

Opening address for the Workshop on Effective Use of Statistics in Policy Making

Dear participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the very beginning of official statistics there was a need to know the state of the society, to inform policy makers and allow them to take informed decisions. Statistical operations, such as censuses, are thousands of years old, and we can read about them in Holy books. If it is so, why do we still talk about the use of statistics in policy making, why do we still maintain the never ending dialogue between producers and users of official statistics?

Many activities and initiatives in this direction occurred in connection with monitoring progress towards internationally agreed development goals spelled out in the Millennium Declaration of the United Nations. Many tools and approaches were developed along with frameworks for development indicators in this context. The Millennium Declaration brought definitely new impulses, but we have to recognise that statistics was already used in the context of informed decision making.

The society is changing, the pulse of our lives is increasing and the needs for information and evidence gets new dimensions. Policy makers need the data that are more precise, more specific, more timely, more frequent, and generally they need more of data. So the issue is not whether the statistics is being used for policy making, but whether we produce the statistics adequate to the needs of policy makers.

When we design new statistical studies, when we want to implement new statistical surveys, we can take inspiration in numerous international standards and in experiences of other countries. However, here I would like to raise a warning. Our role is not to replicate others. Our role is not to produce statistics, because someone recommended it. Our role is to produce statistics that our users need, and there we shall begin.

Therefore, at the national level we shall begin with policy areas of priority to national governments, the main policy related issues that need to be addressed at the national level, the facts that the national policy makers need to know. We have to translate these needs into statistical indicators – indicators needed to monitor policies, indicators needed to answer questions by policy makers, indicators that are needed at the specific time, in a specific country. Then we will be successful.

From the viewpoint of a statistician, I do see an interest among policy makers, and therefore, we have to learn how to bring relevant data to them. On the other hand, I see also a need to accompany policy makers in interpreting and explaining statistics, as well as seeking their feedback, following evolution of policies designing new indicators for new policy needs. This is a never ending process, a perpetual need for a dialogue – a dialogue where policy makers try to explain their concerns and needs, and statisticians explain their abilities and possibilities.

I believe that official statistics will still keep its role in supporting policy making at various levels from the municipality, through governorates to countries, regions to global policies. Allow me now to approach policy makers and explain why from all possible sources of information they should use official statistics.

Statistics does not become official because of a mandate. A modern definition says that official statistics is being developed in the framework of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Official statistics follow the fundamental values that are impartiality, relevance, reliability and high quality

standards. Many non-governmental and private sources produce statistics, however, the official statistics guarantees through its ethical principles and professional independence a focus on the public good. As a public service official statistics maintains its independence guaranteed by the law. Data emanating from official statistics are well documented and based purely on scientific methods. The process of production of official statistics is transparent, and all sources are verifiable.

Now I would like to approach statisticians, and spend few words about the focus on policy needs. Statistics is a beautiful science, and there are many recommendations and guidelines available internationally. However, the role of national statisticians is to serve the needs of their countries first. Therefore, design of statistical operations undertaken by national statistical offices and other national producers of statistics should focus on the particular needs of their countries, of people in their countries. Therefore, design of official statistics at the national level always begins from the policy requirements. It is true that we, at international organizations, are interested in internationally comparable data. It is also true that your national policy makers may be interested in comparing their country with others. However, the national and local policy priorities will still be the main focus.

This may, inevitably, cause that data used at the national and international levels will be different. Such difference and variation in data may be well legitimate, due to methodological differences. Methods applied at the national level focus on national policies, while methods used at the international level serve primarily international comparisons. Such different methods often result in a different numerical value. The data should be used for the purpose for which they were compiled. All these data still form official statistics. The term official statistics is not about a single and only valid figure. The term official statistics is about the ethical and professional principles that bring always the most relevant and reliable statistical information within a given policy context.

The subject of effective use of statistics in policy making is a complex one. Therefore, our aim is to bring together good practices and ideas on how official statistics can be a better tool and source of information for informed policy makings. Conclusions of this workshop will be discussed at a seminar session that will form a part of the 10th session of the Statistical Committee of ESCWA in December. The Committee composed of heads of national statistical offices will aim at a common framework taking into account good practices and experiences.

The work that you undertake in these three days is very important, there are high expectations on the output of our work. Allow me to wish you a successful workshop. Let this workshop be an example of a constructive and fruitful dialogue between producers and users of official statistics for informed policy making. I hope that contacts established in this group will continue in the future work, and in particular that you would accompany us through stages of preparing guidelines and recommendations in for effective use of statistics in policy making.

I wish you also that you have time to experience traditional Jordanian hospitality and that you will use also the time here for establishing informal contacts with colleagues from other offices.

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