

Guest-editorial

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The Siena Group, which was created in 1993 on Paolo Garonna's (Director of the Italian Statistical Institute) initiative, brings together every year some forty statisticians and social scientists from different countries and international bodies (OECD, Eurostat, UN-ECE) for an informal two days meeting.

The first meeting in Siena, dedicated to Sir Richard Stone, was devoted to social accounting. This was followed by the 1994 meeting in Stockholm devoted to the future of social statistics and to the development of tools, e.g., multi-theme surveys, social indicators, microsimulation, etc.

Following these first exchanges, it was decided to center future meetings on more specific themes and not only to concentrate on methodological issues but also on analyses and studies. Thus, the meeting in Oslo in 1995 was devoted to 'youth and integration' and discussed the use of longitudinal data, the combination of administrative statistics and surveys, the integration of sociological and economic approaches of exclusion phenomena as well as the needed collaboration of academics and statisticians to elucidate the problems of integration experienced by young people. A selection of the 1995 papers has been published, in a special issue of UN-ECE's Statistical Journal (volume 12, issue 3/4, 1995) and a publication is under preparation describing 'young people's integration' in a number of countries.

The current issue contains a selection of the papers presented at the Siena Group's last meeting in Paris in June 1996. This year's topic was focused on 'intergenerational relations and social mobility'. The democratic model which is the base of our developed societies and which cements its social cohesion is based on several factors. In particular, a more or less developed system of social protection which insures against different social risks, e.g., illness, old age, unemployment and disability. Moreover, the model presupposes some form of equal opportunity which guarantees that everyone, whatever their social origin, has access to education and to an occupation according to abilities.

The system has been financed by the continuous growth in the postwar period to the end of the seventies. Thus even if all the opportunities were not exactly equal for everyone, at least a hope remained of a better future for one's children.

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Unfortunately, the economic crisis consecutive to the oil shocks as well as the profound changes to international relations have greatly disturbed this model and the way it is viewed by the different social actors.

The distance is now becoming sufficiently large to assess some of the consequences and to pose some fundamental questions concerning the labour market, intergenerational relations and the role of social environments and family strategies:

- Has the education system adapted itself well to the evolution of employment and to the demand for labour?
- Are younger generations penalized in the labour market?
- Is the national debt burden going to degrade the living conditions of the future generations who will be less and less numerous?
- How can the system of redistribution of wealth face the rise of new risks in a reduced financing context?
- Is there a place for positive discrimination policies to thwart the trend towards exclusion and social fragmentation?
- Is the progressive homogenization of our societies towards a huge middle class called into question by the broadening of the gaps between social groups?
- Which are the respective parts of inherited status, such as ethnic belonging or social environment, and of acquired status, such as educational level or career, in the acquisition of a person's social position? Or summing-up, has the 'social lift' stopped?

The papers which follow do not pretend to bring conclusive answers to these essential questions, they do, however, contain statistically established facts and analyses which bring significant elements to the debate.

In particular, the methodological aspects more familiar to participants have given rise to several presentations of socio-professional classifications in use in different countries. The harmonization of these at the European level, or even at the international level, is of course desirable, but will also be extremely difficult, because each national classification refers to a historical – and sociocultural context which is different.

In conclusion, the discussion at the meeting showed that several statistical offices are able to deal with the essential issues of social mobility and intergenerational relations linking them up with the tools and classification which they are responsible for. All this in a warm and friendly atmosphere which is not the least of the qualities of the 'Siena Group'.

The next meeting which will take place in 1997 in Switzerland, will be hosted by the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, and will be devoted to the following theme: 'On the way to a multicultural society?'