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International construction of indicators raises concern – Spotlights and smokescreens?

Heinrich Brünger, Director of the Statistical Division of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, is concerned about growing construction of indicators. In his view, users of statistics find it increasingly harder to know when it is a question of indicators based on official statistics, when of other matters. At best, official indicators are spotlights shedding light on the state of things, while unofficial ones are at worse smokescreens meant to obscure things. Heinrich Brünger spoke in the opening session of the Nordic Statistical Conference held in Turku on 18 to 21 August.

Individual statistical data or various combinations made from them are known as indicators that are believed to condense the flood of information into summary information or its most essential parts. Indicators based on official statistics are such as gross domestic product or life expectancy. Other types of indicators are popular indicators for competitiveness and integrity, for instance.

Brünger is worried that the role of professional statisticians has become indeterminate and blurred because many others are also eager to produce indicators. The UNECE principles of official statistics get easily forgotten in indicator work. They are timeliness and appropriateness (relevance) of data, equal and simultaneous access of data to all users, professional independence and impartiality of statistics production (which extends to the definition of indicators and the terminology used), transparency of data content, minimising the burden for respondents, coordination of statistics production, and the right and duty of statistical producers to react against erroneous interpretations and misuse.

Particular causes for concern are some of the indicator sets visibly published by various international organisations for monitoring the attainment of political objectives. These have been issued in numerous summits by the UN and EU, for example. Decisions about the indicators have been made at the political level, without consulting statistical producers on the validity and feasibility of the indicators, and without ensuring impartiality in the terminology. The division of work between policy-makers and statistical producers that was followed in these examples is not in line with the above principles.

Brünger puts forward that professional producers of statistics must pull themselves together in indicator work, and claim back some of the functions that is their prerogative under the principles of official statistics. On the other hand, statistical producers have to provide tailor-made services for ministries and government agencies, which includes the compilation of user-defined indicators. The most important element is to make a clear distinction in the dissemination of the two types of indicators in such a way that those indicators that are produced with full respect of the principles of official statistics receive a clear status of spotlight indicators for general purposes with high visibility. On the other hand, the limited responsibility of statistical producers when disseminating user-defined indicators that deviate from the spotlight indicators has to be clearly indicated. Otherwise users of data – ordinary citizens, the media, experts and

politicians – may get misled and smokescreened if the nature of indicators, and the respective responsibilities, are not spelt out clearly, says Brüngger.

The 23rd Nordic Statistical Conference is held in Turku on 18 to 21 August 2004. The topic of the conference is knowledge for the future and it has over 300 participants from the Nordic and Baltic Countries.

Further information: www.stat.fi/abo2004/foredrag/brungger.pdf ,
<http://www.stat.fi/abo2004/index.html>

UNECE Fundamental principles of official statistics:

1. Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honor citizens' entitlement to public information.
2. To retain trust in official statistics, the statistical agencies need to decide according to strictly professional considerations, including scientific principles and professional ethics, on the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data.
3. To facilitate a correct interpretation of the data, the statistical agencies are to present information according to scientific standards on the sources, methods and procedures of the statistics
4. The statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics.
5. Data for statistical purposes may be drawn from all types of sources, be they statistical surveys or administrative records. Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents.
6. Individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes.
7. The laws, regulations and measures under which the statistical systems operate are to be made public.
8. Coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.
9. The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts, classifications and methods promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels.
10. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.

Source: <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/e/1992/32.e.pdf>