Stakeholders Involvement in the Statistical Value Chain: Bridging the Gap between Citizens and Official Statistics

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INTRODUCTION

One of the starting points of our round table was the citizens' growing suspicion vis-à-vis the official statistics, suspicion which would be in line with our 'post-truth' and anti-intellectualist era. It is not sure that this scepticism is a new and growing phenomenon among the citizens, but what is quite sure is that the distrust with regard to expertise is more and more developed by politicians all over the world and more and more mediatised. It can be acknowledged that statistics have regularly been used by politicians or managers (from public and private sectors) to mislead people, to justify political and economic decisions pretending them to be evidence-based, or to make them so difficult to understand that non-expert people will not be able to question the choices and decisions which are made. Hence, statistics have been part of the system of domination. The first thing to do to bridge the gap between citizens and statistics will be to stop using them in that way and for that kind of purpose. However, this is far beyond the control of the official statistics in themselves. This paper, based on the works on quantification done by French social scientists, discusses what Eurostat is able to do to reduce this gap.

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVEMENT IN THE DESIGN PROCESS: TOWARDS A CO-CONSTRUCTION APPROACH

From its beginning[1], Sociology has been using statistics to analyse and understand society.

However, till very recently, very few studies have questioned the figures they used, as if these figures were simply measuring a pre-existing reality. To prevent this 'realist epistemology', Alain Desrosières, who is the founder of a new way of thinking about statistics[2], proposed to talk not about 'measurement" but about "quantifying process': 'The use of the verb 'to measure' is misleading because it overshadows the conventions at the foundation of quantification. The verb 'quantify', in its transitive form ('make into a number', 'put a figure on', 'numericize'), presupposes that a series of prior equivalence conventions has been developed and made explicit (…). Measurement, strictly understood, comes afterwards (…). From this viewpoint, quantification splits into two moments: convention and measurement'. (Desrosières 2008a, p. 10-11). The first part of this paper will focus on that convention moment and will examine its implications for the design process of official statistics.

STATISTICS, DEFINITIONS, VALUES AND LOCAL REALITIES

Statistics are based on a definition of the population expected to be counted or a definition of the phenomena planned to be measured. These definitions are the bedrock of the conventions mentioned above, and they have been built through a social and historical process[3]. The works of the Stiglitz Commission have, for example, showed that GDP is based on a very restricted conception of wealth. While it accurately captures the growth or contraction of the overall economy, it is a crude tool for describing social health and for grasping

environmental issues. GDP was particularly relevant when environment did not seem to be such an important issue and when economic growth was quite in line with social progress. But nowadays alternative indicators seem to be needed and new conventions are emerging.

This can be briefly illustrated by two other examples from the Europe 2020 strategy. One of the headline indicators is the employment rate for the age group 20 to 64; this rate was of 70.3% in 2008, the target for 2020 is to increase it at least to 75%. But what is 'employment'? 'Persons in employment are those who, during the reference week, did any work for pay or profit, or were not working but had a job from which they were temporarily absent. 'Work' means any work for pay or profit during the reference week, even for as little as one hour'[4]. It is a very extensive conception of what a job is. Many people would not consider they have a job because they have worked one hour during some week. The age limits are also part of the conventions. The possibility of raising the upper age limit has been considered in 2009-2010 during the setting process of a new overall employment rate target for 2020: 'Consideration was given to possibly extending the upper age range slightly, by one or two years (e.g. to 65 or 66 years), (…) to reinforce the policy message of the importance of active ageing.'[5]

This example clearly shows that statistics are built on a specific conception of the phenomena referred to, and are the bearer of choices for society and hence of values. Choosing and designing indicators are not at all technical decisions but very political issues. It is the reason why the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, within the EU's institutions (including the Parliament) and beyond, is so important. All the more so as statistics are not inert objects; statistics can act, in the sense that social actors partly orient their action in relation to them[6].

The last example will show the importance of including stakeholders from 'civil society'. Poverty reduction is a key policy component of the Europe 2020 strategy. The poverty strategy target is monitored with the headline indicator 'people at risk of poverty or social exclusion'. This indicator is based on a multidimensional concept, incorporating three sub-indicators on monetary poverty ('People at risk of poverty after social transfers'), material deprivation ('Severely materially deprived people') and low work intensity ('People living in households with very low work intensity')[7]. Although proclaimed as multidimensional, this concept of poverty is mainly based on material and economic criteria. Some immaterial poverties are not considered, for example the lack of education or the insufficient schooling. Furthermore, even if some immaterial goods like education were taken into account, the perspective would still be based on resources and lacks of these resources. Amartya Sen's works have questioned this conception of poverty that ignores the conditions for one to be able to convert resources into capabilities[8]. For example, in order to have a capability/capacity to vote, citizens first need some 'functionings'. These 'functionings' can range from the very broad, such as the availability of education, to the very specific, such as transportation to the polls. Who knows what are the most significant problems for 'poor people' and what are the barriers and impediments to the transformation of their rights into real capacities? The people who have experienced these barriers and impediments directly (people who are living or have lived in poor conditions) or indirectly (people who work with people who are living in poor conditions, especially people from NGOs, or people who are doing research and especially qualitative research, that is the social scientists working on the domain).

As Robert Salais puts it, the conventions underlying statistics 'are profoundly marked by historical, institutional and national idiosyncrasies. (…) This dimension is completely neglected when doing international comparisons'[9], and, I will add, when designing indicators down to their minor details. Statistics are about social reality; it is what is expected from them. To construct them relevantly, local knowledge is

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(⁴) *Eurostat, Smarter, greener, more inclusive? Indicators to support the Europe 2020 Strategy, 2015 Edition, p.28.*
(⁵) *J. Medeiros & P. Minty, Analytical support in the setting of EU employment rate targets for 2020, Working Paper 1/2012, Brussels: European Commission (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion), 2012, p. 15.*
(⁶) *Desrosières analysed these "retroaction" phenomena especially in his last writings, brought together in a book published posthumously: Prouver et gouverner. Une analyse politique des statistiques publiques, Paris, La Découverte, 2014.*
(⁷) *Eurostat, op. cit., p. 136-145.*
(⁸) *A. Sen, Commodities and Capabilities (1st ed.). New York, NY: North-Holland Sole distributors for the U.S.A. and Canada, Elsevier Science Publishing Co, 1985; (2004), "Capability and well-being", in Nussbaum, Martha; Sen, Amartya, The quality of life, New York: Routledge, pp. 30–53; "Equality of what?", in MacMurrin, Sterling M., The Tanner lectures on human values, 4 (2nd ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 195–220.*
(⁹) *R. Salais, "On the Correct (and Incorrect) Use of Indicators in Public Action", Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal, vol. 27, 2006, p. 237-256 (quotation from p. 238).*

POWER
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needed. This can be clearly seen in the case of the discussions between the French Treasury and the Ministry of Education about the delimitations of the indicator measuring the results of doctoral studies[10]. The two ministries agreed on measuring this result using the rate of PhD students defending their thesis within 3 years. But the Treasury planned to calculate it strictly confining it to three academic years, so from the 1st September of year n to the 31st August of year n+3. They were unaware that, in France, a great majority of PhD viva take place from October to December. The Ministry of Education hence proposed to calculate the rate from the 1st September of year n to the 31st December of year n+3. The proposition of the Treasury would have reduced the result by more than 20 percentage points for irrelevant reasons[11].

HOW TO DO IT?

Including stakeholders in the design of indicators is a demanding process. It can only be organised through working groups on specific issues, such as migrations, poverty, employment and unemployment. The basic idea is to bring together representatives of Eurostat's relevant directorates and units, representatives of EU's relevant DGs and committees (Employment Committee, Social Protection Committee) and of their indicators sub-groups, European MPs, NGO's and/or (depending on the subjects) trade unions' representatives (possibly chosen through the European Economic and Social Committee), and some academics experts on the field[12]. The meetings minutes of the working groups should be, at least, publicised. NGOs and trade unions could be involved in working with people who have experienced the phenomenon that is to be analysed: poverty, migration, unemployment; as the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN), including for example the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) and ATD Fourth World, sponsored by the European Commission, tried to do at the European Economic and Social Committee in 2002[13]. The working groups could work on different scenarios, proposing to European political levels different indicators

potentially differently designed, since, as was pointed out earlier, choosing and designing indicators are highly political issues.

Building statistics in this way would allow official statistics to be both recognised and relevant, be meaningful to people, and help to bridge the gap between citizens and statistics. The people working in NGOs and trade unions and the academics doing research on the field are particularly aware of emerging problems and phenomena. Involving them in the process is therefore a way of keeping official statistics relevant to social reality and useful for public policies.

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNICATION AND DISSEMINATION PROCESS

COMMUNICATION: PUBLISHING AN EASY-TO-READ SERIES TRANSLATED IN ALL EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

Most of the documents using statistics in a rigorous and meticulous way are very complicated to understand. Alongside with complex and comprehensive documents and reports, Eurostat could present accessible format, brief (6 pages?) and easy-to-read analysis on some important issues (migrations, poverty, employment and unemployment, education, etc.). These documents should be publicised in all European languages and put on the most visible webpages. Eurostat provides the series of 'Statistics explained' which are very useful, but which are still complicated, quite technical and available either in three languages (English, French and German) or, for most of them, only in English; their translation into all European languages is a crucial issue. There is also a scope for improving their comprehensibility; as experts on statistics cannot possess every talents, the production of these documents could be given to external services or Eurostat could try to develop teaching and pedagogy skills internally. Finally, groups of users and stakeholders

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(10) I analysed the controversies between these two ministries during the designing process of performance indicators for higher education and research in : C. Eyraud, « Reforming under Pressure : Governing and Funding French Higher Education by Performance Indicators (2006-2012) », in Mattéi P. (Ed.), University Adaptation in Difficult Economic Times, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 75-88; "Archeology of a Quantification Device. Quantification, Policies and Politics" in Mennicken A. and Salais R., Power through Numbers. Quantification and Democracy, Oxford University Press, Forthcoming.

(11) This example also shows the absolute need, if one wants to understand statistical figures, to go into details of definitions, delimitations and methods of calculation (Eyraud, 2008). It is one of the reasons why international comparisons using statistical data are so difficult to handle properly.

(12) The working groups of the Conseil National de l'Information statistique (CNIS) have been in France very efficient for producing relevant statistics and knowledge on, for example, poor housing and homelessness issues.

(13) Revue Quart Monde. Dossiers et documents, n°10, 2002 :http://www.editionsquartmonde.org/rqm/sommaire.php?id=4365

could be involved in a positive critique of the documents produced to check and improve their understandability. The documents could also be produced by the working groups in charge of designing the indicators, as users and stakeholders are already included in them.

These documents should explain the conventions which the statistics are based on, showing that different conceptions of the phenomenon would be possible. They also should clearly explain the strengths and weaknesses of the statistics used, their limits and the challenges of interpreting them[14] especially in a cross-national perspective. It is about improving pedagogy, including that of international comparisons. By clearly explaining all this, one appeals to the intelligence of citizens, empowering them, strengthening their

confidence in official statistics and developing their acceptance of complexity.

IMPROVING STATISTICAL LITERACY

This is the last issue to complete the process of production and dissemination of official statistics. I will be very brief on that, since several other papers deal with the subject. It could be done by building on and supporting current programs, initiatives and networks as the International Statistical Literacy Project (ISLP) initiated by the International Association for Statistical Education (IASE), as the Steering Group on Statistical Dissemination and Communication of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and obviously by building on the project for Digital communication, User analytics and Innovative products (DIGICOM).

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(14) For example explaining that an increase in the number of accidents at work may mean an increase of accidents at work reported (which is quite positive) rather than an increase of accidents at work which really happened.