

**INTERNATIONAL STATISTICS FOR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DECISION MAKERS:  
NEW TOOLS TO IMPROVE THE OECD COMMUNICATION POLICY**

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*The OECD has recently defined a “new vision” for its statistical activities, deciding to develop a new statistical information system based on a corporate strategy. One of the targets of this strategy is to increase the positive perception of OECD statistical work within the Organisation and users in Member countries (primarily in ministerial authorities, OECD Delegations, national statistical offices, media) and in other international organisations. To achieve this target, one of the actions commenced by the OECD has been the definition of a new policy for increasing the external communication to users and policy makers about the statistical activities and results. The paper describes the characteristics of this policy, focusing on the aspects more relevant for the relationships with private and public decision makers.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has a very long tradition in statistics and plays an important role in the international statistical community. In particular, the OECD Secretariat requires a wide range of comparable statistics for its ongoing work of monitoring developments in Member countries and in key non-Member countries. These activities are normally developed in co-operation with national statistical offices (NSOs), central banks, other government agencies and other international organisations. The OECD also disseminates a very large amount of statistics to external users. To ensure comparability and reliability of these statistics the Secretariat promotes, in co-operation with other international organisations, the adoption of international statistical standards and best methodological practice.

The OECD currently has a high reputation for both the quality of its analytical work and for the statistics that underpin that work. The network of national and international experts created, through the Committees and Working Parties, gives the Organisation the possibility of launching research activities (and data collections) on new topics, playing a leading role in producing new statistics and developing new definitions, classifications and standards. However, with the expansion in the Organisation’s cross-cutting activities and products there is a need for significant improvement in internal co-ordination across the whole range of its statistical activities (data collection, transformation, dissemination). Also, despite improvements in internal co-ordination that have taken place over recent years, there is emerging internal and external criticism about some of the Organisation’s statistical activities and some of its statistical products.

In order to improve the current situation of statistics at OECD a project for the reform of the Organisation’s statistical system was launched at the beginning of 2001. One of the main targets of this strategy is the improvement of accessibility to OECD statistics and the enlargement of statistical information disseminated for free on Internet. To achieve these goals several initiatives have been undertaken to develop new communication and dissemination tools. This paper presents the main aspects of this initiative, linking them to the role that the Organisation plays in the international context to promote the use of statistics for policy-making processes and the statistical knowledge across OECD Member and Non-member countries.

**THE ORGANISATION OF THE OECD AND THE NEW STATISTICAL STRATEGY**

The organisation of statistical activities at the OECD is based on a “decentralised approach”, which means that various statistics are developed by the Directorates responsible for analytical studies and policy analyses. The Statistics Directorate was created in 1992 with the following mandate: (a) to improve the supply of relevant and timely statistical information to analysts and policy makers inside and outside the Organisation; (b) to develop international statistical standards, systems and classifications in collaboration with other international statistical agencies; (c) to improve co-ordination between the statistical activities of the OECD and those of other agencies; and (d) to provide a mechanism for co-ordinating statistical activities within the Organisation. The Statistics Directorate took responsibility for macroeconomic statistics and for

some social (i.e. labour force) and business statistics, playing a fundamental role in promoting internal co-ordination and external co-operation with other international organisations.

Today, the OECD statistical activities are mainly concentrated in five Directorates:

- Statistics Directorate (STD);
- Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs;
- Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry;
- Directorate for Financial, Fiscal and Enterprise Affairs;
- Environment Directorate.

Other important statistics, but more limited in quantitative terms, are produced by the International Energy Agency, the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency, the European Conference of Ministers of Transport, the Economics Department, the Development Co-Operation Directorate, the Public Management Service, the Directorate for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries and the Territorial Development Service. In this framework, the Service for Information Technology and Network Services (ITN) and the Public Affairs and Communications Directorate (PAC) play an important role. The former co-operates with STD and other Directorates in developing the statistical databases and other IT infrastructures for conducting statistical activities, while the latter, PAC, is responsible for the dissemination of all OECD products, including statistical data and publications. Finally, ITN and PAC developed jointly "SourceOECD" (the electronic gateway for accessing all OECD publications) and the new OECD web site, which are very important tools for the implementation of the new OECD dissemination policy for statistics.

The management of a decentralised system is always difficult, and the OECD is no exception. The main concerns relate to the following aspects: weak and inefficient co-ordination in data collection; insufficient coherency and (sometimes) quality of the statistical information published; inappropriate inferences from cross-country data; unnecessary overlap between OECD and other international and supranational organisations in some areas. Over the last five years, some actions were implemented to improve the situation, but despite these improvements, it is fair to say that there is still considerable room for improvement in some critical areas. This consideration pushed the OECD into launching a program to reform its statistical organisation, in order to improve the efficiency of statistical activities and to enhance the quality of its statistics. This program was defined in early-2001 and covers three years 2001-2003. The main objectives of the new OECD statistical strategy would be, over the medium term, to:

- improve the quality of OECD statistics;
- increase the efficiency of OECD statistical activities;
- improve the quality of human resource of OECD statistical staff;
- enhance the role of the OECD in the international statistical network.

The implementation of the new strategy is clearly a multi-annual project, but with several short-term actions and expected results. The basic assumption is the maintenance of the current decentralised organisation of statistical activities, which (theoretically and practically) has as many advantages and disadvantages as a centralised one. In order to achieve the first two targets mentioned above, it is absolutely necessary to adopt a different perspective, implementing a comprehensive OECD statistical information system, which is able to manage decentralised statistical activities in a general co-ordinated framework.

A statistical information system can be defined as a structure composed of sub-systems which collect, process, store, retrieve, analyse and disseminate statistical data. The information system architecture (ISA) of a statistical organisation is a common framework within which different sub-systems have their respective roles, and interact mutually. Without entering into technical details, it is important to say that this approach has been adopted by the OECD as a reference in developing some short-term actions. A necessary condition for the development of a statistical information system is the definition of a model of "governance". This model has to define the role of all players (substantive Directorates, Statistics Directorate, etc.) and the rules for the "political" management of the system. From this point of view, there is a general consensus on the principle that STD has to:

- define (in co-operation with other Directorates) general guidelines for the development of statistical activities (data and metadata collection, storage and dissemination) to improve the quality of all OECD statistics;
- ensure the exchange of relevant information across the Organisation;

- develop (in co-operation with other Directorates) common infrastructures for conducting statistical activities;
- co-ordinate the external relationships with other international organisations and with national statistical authorities;
- promote and organise (in co-operation with the relevant OECD bodies) the development of training activities for statisticians.

#### NEW TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF OECD STATISTICS

In the area of communication and dissemination of statistics new initiatives have been undertaken in 2001 and, from an organisational point of view, they have represented a good test for verifying advantages and implementation problems of the new OECD strategy for statistics. In particular, five main projects have been developed:

- a) the publication of statistical press releases containing estimates for key monthly and quarterly economic indicators;
- b) the publication of the monthly "OECD Statistical Newsletter";
- c) the publication of "Statistics Brief", a new occasional statistical publication;
- d) the creation of a "statistical portal" in the framework of the new OECD web site ([www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org));
- e) the new Intranet site for OECD statisticians and analysts.

In September 2001, the OECD began publishing *regular statistical press releases about economic indicators* (GDP, composite leading indicators, standardised unemployment rates, consumer prices and international trade). Press releases contain data for the following areas and countries: OECD, G7, EU, EMU, United States, Japan, Canada, Germany, Italy, France and United Kingdom. In general, OECD totals are estimated by the Secretariat to fill gaps which exist in data provided by individual countries, while figures for EU and EMU are normally provided by Eurostat<sup>1</sup>. This set of press releases will be gradually enlarged during 2002, when a calendar of releases will be announced in advance (following the rules of IMF Special Data Dissemination Standards). The decision to begin publishing statistical press releases was taken in order to achieve three main targets:

- to improve the public awareness about OECD statistics, in particular about variables which are normally used by financial analysts and economists;
- to improve the (external and internal) visibility of the OECD statistical work;
- to establish clear rules for the dissemination of statistics to the public, according to the best practices adopted at national and international levels.

The monthly *OECD Statistical Newsletter* is a short electronic publication (12-14 pages) which contains brief articles about OECD activities and projects, as well as articles written by national statisticians to illustrate relevant projects being carried out by national statistical authorities. The Newsletter is articulated in the following main sections:

- an editorial, containing feature articles particularly relevant for the development of statistics at international level;
- articles on innovative statistical projects carried out by the OECD Secretariat or by national statistical authorities;
- news in brief about OECD activities (outcome of meetings, new data collections, etc.);
- a brief description of OECD publications just published;
- a section specifically devoted to present new on-line developments (new statistical web sites or databases developed by OECD and national authorities);
- the list of forthcoming OECD statistical meetings;
- "the database of the month", a two-pages description of a specific database released by the OECD.
- Feedback received from users is very positive and several thousands now receive the electronic version of the Newsletter. Very positive feedback was received from national Delegations to the OECD, which are now kept informed about latest statistical developments.

*Statistics Brief* is an occasional (4-8 pages) publication which intends to present important statistical issues to the international community of statisticians, economists, policy makers and researchers. By doing so we hope to contribute to a better understanding of statistical issues, in relation to economic, social and environmental topics, relevant for policy makers and analysts. "Statistics Brief" typically reports on statistical measurement problems, new statistical outputs and statistical developments using, as much as possible, a language accessible to non-experts. It also provides a glossary and a reading list on where to find more methodological details, related databases and supplementary information about other OECD statistical and analytical activities and products. It has been designed to complement the existing OECD *Policy Brief* series. It is noticeable that after one month since the publication of the first issue of "Statistics Brief" (on measurement of international trade in goods and services), the file containing the publications is the fourth most downloaded file from the OECD web site, an absolutely unexpected result!

A fourth (and more complex) initiative has been the creation of a *Statistics Portal* in the framework of the new OECD web site ([www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)), launched on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2001. The Statistics Portal provides, for the first time, an OECD web site exclusively dedicated to statistical information. In addition, a Statistics button at the top of the screen permits access with a single click to the statistical information available for any particular OECD activity. On the old web site access to statistics was very difficult because the user was obliged to follow a very winding road (through the home page of each directorate) to find data on a particular subject and the main navigation occurred "by directorate" and not "by theme". Now it is possible to navigate across all statistical pages following a unique classification, derived from the UN classification of statistical themes, based on three levels of detail (for example, national accounts, annual national accounts, etc.). The OECD Statistics Portal has been designed to become a one-stop shop for data, indicators and other statistical information as we continue to add content. A particular effort is under way to enrich the Portal with free access to on-line OECD databases. In that context, for the first two months, the OECD Statistics Portal has provided free access to the on-line databases of SourceOECD, and more than 1000 new users accessed to the latter. The Portal will contain a selection of available statistics for each theme, which will be accessible free, while a more general analysis of the current dissemination and pricing policy for statistics has been initiated as part of a wider review of the OECD general dissemination policy.

The new Statistics Portal also offers features that will facilitate co-operation amongst the world-wide statistical community working with the OECD. Electronic Discussion Groups and detailed pages on OECD statistical meetings are already available. Visitors can tailor the OECD site to their own needs and receive email alerts to keep up-to-date on specific topics ("My OECD"). More features will be added at the beginning of 2002, such as a glossary of statistical terms and a detailed view of OECD statistical activities. Since the end of September, when the new site was launched, the Statistics Portal is largely the most accessed page of the OECD web site: more than 50,000 visits were registered in three months, while the second most accessed theme (taxation) registered about 16,000 visits. Normally, more than 400 daily accesses are registered for the Portal. Finally, the new *Intranet site* for statisticians and analysts, developed in October-November 2001, intends to be a working tool for supporting the research work of the Secretariat and for increasing its efficiency. It has been designed as a gateway to several internal and external sources of:

- statistical guidelines (manuals and handbooks, classifications, definitions adopted at international level, etc.);
- data and metadata produced within the Secretariat, in other international organisations and in Member countries;
- IT tools for conducting statistical operations (seasonal adjustment, data verification, etc.);
- the OECD statistical program of work (who does what, calendar of releases, etc.);
- reference documents for OECD statistics (guidelines, agendas and minutes of statistical meetings, etc.).

The site was launched 3<sup>rd</sup> December and in 20 days more than 1,000 visitors had used it. It is still under development and new facilities will be released at the beginning of 2002.

## TOWARDS A NEW DISSEMINATION POLICY

The initiatives briefly described have contributed substantially to enhance the visibility of statistics across the OECD network (Council, national delegations, Secretariat, national experts, etc.) and called OECD decision makers' to pay more attention to statistics. In a sense, some have discovered that statistical issues can be of interest, that statistics is more than a set of tables, and that some statistical initiatives and problems could be very relevant to them. On the other hand, they have largely increased the visibility of OECD statistical activities outside the Organisation, enlarging its usual network of people involved in statistical matters. An important outcome of this strategy has been that in July 2001 the Secretary General of the OECD listed statistics as one of the priorities for the organisation in 2002. In November 2001 the Council of the OECD endorsed this proposal, approving the proposed increase of the 2002 budget for statistics, and invited the Chief Statistician to report regularly to the Council about the results of the strategy. Today, several OECD officials' say, statistics has reached the highest profile within the Organisation for many years, in terms both of internal visibility and political support.

This example shows that a proactive communication policy about statistical matters can really affect the way in which policy makers look at statistics, deciding to invest more resources in this field. But this only a very partial result: the key issue, in fact, is to stimulate a real jump in the usage of statistical results by decision's makers, mainly public officials, businesses and citizens. To do this, a relevant change in the statistical dissemination policy is necessary.

Today, the general publishing policy of the OECD achieves the following objectives:

- to disseminate, as widely as possible, the results of the Organisation's work in order to contribute to increasing the visibility of the Organisation and its work throughout the world;
- to contribute to enhancing to the greatest extent possible the reputation and credibility of the OECD as an authoritative source in the field of statistics, research and economic analyses and recommendations for governmental actions;
- to help build support in Member countries and in non-Member countries for the policies that Member governments have agreed upon within the framework of the OECD.

The OECD currently applies a very restrictive policy in terms of free distribution of statistics, mainly because the revenues of publications contribute to reduce OECD Member countries' contributes to the OECD budget. Very roughly, for 2002 the gross revenues for publications and other products are expected to be M€12 (excluding IEA). Statistical products (publications, databases, CD-ROMs, etc.) could give a gross revenue of about M€4 (33% of the total). In particular, 25% of this revenue could derive from SourceOECD, 25% from CD-ROMs and diskettes, 30% from STD paper publications, and the remaining 20% from data clients and paper publications from other Directorates. The net revenues are about M€3.5, and a relevant part of them are paid to Member countries.

This policy is quite different from those applied in several OECD countries, where the character of official statistics as a key "public good" element has been recently reinforced, providing a catalyst for statistical offices to substantially enlarge their distribution of free statistics on the Internet. Even in those countries where rigid and strict rules were applied in disseminating statistics, almost all statistics are now disseminated free on the Internet. In some countries, this change has been presented as part of the more general national e-government policy and the loss of revenue for NSOs due to this passage has been fully compensated by governments, through an increase of public allocations to statistical offices.

In particular, national e-government policies have been launched to support the evolution of national societies, to improve the efficiency of the public administration, to minimise the "digital divide" across citizens, etc. In this framework, statistics plays a fundamental role in filling the information gaps between different parts of society and in improving the decision-making processes of public bodies, businesses, and individuals. In several OECD countries plans to create unique "portals" to statistical information released by different parts of the government have been launched, and in some cases, national statistical offices have been called to co-ordinate these efforts. Statistics Denmark carried out a review of dissemination policies in seven European countries: Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Some conclusions of this comparative study are the following:

- in all surveyed countries all publications that can be downloaded from the web are given free of charge;
- in the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, the step was taken to give first priority to dissemination of publications via the web, second priority to paper publications. This means that the web version is regarded as the “real” publication, the paper version is an extra service;
- in Sweden, the number of users increased from 500 (December 1999) to 10,000 (December 2000) moving towards free of charge databases and the yearly retrievals increased from 72,000 to 160,000. Preliminary figures show similar tendencies in Denmark (50,000 retrievals in the first month when the free access database was launched);
- a remarkable change in the composition of users occurred in Sweden after the decision to adopt free dissemination. In particular, ministries, local governments, etc. were the main users during the period of the paid service, while more than 50% of all users are now private enterprises.

Several of the conclusions raised for European countries (Eurostat is now launching a new survey on all EU countries) are also true for other OECD countries. In particular, experiences in the Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States show similar results, and strategic plans to adopt new dissemination policies based on the web are under development. Finally, it is noticeable that in several countries, in the framework of e-government policies, NSOs have been given responsibility for horizontal projects to improve the electronic dissemination of data produced by other public bodies, following the same standards and policies already applied by statistical authorities. From the standpoint of international organisations, STD recently reviewed Internet dissemination policies adopted by members of the ACC, the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination is a UN body where all international organisations active in statistics are represented. The review showed that all ACC members disseminate at least some statistics via the Internet, though there is considerable variation in both the amount of data disseminated, and the amount of data disseminated free of charge.

In conclusion, a clear tendency towards the major use of the Internet to disseminate statistics, and towards a policy of free data dissemination through this medium is emerging both at the national and international levels. This tendency is encouraging all NSOs and international organisations to carefully re-think their existing policies, and to apply the most advanced techniques to improve the accessibility of statistics (and related metadata), as well as the efficiency of the process. In several countries, the increased access to free data on the Internet has also been associated with an increase in revenues, depending on a series of direct and indirect effects (and favourable demand elasticities), that are very difficult to evaluate singularly.

## CONCLUSIONS

Statistics are one of the main outputs of the OECD, and although policy guidelines and reviews are very important for OECD governments and politicians, as far as the general public is concerned, statistics are the most requested product of the Organisation. In fact, statistical products comprise more than one third of the total revenues from paper publications and the statistics pages are the most accessed information disseminated through the OECD web. In several countries and international organisations a proactive policy to widely disseminate free statistics on Internet to civil society and citizens has been adopted, as part of the e-government policy to reduce asymmetric information among governments and other parts of the society. The recent experience carried out in the OECD shows that an integrated strategy to enhance the visibility of statistics and the accessibility to statistical results can largely affect the perception of policy makers and the general public about statistics, stimulating both additional investments to improve the quality of statistical products and the usage of statistics for decision making processes.

1. This is not the case for composite leading indicators, whose estimates are produced by the OECD Statistics Directorate for all countries.