

International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) Strategy 2019–21¹

John Pullinger

President, International Association for Official Statistics

1. Background

Official statistics are fundamental to democracy. They provide governments, businesses and civil society with the information they need to make good decisions. And they give people and their representatives the tools to have informed debates, to make choices and to hold decision makers to account

In 2019 we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics which have been adopted by the United Nations to guide all nations in developing statistics that meet the test of practical utility.

At the same time, developments in technology mean that it is possible to utilise statistical science to gain insights from data that were unimaginable only a few years ago.

The IAOS is one of the seven associations of the International Statistical Institute (ISI). The ISI has a medium term vision for the period 2017–21 and the IAOS aligns itself with the ISI vision.

2. Context

IAOS objectives (<http://www.iaos-isi.org/index.php/>

¹The outline for this strategy emerged at the General Assembly of the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) held during the World Statistic Congress in Kuala Lumpur in August 2019. A draft was issued for consultation which generated useful contributions from around the world. A final version was adopted by the IAOS Executive Committee at the beginning of March 2020. It is being published in the Journal (in shortened form) now because of its likely interest for readers, especially given the response of the official statistics community to the COVID-19 pandemic.

about-us/foundation-and-objectives) are:

- to promote the understanding and advancement of official statistics and related subjects.
- to foster the development of effective and efficient official statistical services, particularly in developing countries, through international contacts among individuals and organizations, including users of official statistics as well as research institutions.

The world of official statistics is changing fast:

- demands are extending in scope and are up in all fields – users need faster, more fine grained and relevant insight
- many new data sources are available but also many new providers of data services
- we have a challenge to demonstrate trustworthiness and the special value of official statistics in a complex data landscape

The IAOS has many strengths: a growing membership, a well respected journal (SJIAOS), good conferences, the young statisticians prize (YSP), an active community, and the ability to be “free-thinking”. However, we have limited reach and impact with decision makers, our “call to action” for our supporters is not well understood and work rests on few shoulders.

There are opportunities for us arising from the 25th anniversary of Fundamental Principles, World Statistics Day 2020, the 2020 Census round, data gaps in the indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and recent case studies in official statistics. At the same time, we face threats that are confronting institutions in many countries, in particular

loss of political (“enough of experts”) and public (“your GDP not our GDP”) support.

3. Plan themes for 2019–21

The strategy for 2019–21 builds on the existing plan and our current activities rather than develop new ones:

- the conference: for Zambia 2020 we should aim to build on success of Paris 2018 which attracted 323 attendees from 71 countries
- the journal: SJIAOS is in good health, proposals for the next two years are well advanced and our new discussion platform, launched at the World Statistics Congress, has been well received
- the young Statistician Prize: 2020 is the 10th year and the prize is now a well respected feature of our community. This anniversary year provides a basis for linking the prize with wider efforts to engage young statisticians and young people more generally

We can draw on our core principles: the Declaration on Professional Ethics for Statisticians adopted by the ISI in 2010 (succeeding to the 1985 one), as well as in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics published in 1994.

The unifying idea behind the IAOS and the principles on which we draw is that our central interest is our users: those who rely on us to provide a trustworthy guide for the domains we cover to what is going on in the world around them. What matters is the better use of official statistics in public debates, decision making and democratic accountability. We should focus our work in each of our activity areas on delivering an outcome where the IAOS is seen as a leading global advocate for official statistics with the result that:

- Parliaments and Governments recognise value of official statistics and invest in them through strong laws and adequate funding, with a particular attention to the capacity of Official Statistics to inform national and international decisions and to track progress in all the SDG domains.
- Commentators refer to official statistics as fundamental to democracy.
- The impact of poorly supported official statistical systems on countries and citizens is widely understood and referenced.

This implies five themes for our strategic plan:

1. *Focus on users* so that the value of official statis-

tics is understood and recognised. This requires us to analyse the key users of official statistics and make sure we reach them. Leading figures outside official statistics acting as advocates, including politicians, central bankers and other public figures, could be highly effective champions. (Outcome theme)

2. *Build on existing activities* rather than develop new ones: the conference, the journal, young statisticians prize each with a clear focus that supports our outcomes. (Output theme)
3. *Develop IAOS processes* to deliver activities focused on outcomes: EXCO agendas and actions designed to help those responsible for each activity area. Improved two-way communication to engage and enrol. (Process theme)
4. Increase resources by growing membership still further. We have had a growing membership in recent years. We could build on this progress and *recruit more members*, especially in Africa and other underrepresented regions and amongst younger people, to increase the breadth, depth and diversity of our community.
5. Enhance capability: build new *partnerships* with others who share our goals e.g. Parliaments, data ethics bodies, National Statistical Associations/Societies and organisations like PARIS21, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, open data/fact checking organisations and consumer groups. At the same time, we should deepen existing partnerships with the ISI and its Associations. Relationships with National Statistical Institutes (and other producers of official statistics including central banks and ministries) are especially important. Specifically, we should support the ISI strategic priority for capacity building, the ISI strategic plan for the Public Voice for Statistics and the new ISI Special Interest Group on Communicating Statistics and Data Science. IASE is another priority partnership for us given the imperative to build statistical literacy and capability. (Capability theme)

The strategic plan could become a call to action:

- Official statistics give people a voice in decisions that affect them, they make the invisible visible. Official statistics are fundamental to democracy, helping society to leave no one behind. The best-known example of official statistics is a countries Population Census – often the largest civic engagement exercise undertaken
- the IAOS is the voice of official statistics

- with a fast-growing membership, with acclaimed conferences, journal and young statistician prize, the IAOS is the place to come if you:
 - * care about taking part in developing the future of democracy
 - * recognise the importance of evidence in making good decisions
 - * want to make a difference
- join us