

## Editorial

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# Governing by the numbers

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A series of manuscripts in the Journal on the ‘The future role of Official Statistics in the informational ecosystem’ was introduced in the December 2019 issue (Vol. 35/4) with the opening article ‘Governing by the numbers; Statistical Governance Reflections on the future of official statistics in a digital and globalised society’ (Radermacher, Vol. 35/4, pp. 519–538). This opening article was supported by two specific articles (Lehtonen, Vol. 35/4, pp. 539–548, and Rancourt, Vol. 35/4, pp. 549–558). In this issue (Vol. 36/2) this series on ‘Data4Policy’ will be continued with six more articles.

### Learning from the pandemic

In the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are learning again – and this time in a hard way –, that sound statistics are vital for the functioning of states, for the participation of citizens in political decision-making and (ultimately) for the form of governance itself. In quieter times we are little aware of the fact that official statistics continuously change and develop, although normally very slowly, and when it takes place (exceptionally) in larger leaps, that three forces drive this development: political events, scientific progress and new data sources.

Alain Desrosières<sup>1</sup> has worked out in detail the interrelation between the state and statistics; with him one could even speak of statistics for ‘the making of the state’. To understand when and for what reasons this interrelation went well or not, what were the developmental phases, what problems were associated with them, it

is therefore important to be aware of the history of the development of official statistics. In this sense, it comes at just the right time that under the motto Data4Policy several articles put on historical glasses:

Jean-Guy Prévost “Past, present and future of Canadian statistics” explores this research question for Canadian statistics from the advent of modern Canada in 1867. Historical development is put into the context of major turns in government’s policy needs, the adoption of technical or managerial innovations and the presence of a strong bureaucratic leadership, while setbacks are observed when one of these factors is found wanting.

Hermann Habermann and Thomas A. Louis “Can the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the Political Process Co-exist?” describe the relevant aspects of the United States federal statistical system considering examples where professional independence has been compromised or threatened. The recent controversy in the United States over the proposed addition of a question on citizenship to the decennial census is used to illustrate the challenges in holding to the Fundamental Principles.

John Pullinger “Trust in official statistics and why it matters?” explores some enduring aspects of the way we as human beings interact with numbers and gives a historical perspective on how this became manifest in official statistics. He highlights the essential role of the National Statistical Institute as a trustworthy servant of democracy within the evolving data ecosystem and explains why this matters. Jean-Louis Bodin, “A view on 50 years of life of the ISI” can be added to this circle of authors and contributions with his very personal review of 50 years of international statistics.

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<sup>1</sup>Desrosières, Alain. 1998. *The Politics of Large Numbers – A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Massachusetts).

Of somewhat different character are two other contributions, which are analysing present cases of co-production of statistics and society:

Len Cook "Evidence, accountability and legitimacy: The oversight of child welfare services" investigates the specific case of child welfare services in New Zealand, with the aim of demonstrating the extent to which measurement regimes of public agencies are recognising that accountability and transparency are just some of the elements of legitimacy that need to reflect the diverse histories of different communities. As agency accountability measures have increasingly focused on fiscal measures and outcomes information, the legitimacy of the practices that are employed by agencies has become less demonstrable.

Walter Bartl and Christian Papilloud "Measuring 'Equivalent Living Conditions'? The Use of Indicators in German Federal Spatial Planning" investigate the specific use of indicators in the policy field of federal spatial planning in Germany. Drawing on literature about the use of scientific knowledge in politics as well as on social studies of quantification processes, they argue that regular monitoring of regional disparities has increased the political salience of the idea of equivalent living conditions.