

SJIAOS Discussion Platform

Launch of the 12th discussion: The positive and negative aspects of ‘standardization’ in official statistics

With the release of this issue of the Journal (June 2022), also the 12th discussion will be opened. This discussion is triggered by the section on ‘Standards, guidelines and recommendations’ in this issue (Vol 38, (2022) Nr 2). This section contains six manuscripts that originally stem from the ISI WSC 2021 SJIAOS Invited Paper Session. Further to that, it contains a manuscript that describes the development and characteristics of a harmonized definition of cities, towns and rural areas for international comparison, called the Degree of Urbanisation.

The work of international official statistics focuses very much on harmonized definitions, procedures and methods to achieve comparable outcomes between regions and countries. Much of the work of international statistical organizations in developing statistical standards and harmonized classifications is directed to produce such procedures, methodologies and nomenclatures that, when applied for example in surveying and compiling indicators, allow countries or groups to be ‘compared’ via the resulting scores on so produced indicators. The development of definitions, methodologies and procedures; the ‘standards’ (used here in a wide sense and also covering guidelines and recommendations) and the use of the resulting so-called ‘harmonized statistical information’ is – for example – an important building block in the creation of the indicators to monitor the progress of countries on the sustainable development goal (SDG) indicators. More in general statistical standards, guidelines, recommendations and standardized methodologies and even specific technologies like SDMX for the exchange of statistical information or other software applications can be considered the backbone of international official statistics. Without these, the international official statistics would not have such a high-quality status.

However, beyond positive achievements, the development, implementation and use of ‘standards’ can also be characterized by a variety of negatively assessed

characteristics, obstacles/challenges, objections or even disadvantages. Standardization is considered positive from the perspective of improving comparability and allowing regional or global monitoring as well as having procedures that when applied and well-documented witness the quality of the process and consequently the results. Less good, or even negatively assessed is that in the development, implementation and operationalization not every situation can be or is sufficiently weighted or involved, that resources for full implementation and use according to the ‘standards’ are insufficient or that simply the ‘standards’ do not fit the socio-economic, cultural or political situation in a country and result in a non-valid picture.

Some examples of obstacles/challenges, as well as objections or disadvantages, are the following:

A bias in the development of the standards, focussing on a specific set of (more developed) countries or regions, supported by experts that are on different levels of expertise and on the knowledge that is not equally spread.

A different politically inspired interest of countries and regions for a certain standard, or the misfit of a classification developed for global statistical purposes with the local or regional desired classifications.

The resources both financial and human needed to implement standards, the knowledge and basic data needed as well as the political will are also influencing the level of implementation and operationalization of standards in countries and regions.

In conclusion, though the ‘standards’ are the backbone of modern official statistics it is valid to question if the frequent use of cross-national comparisons dismisses the cultural specificities of a country or region? It is also relevant to ask if the standards that are used to produce the indicators for cross-national comparisons are sufficiently implemented to allow for valid comparisons? And in general, one might question if there is a misfit between the emphasis on and practice of cross-national comparisons by international organizations and the attention to the level and awareness of the implementation of the standards used to produce the indicators on the country level?

The exact statements will come around mid-June online on the SJIAOS discussion platform (www.officialstatistics.com).

Several other discussions are still also online on the SJIAOS Discussion platform (www.officialstatistics.com)

The 11th discussion: Large international projects on the development of official statistics, the 50x2030 Initiative as an example.

The discussion statements can be found at: <https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/11th-discussion-50x2030-initiative-agricultural-and-food-statistics>

With the release of the March 2022 issue of the Journal, the 11th discussion was opened. This discussion is triggered by the special section concerning the 50x2030 Initiative, as presented in this issue (Vol 38, (2022) Nr 1) via seven manuscripts and a guest editorial.

The 50x2030 Initiative to close the agricultural data gap is a multi-partner program that addresses current shortcomings in the quality and availability of agricultural data by transforming country data systems in 50 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America by 2030. The initiative is also one of the largest international projects on the development of statistics ever with planned costs of 500 million US dollars.

In the discussion, via a set of thought-provoking statements, the ambitions, structure, and content of the 50x2030 initiative will be proposed for reflection, as well as the role, structure, and governance aspects of such large international projects.

The 10th discussion: ‘Statistics on difficult to measure population groups: challenges to leave no-one not included is triggered by the manuscript ‘Improving official statistics on stateless people: challenges, solutions, and the road ahead, by Mary Strode (and Melanie Khanna in Volume 37 (2021) Nr 4).

The discussion statements can be found at: <https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/launch-10th-discussion>

The discussion statements will concentrate on the need for such statistical information, the challenges in collecting them as well as aspects of confidentiality and protection in data sharing and it will stress the importance of data to be comparable over contexts and time and to use the same definitions, concepts, questions and methodologies. The discussion will also invite comments on the experiences gained and result achieved

in developing guidelines for measuring and developing statistics for difficult to measure groups.

The ninth discussion on the SJIAOS discussion platform is based on seven statements on ‘New Developments in Training in Official Statistics’

<https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/demand-and-format-training-official-statistics>

In the Statistical Journal of the IAOS, Volume 37 (2021) Nr. 3, on ‘New Developments in Training in Official Statistics’ the recent trends in training in official statistics are discussed in 22 manuscripts. The need and rationale for training in official statistics and the necessity to anticipate recent developments, the requirements needed for training in Data Science, a method for assessing the type and content of this demand for training, an overview of existing training in official statistics initiatives, general trends in learning and training, and a selection of examples of training in domains of official statistics or regions.

The eighth discussion on the SJIAOS discussion platform focuses on the UN Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics

<https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/un-fundamental-principles-official-statistics-suitable-and-current-self-regulatory>

This discussion builds on one hand on the manuscript ‘Assessing compliance with the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: A Maturity Model for Continuous Improvement’ complementing the Fundamental Principles with the assessment of their compliance by countries and regions based on a Maturity Model for Continuous Improvement,¹ illustrating the acceptance of this main framework for high-quality statistics as a still suitable instrument. On the other hand, during the last decennium, there were many events, where the principles were consciously or unconsciously ignored.

The objective of the discussion is twofold: first to generate knowledge and experience with the implementation, application, and effectiveness of the Fundamental Principles, second to inquire especially about major improvements, both to the Fundamental Principles themselves as well as to the compliance and the enforcement of compliance.

¹Milicich, R., T. Dickinson, G. Van Halderen, T. Labor, H. Neven: Assessing compliance with the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: A Maturity Model for Continuous Improvement. In SJIAOS Vol 37 (2021) Nr /2.

The seventh discussion on the SJIAOS discussion platform focuses on Misuse of Statistics, based on the section on Misuse of Statistics in Volume 37 (2021), Nr. 1: Misuse of Statistics; Time to speak out.

<https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/misuse-statistics-time-speak-out>

The seventh discussion focuses on the Misuse of Statistics. It aims to center around comments and contributions around the need for trustworthy information to guide decision-making and enable citizens to understand issues that affect their health and livelihoods. Misuse of statistics is a phenomenon as old as statistics itself. Regulatory systems like the Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics, statistical laws and rules for ethical behavior of statisticians aim to avoid and whenever needed correct forms of misuse of statistics. The data revolution, new data sets (Big Data) and open data all cause an even more complex society with an increasing number of stakeholders that are supposed to comply with these official statistics quality and behavioral requirements. In times of crisis like we are now in at a worldwide scale, ‘invites’ even more than in normal times those who have an interest in specific figures to massage, manipulate or even falsify information. The impact of misuse of statistics or false statistics is apparent. All this makes a discussion on the Misuse of statistics even more current, and surely justifies the second part of the title: Time to speak out.

The sixth discussion on the SJIAOS discussion platform: Successes and challenges of regional cooperation and capacity building in Statistics: the example of the Asia-Pacific region

The sixth discussion on the discussion platform centers around the themes of innovation and transformation in official statistics production and dissemination. The four statements are based on experiences from Asia-Pacific countries as reflected in the special section on the Asia-Pacific Statistics week in Volume 36 (2020) Nr. 4: <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji200771>.

This discussion aims to highlight, beyond the results and successes, challenges, problems, and pitfalls of national and international initiatives to improve the national statistical systems of low and middle-income countries. Participants will be invited to reflect on the role and impact regional organizations like UN ESCAP, international statistical organizations (for example custodian agencies for the SDGs), and support from individual donor countries can have. The discussion

will emphasize experiences and lessons with deploying methods and tools to support the development of national statistical systems at the policy, organizational and individual levels.

You are invited to contribute to the discussions on: www.officialstatistics.com

Closed discussions

The first discussion kicked off in September 2019 is closed for contributions. The closing article for this discussion is published in the December 2020 issue (Vol. 36, 2020, Nr. 4, pp. 1299-1306). See: <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji200722>.

The second discussion kicked off in December 2019, ‘Reflections on the future of official statistics in a digital and globalized society’ was closed in June 2021. The closing article (Walter Radermacher: *Governing-by-the Numbers – Resumé after one and a half years*) can be found in the issue (Vol37, 2021, Nr. 2).

The third discussion kicked off in March 2020 on the Population and Housing Censuses was also in June 2021 closed with the closing article (Jean-Michel Durr: *Population and Housing Censuses: an overdue and old-fashioned instrument or still a modern, severely needed and steadfast tool?*) (Vol. 37, 2021, Nr. 2).

The fourth discussion on the discussion platform was launched in June 2020. The discussion centered around statements taken from the article by Andreas Georgiou: ‘Pre-release access to official statistics is not consistent with professional ethics’ The closing article on this discussion can be found in this issue (Vol 38 (2022), Nr. 2).

The fifth discussion was launched in September 2020 and based on the Special issue The Future of economic statistics. (Volume 36 (2020) Nr. 3): <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji209007>. The closing article for this discussion is published in this issue (Vol. 38, 2022, Nr. 2, pp. 1299-1306). See: <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji200722> In this closing article Ivo Havinga updates us on the state of the reflections on a new statistical business model for economic statistics.

This fifth discussion focused on the four inter-related and mutually reinforcing building blocks of the emerging new statistical business model for economic statistics: outreach and user consultation; statistical framework; institutional and statistical operations, and data

stewardship; and statistical infrastructure and data solutions

The four statements you were invited to react to focused on the most important elements of a new statistical business model that is needed to achieve such a more responsive and agile system of economic statistics. The main question is if we official statisticians and our environment are sufficiently up for the challenges, and adequately focused and resourced to make this new statistical business model a reality.

Two special discussions in the context of the COVID-19 crisis: are also closed.

The discussion Crises, politics and statistics: Official statistics in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, focuses on the roles of Official Statistics in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. It stated the important role that official statistics will have to play in the phase of worldwide recovery from the pandemic and the rapid investments and actions that are needed to fulfill properly this role. It also emphasizes the importance of investing in achieving the objectives of the SDG indicators, the need to develop new statistics and use modern data sources, and last but not least the establishment of a new role of official statistics in the public statistical infrastructure.

The discussion 'Official statistics methods need investments to be robust enough to maintain sufficient product quality in times of economic downturns' is based on statements extracted from the article 'Robust official business statistics methodology during COVID-19-related and other economic downturns' by Paul A. Smith and Boris Lorenc (respectively. University of Southampton; Bright Lynx Research; European Network for Better Establishment Statistics). This article is available as a blog on: <https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/robust-official-business-statistics-methodology-during-covid-19-related-and-other>, as well as a manuscript in Vol. 37 (2021) Nr. 4: <https://content.iospress.com/download/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji210870?id=statistical-journal-of-the-iaos%2Fsji210870>.

Some background on the SJIAOS discussion platform

In August 2019 the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics (SJIAOS) launched a new online platform for discussion on topics of significant relevance for official statistics (www.officialstatistics.com) as part of the SJIAOS website. The discussion platform invites you to contribute to important discussions at a time of your choosing.

The ISI World Statistics Conference, the IAOS conference, and Journals like the *Statistical Journal of the IAOS*, are the traditional platforms where views on new developments and important issues in Official Statistics are exchanged. However, conferences occur only a few times per year, journal issues are released maybe four times per year, and typically only reach specific interest groups. This new online discussion platform of the SJIAOS is an opportunity for anyone working or interested in official statistics, to contribute to topical discussions, at your convenience.

Every three months there is a new discussion item. With each issue of the SJIAOS, a new discussion topic will be launched via a leading article. Statements from this article will then invite you to post your opinion and arguments. Each discussion will run for a year and be closed with a concluding commentary by the article author(s). When fully up and running (after four journal issues), there will be four different discussions topi open for your contribution at any one time.

The discussion platform can be found in a prominent place on the new SJIAOS website (www.officialstatistics.com). Contributions have to be in English, have to be clear and concise, specifically addressing one of the statements, and should not exceed 25 lines. When considered useful, references to a longer text (article, paper) can be added as an attachment. Contributors are required to register on the discussion platform. Anonymous contributions are not appreciated.

The SJIAOS discussion platform editor (James Whitworth) moderates the discussions and the quality of the contributions (but of course not on the positions taken), takes decisions on the integrity of the arguments, and is available for support when needed.