the last three of which comprise the "devolved administrations".

5. The governing body of the Authority (the Authority's Board) is composed of a majority of non-executive members appointed by Ministers following consultation with the Chair (of the Authority). It also includes three executive members, of which one is the National Statistician as the Chief Executive of the Authority. The National Statistician and the Chair of the Authority are Crown appointments.

6. The UK's de facto National Statistics Institute (the Office for National Statistics – ONS) sits formally as the executive office of the Authority, producing many of the country's key economic, population and social statistics, whilst statisticians within UK government departments and the devolved administrations generate many other key series relevant to their department's policy and operational business. By volume, of the 1,700

official statistics produced in the UK, around 1 in 7 official statistics are produced by the ONS. The remainder of official statistics are produced by other government departments and agencies, and since their inception in 1998, the devolved administrations.

7. The Authority has a statutory responsibility to monitor and report on the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics. To fulfil this responsibility, the Authority has prepared and published professional standards in a Code of Practice for Official Statistics (the Code). The Authority has a duty to assess, for approval as National Statistics, existing National Statistics against the Code. The Authority also, at the request of the Departmental Minister responsible, assesses additional official statistics for approval as National Statistics. Together they comprise the Authority's Assessment Programme which is published annually. More information about the Code of Practice and the Assessment of statistics are in Annexes I and II respectively.

8. The Act left unchanged other aspects of the statistical system including:

(a) The Government Statistical Service (GSS) as the community of all those involved in the production of official statistics in the UK. Led by the National Statistician, it is a flexible and diverse network of people. It includes statisticians and others providing high quality information, analysis and advice to decision makers. Around 1,400 staff are members of the Government Statistician Group (GSG), the professional community of statisticians within government; and,

(b) Departmental Heads of Profession for Statistics (HoPs) in government departments or agencies that produce National Statistics. Chief Statisticians are the equivalent in the devolved administrations.

III. Relationships with non-official statistics

9. The Act and subsequent secondary legislation have radically altered the size of the UK statistical system by generating an expansion in both the number of public bodies and the number of public servants now deemed to be producers of official statistics. The system now extends to all Crown Bodies which produce statistics and those Non-Crown Bodies specified in secondary legislation. Moreover, the concept of official statistics embraces a wider spectrum of quantitative products than those managed by professional analysts.

10. Both Crown and Non-Crown bodies engage with the UK Statistical System via the Head of Profession (HoP) or Chief Statistician in their sponsor government department. A HoP is expected to provide advice, guidance and support to a nominated 'Lead Official' for statistics in these bodies. Each Lead Official is responsible within their organisation for the production of statistics and for compliance with the Code.

IV. The key challenges

11. The UK statistical system has evolved into one which now recognises in legislation official statistics as a public good and gives a mandate to the Authority to safeguard the production and publication of official statistics in accordance with a Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

12. There are many strategic challenges facing the development of official statistics across the world including:

- (a) Changing political philosophy, institutions and structures;
- (b) Misuse/misunderstanding of official statistics;

- (d) Growing demand for official statistics and detailed statistical data and datasets;
 - (e) Utilising technology and partnership to capture, link and disseminate information in new ways;
 - (f) Competition from external producers of statistics; open data initiatives;
 - (g) Resources for the production of official statistics;
 - (h) Enhancing the statistical narrative and context;
 - (i) Consistency and coherence across a decentralised system;
 - (j) Declining numbers of senior statisticians;
 - (k) New data sources and new methods;
 - (l) Declining survey response rates.
13. This paper discusses the top five of these challenges which particularly resonate in the UK.

A. Changing political philosophy, institutions and structures - the impact of Independence

14. Creating a legal framework for statistics in the UK has certainly strengthened the perceived independence of statistics. This is particularly the case where public interventions by the Chair of the Authority have demonstrated that even those in the most senior political positions can be challenged where there is a risk of misleading the public. For example, following an abuse of knife crime statistics by a UK Government Minister and a public intervention by Authority, the Head of the UK Government's Civil Service wrote to all civil servants to draw their attention to the importance of complying with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

15. The coming into force of the Act has not been accompanied by increased allocation of resources by departments for statistics. Indeed, the recession in the UK in recent years and its impact on funding the public sector has forced government departments to review their statistical portfolios with users in order to improve efficiency and reduce costs.

16. However, senior statisticians working in policy departments across government may not always be valued as much as some other departmental professionals and there has been a net loss of senior statistical posts over the last 20 years in the UK. This is almost certainly associated with the growth in the production of statistics from administrative sources and an assumption that little statistical expertise is needed to beyond acting as the foundation for policy development and monitoring.

17. Key issues:

- (a) Publicly challenging/responding to the misuse of official statistics;
- (b) Building the reputation and impact of statisticians;
- (c) Capability development of statisticians.

B. Misuse/misunderstanding of official statistics - the importance of trust

18. The Authority is pursuing a strategy of building trust in the statistical service by pressing for open and clear explanation of the strengths and weaknesses of statistics in relation to their likely uses. This requires a much fuller understanding of the main uses of

sets of statistics and is a real challenge to the existing culture of the service. However, trust in official statistics is closely related with public sentiment toward, for example, parliament, politicians, government or other administering bodies rather just the statistics themselves. For example, trust in Crime Statistics, regardless of the producer, could too readily be associated with trust in the police.

19. The Authority has also focussed on that which can be more readily controlled and measured i.e. the trustworthiness of statistics; their quality and explanation etc. Such traits are monitored via the comprehensive programme of assessment of National Statistics conducted by the Authority's Head of Assessment, who is fully independent of all producers of statistics including the ONS and the National Statistician, and who reports to the Chair and non-executive members of the Authority's Board.

20. Key issues:

- (a) Clarity of explanation and context of statistical releases;
- (b) Recognising the difference between trust and trustworthiness;
- (c) Public scrutiny as part of a long term strategy to build trust.

C. Growing demand for official statistics and detailed statistical data and datasets - shaping stakeholders' thinking

21. The most effective way to influence stakeholders is to convince them that you are addressing their interests and concerns. Across the UK's statistical system it is necessary to get much closer to the leading opinion formers and in the context of shaping policy, there is a particular responsibility on the Authority and ONS to do this. It is a challenge to know how best to do so.

Key issues:

- (a) Understanding users and uses;
- (b) Building relationships with opinion formers.

D. Utilising technology and partnership to capture, link and disseminate information in new ways - Privacy and Utility

22. On the matter of protecting privacy versus maintaining data utility there has been a public debate in recent years, particularly as a result of the present UK Government's push for Open Data and a public Right to Data. Academics have also been invited to assess the balance of risk to privacy, particularly through "jigsaw identification" (i.e. the potential identification of individuals by cross-referencing and deduction). In the UK, the ONS through its work on disclosure control is well placed to lead work on privacy protection and, as part of the National Statistician's response to the recent 'Making Open Data Real' consultation, it has offered to take a lead. Other initiatives in the UK, such as the evolution of the microdata lab for approved researchers (now available online via the Secure Data Service) are helping to open up data whilst maintaining tight control of sensitive information.

23. Key issues:

- (a) A broader role for statisticians on disclosure control;
- (b) Opening up data and datasets in a controlled way;
- (c) Embedding a culture of "how can I release" rather than "why shouldn't I".

**E. Competition from external producers of statistics; open data initiatives
- Data Growth**

24. The growth of data from other sources, including competition from major players such as Google - who are able to produce their own estimates of inflation based on online sales - does present challenge in terms of positioning and media handling. What is clear, however, is that whilst open data has already enabled a degree of private innovation in the explanation and visualisation of data, the private sector cannot guarantee longevity and consistency. There have already been examples, e.g. in the area of education statistics, where innovative private presentation has ceased after only a year because of a lack of funding.

25. There remains a need to embrace external data and to work increasingly in collaboration and partnership with others. This will ensure the avoidance of central official effort where others might be better placed, whilst continuing to ensure sound and continuous production of key economic and social statistics for the UK's public good.

26. Key issues:

- (a) Embracing the opportunity of competition, collaboration and partnering;
- (b) Preserving longevity and consistency of key series.

Annex I

Code of practice

1. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 requires the UK Statistics Authority to:
 - (a) Prepare, adopt and publish a Code of Practice for Statistics;
 - (b) Re-assess against the Code all existing National Statistics designated, and
 - (c) Assess against the Code any official statistics not currently designated as National Statistics that are proposed by Ministers as candidate National Statistics.
2. Only official statistics that are assessed as compliant with the Code are designated as National Statistics. The Code builds on, and supersedes, the former National Statistics Code of Practice.
3. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 created the UK Statistics Authority and empowered it to determine, and assess compliance with a Code of Practice for Official Statistics. In a highly decentralised statistical service like the UK's, the Code serves to establish common standards and, by so doing, helps to ensure a coherent and trustworthy service to users of statistics.
4. The first edition of the Code was published in January 2009. It established a cornerstone of the new statutory framework. Compliance with the Code allows official figures and statistical publications to carry the National Statistics designation. That label is recognised as a stamp of assurance that statistics have been produced and explained to high standards and that they serve the public good.
5. The Code applies to all UK bodies that are responsible for official statistics. Compliance with the Code is a statutory requirement on bodies that produce statistics that have already been designated as National Statistics.

Annex II

Assessment and designation as National Statistics

1. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics. Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the Code of Practice. The Code is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.
 2. Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the Code requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.
 3. Assessment Reports do not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, the Reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable. Assessment Reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment Reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the Code, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the Code requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".
 4. The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the Code's requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the Code. The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:
 - (a) Factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
 - (b) The views of users who are contact, or who contact the Authority, and;
 - (c) Their own review activity.
 5. If further information comes to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment Report and revise it as necessary.
 6. It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the Code of Practice.
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