

Interview with Mario Palma Rojo¹

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Mario Palma is the current President of the IAOS. He also serves as one of the five members of the Board of Governors of Mexico's official statistics agency, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography's (INEGI), where he is in charge of the National Information Subsystem of Government, Public Security and Justice. He has had a distinguished career through INEGI and various parts of the Mexican governmental ministries. He holds a Law degree from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Law Faculty and a Masters of Law degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

In the interview, Mario Palma will continue the conversation about his strategic plans for the IAOS and

its future, some of which you may have already heard while you attended the IAOS conference held in July 2017 in Marrakech, Morocco during the ISI WSC. He will develop some of these themes for his Presidential tenure both in this interview and at the jointly organized IAOS-OECD Conference to be held in September 2018 in Paris. Also, in this interview, Mario will talk about how he entered the world of official statistics as well as his experiences in the development of the official statistics agency in Mexico, INEGI.

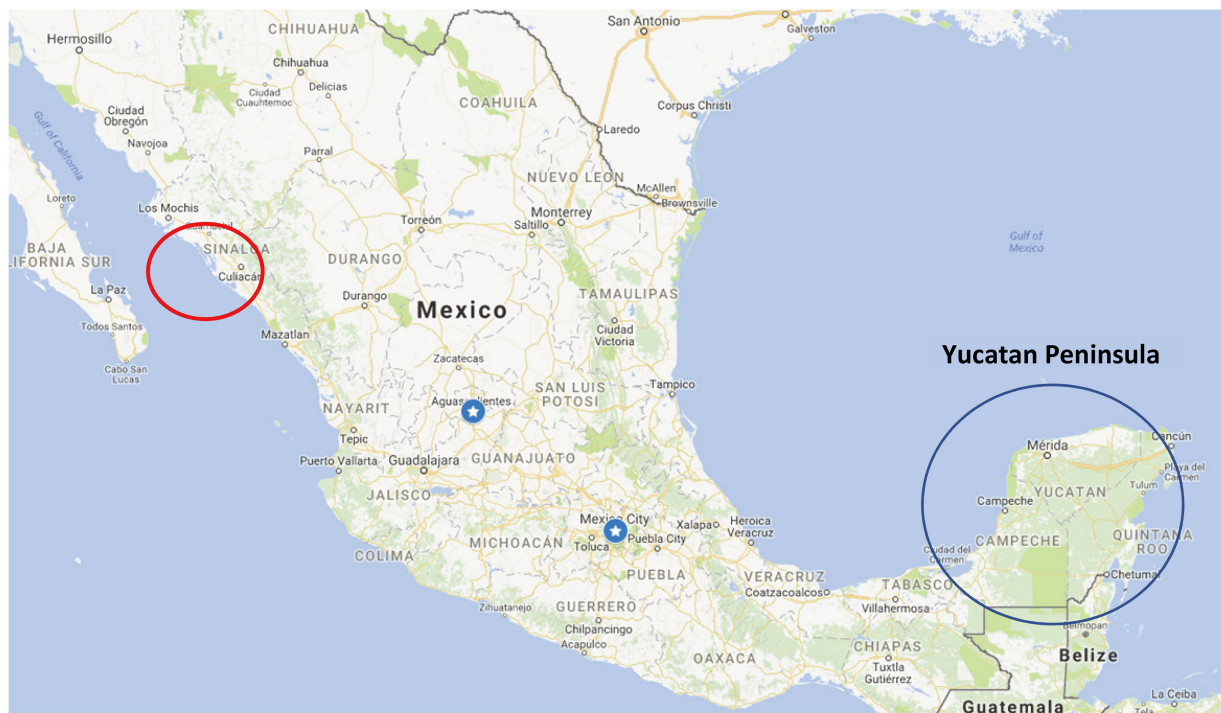
INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for allowing us to interview you. Let us start at the very beginning and go back to your childhood in Mexico. What was it like growing up in your country? For example, what was your education like before university and brought you into statistics?

That's an interesting question though I am afraid I would not have much to say. However, there are a few things that might be of interest. I was born in Yucatan, in the South-East part of the country and, from a relatively very early age I also lived in Culiacan, in the northwest part of the country, finally ending up in Mexico City where I have lived for many years. These influences remained for my whole life as I have relations in all these places and I visit them often.

Why is that interesting? Because Mexico² was a very closed country at the time. Being a [physically] large country, it was not very well communicated both internally and externally. People from the north of Mexico were completely different from those in the

¹The views and opinions expressed in the conversation are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics nor IOS Press.

²A brief summary of the history of Mexico can be found at: Escalante, Pablo, 2004, *Nueva Historia Mínima de México*, El Colegio de México.



Map 1. Mexico and Locations mentioned in the interview.

south and there was very little exchange between them except if they met in Mexico City. We were in general also a very closed country not only in terms of trade, but also culturally, politically, and socially.

This has certainly changed a lot in Mexico.

I was lucky to have very good teachers. Some of them, will eventually encourage me to go abroad to study. This was also a feature in my family, where education was a top priority.

I am proud to be still close friend with some of my teachers who are still alive.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. So, your CV states that you have a Bachelor of Law from National University ó and a Master of Law from London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London. How did that come about?

I know it isn't a very common background for someone working in a national statistical office. At the time, the general career-path followed in Mexico, if you wanted to get into the social sciences and government administration, was law. Studying law, did not necessarily mean becoming an attorney, as it was the most prestigious career in social sciences at the time, it usually opened many different avenues for working later in life.

For my masters at LSE I did international law and international politics. I would eventually lecture in both subjects at university level and they have also been useful in my public office career as I have been involved with international affairs a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Very interesting! And yes, the local environment/situation is critical in starting us on our career paths and what we study at university – thank you for the explanation. Remembering back to when you were completing your education, what did you hope to accomplish and what were your aspirations in your professional life?

Ah, again remembering the situation of Mexico, what I wanted to do was to work in Public Administration and do things for the development of the country.

While I have explained that Mexico was a closed country, it was also not a democratic country. The same political party was going to be in power for almost 70 years.³ So, in my generation, there was a common hope among young people to push for a change and to make Mexico more modern. It must be remembered

³A list of the presidents of Mexico, and further details can be found at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-presidents-of-Mexico-1830608>.

that our first President from an opposition party came only in 2000 [with Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN)].

INTERVIEWER: You are unique in that you do not have a purely statistical or economics background, but your educational training is in law. How did you get interested in official statistics?

I was always interested in statistics per se, but in 1983 I was invited to work for a new government institution in Mexico. It was the year that INEGI⁴ – the National Institute of Statistics and Geography – was founded. I was one of the original founders. Although we did have since 1895 an Office of Statistics, it was part of several ministries through time, and, in fact it was not a very important office. However, in 1983 it was created as an institute, as a specialized agency⁵ with one very interesting characteristic, it had both statistics and geography in its remit.

While it is now a very strong institution, looking back when INEGI was created, it was not so. It didn't even have offices in each of the different Mexican states. In addition, there were very few surveys and the infrastructure to carry out censuses still had to be developed. Statistics was still to acquire any relevance in the country. The modernization of INEGI starts with its birth in 1983. It was a slow process in the beginning especially, and I was fortunate to be part of it.

I was invited originally to develop the offices for legal and international affairs inside INEGI. At the time INEGI was part of the Ministry of Budget and Planning which would take care of these two areas directly.

INTERVIEWER: Stepping back to the beginning of your professional experience, you began your professional career in academia as a Lecturer teaching Public International Law at UNAM, but you also were at the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) as Head of the Promotion Department in charge of Government Scholarship Program. Can you tell us a little about what you did in this latter position?

Yes, this was a few years before the experiences we were just talking about at INEGI. Initially, I went to the National Council of Science and Technology. We were facing these issues that we have talked about before, re-

lated to the process of development in Mexico, specifically, how do we create institutions and how to train people for these new institutions. I was, again, fortunate to be part of it and eventually I became the head of the department that was in charge of the country's graduate scholarships program.

We developed a huge program of scholarships. It was geared both for academic programs in Mexico and for sending students to be trained abroad. The development of this training/scholarship program is one of my greatest satisfactions. Before there was a very small effort of sending students abroad to study.

At our highest point in 1981 we had about 3,000 students abroad in the best universities of the world and the double of that number in Mexico. Most students went to the U.S., England and France, and the great majority of them studied a Master's Degree or a PhD.

The philosophy behind this program was that we realized we had to send young people to get the best training abroad. This scholarship program was quite successful. It is one of the good memories I have.

Afterwards, I have always tried to encourage all my staff to use this scholarship program and gain international experience. [*We had a discussion of the importance of these experiences.*] The importance of international experiences, are two-fold. First the technical skills that are learned abroad, but also the broadening of the minds to other cultures. Both things are important for students (and were particularly important at the time) as they are exposed to democratic countries and practices. We did not mention it loudly at the time, but we consider the return of these students from abroad after finishing their graduate programs were one of the elements that helped Mexico's institutions to develop.

INTERVIEWER: You then held various positions at INEGI – from Deputy Director of Technical and Normative Services, to Executive Coordinator and Administrative Coordinator in charge of administrative services, personnel management, training budgetary matters, legal affairs and international cooperation. During this period, you also served as an Advisor to the Mayor of Mexico City for two years. What did you learn from these experiences?

Before I talk about this, let me give you a bit of a background. I have been at INEGI three times. I have left and I have come back. The very first time was in 1983 when INEGI was founded and I worked on what I explained to you earlier. From there, I went to the government of Mexico City. I was an Advisor for a few years, and then I went back to INEGI, where I held some other positions.

⁴In Spanish, the Ministry is Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (<http://www.inegi.org.mx/>).

⁵INEGI was created on January 25, 1983 by presidential decree – for more information see, in Spanish: <http://www.inegi.org.mx/inegi/acercade/default.aspx>.

When I was Advisor to the Mayor of Mexico City, I was doing mainly two things. One was related to international affairs, I was taking care of relations with foreign cities and organizing some international conferences; the other one concerned to a relevant legal matter for the city, as I was fortunate to take part in the writing of the first draft of a legislative assembly for Mexico City.⁶

While Mexico City belonged to the Federal Government directly, it was just one department. It was not an independent government as it is now, similar to a state government in Mexico or the USA. There was no decisional body for the city. All decisions were made by the Federal Government and legislation on local matters came from the federal chambers. So, I was involved in a project to write the first draft of the statute to gain this autonomy. Eventually it became the local Assembly of Representatives, created still with quite limited powers but with time it gained in legislative power. It was a start.

In addition, a lot of other things had happened in the meantime. One of them was that Mexico City was struck by a very big earthquake in 1985. INEGI was particularly hit hard. We lost a whole building and several lives. Some other buildings were damaged; hence, it was eventually decided in 1987 to locate the Institute outside of Mexico City. This is also an important part of INEGI's story. As a result, the headquarters of the organization were installed in Aguascalientes City.⁷

I was not at INEGI at the time of the earthquake, but I came back at the end of 1988. The move to Aguascalientes was a complicated one that took several years. After some delays, we concluded the main parts of it well into 1989. Around 3000 families from Mexico City moved to Aguascalientes. It also included overseeing the building of houses which were later sold to our colleagues with attractive mortgages, as well as the building of our headquarters. All of which was quite complicated. I was very much involved and lived through this move.

When I went back to INEGI in 1988, I worked first as Executive Coordinator [1988–1990] and then as the Administrative Coordinator [1991–1999]. This was the

time that I got involved in a lot of different projects. Three national censuses were held in a row. There was an economic one in 1989.⁸ The first modern population Census was conducted in 1990 [although officially the 1990 General Population and Housing Census was the eleventh of its kind held in Mexico].⁹ There was also an Agricultural Census in 1991 as well.

INEGI was becoming a more important agency that could offer good products to the country. At the same time, we were lucky that in 1988 the new Minister of Finance and the President of the Country, understood the importance of statistics. The Minister of Finance had been the head of INEGI at its founding in 1983 (Pedro Aspe). This is very important in developing countries. It is not common to find that the people in political power understand the importance of statistical information, you may say the same in some developed countries of course.

New surveys were developed and after the agricultural census in 1991, INEGI was asked to help with a major reform of the land tenure in the countryside that changed the land that was reserved to communal use to private property. This was a substantial political and economic change for the country. INEGI measured each parcel geographically to confer private property of their land to millions of peasants.

[This brought up an interesting comparison between the situation of Mexico and the United States and the location of each of their statistical agency (INEGI and Census Bureau) and how it could impact by not being within the national capital city – although the Census Bureau is still within the Washington DC metro area, it still is not actually in Washington DC proper. We also talked about the perception of maintaining privacy and confidentiality of the information that people are asked to give. Although for Mexico, it still has a very centralized government and there is still an INEGI office in Mexico City – but it is a Regional Office.]

Then later, when INEGI became autonomous, which I will talk about later, it was also helpful not to be in Mexico City. We were physically separate. Not only legally but we were physically outside the center of government.

⁶“Delegaciones” are the 16 territorial divisions or boroughs in which Mexico City is divided. They are political and administrative entities with autonomous and decentralized characteristics. For more information and a list of the delegaciones see, in Spanish: <http://www.cdmx.gob.mx/gobierno/delegaciones>.

⁷For more information about Aguascalientes, see <https://www.britannica.com/place/Aguascalientes-state-Mexico>.

⁸While not the first ever Economic Census in Mexico – an industrial census was conducted in 1930.

⁹<http://en.www.inegi.org.mx/proyectos/ccpv/1990/default.html>. A 10% sample of this 1990 Census is available through Integrated Public Use Microdata Series-International – which is a data project based out of the Minnesota Population Center (MPC) at the University of Minnesota. <https://international.ipums.org/international/>.

INTERVIEWER: You returned to INEGI in 2008, as Vice President (Vice-Minister level), one of the five members of the INEGI Board of Governors in charge of the National Information Subsystem of Government, Public Security and Justice. Could you tell us a little more about this experience? So far, what has been your greatest satisfaction in this position?

I left INEGI again in 1999. I was vice minister on several occasions and held other positions in different branches of government for a period of 8 to 9 years. For that time, I will not say too many things, except that I appreciated and used statistics very much. When working on public policies – designing, implementing or evaluating public policies – having good statistics is crucial and indispensable.

Then I came back to INEGI for the third time (2008) and I am still here now. INEGI has changed again. INEGI became autonomous constitutionally in 2006 when it was written into Article 26 of the Constitution. But then the specific law was only passed in 2008. Towards the end of this year INEGI started functioning as an autonomous institute from the Federal government.

This is a story that goes back to the previous time I was at INEGI. The process took a long time to implement. In the early 90s, we started a discussion of what to do for the future of the institution. At the time, one of the important things that happened in the country was that the Central Bank of Mexico became independent of the government. Then we started to look at this. Again, people who had been at INEGI, particularly those like the Minister of Finance Pedro Aspe – who I previously talked about – were some of the big promoters of making the Central Bank independent.

At the same time, at INEGI we started to think about the future of the institute and what would be the best legal structure to assure its independence. We started working on that around 1992. I was part of a small team that secretly wrote the first draft of a document to make INEGI independent. We wrote it secretly because there were many people in government against its independence. It actually took from 1994 to 2006 – about twelve years! – to enact it.

You have to see these events in the context of the general process of democratization of the country as it gave the society an institution that does not depend from political groups in power, and produces information vital to understand what is happening in the country and to evaluate public policies.

INEGI was finally created as an independent institution. We may be the only ones in the world that have the statistical agency's autonomy written into the Con-

stitution. With independence, it is important to have a legal structure. One important thing that I would like to mention is that the law divided the National Statistical and Geographic Information System into three subsystems of national information: socio-demographic, economic and geographic. However, the law allowed the creation of other subsystems. We decided to create another one related to government and security responding to an increase of crime that was noticeable in 2007 and 2008.¹⁰ While previously crime [in particular homicides] had been decreasing for many years, they started to increase sharply again around that time. Thus, it was obvious to us that we needed to look into this statistically. So, we decided to create a sub-system with a corresponding administrative unit.

I was put in charge of the *National Information Subsystem of Government, Public Security and Justice*. We started practically from zero. We did not have much experience on this. Actually, there are very few countries that have any experience of this sort. We started by developing surveys on crime and victimization. At the time, there were only two good ones, the American and the British.

We also became very close to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime¹¹ (UNODC) in Vienna with Angela Me, who is responsible for their statistical program. They had already been promoting lots of studies on crime and on drugs. We started working with them in 2010. We created together a Centre of Excellence [Centre of Excellence for Crime Statistics on Governance, Victims of Crime, Public Security and Justice] in Mexico City to promote, among other things, surveys on crime and victimization in Latin America and the Caribbean region, but in practice their reach has been broader to cover all regions of the world.¹² That is, a Centre that has developed a lot of things and provided technical cooperation to several countries in the region to carry out victimization surveys among other projects. Together we presented to the UN Statistical Commission and to the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice a Road Map for improving crime statistics. Among its projects, the interna-

¹⁰See: Palma, M., 2012, Challenges and qualities: Government, Public Security, and Justice Information in Mexico, in Philip, G. and Berruecos, S., *Mexico's Struggle for Public Security, Organized Crime for State Responses*, Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹<http://www.unodc.org/>.

¹²See: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2011/October/unodc-head-inaugurates-statistics-centre-of-excellence-in-mexico.html>.

tional classification of crime for statistical purposes¹³ stands out as something that had never been done before. The classification was approved unanimously by both UN Commissions and has been translated to all UN official languages. We are now working with UN-ODC on a road map to improve the measurement of the drug phenomena. We have presented it together to the United Nations Statistical Commission and to the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs. Statistical offices have not been used to get involved in these areas. Most were afraid for the wrong reasons, maybe because it is not a traditional area in the world of statistics, lack of resources, etc. That is part of the story. I can talk more about this, but I think we have more to cover in this interview.

INTERVIEWER: While I was going to ask whether over your career – so far – your law background has impacted your views on government statistics and how has it helped you in thinking strategically? You have woven a lot of your potential responses to this question already into our conversation. Is there anything more that you would like to add?

Well, I would say that INEGI has been quite an experience for me. I was lucky enough to be there during the times of big changes for the institution.

What I have learned here is that official statistics are indispensable in a country, that they must be of high quality, of course. And, you have to defend them. “Defense” comes in many different ways. One example is with budget, you have to be relevant for the country, to offer something valuable and to convince policy makers of this, in particular those who approve budgets. Another example is, in extreme cases, when someone puts into doubt the quality of the data, you must be able to defend its quality, it can be complicated, but you must be able to do it.

I hope that answers this question.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, thank you. Now, turning to your other professional activities, such as your involvement with the IAOS? How did you become involved with IAOS?

That is interesting. The first time I really got involved with IAOS was in 1998. The biennial conference was in Aguascalientes, Mexico where INEGI’s headquarters are located. I was part of the local orga-

nizing committee. This was the first time I was really involved with IAOS.

Herman Habermann invited me back to the IAOS in 2013 when I became member of the Executive Committee of IAOS. In 2015 I became President-Elect, and now I have become President. That is my story at IAOS in a few words . . . you see. [Laughter].

I have been very much involved in the international community in the past. In the 1990s I was in charge among other things of the international office at INEGI. I remember working very closely with Zoltan Kenessey to sign an agreement in which INEGI helped with the printing and distribution of the ISI’s International Statistical Review. I attended the Statistical Commission practically every year from 1989 to 1999 and was very much involved in the creation of the present format for the Statistical Conference of the Americas (CEA-CEPAL), besides working international programs for INEGI with more than 40 statistical offices.

I can say what distinguishes the international statistical community is its sense of being a community. There is, to a great extent, a common sharing of principles and interests. We are a community in that sense. It is a feature of the international statistical community that you appreciate more when comparing with other international groups. For me, when I attend other commissions, for example, it is a completely different thing than the statistical commission with regard to people’s work, how they behave, how people think. I can say clearly that the statistical community is closer to the sense of community that I have ever seen. That is one important thing.

INTERVIEWER: How do you see IAOS can have an impact on official statistics?

Well, what are the objectives of IAOS.¹⁴ They are: (1) to promote the understanding and advancement of official statistics and related subjects; and (2) 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.

We must start looking at the challenges to official statistics. On the presentation I did in Marrakech on July 2017 [See Fig. 1] I mentioned the main ones.

¹³Further information on statistical standards developed by UN-ODC in the field of crime, criminal justice and illicit drugs can be found at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/statistics.html>.

¹⁴<http://www.iaos-isi.org/index.php/about-us/foundation-and-objectives>.

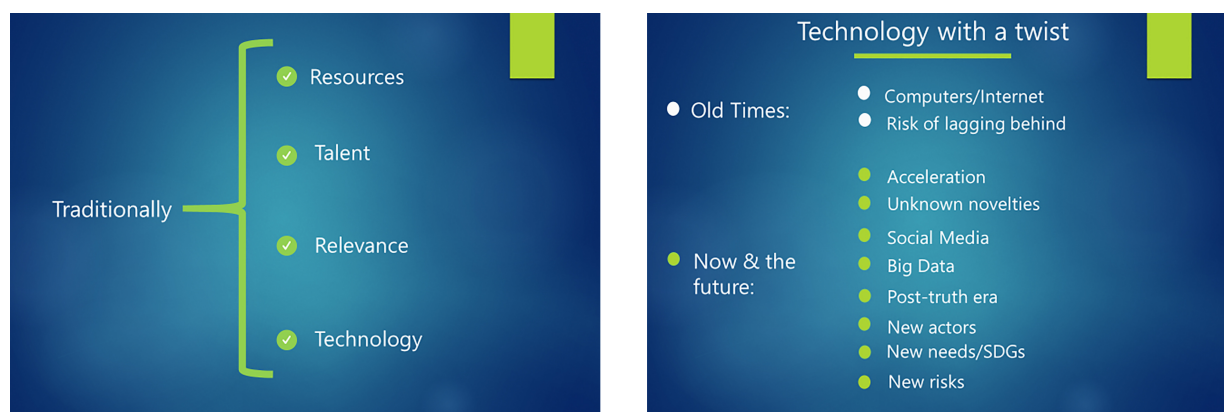


Fig 1. Two slides presented at IAOS meeting, Marrakech, July 2017.

You can consult it in our web page: <http://www.iaosi.org/pdf/IAOSStrategicPlan2017-2019draft.pdf>.

What do we need? We need to have resources, to attract talent and to have a recognized status, to be relevant for the society. We must take care of the guys who are approving the budget, who are going to give you the money [laughter], they have to find value in what you are doing. Further, you must be good at adapting technology and using it, if not, you will become irrelevant. We must always remember that the opposite of relevant is irrelevant [laughter and agreement]. And we should be aware of external actors producing information. Now, it is relatively easy to produce data, but this information, without the quality of the statistical information is another thing. That is part of the big discussion for me, this is one of the points that we cannot lose sight of.

Then, I would like to add one more point of the utmost importance and it is related to the Fundamental Principles,¹⁵ even if they were approved unanimously by the General Assembly of the United Nations we have to keep defending statistics in many ways. The risks are ongoing and some we may not know yet. If a government does not like your results, either in a big way or in a small way, you should take a stand to defend those statistics. If you do not do it, then governments will start trying to produce their own, without consulting the experts/actors or try to intervene directly in the NSOs. This has happened in the past and we should be aware of that. One danger could be for governments to subcontract the production of information from sources different to the local NSO. IAOS is organizing a special event on the independence of offi-

cial statistics where we will discuss the most relevant and actual features of this subject. It will take place on Tuesday 18, September one day before the 2018 IAOS-OECD Conference in Paris.

Those, I would say are the main challenges we are facing. So, what would make IAOS relevant? That is the other thing. For official statistics, IAOS is a professional association and a voluntary one. We really depend on voluntary work by people who are members, the Executive Committee and those who are helping them, like you and Kirsten [SJIAOS Editor-in-Chief] and many others. We also depend a lot on the support from our individual statistical offices for traveling, for funds, for facilities, etc. This is part of that earlier conversation in which I talked about “community”, so many people committed to do things and doing them for the last 35 years for IAOS. That is something. Those are things that I always like to stress.

What will make IAOS relevant? In the end, we need to be at the forefront of the discussion of the relevant issues for official statistics. We have to be the first ones to say the things that need to be said and say them loudly. What are those new things to be discovered? Sometimes it will be very technical, but sometimes it will be relatively political or legal, such as independence – the autonomy of our institutions. So, it is a combination of things, but in the end, we should offer something that is useful to our members and useful for official statistics. That is how I see it. We have to organize the instruments, our Journal has a special role here; we have to organize conferences – such as the one we will have in September 2018 with the OECD, and which we will conduct in partnership for the first time with an international organization.

In the end, to make us relevant, we must be at the forefront of the discussions of the important subjects of

¹⁵<http://www.unece.org/?id=3207>.

official statistics. Sometimes, it will be relatively new things. We have to be very agile to spot new things. In addition, there will be traditional things that will need to be discussed again.

One of our strategies now, is to start to get younger people interested in official statistics. They may not have much money, whether they are students or young professionals. We are working on two programs: one that you know very well is the Young Statistician Prize (YSP)¹⁶ which has been going since 2011 and that is for people younger than 35 years old who are already working for a statistical agency. I am happy to report that this year we have received many applications for the YSP. More recently, for the 2018 Conference, we have just started a new one for graduate students from universities to write essays related to official statistics, the Young Scholars for Better Statistics Award.¹⁷ We are targeting young people who are writing their thesis for Master's and PhD's. If they have a need for official

statistics in their dissertations, if they can write a critique of what is available for their subjects and they can describe the state of official statistics in that particular subject they can participate in the contest. We have sent invitations to people and universities all over the world. In fact, we have sent invitations directly to heads of departments of universities in areas that are related to us, like demographics, economics, mathematics, actuarial science and government for example, about 700 departments already. The deadline is April 16, 2018. We do not know yet at this stage what the response will be, but we are hopeful of igniting some interest among graduate students. We hope that this will attract new young members.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

My pleasure, many thanks and best greetings to all our members.

¹⁶<http://www.iaos-isi.org/index.php/statistics-prize>.

¹⁷<http://www.oecd.org/iaos2018/YS-Awards-description.pdf>.