

CNIS looks ahead to 2023

The National Council for Statistical Information (CNIS) gauges the statistics needs of the wider public and conveys these to producers of official data. Doing this effectively means being able to identify what the public expects in relation to the themes that it considers most important and to pass on demands to data producers, adapted to ensure that needs can be met with available resources.

Work to identify requirements takes place every five years. The latest feedback has just been collected and incorporated within a new medium-term agenda for 2019-2023. Major themes on the CNIS agenda include sustainable development, technological change and regional issues. The agenda also places an emphasis on incorporating the European statistics code of practice guidelines as far as possible into the work we do.

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On 31 January 2019, the CNIS plenary assembly endorsed the medium-term agenda for 2019-2023, aimed at meeting public statistics demand by addressing themes around economic and social issues over the next five years. The programme's relevance depends on CNIS' ability to identify and collate public statistics needs and translate these into coherent official statistics approaches, with a view to delivering outcomes by 2023.

Taking account of the economic and social context

Developing a medium-term programme rooted in economic and social reality involves listening to views expressed within the environment that we want to understand. It is worth highlighting three contextual factors, none of which are new, but have taken on a greater importance today than probably ever before.

The first is the digital economy, which has profoundly changed our economy and society, with two knock-on effects. One is the circulation of increasing volumes of data, whose quality often

varies widely. The other is an ever-increasing demand for speed and responsiveness, as seen with the growing demand for instant or speedy availability of information. Then, there is the internationalisation of business and interactions – bolstered by the growth of the digital economy – which underlines the need for EU-wide statistics and international comparison more generally. The third factor is heightened awareness among civil society about the challenge of sustainable development, comprised not only of its specific environmental aspect, but also social (i.e. ensuring social cohesion) and economic (i.e. promoting responsible economic activity through production methods and modes of consumption) considerations.

Ultimately, the world that official statistics attempts to monitor and describe is becoming increasingly complex; both in the etymological sense (literally “comprised of interlinked elements”, in reference to the notion of an interconnected world), and how it is commonly understood: complicated, difficult to understand.

Describing a world that is becoming more difficult to understand therefore calls for more accurate



and indeed more sophisticated monitoring tools. The public statistics authority must adapt to this reality. However, one option is not to create additional survey activity, conscious of the need to retain the consent of those who respond to surveys in order to collect data used to address themes identified on the agenda.

As well as the task of describing the world we live in, a further challenge lies in explaining and conveying often complex messages. The public statistics authority must therefore engage further in educational initiatives to maintain a strong presence and continue to be heard in public debate and discussion, for example in distinguishing the true from the false.

The CNIS medium-term agenda shows that we have considered these issues and their related challenges, but we must remember that this alone does not ensure that the public statistics authority will address all of them. For example, INSEE has adopted its own strategic plan, INSEE Horizon 2025, which sets out a broad framework and direction for its activities and operations.

Identifying public needs: not so straightforward

Public needs are not expressed spontaneously. It takes time for these to emerge and be articulated with sufficient accuracy to be addressed. To achieve this, the CNIS uses a number of channels.

The CNIS has set up seven thematic committees (one for employment, another for companies, another for regional statistics, etc.). Their biannual meetings, open to the public, are a forum for dialogue between users and producers of official statistics, on topics within their respective areas of expertise. Users explain what they expect from statistical releases, and producers set out what their data sources allow them to do from the outset, as well as possible changes that could be made – taking constraints into consideration –

to their information systems to meet these expectations.

Thematic committees are chiefly responsible for implementing medium-term policy positions. However, the discussions that they facilitate often result in new requests and requirements, which might be adopted in the following medium-term programme.

Committees are an efficient way of addressing needs and monitoring emerging themes. Many committee chairpersons can attest to the substantial progress that these have facilitated. However, one criticism that is sometimes levelled at the committee model is that work, if left unchecked, can become compartmentalised.

To identify public needs and expectations, the CNIS also holds regular events – consultations and meetings – which host discussions and are an opportunity to put forward new requests and demands. The council also uses working groups, made up of producers and users of official statistics, which it sets up to inform a particular theme or need as well as arrive at a set of recommendations, which may be added to the medium-term agenda where appropriate.

Identifying areas of demand through public consultation

The medium term 2019-2023 has seen the introduction of a new initiative, in the form of a “public consultation” which involved posting a questionnaire on the CNIS website asking respondents to list themes that they considered major or important, and which the CNIS should include in its medium-term agenda. Respondents were also asked to explain the reasons for their choices. The term “theme” was not narrowly defined, so respondents could suggest specific topics or more general themes.

The results of the consultation are presented in the form of a tag cloud made up of themes raised¹.

Employment, inequality and sustainable development among the most notable issues raised



What emerges at first glance is the importance attributed to jobs and three overarching themes: inequality, sustainable development and local statistics.

With respect to jobs, the main concern was the transformation of employment due to technological change. More than ever, we need to know much more about the proliferation of employment arrangements and positions, as well as develop metrics for their variety and progression, including at a local level.

Inequality in all forms – income, wealth, social status, access to rights, access to services, etc. – remains a major theme, especially when the theme of poverty is also raised, where statistics needs are not limited solely to its financial aspect, but also include its extent (metrics for extreme poverty) and its progression overtime (persistence of poverty).

Public consultations have served as a reminder of the importance of sustainable development, in terms of its environmental aspect (the management of natural resources, protecting biodiversity, combatting pollution and their

1. The tag cloud represents themes raised by at least 5% of respondents. In the cloud, the most frequently mentioned themes (words) are highlighted by their corresponding font size.

sources, etc.). They also revealed a more overarching concern, namely the consideration of the environment in all areas of public policy, including economics, health, transport and urban planning and living conditions.

Local statistics, produced and released at clearly defined geographic levels, is another theme of major interest, as are regional disparity and travel to a slightly lesser extent. One in three respondents requested that the public statistics authority address all three issues in the next medium term. A major finding of the consultation was the extent to which the regional/sub-national issue emerged as a concern among so many. However, this is not surprising. The importance that society ascribes to this issue has been observed on other occasions and in other ways.

A host of other themes were raised, and some served as a reminder to the public statistics authority of its core remit. Health and housing are two examples of this. In the former case, demands relate to measuring the health of the population, including disabilities, at regular intervals. This relates closely to issues around old-age dependency and thus places the phenomenon of old age in a societal context. As with health, housing – in terms of cost, quality, etc. – is a fundamental aspect of people's daily lives, and instances where people cannot access a basic standard of accommodation are cases of real social hardship.

The consultation also brought to light concerns regarding resources and methodology. As such, we expect the public statistics authority and official statistics ("official stats" in the cloud) to be innovative and educate its audience when releasing output and continue to be an authority in public debate. It is also encouraged to use "new sources" and to promote open data.

General recommendations: the backbone of the medium-term agenda

The work of the committees and the regular reviews that take place (e.g. to determine if work is meeting public demand and expectations), the findings emerging from consultations and

meetings held by the CNIS, the recommendations of working groups and feedback from public consultations together provide a solid platform from which to build the medium-term agenda.

The programme is presented in the form a series of recommendations that commit producers of official data to address the themes included, and are loosely ranked in order of importance, their apparent difficulty to deal with in the case of new themes, and, for existing themes, the level of progress already made. The CNIS will encourage, call for, or reiterate the need to begin or continue efforts to address the public demand in question, as the case may be.

Eight of the recommendations (general recommendations) are cross-thematic. They deal with themes that affect all of the committees in one way or another. They take account of the challenges, tied in with the economic and social context, to which the public statistics authority must respond, as well as feedback received from the public.

General recommendations come under four headings. The first, sustainable development, consists of three dimensions: environmental, social and economic. The first recommendation

calls on the public statistics authority to implement the CNIS working group recommendations with respect to the UN sustainable development goals and track their progress². UN sustainable development goals are not limited to environment, biodiversity or natural resource management, and also include issues such as health, education, work and well-being. Some or all of the indicators associated with these goals serve as a counterweight to GDP in order to capture the "quality" of growth. From the outset, this approach roots economic growth in a longer term perspective, which considers environmental limitations and social cohesion. The second recommendation relates to the social aspect of sustainable development, specifically all forms of inequality, which undermine social cohesion.

The second heading includes two recommendations, which address two different aspects of the central theme. The first relates to digital transformation itself, and its impact on the wider economy and society. This involves measuring not only the growth of digital technology and its use by companies and other organisations, but also its impact on the economy and society. The second recommendation is less about a specific theme to be addressed in official statistics, and more about encouraging the adoption of an approach to dealing with specific topics. This falls under the "digital economy" heading as it relates to datasets and information generated by the digital economy. The committee encourages the public statistics authority to incorporate them in their monitoring tools, but to supplement rather than replace them, thereby avoiding the need to set up a new data collection system that would increase the workload of respondents. However, because these new sources are not always of adequate quality for use as statistical tools, they must be subject to prior evaluation.

The inclusion of a "Regions" section became essential, if only to respond to the strength of opinion in the public consultation. The first recommendation relates to the production of local statistics and the second to international comparisons. Merging these under the same heading was justified, not only because areas

Eight general recommendations that apply to all committees

Sustainable development
1. Improve quality of growth metrics 2. Measure and analyse the various forms of inequality
Digital economy
3. Monitor and analyse economic and social trends related to digital transformation 4. Make use of data sources that have emerged alongside the growth in the digital economy
Regions
5. Expand the range of sub-national data released by the public statistics authority 6. Continue investment in international comparative studies
Methodology and statistics releases
7. Develop linkages between data sources 8. Improve the clarity of public statistics authority output

2. J.R. Brunetière, S. Eghbal-Teherani, F. Vey (2019). Sustainable development goals progress indicators applied to France. CNIS report no. 150.

within a national territory and countries are both territories in themselves, but above all because it is important to move beyond comparisons of national averages and conduct comparative analysis between territories in different countries.

The final two recommendations, under the heading “Methodology and releases”, are no less relevant. The first encourages linking data sources as a way of expanding the application of sources already available, thereby avoiding the need to collect further data. Linkages also offer the advantage of being cross-thematic (e.g. being able to analyse the relationship between a person’s health and their environment) and thereby reduce compartmentalisation in the work of committees. The second recommendation urges the public statistics authority to demonstrate its role in educating the public, as a way of ensuring that it continues to be heard and viewed as an authority in public debate.

Committee recommendations with a specific focus

The other 75 recommendations are divided among committees according to their area of expertise. Each committee must address 10 between 2019 and 2023, which normally relate to a specific issue within its remit. Some recommendations may be monitored jointly by a number of committees to achieve more complete outcomes. The most apt example is the recommendation to the environment and sustainable development committee, which calls for the relationship between the environment and people’s health to be explored in greater detail. This theme is likely to involve three other

committees: demographics and social issues, for the health metrics; public sector and public services, to take account of health care provision; and regions, given the possible relevance of health care service location and the question of accessibility.

A significant number of recommendations tie in with general recommendations, which adds to the programme’s overall coherence. This can be illustrated using two examples.

First, the international dimension. This features heavily in recommendations by the companies and market strategy and financial system and economy committees. It should be noted that internationalisation is most relevant to economic and financial questions. The international dimension also feeds into the work of other committees: demographics and social issues, for measurements of emigration; employment, qualifications and earnings from work, to assess skills acquisition in line with European studies; and public sector and public services, in pressing for a single classification of offences based on the international classification in force and which can be used in international comparative studies.

The second example refers to sustainable development. Of course, there is a general recommendation on inequality, which is relevant to all committees. However, the work programme for the companies and market strategies committee features a number of recommendations regarding challenges faced by the production base in the context of sustainable development, which also tie in with the social and solidarity economy and companies’ social and environmental policies. One recommendation by the financial system and economy committee calls for sustainable

development to be examined from a financial sector perspective, making reference to green finance, banking inclusion and microcredit. By calling on the regions committee to compile data on land use, the Council takes an interest in the issue of land take.

Lastly, it should be noted that the CNIS 2019-2023 medium-term agenda makes explicit reference in its general recommendations to a number of principles in the European statistics code of practice, adopted by the public statistics authority. In the first instance, the relevance principle, aimed at ensuring that statistics meet the needs of users, is a key element in this approach. There is also the commitment to quality (e.g. being extra-cautious with new sources) to ensure the trust of users, as well as making sure to avoid adding to the workload of respondents (e.g. favouring linkages between data sources) to ensure their continued participation and to provide high-quality data. In order to be effective, general recommendations applicable to the regions assume ongoing checks to ensure consistency and comparability of statistical output, so that international and regional comparisons are of sufficient quality. The last principle in this code sets standards for accessibility and clarity³ that users are entitled to expect from statistical output, just as the final general recommendation urges clarity in official statistical output.

The challenge for the CNIS medium-term agenda and its recommendations for the public statistics authority, in the current climate of distrust of information in general, is maintaining and building confidence in high-quality statistical output that can properly inform public debate. ■■■

3. The five principles highlighted are numbers 11, 4, 9, 14 and 15 respectively in the European statistics code of practice.