

Introduction

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From 25 to 27 September 1996, the Conference of European Statisticians, whose members are all the heads of statistical offices in Europe and North America, convened a meeting in Lisbon which had as the general theme “Official Statistics – Past and Future”. The papers in this issue are a selection of those discussed at that meeting.

The seminars of the Conference of European Statisticians were initiated in the 1970s when members felt that the time dedicated at plenaries for “substantive discussion” of matters of concern to heads of statistical offices was insufficient. The tool chosen to satisfy this need was ad hoc seminars for heads of statistical offices on particular issues which had been identified during the annual plenaries.

Since the beginning it was decided that to distinguish these meetings from the annual plenaries and to create a seminar atmosphere, they should be less formal gatherings and should be hosted by countries rather than by the secretariat in Geneva. Thus, the four seminars preceding the Lisbon Seminar were hosted respectively by the United States (Washington, 1977), Russia (Moscow, 1981), France (Paris, 1986) and Hungary (Budapest, 1991). The topics they dealt with were

- Statistical Services in Ten Year’s Time;
- Statistical Data Collection and Processing Systems under New Conditions;
- Role and Functions of Statistical Services within the Overall Information System;
- Provision of Statistical Services.

Because of the prestige of the Seminars it has never been a problem to find countries willing to host them or to contribute discussion papers and they have all been very well attended. In the case of the Lisbon Seminar, the Bureau appointed an organizing committee headed by Mr W. De Vries from Statistics Netherlands. This committee has been responsible for inviting papers, for appointing session organizers and for deciding on the overall format of the five sessions and the meeting.

The current selection of papers from the Lisbon Seminar tell us something about how statistics can help us to reconstruct our past, how they can reveal the conceptual and political thinking of previous generations, how they should be ar-

chived for future use and how statistics have influenced the birth and identities of nations. Statistical systems do not develop in a vacuum but are greatly interlinked with political and social developments. The concrete, practical problems that variable geographies cause for statisticians who are faced with the task of producing long-term time series are discussed in several contexts. With the numerous territorial adjustments which have occurred on the European continent in this century alone and with the fundamental differences between the statistical systems of East and West, Europe may be considered as a testing ground for statisticians. With all these problems and constant conflicts between innovation and continuity, the statistician's role is far from simple. Several papers call for the need for integrating the role of the two kinds of statisticians, academic and official, to increase credibility and public acceptance for the work of official statistics.

The Seminars of the Conference contribute to the extensive cooperation between official and academic statisticians just as well as they support the Conference's ongoing efforts to promote statistical cooperation and collaboration between statistical offices in the region. The Lisbon Seminar confirmed that this type of gathering continues to be convenient for discussion among heads of statistical offices. The Seminars have traditionally been convened at five years intervals, but the participants at the Lisbon Seminar raised the question whether the Seminars should perhaps be organized more frequently.

Participants appreciated very much the efficiency and the hospitality of Mr. Corrêa Gago and his staff at the National Statistical Institute of Portugal, which provided an excellent forum in which to hold the seminar and which contributed very significantly to its success.

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