

The National Council for Statistical Information (CNIS)

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The main mission of France's National Council for Statistical Information (Conseil National de l'Information Statistique: CNIS) is to provide a forum for consultations between producers and users of official statistics. It identifies new requirements in a forward-looking perspective. The Council's Executive Committee, Plenary Session, Task Forces, and other units are organized in such a way as to promote expression of social demand on issues regarding official statistics. In the same spirit, CNIS helps to ensure the annual preparation of a program of operations and surveys that will reflect the need for political, economic, and social actors to continuously improve their understanding of French society.

The Economic Modernization Act of August 4, 2008, and its Implementation Decree of March 20, 2009, reasserted the original missions of the National Council for Statistical Information (Conseil National de l'Information Statistique: CNIS) (box 1) and entrusted it with a new one. The Council paves the way for statistical operations by organizing a dialogue between users and producers, and by identifying the demands of civil society in regard to official statistics. On this basis, the official statistical service (Service Statistique Public: SSP)—i.e., INSEE and the ministerial statistical offices (Services Statistiques Ministériels: SSMs)—finalizes and implements its work program. One of the missions of the Official Statistical Authority (Autorité de la Statistique Publique: ASP [see separate document]) is to assess the implementation of the work program with reference to the European Statistics Code of Practice. The ASP also ensures that the program is relevant to the demands that have been voiced. For this purpose, the Authority relies on the CNIS Chairperson's detailed annual report to the ASP on work-program implementation.

Box 1 – A brief history

Ever since its inception, the French official statistical service has sought to engage in dialogue with civil society. The 1951 Act, the keystone of France's official statistical system, had already made provisions to ensure that the system's legitimacy would rest on its acceptance by civil society. That same year, the Act established a Statistical Survey Coordination Committee to organize consultations on the program of compulsory surveys. The goal was to make sure that the entities surveyed—especially businesses—would regard the information requested as sufficiently useful to warrant a response. Several other bodies were set up in later years to gradually enlarge the scope of the dialogue to organizations in need of official statistics. This process culminated in 1984 with the establishment of the National Council for Statistical Information (Conseil National de l'Information Statistique: CNIS), tasked with organizing permanent consultations between users and producers of official statistics. The establishment of the Quality-Label Committee in 1997, whose terms of reference were specified in 2005, added a final component to the consultative system by ensuring the statistical quality of every survey. Most recently, the Economic Modernization Act (LME) of August 4, 2008, reformed official-statistics governance and set up a tripartite organization consisting of the Official Statistical Authority (ASP), CNIS, and the official statistical service (SSP). In so doing, it spelled out the missions of CNIS and reasserted its role.

The Council's new mission is to prepare this assessment. The review allows CNIS to measure the gap between user demands and the information actually developed, produced, and disseminated by the SSP. If the Council concludes that the gap is too wide, the CNIS Chairperson has the opportunity to inform the Authority at the annual hearing called for in the Act. It will be incumbent upon INSEE's Director-General to respond on behalf of the SSP. This mechanism completes the new tripartite governance of official statistics (CNIS, ASP, and SSP).

By reorganizing French official statistics, the 2008 Act and 2009 Decree have also led to changes in CNIS operating procedures.

First, the CNIS Chairperson is no longer the Economy Minister, but a member of the CNIS Executive Committee nominated by the latter and appointed by the Minister. The fact that the Council is headed by a "full-fledged" Chairperson enhances its visibility. As a duly elected chief executive, the Chairperson can more easily introduce proposals and give wider publicity to the Council's work.

Second, the Council's membership has been refocused exclusively on users. CNIS meets at least once a year

* Chairman of the National Council for Statistical Information (CNIS). This article was originally published as "Le Conseil national de l'information statistique," *Courrier des statistiques* no. 128, Sept.-Dec 2009, pp. 9-13.

in Plenary Session. It formerly comprised about one hundred and forty members; today there are forty-four, representing the economic sector, social partners (employers' and employees' organizations), members of Parliament, local government, and non-profit groups. The Plenary Session ratifies the opinions prepared by the Task Forces and the list of surveys proposed for the following year.

Conversely, the CNIS Executive Committee has been expanded to seventeen members: INSEE's Director-General, the President of the Bank of France, a representative from each of the labor unions, trade organizations, and chambers of commerce represented at CNIS, a representative of local government, and two qualified persons appointed by the Economy Minister. The 2009 Decree also added a representative from the academic community and one from the French Banking Federation (FBF). The Committee draws up the Plenary-Session agenda and examines the reports prepared by the Task Forces and Working Groups.

CNIS, a consultative body

The foremost objective of CNIS is to identify new information needs and users' concerns. Does a labor union want a more refined measurement of comparative changes in income? Is an employers' organization seeking to reduce the survey response burden for businesses? Does a research center want access to a survey microdata file? CNIS offers a forum for engaging the official statistical service on the issue of potential gaps in the observation of economic and social phenomena, suggesting new avenues of investigation, or asking for a reappraisal of a particular guideline or procedure.

CNIS is also a place where controversial issues can be discussed in a dispassionate setting. In recent years, for instance, it has initiated in-depth reviews of the measurement of the unemployment rate and of changes in purchasing power—two issues that had sparked bitter controversy at the time. In the same spirit, the Council has launched investigations that have produced major advances regarding inequality and exclusion indicators, the measurement of precariousness, and the effects of economic globalization.

CNIS helps to prepare the official-statistics program for the following year. It examines every new proposal, including surveys, censuses, panel studies, or analyses of data from administrative sources. Projects are submitted by INSEE and the ministerial statistical offices, but also by all the institutions whose work contributes to the development of official statistics: the National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), the Center for Research on Education, Training, and Employment (CEREQ), and INSERM (National Institute for Health and Medical Research). The review centers on the goals of the operation, its place in the information system, and its planned dissemination. Each project must serve the public interest and not duplicate existing information sources. In other words, its usefulness must be established. Next, the Council's Quality-Label Committee ensures that the operation meets statistical quality criteria (box 2).

Box 2 – How CNIS reviews a survey proposal

To prepare the program of official statistical surveys, each producer entity submits its survey plans to CNIS. For a national survey to be included in the annual program proposed by CNIS and be covered by legal provisions on statistical confidentiality, it must receive CNIS approval in two stages:

- First, the relevant Task Force meets to assess the project's usefulness. If the discussion yields an agreement, the Task Force Chairperson issues a "usefulness opinion" (*avis d'opportunité*). Statistical surveys proposed at regional level are examined by a consultative group comprising the main governmental, economic, and social players concerned in the region. The group may consist of the Regional Committee for Economic and Social Information (Comité Régional pour l'Information Économique et Sociale: CRIES)—if one exists—or an *ad hoc* commission convened by the Director of the INSEE Regional Office. The commission's membership may vary according to the survey topic.
- Second, the Quality-Label Committee assesses the proposal's quality. The Committee comprises four divisions respectively devoted to businesses, households, agriculture, and local government. Each division comprises representatives of the entities or government bodies most directly concerned. The Committee evaluates the implementation procedures envisaged by the surveying entity. In particular, it reviews such aspects as the proper application of rules on sampling methods, the response burden, dissemination of results, explanations provided to individual respondents, prior consultation with the main survey users, and so on. It also ensures that the proposal complies with the terms of the "usefulness opinion." If the Committee's findings are positive, it issues a "public interest and statistical quality" label, also called "quality certificate" (*avis de conformité*). At the surveying entity's request, the Committee may propose that the survey should be compulsory. In light of these findings, the Economy Minister issues an approval and can decide to make the survey compulsory. Every year, the Minister signs a decision (*arrêté*), published in the *Journal officiel* (the government publication of record), listing the surveys to be conducted in the following year and specifying which ones will be compulsory.

This process is conducted with the greatest possible transparency. All CNIS documents are available on the

Council website www.cnis.fr. They include reports, minutes of meetings, survey programs, the newsletter *Chroniques du Cnis*, and other material.

Since 2009, CNIS has also been preparing an assessment report on the implementation by SSP members of their work program and of the Council's own recommendations. The Council is particularly committed to ensuring a wide dissemination of official statistical surveys.

Preparing the 2009-2013 medium-term program

Every five years, CNIS conducts a forward-looking analysis of medium-term needs and desirable changes in the information system within that time frame. The exercise yields recommendations on guidelines for the five-year programming of statistical work and surveys. Planning for the 2009-2013 medium-term program lasted throughout 2008, coinciding with the implementation of the new governance system for official statistics. The exercise relied on the assessment of the previous medium-term program and on a comparison between the objectives chosen by the Plenary Session for that period and the objectives reached at the end of the five years.

Relative to the 2004-2008 medium-term guidelines, CNIS found that the official statistical service had, by and large, made progress in describing the labor market and inequalities, and in improving price observation. The assessment¹ also highlighted the advances in offering free online access to statistical data and in microdata use by researchers. The Council emphasized the numerous heavy investments made during the period, such as the new population census and the reorganization of business statistics. The assessment concluded that the SSP should now concentrate on leveraging these investments to improve its response to users.

On the basis of these findings, CNIS organized a series of meetings offering extensive outreach to economic and social players:

- First, outreach toward local players: one meeting focused on the needs of the governing councils (*conseils généraux*) of the *départements* for statistics to help them oversee the social policies for which they are increasingly responsible; another meeting was devoted to territorial units in the context of globalization and changing lifestyles.
- A second meeting examined the medium-term outlook for monetary and financial statistics.
- A final meeting was dedicated to sustainable development, in the wake of the national forum on environmental issues called "Grenelle de l'Environnement."

The very high attendance at these events revealed the growing information needs of official-statistics users. It showed that the official statistical service must be more responsive to the fast-changing economic and social environment, and must communicate more effectively. The gap is widening between the public's subjective perception of economic and social phenomena and the objective measurement of the phenomena by the SSP. This divergence is routinely noted by officials and labor leaders across the political spectrum. The most significant debate in this respect concerns purchasing power, but one could also mention other issues such as unemployment and "ethnic" statistics.

CNIS Executive Committee members questioned about the previous medium-term assessment stressed the fruitfulness of discussions on the programs prepared by statistics producers and the quality of the work performed by the CNIS units operating under its supervision. The members did note, however, that in certain areas such as sustainable development and the financial crisis, the Council had not always successfully predicted the questions that would be asked of the official statistical service.

In consequence, the Executive Committee decided to review its procedures for dialogue with users so as to gain a better perception of their new questions, convey them to the producers of official statistics, and thus initiate a forward-looking analysis of statistical-information needs.

Expanding consultations in the Task Forces (*commissions thématiques*)

Continuing exchanges between users and producers at CNIS were formerly conducted in fourteen specialized divisions called *formations*², whose organization was patterned on that of the official statistical service. This

¹ "Bilan de la période de moyen terme 2004-2008 pour la statistique publique," *Chroniques du Cnis* no. 10, September 2009.

² Eleven divisions were devoted to specific fields: Agriculture; Wholesale/retail trade and services; Demography and living conditions; Employment and earned income; Environment; Education and training; Manufacturing, food industries, and energy; Money, finance, and balance of payments; Health and social protection; Transportation and tourism; Urban planning, infrastructure, and housing. Three other divisions were cross-sectional: Social statistics; Business statistics; Regional and local statistics.

arrangement tended to foster technical discussions that sometimes made it hard for users to participate and express their needs clearly. The new system introduced in 2009 seeks a more horizontal approach centered on the major themes of the social debate rather than on the segmentation of SSP production. The fourteen divisions have been replaced by seven Task Forces (*commissions thématiques*) devoted to the current issues in the economic and social debate. Each Task Force has adopted the broad guidelines defined by CNIS in its 2009-2013 medium-term program.

“Demography and social issues” (Chairwoman: Claire Bazy-Malaurie, General Rapporteur and President of the Chamber of the Court of Auditors)

This Task Force is dedicated to the observation of the income, assets, and purchasing power of population groups as well as their living conditions. Special attention is paid to inequalities, following up on the recommendations of the Freyssinet Report³. Two aspects emphasized in the current medium-term program are the system for observing access to housing and the health status of the French population. Grouping all of these themes in the same Task Force should make it possible to grasp the full complexity of today’s fast-paced social changes.

“Employment, skills, and earned income” (Chairman: Raoul Briet, Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Pension Reserve Fund)

This Task Force is dedicated to the observation and measurement of the growing “halo” between employment and unemployment, consistently with the recommendations of the report prepared under the chairmanship of Jean-Baptiste de Foucauld⁴. The group participates in the drafting of requests for information on life-long training and on the measurement of occupational skills. Another of its concerns is the impact of working conditions on health, particularly as regards the observation of stress at work, following up on the recommendations of the Nasse-Légeron Report⁵.

“Businesses and market strategies” (Chairman: Lionel Fontagné, Professor at the Paris School of Economics)

This Task Force addresses topics relating to globalization and the characteristics of business firms. Employers’ organizations, trade associations, and economists believe that the presentation of statistical information by activity sector has lost relevance. Accordingly, CNIS has replaced its previous consultative arrangements by sector with an analysis of the production system as a whole. The Task Force has two missions: (1) to promote a better understanding of globalization by expanding our knowledge of enterprise groups as recommended in the Salustro Report⁶ and of trade between their affiliates, particularly at international level; (2) to improve the observation of small and medium-sized enterprises.

“Environment and sustainable development” (Chairman: Guy Paillotin, Perpetual Secretary of the Academy of Agriculture)

This Task Force deals with the environmental “pillar” of sustainable development and its interface with the economic and social pillars. Discussions should concentrate on the indicators for the national strategy of sustainable development and on the study of aggregates designed to complement a GDP-based approach to growth, in the wake of the Stiglitz-Sen Report. The importance of environmental stakes in economic activity should also be better measured.

“Public services and services to the public” (Chairman: Pierre-Yves Geoffard, Senior Researcher, French National Center for Scientific Research [CNRS])

This Task Force has adopted a broad-based approach to the examination of “public administration” functions, i.e., all contributions to the public service, whether from public- or private-sector operators. The new Task Force covers defense, security, justice, initial education, the healthcare system, and healthcare access. It also tracks the impact on the official statistical service of the constitutional reform requiring impact studies for all new draft legislation.

³ Niveau de vie et inégalités sociales, Rapport du Cnis no. 103, February 2007.

⁴ Emploi, chômage et précarité – mieux mesurer pour mieux débattre et mieux agir, Rapport du Cnis no. 108, January 2008. English version: Employment, unemployment, and precariousness: Better measurement for better discussion and better action, Rapport du Cnis no. 114, September 2008: http://www.cnis.fr/cms/Accueil/publications/Les_rapports_du_Cnis?publication=82575.

⁵ *Rapport sur la détermination, la mesure et le suivi des risques psycho-sociaux au travail* presented to the Minister of Labor, Social Relations, and Solidarity on March 12, 2008.

⁶ Statistiques structurelles sur les groupes d’entreprises et leurs sous-groupes, Rapport du Cnis no. 107, January 2008. English version: Structural statistics based on enterprise groups and subgroups, Rapport du Cnis no. 111, September 2008: http://www.cnis.fr/cms/Accueil/publications/Les_rapports_du_Cnis?publication=82581.

“Financial system and financing of the economy” (Chairman: Jean-Paul Pollin, University Professor)

This Task Force describes the financial sector of the economy and the financing methods of non-financial agents. It examines the non-financial accounts of the financial sector in a national-accounting perspective, as well as the financial accounts of the non-financial sector. The financial crisis has revealed a growing need to reconcile the national accounts with the accounts of financial groups. Access to credit must be better observed not only for small and medium-sized enterprises but also for individuals seeking to re-enter the economy.

“Territorial units” (Chairman: Jean-Marie Vanlerenberghe, Senator-Mayor of Arras)

This Task Force takes into account the “explosion” of local-information needs, including in the overseas *départements* (DOMs). Public policies are now largely implemented by local government units (*collectivités territoriales*). The Task Force must ensure that local players have the statistical tools they need to oversee policies at their geographic level. The same Task Force deals with regional-development issues.

National Population Census Assessment Commission (CNERP) (Chairman: Jean-Claude Frécon, Senator of the Loire)

This commission is the final component of the CNIS consultation system. Since 2004, French municipalities have been responsible for preparing and organizing census surveys. In addition to INSEE statisticians, CNERP members include representatives of local elected officials, local-government employees, and institutions and government bodies that are stakeholders in the census arrangements. The Task Force is in charge of assessing—in cooperation with municipalities—the procedures and arrangements used to collect information in the census.

How the Task Forces work

Each Task Force is chaired by a recognized expert from outside the official statistical service (SSP). The Chairperson is responsible for organizing the widest possible discussion in order to allow an expression of views from civil society, in keeping with the Council’s prime mission. These exchanges center on the points of the SSP work program that have been the subject of debate, with the aim of reaching an opinion on the various topics reviewed. In particular, the Task Force issues “usefulness opinions” (*avis d’opportunité*) on the survey proposals that have been presented to it.

To examine a specific topic in detail and to issue recommendations, the Task-Force Chairperson can also submit a proposal to the CNIS Executive Committee for the establishment of a Working Group. CNIS Working-Group recommendations constitute the road map, so to speak, for statistics producers. For example, the findings of the Freyssinet Working Group⁷ have become the guidelines for producing inequality indicators, while the recommendations of the de Margerie Working Group⁸ should lead to changes in the statistics produced by INSEE and the Bank of France aimed at improving our knowledge of financial groups.

The Task Forces are also the forums where CNIS releases its opinions, which are needed for the communication of data collected by a government body, public institution, or private-sector entity performing a public-interest mission, within the terms of reference of such missions. This is consistent with Article 7bis of the 1951 Act, which specifies that such communications are made at the request of the Economy Minister after CNIS has issued its opinion.

This reorganization of CNIS activities around issues more relevant to user concerns should encourage the active participation of social partners and civil society. Task-Force meetings are open not only to CNIS members but to anyone interested in the subject discussed.

However, to ensure adequate representativeness and facilitate dialogue, it is important to ensure that participants will attend on a fairly regular basis. A discussion on an information system or a definition of indicators remains technical, even if the exchanges focus on participants’ needs. CNIS has therefore organized these meetings in such a way as to foster steady attendance and so guarantee a reasonable continuity in the discussions.

Alongside these theme-based Task Forces, CNIS also includes Committees and Commissions that serve more cross-sectional purposes.

The **Quality-Label Committee** examines survey proposals and certifies their compliance with statistical good practice, after the “usefulness opinions” issues by Task-Force Chairpersons (box 2).

⁷ Niveaux de vie et inégalités sociales, Rapport du Cnis no. 103, February 2007.

⁸ Statistiques structurelles sur les groupes financiers, Rapport du Cnis no. 118, December 2009.

The **Litigation Committee for Compulsory Statistical Surveys** examines refusals of business firms to respond to compulsory statistical surveys.

The **National Commission on Economic and Social Classifications** is responsible for keeping official economic and social classifications up to date. It is consulted with regard to all proposals to modify European and international classifications. It issues opinions on all draft regulations to approve official economic and social classifications.

A final point: the Decree of March 20, 2009, specifies that the **Statistical Confidentiality Committee** is “attached” (*rattaché*) to CNIS. In other words, the Committee does not formally belong to CNIS, but maintains privileged relations with it.