

The utility of data – from a user perspective



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and

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Themes

- To introduce the role of ESAC
- To discuss quality from a user perspective

The European Statistical Advisory Committee



The ESAC - History

- Need for profound reform of role, mandate and composition of CEIES
- November 2006 Commission proposal
- 11 March 2008, Adoption of Decision No 234/2008/EC on the ESAC
- **Inaugural meeting on June 2009**



The ESAC – Mandate

- New Committee shall assist the European Parliament / Council / Commission in ensuring that user requirements and the costs borne by information providers and producers are taken into account in coordinating the strategic objectives and priorities of the Community's statistical information policy



The ESAC – Tasks

OPINION

on Community statistical programme, in particular on its

- relevance to requirements of European integration
- relevance to Community activities
- balance as regards priorities and resources and possibility to re-prioritise statistical work
- adequacy of resources for its implementation and appropriateness to users' needs
- costs and possibilities of reducing response burden

own-initiative opinions/reports on user requirements and costs borne by data providers



The ESAC – Tasks (continued)

ADVICE

- Point out necessary new statistical activities
- Advise the Commission how to improve the relevance of Community statistics to users



Relations with Community institutions/other bodies

At request of the European Parliament/ Council/ Commission, ESAC shall deliver an opinion relating to user requirements and costs incurred by data suppliers in

- development of the Community's statistical information policy
- priorities of the Community statistical programme
- evaluation of existing statistics
- data quality and
- dissemination policy



The ESAC – TOOLS

- Plenary meetings
- Establishment of temporary working parties
- Commission of studies
- Organisation of seminars

For more information:

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/esac/introduction>

The ESAC – Composition

24 members, appointed for 5 years, renewable once:

12 appointed by Commission

- users
- respondents
- other stakeholders

Director-General of ESTAT

11 directly appointed by

- European Parliament
- Council
- Eur. Economic and Social Committee
- Committee of the Regions
- European Central Bank
 - ESSC (2 members)
 - Businessseurope
 - ETUC
 - UEAPME
- Eur. Data Protection Supervisor



challenges

- Different mandates of group
- Emphasis on response burden
- Range of users
- How to connect with users
- Coverage of countries
- Resources, resources, resources
- Deciding where we add value



Adding value

- Principle of subsidiarity (consultation on national statistics better undertaken nationally – but ...)
- Sharing good practice across countries
- Understanding needs for European data
- Influencing European practice



The ESAC → state of play

- Set-up of 3 Temporary Working Parties on
 - “GDP and beyond and Stiglitz-Sen report” ,
 - “Access to confidential data for scientific purposes”
 - “Quality”



European Statistics Code of Practice 2005

PRINCIPLE 11: RELEVANCE

European statistics must meet the needs of users.

- Processes are in place to consult users, monitor the relevance and practical utility of existing statistics in meeting their needs, and advise on their emerging needs and priorities.
- Priority needs are being met and reflected in the work programme.
- User satisfaction surveys are undertaken periodically.

Achieving relevance (to Government) whilst ensuring independence (from Government)

*“The Marriage of Impartiality and
Practical Utility”*

Paper given by Richard Alldritt
and myself at the ISI in Durban,
2009

UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Principle 1

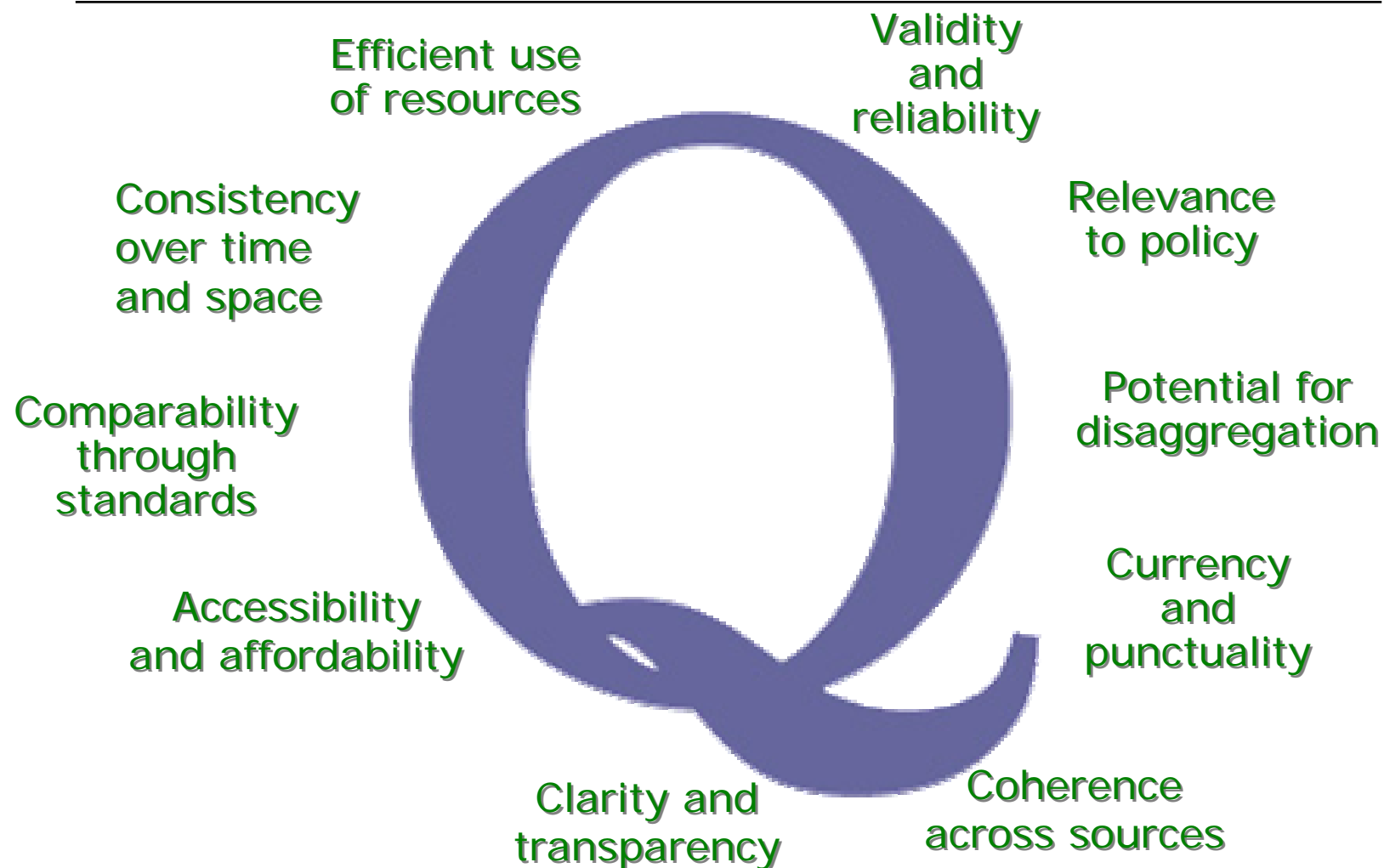
“Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public ... To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies..”



Words: relevance or utility?

- “Relevance” more often used than “utility”, but relevance to what? The wishes of government?
- Better to focus on utility or fitness for purpose

Quality of data





Impartiality

- The role of statisticians:
 - to inform political debate and decisions without taking part
 - to promote the collection and use of statistics for policy purposes
- Fear exists that enhancing statistical utility will compromise impartiality
- Not impartial \Rightarrow lack of trust \Rightarrow low utility



Are we too shy?

- Are statistical offices so afraid of being accused of political motives that they dare not make reports useful?
- Is the only answer to avoid commenting on the relevance of the statistics to public debate?

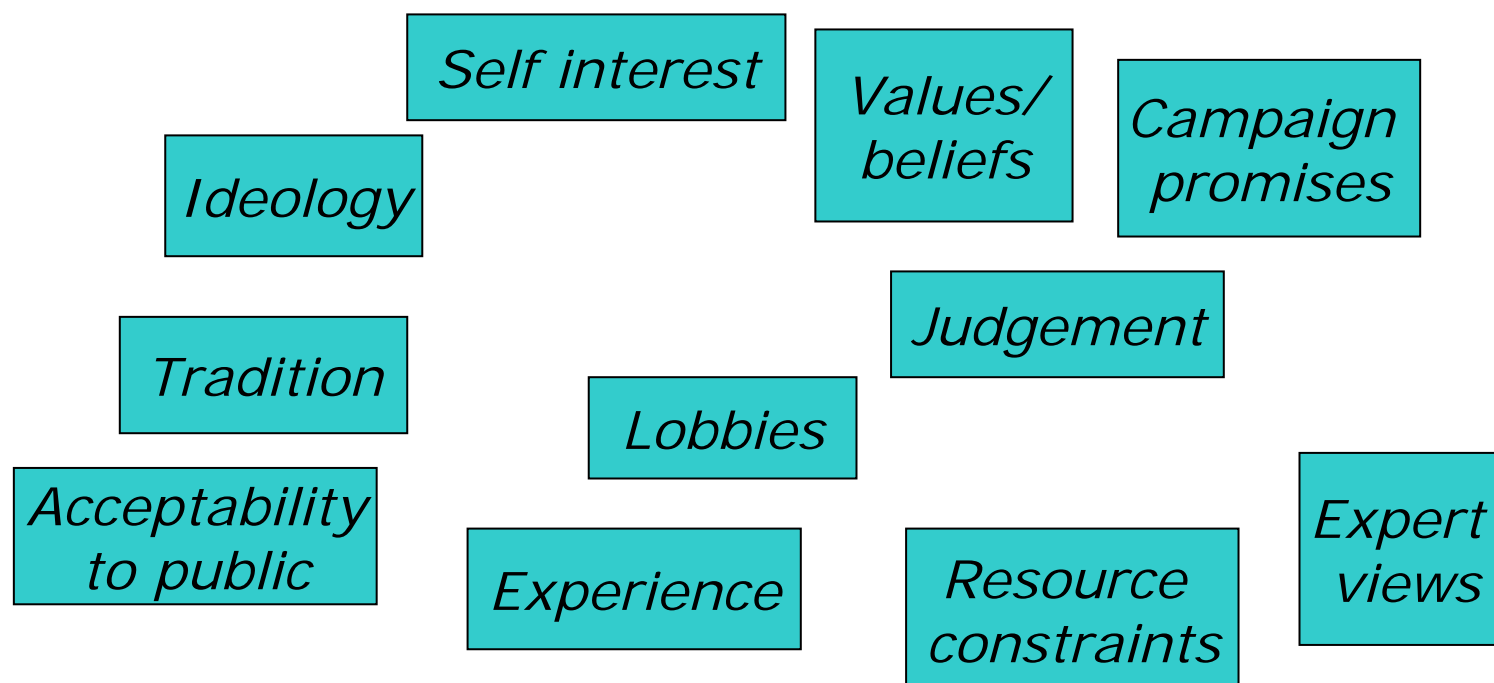


*“Trust comes on foot, but
leaves on horseback.”*


Dutch statesman,
Johan Thorbecke

The policy making process

- *Policy making is the process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions to deliver desired changes in the real world*



All evidence is imperfect



“The absence of excellent evidence does not make evidence-based decision making impossible: what is required is the best evidence available not the best evidence possible”

Muir Gray 1997

“ Evidence rarely provides neat and tidy prescriptions to decision makers as to what they should do. Often it generates more questions to be resolved ”

Petrosino et al 2001



Evidence is sometimes resisted...

" There is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed: for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult. "

John Maynard Keynes



Inconvenient truths

- Governments prefer good news stories
- Bad news stories may be delayed or buried
- They are often too focussed on populism
- The government's horizons can be shorter than those of social researchers!
- They prefer their own spin to the interpretation of the statistician/social researcher

Sir Gus O'Donnell
(UK Cabinet
Secretary)



- "I want [the ONS] to be boring, to put out the plain facts, and nothing but the facts, and on clear, predictable deadlines," he said. It would then be for politicians and government press officers to interpret the figures, he added.



Response of the Royal Statistical Society

- It is clearly the task of official statisticians to interpret the figures in a statistical context, to facilitate understanding and avoid misunderstanding.
- *The Code of Practice* of the UK Statistics Authority explicitly states that Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users and that all UK bodies that are responsible for official statistics should prepare and disseminate commentary and analysis that aid interpretation, and provide factual information about the policy or operational context of official statistics.



Important aspects of building trust

- Autonomy of statistics office
- Statistical legislation
- Existence of an independent statistical board
- Development of codes of conduct
- Breaches of the code identified, investigated and publicised
- Appointment of head of statistics should be removed from the political process
- Statistical processes should be externally audited
- Audit body should report to Parliament



Important aspects of building trust – the statistical environment

- Media educated on the value and quality of statistics
- The public are statistically literate
- Data are made available for open and transparent debate
- Users are involved in setting the agenda for statistics – and are seen to be



Concerned about an over-emphasis on response burden?

- Suppliers who understand the value of data **and who use it** do not see it as a burden
- The value of statistics to society must not just be asserted; it must be demonstrated
- But we understand the reality of the funding environment



Demonstrating the value of statistics to society

“Were a balance sheet for official statistics to be prepared, the costs would be clear enough. The benefit, or value, would however be found to be much more diffuse and harder to treat in traditional accounting terms. Given this, it is possible that the vital asset that official statistics represent is undervalued in public sector planning processes. And we observe that little systematic consideration is given to how the public value could be maximised”.

(UK Statistics Commission, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*, 2007)



Interesting conundrum

Some of the national statistics offices judged to be the 'best' by fellow official statisticians are not viewed this way by users



Why?

- Often the assertion of independence is viewed as arrogance
- Official statisticians should balance professional confidence with humility, a willingness to learn from users and the ability to put oneself in the users' position.
- Determining **fitness for purpose** requires close co-operation between users and producers



Challenges

- Lack of mechanisms to consult users
- Fragmentation of data producers
- Poor understanding of the cost to a country of **not** using data
- Increasing use of administrative data



Value of relationships with

- Data intermediaries
- Expert users
- The professional statistical community



Data intermediaries

- Data archivists, librarians
 - Organise user groups
 - Capture information on data usage
 - Expertise in data supply
 - Metadata standards
 - Can help to produce quality documentation
 - Ensure that the documentation incorporates user expertise



Foster engagement with expert users

- Even more important as there is an increasing pressure on statistical resources
 - Prioritisation must involve discussion with users
 - Expert users can provide methodological expertise
 - Satisfied users help to fight for resources for statistics
 - Partners (user groups, professional societies etc) help to build trust in the statistical system



Professional community of statisticians

- Training and mentoring
- Accreditation and support
- Professional ethics/ codes of conduct
- Training on ethics
- Environment in which people can discuss problems
- Support for statisticians in difficult situations