

Developing the research infrastructure for social and behavioral sciences in Germany and beyond: the European dimension

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Developing the Research Infrastructure
for Social and Behavioral Sciences
in Germany and Beyond:
The European Dimension

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Developing the Research Infrastructure for Social and Behavioral Sciences in Germany and Beyond: The European Dimension

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to identify how to better meet the needs of scientists and take into account their concerns around the use of economic and social data at the European level without compromising or neglecting the legitimate needs and justified concerns of European policy makers.

1. Background

The volume and type of data that can be made available to scientists depend increasingly on targeted initiatives and general developments at the European level. These initiatives and developments are primarily motivated by the need for official statistics to serve the purposes of (European) policy making. A number of scientific needs are met because they overlap with the needs of European policy makers:

- Comparability across national borders is of central importance for both policy makers and scientists.
- Policy makers and scientists both benefit from coordinated program planning between the Member States since this is the only way to have corresponding statistics on hand for all Member States.

Other scientific needs and concerns, however, are either at least partially at odds with the (legitimate) needs and concerns of European policy makers or have a significantly different priority level:

- In science, for example, accuracy is usually more important than how recent the information is; the opposite is true for policy making. While policy makers are often under pressure to make snap decisions, the world of science faces such time pressure only in exceptional circumstances.
- Methodological stability over time is often more important in science than the ability to adequately address up-to-the-minute political and institutional situations; the opposite is true for policy making. While policy makers normally have to base their arguments on what is at play in the current situation, scientific perspectives draw from longer periods of time.
- Complex statistical procedures do not pose a problem for science; scientists often even demand them. For policy making, however, there are limits to complexity because it complicates communication.
- Scientists are always looking for new concepts that must then also be described statistically, whereas policy makers cannot but prefer to work with well-established concepts. Conceptual innovation is a necessity for science, but is subject to limitations in the field of policy making.

Scientists have needs that can be satisfied without obstructing the needs of European policy makers. Nonetheless, these needs are often neglected. An important reason for this is that they have not been, and are still not sufficiently emphasized by scientists themselves.

- Access to (anonymized) microdata has become increasingly important for science. The behavior of individual actors or groups of actors has become increasingly interesting for economic and social science research, particularly with a view toward improving what are still too frequently the rather simplistic assumptions within economic science itself, and to overcome the divide between micro and macro analysis. In contrast, the use of microdata is of limited importance for European policy making (or for European administration), and is sometimes excluded entirely.

Although policy makers and scientists often have overlapping interests in and needs for (European) statistics, it must nevertheless always be borne in mind that - to borrow from the language of sociology - the "science system" and the "political system" follow differing logics and principles. Science (empirical science) endeavors to adopt at least a denationalized or even global approach in order to avoid politicization. Policy making, on the other hand, must remain to a large extent national and, by definition, also political, even where there is an attempt at depoliticization, which is made not least by pointing to the inherent necessities that can be substantiated by statistical evidence. Furthermore, (empirical) science constantly strives for neutrality in its value system; in contrast, policy making cannot escape value judgments - indeed, value judgments are its business.

Official statistics, which are after all part of both systems, can easily risk being torn between the two different fields and end up satisfying neither of them. To make matters more difficult at the European level, official statisticians usually have a much more general mission at the national level and are much freer to decide how to accomplish their mission than would be legally possible at the European level. It is therefore desirable for scientific research policy in particular to look into this issue and to support a broader spectrum of responsibilities for European statistics, which would make it possible to provide European statistics also for domains without a specific *political* competence at EU level.

2. A Few Specific Problem Areas

A number of specific barriers stand in the way of both the extensive, appropriate supply and the sensible use of European economic and social data by scientists. Below is a non-exhaustive, brief outline of some of these barriers. They are not listed in order of importance.

Reference is made first to more technical barriers and then to barriers which are more organizational in nature.

- The purpose of European statistical policy is to organize official statistics in such a way that the information needed to implement European policies (for the appropriate exercise of European competences) is available. It follows that European statistics can cover only those areas for which a European political competence exists. It is therefore not a comprehensive system, and has never been presented as such. This incompleteness is frequently regretted by scientists, but is difficult to remedy at the European level, since the European Union does not have full competence in the field of statistics and the European Commission does not have the corresponding right of initiative to create an all-encompassing European statistical system.
- The harmonization of official statistics is the main focus of the European statistical policy. However, each harmonization brings with it inevitable discontinuity, at least in some Member States. Temporal continuity is sacrificed in favor of improved geographical comparability. Yet continuity over time is particularly important for science (time series econometrics). Scientists (generally more than policy makers) therefore press for retroactive calculations of harmonized statistics.¹ These are very costly and therefore cannot be carried out without a specific request.
- On the other hand, the harmonization of individual statistics repeatedly encounters various limitations which result not least from these statistics being anchored within the different national systems and their basic respective orientations. Even when policy makers consider individual harmonization results to be acceptable, scientists often find fault with them: The process of “output harmonization” often suffices to achieve data convergence for analyzing problems of “practical policy making,” whereas it is all too commonly believed that “rigorous science” requires “input harmonization” in order to obtain secure findings. However, the content superiority of “input harmonization” has not been clearly established and requires expensive comparisons, while the lower costs of “output harmonization” are a definite advantage.
- One technical (but also policy) problem is posed by the incoherence of data related to cross-border issues, such as flows between countries or entitlements with cross-border

¹ The treatment of changes to territorial boundaries is a similar issue. Here again, scientists push for retroactive calculations or for the old territorial boundary to continue to be used.

validity (e.g. rights). Particularly in the case of sample surveys due to the sampling error, but also in exhaustive surveys, exactly identical results in the country of arrival and the country of departure cannot be expected for a number of reasons when statistically measuring exactly the same flow. The same applies to the allocation of entitlements. This problem is indeed inconvenient for policy making, but is not considered too serious for the decision-making process, whereas in science it is seen to undermine research possibilities and the accuracy of conclusions.

- The growing complexity of official statistics has been brought about by the methodological and definition-related cross-linking of specialized statistics. On the one hand this is necessary, for instance, in order to develop a system of national accounts, which is important for policy making, and particularly for European policy. On the other hand, it impedes the targeted pursuit of specific scientific questions because it leads to conceptual definitions that are determined by considerations unrelated to the field of reference. Furthermore, the establishment of an omnipresent statistical "*perspective unique*" (single perspective) encourages the adoption of a "*pensée unique*" (single line of thought). This may even be helpful in European policy since it often makes decision making easier. However, it appears to endanger the safeguarding of a variety of perspectives, which is important in the world of science.
- Another problem for science is the general lack of flexibility of official statistics caused by their increasing codification, which is not least of all a consequence of their Europeanization. In many cases, European legislation is required where national legislation would never have been necessary. Think, for example, of the detailed regulations on the calculation of the HCPI (Harmonized Consumer Price Index). Without its functional significance for European policy even the calculation of national accounts would never have been codified. This to a large extent determines the demands on European statistics and considerably limits the possibilities for rapid, pragmatic action in the field of official statistics, with the result that new phenomena of particular interest for science are insufficiently recorded in European statistics and with a certain delay.
- Recently, policy makers have insisted more on reducing the response burden (which is, on the whole, relatively undemanding) and in this context are pressing for the increased use of administrative sources in order to lighten the "burden" on respondents. This can lead to significant changes (and often also restrictions) in the

availability of comparable data, as administrative structures and thus sources often differ enormously within the EU. This in turn can restrict scientific research possibilities. The partial substitution of observation by estimation is particularly problematic for (empirical) science in this regard. However, it must be borne in mind that these estimation procedures are also developed by the (methodological) sciences. The problem is thus not just a conflict between policy making and science, but also a conflict of interests between empiricists and theorists, possibly worsened by policy makers.

- Policy makers of course generally support a reduction in the cost of official statistics, especially at the European level. Here too, (methodological) science, in conjunction with technology, offers valuable cost-cutting assistance. But here again there is a conflict of interest between empiricists and theorists. The solid, suitably controlled, accurately targeted, and regular sample survey is still the most popular source for (empirical) science, but these surveys are very costly and are therefore becoming increasingly controversial, a trend reinforced by concerns about data protection. Science must come to terms with the fact that, in official statistics, the importance of the classic sample survey will diminish while that of administrative sources will increase.
- The functional use of official statistics for policy-making purposes has expanded at the European level in recent years. This has raised increasing doubts among scientists and others regarding the credibility of European statistics. It seems to be a widely-held belief (and probably also a basic assumption of the New Political Economy) that official statisticians angle their results, when necessary in the national interest, according to desired political outcomes. In this context, however, science all too often overlooks the harmony of interests between European policy making and science, and the fact that the Europeanization of statistics on the basis of trusting cooperation between the national statistical offices and Eurostat has led to the depoliticization of the statistical processes, from conceptualization to data collection, statistical preparation, and dissemination.
- In general, science seems to have difficulty dealing with the role of policy making in official statistics. As regards statistical methods, the influence of science is of course substantial; scientists are even asked for advice. But as far as the statistical program is concerned, it would be difficult for science to accept the primacy of policy making

over statistics. Knowledge in many fields is desirable, but not everything can be researched on account of limited resources (aside from the fact that some things should simply not be officially recorded). Expense and yield, cost and benefit must first be weighed by official statistics within the framework of their legal remit, but ultimately this must always also be the duty of policy makers as legislators and as the budgetary authority. It is therefore not enough for scientists to voice their concerns and needs to official statisticians; they must also seek support from policy makers. In the European context, such efforts are two-tiered and therefore doubly expensive, and the world of science does not appear to be particularly well-equipped for this, since it must work at convincing official statisticians and policy makers at both the national and European level.

- Finally, reference must be made to one more barrier which is particularly problematic in the European context: centralized (European) access to microdata. European legislation generally requires Member States only to provide tables, but not individual data. Microdata at the European level are therefore available for only a very limited number of statistics. These data are of course available to scientists, in accordance with Commission Regulation (EC) No. 831/2002. Access arrangements have admittedly become more user-friendly in recent years, but further improvements in the near future will be difficult to achieve owing to the pending change in the legal basis for European statistics. Instead, we can even expect the process of gaining access to data to become even longer, as a parliamentary inspection has been built into the approval procedure.

3. Possible Solutions

For some of the difficulties listed here, there are no simple solutions (e.g. limitations and consequences of harmonization, changes to territorial boundaries) - science will simply have to live with them. It will doubtlessly be possible to find solutions to other problems, but this will take time and above all budgetary resources, and possibly also an amendment to the legal framework. However, these solutions can be found only through dialogue between scientists and official statisticians as well as between scientists and policy makers.

3.1 Recommendations Relating Solely to Science Policy

Scientists without question believe there is room for improvement in the general policy on scientific research at the European level with respect to official statistics. The provision of economic and social statistics is not a particularly important issue for European research policy, unlike German policy, an importance demonstrated at least in recent years by the very existence of the RatSWD (German Council for Social and Economic Data). At the European level, whatever support is allocated is largely directed toward methodological research in the field of statistics. There are certainly good reasons for this, but the result is that Eurostat - the central authority for the provision of European data and the focal point of European statistics, or more precisely for official statistics at European level - is not and cannot be very active in the provision of statistics for (European) policy and the public. There is no body (as yet) comparable to Germany's national and regional research data centers, which specifically address the needs of science. Likewise, there is no infrastructure (as yet) to connect all the relevant data holders and thereby facilitate the use of European data through different channels and different sites. The following recommendations are therefore proposed:

- First recommendation: German research policy (BMBF, Federal Ministry of Science and Education) should more actively represent the needs and concerns of scientific users of economic and social data at the European level. If it is appropriate in a national context to give science better access to available data, which has been difficult or impossible to access or use until now, then the same applies to the European context. The RatSWD should be called upon to draft recommendations for the further development of a truly European data infrastructure (not only access to data but also data type and volume).
- Second recommendation: in light of the forthcoming amendment to the Commission Regulation (EC) No 831/2002, German research policy (BMBF) and German official statistics should push for simplified access and a greater variety of forms of access. The RatSWD could be asked to give an opinion on this in the context of the European amendment procedure.
- Third recommendation: in the summer of 2009, the European Statistical Advisory Committee (ESAC) will take over from the European Advisory Committee on Statistical Information in the Economic and Social Spheres (CEIES). German scientists must lobby the 24 members of this body, some of whom will be representatives from the sciences, for improvement to data access and data volume at

the European level (for instance via the RatSWD). Furthermore, German scientists could urge this body to provide incentives for improved cooperation between official statisticians and scientists (both empirical and methodological scientists).

- Fourth recommendation: scientists should in general make targeted use of the opportunities to voice their views offered under the new “governance structure” of European statistics that has taken shape in recent months. Their efforts will be even more effective if other Member States share these views. It would therefore be a good idea for the RatSWD to establish closer contacts with user bodies in other Member States.
- Fifth recommendation: lastly, it could be helpful for researchers to look into the social and political processes that generate the need for statistical information and tried to analyze these processes. This would certainly also make it easier for scientists to take part in these processes and influence them in such a way as to ensure that greater account is taken of their own concerns. Such processes have, after all, become considerably more complex in recent years and, with the new media, also more participatory, not least at the European level.

3.2 *Practical Steps*

While policy initiatives to improve the legal framework conditions are important, significant improvements are nevertheless also possible under the current conditions.

- Sixth recommendation: German official statistics should engage in technical cooperation with those national statistical offices which also want to improve access for scientists to European data and, as sponsors (where appropriate through the European structures that have been created for that purpose), should take the initiative. Particular consideration should be given here to whether the data made available in the context of this cooperation would go beyond the already Europeanized microdata (on the basis of EU legislation). Data which has not been harmonized owing to a lack of Community competence and which Eurostat cannot take care of are also of interest to empirical science.
- Seventh recommendation: at the same time, German official statisticians should increase their efforts to lobby for improved access to and an extended scope of economic and social data at the European level. The European Commission (Eurostat) is of course restricted in the exercise of its right of initiative to those statistical fields

that relate to policy areas where the Community is competent. However, when it is a matter of infrastructure that, once created, will be used both for Europeanized and non-Europeanized statistics, it should be possible for the European Commission (Eurostat) to at least assume the role of a catalyst.

Perhaps it will also be necessary to break new ground, separating content, access, and control possibilities from infrastructure. The infrastructure could then be used to provide access to European microdata through Eurostat and at the same time also provide Europe-wide access to national microdata under the joint control of the national statistical offices - in whatever form such a joint structure might take. German national and regional research data centers are probably best placed and suited to submit proposals.

- Eighth recommendation: the use of European statistics presents a number of particular difficulties, some of which have already been mentioned (structural breaks caused by harmonization, contradictions in the double recording of intra-Community flows and entitlements, etc.). Science can make important contributions in how to deal with these difficulties by making them a research subject in their own right. Here again, the RatSWD could provide valuable stimulus.
- Ninth recommendation: the RatSWD could also be a driving force when it comes to the provision of data on statistical units without a clear national affiliation (e.g. multinational companies). The EuroGroups Register is currently being developed and one objective could be to improve the data on multinationals so that they can be subjected to systematic empirical analysis.
- Tenth recommendation: lastly, it must be pointed out that, not least for its own benefit, science should actively support the statistical policy of the European Commission (Eurostat). Successful harmonization, coordinated and forward-looking program planning, efficient collection and processing procedures and widespread dissemination of the results generally also improve possibilities scientific research. However, this should apply not only to the core area of European responsibilities and those fields in which the open method of coordination is used, but also for purely national fields. The research avenues open to empirical science depend on the availability not only of temporal but also of spatial data. The European Commission (Eurostat) is of central importance for making the latter type of data available and should therefore be actively and enthusiastically supported by the scientific community.

To sum up, we wish to restate and thereby emphasize the following: in order to improve data for the economic and social sciences, the RatSWD should first begin to become a more Europeanized organization. Establishing contacts with partners in the European Union is necessary to allow for their common interests to be asserted jointly, based on the broadest possible coalitions. Secondly, German research data centers at national and regional levels should cooperate with partners in other EU Member States, not least of all to maintain the drive generated by their creation. And, thirdly, representatives of German policy on scientific research (BMBF) should push for European policies to improve the supply and use of economic and social data across Europe.