

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Editorial

This Special Issue, titled “Methodological Issues for the Enhancement of Official Statistics,” is the first of two volumes of the IJAS devoted to official statistics. Both issues aim to contribute to the international scientific dialogue on the enhancement of statistical methodologies and analyses to address the new challenges faced by official statistics. In today’s world, we are deluged by data because of the ease with which individual information is captured in digital form and linked to Internet. This data deluge has led many to believe that society no longer needs invest in traditional official statistics tools, such as censuses and surveys, because data can be captured and processed more cheaply in other ways. However, democratic societies do not operate properly without a solid base of reliable and objective statistics, and while traditional methods may need to be updated and improved upon, the electronic data deluge does not necessarily render them obsolete. Modern official statistics focus on the collection and reporting of high-quality information on economic and social issues that is carried out in a fully scientific, transparent and objective fashion (see, for example, Eurostat, 2011 European Statistics Code of Practice). Data and analyses are typically made available at the international, national and local levels for public decision-making purposes and provide an accurate picture of contemporary society.

Official statistics are a public good and serve as a fundamental resource for democracy. In addition, they satisfy the needs of policy makers and of public opinion. Official statistics have specific technical and legislative characteristics at each stage of the data production cycle—from data design to data processing techniques—that ensure the reliability and robustness of information and provide quality indicators for the disseminated data. Thus, public confidence in official statistics is crucial to strengthen the role of statistics in a community. The importance of this public trust is mentioned in Principle 2 of the important ethical code of official statistics, the Resolution on Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (UN, 2014 A/RES/68/261). This Resolution was originally adopted by the European Statistical Commission in April 1994 and was more recently endorsed by the UN General Assembly.

In our rapidly changing globalised and digitised world, new phenomena and

emerging problems call for the innovation and refinement of official statistics instruments so that they continue to adequately capture societal changes. These innovations include the development of new sources of information, the exploitation of new technology (especially the use of the Internet) for data collection and dissemination, and the widening of access to detailed data while still protecting respondents' confidentiality.

Innovation leads to more knowledge to drive the technological processes forward, and, inevitably, increased knowledge corresponds to increased research activity. This was one of the main reasons behind the creation of the Standing Group for the Enhancement of Official Statistics of the Italian Statistical Society (SIS-VSP) in 2006. Italy recognized the need to create a scientific group (comprised of both academics and researchers at Istat, the National Statistical Institute, as well as other public administration statisticians) to exchange experiences and promote research directed toward the enhancement of official statistics.

SIS-VSP has organised two workshops at the European University of Rome to serve as opportunities for discussion among analysts and researchers on new developments in the production, processing and dissemination of public statistics. The first workshop, titled 'Enhancement and social responsibility of public statistics. Principles, techniques and applications', was held on April 28, 2011, and addressed the issues of normative aspects and principles and characteristics of official statistics (i.e., traceability, transparency of data and metadata), as well as the increasing knowledge and policy requirements and public opinion. More traditional topics were also discussed, including data capture, methods for the analysis of administrative archives and survey data, technological innovation and data dissemination. In the second workshop, held on April 19-20, 2012, and titled 'Making decisions: The role of statistics for knowledge development and the governance', participants dealt with topics such as measuring equitable and sustainable well-being, social cohesion, information for labour market and human capital policies, competitiveness and development of firms, statistical methods for the utilisation of administrative archives and for the evaluation of public policies, government data, open data and confidentiality, statistical information and social media.

SIS-VSP then issued an international call for papers on the topics of these workshops to be published in two special issues of the Italian Journal of Applied Statistics. The purpose of this was to widen the dialogue on official statistics at the international level.

This call for papers was also a special opportunity for the Standing Group to celebrate a distinguished scholar, Professor Luigi Biggeri, who has devoted much

of his career to the development of official statistics both within Italy and internationally. He has dedicated much time and effort to promoting the culture of statistics, and his accomplishments have been recognized with the ‘Adolphe Quetelet’ gold medal from the International Statistical Institute (1993), fellowships from the American Statistical Association (1994) and the Royal Statistical Society (2005) and an appointment in 2009 as a member of the Technical Advisory Committee of the International Comparison Program at the World Bank. He was also a member (1993-1996) and later President (1996-1999) of the Italian Commission for the Guarantee of Statistical Information. During this period, Italy assumed the Presidency of the European Union Council of Ministers, and Biggeri took this opportunity to highlight the importance of controlling the quality of official statistics. In 2001, he was appointed President of Istat and served with distinction in that role. Throughout his career, Biggeri has striven to increase the awareness of decision makers and citizens of the important role that statistics play in a democratic country.

SIS-VSP is taking the occasion of the publication of these special issues to recognise these accomplishments and to indicate the extent to which Italian scholars are following the path he has created.

The results of the call constitute a collection of papers on theoretical, methodological and applied issues in the field of official statistics. These papers represent a first step towards charting future directions for the field that lies at the intersection of interests of academic as well as official statistics scholars.

In this volume, the first two papers deal with some aspects of sampling, while the next refers to data collection techniques. The last two are devoted to data quality problems.

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