
EDITORIAL

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What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?

Tudorel ANDREI
Ilie DUMITRESCU
Daniela ȘTEFĂNESCU
National Institute of Statistics - Romania

Motto:

*“Not everything that can be counted counts
and not everything that counts can be counted”*

Albert Einstein

BACKGROUND - EXAMPLES

Einstein’s aphorism mentioned above wasn’t meant to colour the text, but we particularly believe it corresponds, in a way, to the topic we plan to introduce during the seminar. Consequently, paraphrasing it, the aphorism suggests a derived one which could read: *“Not any statistics is official statistics and not any official statement that contains a numerical expression is statistics”*.

As to the above statements, the following question normally arises: *“if not any statistics is official statistics, than what does official statistics mean and where does this brand, that represents a special value of statistics, come from?”*

On the other hand, if not any official statement, that contains a numerical expression on a certain economic or social phenomenon, is statistics, then what kind of meaning does it have?

For better understanding the message behind the statements, let’s consider some examples:

Unemployment is known under two dimensions: one representing the registered unemployment, managed by the Ministry of Labour, an indicator that has a specific way of compiling, where the administrative considerations prevail against those requiring statistical qualitative features. It depends essentially on the legislation in force in every country and on the restrictive conditionality imposed by law. The second indicator that characterizes the unemployment is based on statistical methodology, using Labour Force Survey, so called ILO Unemployment.

The following question arises: *“while the ILO unemployment is obviously an official statistics, meeting all the quality criteria assumed by the concept, is the registered unemployment official statistics as well, without relying on all the quality elements and being built on other criteria?”* The answer is, by far, questionable.

Let us take another example: in Romania, data on prognoses and forecasting are given by an institution called the National Commission for Prognosis whose estimates are, naturally, based on statistical data. The prospective data on short, medium and long term, elaborated and published by the above said institution, are, of course, official data but, in the authors’ opinion, they are not official statistics. However, from what we know, there are statistical institutions in Europe that make such forecasts. If this is the case, do the same data remain with the above status or do they assume, by right, the phrase “official statistics”?

A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT APPROACH

It is generally known that, with a well-defined purpose in mind, political decision-makers often resort to a statistical estimate (usually positive) of economic growth, such as *“we expect an economic growth of over 2.5% by the end of this year”*. This is accompanied by a warning *“let us, however, wait for the official figures of the National Institute of Statistics”*. Such a statement from a politician contains two essential elements: firstly, the “estimate” announced by the politician in question is rather a wish, possibly a perception, based on previous real data or even on statistical elements and inputs that he actually doesn’t refer to and which we will never know. Does the figure pronounced by the politician belong to statistics? Does it belong to official statistics? We shall let each of you to consider that.

The second element contained in our politician’s statement is by far the most important one since it points out the authority of the National Institute of Statistics, as producer of official statistics, implicitly recognising the professional independence of the INS.

PRIVATE STATISTICS COULD, ON ITS TURN, BE OFFICIAL?

A notable Romanian researcher conducted an exceptionally valuable and comprehensive study on which he has worked for over 30 years. This two-volume work of more than 1000 pages aimed to determine Romania's Gross Domestic Product over a rather long period, 1862-2010. In the study we find three categories of data: official statistical data for the 1990-2010 period, which were taken as such from the publications of the National Institute of Statistics; data for the planned economy period, which were recreated through his own effort by converting the data from the Material Production System to the System of Accounts; and data for the period prior to 1945, which were obtained based on original scientific models that gave the results at least the value of reasonable estimates, difficult to contradict without conducting a similar exercise. Are the statistical data of the GDP series for the entire period official statistics? Are they exclusively statistics? Or are they a combination between official and unofficial statistical data?

Under such hypotheses, the perception would be that we are not dealing with official historical statistical data but with data that can be useful to some categories of users, particularly researchers, and to some others, if a certain event would lead to a retrospective vision of a long period of time, making them turn to the data of the study in the absence of other information. In the meantime, we can't avoid the answer to a question: whether a similar study had been conducted by the National Institute of Statistics, would it have been interpreted the same way or would it have had, through the institution it originated from, the official statistics status?

STATISTICS IN GENERAL VERSUS OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Of course, the paper does not aim to define statistics, which would be far too ambitious and would take too much space. But certainly we believe that the definition of official statistics is a topical issue, which needs to be dealt with. Such a necessity becomes even more obvious today, when the task of producing official statistics can no longer be the objective belonging exclusively to only one institution as official statistics producer, even being it a National Institute of Statistics. It is probably useless to mention that, in the historical as well as in the relatively near past, official statistics was the only responsibility of the national statistical office. There were two reasons for this. First, that "statistics" originate from "state", etymologically depicting a science

meant to serve the state in administrating its affairs in the economic and social field, environmental protection, etc. Second, the national statistical office had almost full monopoly over this area, considering that other institutions with an interest in statistics in general and in official statistics in particular did not exist or were limited in number.

Nowadays, the generally recognised producers of official statistics are the national statistical offices and the national central banks that justify this quality due to tradition and recognition. Alongside, another category of producers of (implicitly official) statistics joined the above due to the specific nature of the data and information that only these institutions could produce or as a result of the incapacity of the national statistical institutes to meet all the needs for statistical information, including official information, through their own resources.

THINKING AND REASONING ABOUT OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Under these circumstances, a series of questions aiming at defining the boundaries of official statistics as clearly as possible arise. The resulting answers would tell us who the producers of official statistics are, what criteria statistics should meet to have the official statistics status, who is entitled to give this “brand” to the statistics produced by various authorities, agencies, etc., what should be done so that the official statistics status would be accepted by society, how intense should be the shift from the statistics identified as evidence-based information to official statistics, etc.

Here we can add events that we expect to occur in the statistical system, such as those related to the improvement of technological performance, an increased use of administrative sources, the use of open and big data, etc.

OUR OWN ATTEMPT TO TEST THE OPINION OF THE USERS

The President of the National Institute of Statistics has initiated a periodic dialogue with mass-media representatives, particularly journalists from news agencies, radio and TV stations, aiming to collect the messages of this category of users in order to improve the image of the INS and increase the credibility of the Institute. On this occasion, specific issues are discussed concerning their degree of satisfaction with the official statistical data produced and disseminated by the INS. They are asked for opinions about some of the major actions carried out by the INS (i.e. the Population and Housing Census, the Agricultural Census, etc.), their point of view about the quality of

statistical indicators in general, with a focus on sensitive indicators, such as the GDP, the Consumer Price Index, unemployment, the industrial production index, indicators on the level of salaries and pensions, living conditions, etc. Recently, with a view to producing this paper, issues related to their vision of official statistics have also been discussed.

To the questions they were asked, journalists responded as follows:

- a large majority of the journalists (over 95%) considered the data produced by the National Institute of Statistics as official data. Some concerns about the quality of these data were also expressed, suggesting, for instance, that in terms of perception, improvements should be made to the Consumer Price Index and other indicators on living conditions;
- in the category of “other institutions that produce official statistics” they included the National Bank of Romania, as well as public administration institutions. In this context, they pointed out that, if a certain indicator is produced by several institutions, among which the INS, the official data are the ones of the INS, and the other data are merely statistical data based on own calculations, which are meant to serve these institutions’ internal management purposes;
- they also expressed the idea that, to be official, statistics should meet strict quality and coverage criteria, and it should be based on methodologies in compliance with international standards (approximately 54%). The remaining 44% refrained from answering this question.

HOW COULD WE DEFINE AND STRENGTHEN THE SYNTAGM “OFFICIAL STATISTICS”?

Summarising the statements and the examples presented, we tried to reach the expected goal that is to frame, or rather delineate the scope of official statistics from the one of statistics in general and from the administrative sources. The latter are those can be taken as such for statistical purposes or just as a result of special processing of “cleaning” the elements that separate them from the qualitative requirements of official statistics. In this respect, we turned to possible alternatives that would be the basis of official statistics:

1. Defining the official statistics according to the data producer nature;

The following are hereby envisaged:

- (a) institutions that qualify by right as producers of official statistics (principled statistical production) and are de facto recognised,

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- their activity involving the production of official statistical data - central statistical offices that are also the coordinators of national statistical systems;
- (b) institutions which, without having as main activity the production of statistics, have a strong statistical component (National Central Banks, the Ministry of Justice for crime statistics, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture, etc., other public authorities and institutions, national and local agencies that produce data exclusively for certain areas, non-governmental agencies, professional associations, etc.);
 - (c) other institutions, research or academic institutions that are compiling statistics either independently or together with government agencies;
 - (d) institutions that are drawing up statistical papers intended for official statistics, on contract basis, on behalf of a central public institution, typically the INS.

In an early stage, Eurostat and the draft amendments to Regulation 223 as the law of European statistics entailed, for the EU Member States, a clear disjunction between national statistical offices and other producers of European statistics, statistics which, ipso facto, are official statistics. In this regard, the Member States have communicated, based on certain criteria suggested by Eurostat, the lists of other official statistics producers, these lists being posted on the Eurostat website.

If not only the grand totals of data at European level, but also the data produced at national level by countries and submitted to the Commission envisaging the compilation of European statistics are both official then, naturally, this fact should be also reflected in national legislation as well. As a result, it also determined us, in Romania, to insert among certain improvements to our statistical law, that we have recently submitted to the Government, the following text: “the **official statistics producers** are: the National Institute of Statistics and the National Bank of Romania, each of them for the own competence area, as well as and other producers of official statistics; **other producers of official statistics** - can be the public authorities and institutions that develop, under the INS coordination, produce and disseminate, in compliance with the European Code of Practice, official statistical data mentioned in the National Statistical Programme. The list of official statistics producers from Romania, intended to be submitted to the European Commission, is updated and communicated by the INS, as coordinator of official statistics in Romania and the unique contact point with the Commission (Eurostat)”.

2. Official statistics determined in terms of indicators importance for all the user categories;

Such an alternative that would be the basis for promoting the envisaged data in the official statistics category is, of course, based on some pros and cons. The pros would be related to the fact that official statistics could be defined in terms of data and leading indicators, first of all as the foundation of macro and micro economic decisions, among which many of the decisions taken at international and national level would be placed. This would also include the categories of indicators defined at international level on summits occasion, such as the Millennium Development Goals, the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Stiglitz Report, etc.

The cons would be those related to the difficulties of covering all indicators that have the features of official statistics, but are either details of the indicators from the first category or they just have a national, regional or local importance.

3. Official statistics, from the perspective of exclusive relationships with governmental needs, including all institutions of central and local administrations;

The favourable hypothesis of such assertion would be related to the fact that the term “official” lead us, by its very nature, to the official area, in other words, to the State administration. It is, however, easily understandable that this would practically exclude from official statistics area the requirements of all other statistical data user categories that also claim their right to use the official statistics.

CRITERIA SUGGESTED TO BE MET BY STATISTICS TO QUALIFY FOR THE STATUS OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

The current state of art requires new definition / redefinition of criteria for considering the role, contents and coverage of official statistics. Among these, the following preliminary criteria and limits of official statistics values could, in the authors' opinion, inter alia, be envisaged:

- De facto recognition of a statistical product as being generated in order to serve the entire spectrum of the society, that means all the categories of users of statistics;
- The production covered by is to be based on the fundamental principles and the quality criteria, as, for example, of the European Statistics Code of Practice;

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- The official statistics governance be ensured by means of a sufficiently strong provisions of the law, allowing for its professional independence and recognition of its role and importance as a fundamental pillar of the society;
 - Identification of the official statistics products under a unitary, coherent and logical coordination of a centre with well-defined position as official statistics state body in a democratic state, i.e. normally national statistical office;
 - Ensuring consistency and congruence, transparency and visibility of the official statistics process with the one of observing individual information privacy;
 - Identifying the most adequate systems of involving official statistics producers in the process of inter-institutional collaboration and ensuring citizens' unrestricted access to information.

**WHO AND ON WHAT BASIS IS ENTITLED
TO ASSIGN THE OFFICIAL STATISTICS “BRAND” TO
STATISTICS PRODUCED BY VARIOUS AUTHORITIES,
AGENCIES ETC?**

Prior to answering this question, we ought to anticipate another one “is it required a validation and certification to be specifically assigned by someone or something?” The concerted actions at European level related to undertakings at national level would suggest that, in principle, assigning the official statistics brand to certain statistics or to certain official statistics producers is to be taken into account. In this case, the only institution entitled to take this role is the one defined as the coordinator of official statistics, i.e. the INS. This may also involve some other bodies, e.g. Statistical Councils. Their functions in this direction would be to attract in the statistical circuit the statistical data producers and to include them in statistical programmes. The official statistics brand would come as a matter of course since, once included in the programme, the statistical data producers and their activities would be subordinated, by default, to the basic criteria included in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the European Code of Practice for the Member States, as well as to other norms governing the statistical process, thus assigning them the fundamental society pillar status and the official statistics brand.