



**Economic and Social
Council**

Distr.
GENERAL

CES/2004/10
1 April 2004

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Fifty-second plenary session
(Paris, 8-10 June 2004)

**THE SYSTEM OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS IN FRANCE:
DECENTRALIZED, BUT CLOSELY COORDINATED**

Paper submitted by INSEE, France¹

France's official statistics system is founded on the dual principle of decentralization by sector in the ministries, with INSEE playing a strong coordinating role.

DECENTRALIZATION BY SECTOR

1. The decision to establish a decentralized structure was taken very soon after INSEE was created in 1947. Since then it has gradually evolved, adapting in response to changing administrative structures, emerging needs and new methods of processing data, an ongoing process that demands continuous adaptation.
2. INSEE coordinates the official statistics system as a whole, and now has grouped around it 19 statistical services, each located within a ministry. Together, these ministry statistical services (SSMs) cover almost the entire spectrum of government action, besides producing the statistics for the areas, for which they have primary responsibility. INSEE, for its part, produces general statistics or statistics covering areas that are broader than those dealt with by individual ministries. As well as compilations such as the national accounts and major indexes, it mainly produces statistics concerning prices, population and households.

¹ Paper prepared by Jean-Pierre Le Gléau.

3. INSEE is also in charge of several registers used mainly for administrative purposes: the national register of physical persons, the electoral roll and the register of enterprises and establishments, all three of which are used for the application of official regulations. INSEE is thus in overall charge, a position from which it benefits by being able to extract reliable sampling bases for the statistics system as a whole.

4. All the major ministries run their own statistical services: labour, health, education, infrastructure, agriculture, environment, defence, interior, justice, culture, tourism and sport. The Ministry of Economic Affairs, Finance and Industry is different, to the extent that INSEE is attached to it. It does however run a statistical service for industry and three other statistical services for specific areas covered by the Ministry: one for commerce and crafts, one for foreign trade and one for energy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the only major ministry that still has no statistical service; its statistical material is not considered sufficient to warrant the establishment of a full service, although a few INSEE experts do work there. There are also statistical services for certain other areas within the public domain, which constitute subdivisions of ministries, such as communications, fisheries and the civil service.

5. The SSMs employ nearly 3,000 staff in all, as compared to INSEE's 6,300. In staffing terms, they thus account for nearly one third of the official statistics system.

6. The SSMs vary widely as regards their size, their place within the ministries, and their structure:

- Size: seven SSMs (social affairs, agriculture, customs, education, infrastructure, industry and labour) employ more than 100 staff, while seven others (interior, communications, defence, civil service, sport, fisheries and tourism) have fewer than 20 employees. The largest is the statistics service of the Ministry of Agriculture, which expanded during the 1960s as the common agricultural policy gained in importance. Such variations in size naturally give rise to differing concerns in terms of personnel management;
- Place within the ministries: some statistical services are ministerial departments (labour, social affairs) and are thus directly attached to the minister's office. Others are larger or smaller units attached to a department and therefore under the supervision of a ministry official. As a result, their relationships with, and their degree of autonomy from, the political and administrative authorities tend to differ;
- Structure: five of the SSMs are territorially decentralized (agriculture, infrastructure, social affairs, labour, and education). This means in practice that a few statisticians work at the regional level (there are 26 regions in France) within the regional office of a ministerial department. Agriculture in fact has a statistician in every geographical *département* (of which there are 100), in departmental offices of agriculture. With the exception of agriculture, these units are not considered sufficiently independent from the office where they are based to count as SSMs. The fact that some statisticians work at regional level naturally raises the problem of coordinating their work with that of the other statistical services in the same region and, particularly, with INSEE's own regional office.

7. The rationale underlying this type of structure is the idea that statistical data are more needs-oriented and more reliable if they are prepared in close proximity to the principal administrative sources and the most authoritative users, i.e. those responsible for policy implementation. Thus the statistics budget is run by the ministries and, in the long run, is likely to be better distributed across the various areas according to requirements. Similarly, the proximity of users and producers is essential for maintaining and enhancing the quality of statistics.

8. The advantages of such a system manifest themselves both upstream and downstream of statistics production:

- Upstream: the statistician is involved in setting up information systems and can influence their design and implementation. He is close to sources as they become available and can thus exploit them directly and without delay;
- Downstream: the statistician is in direct contact with the originator of the inquiry, who in most cases is located within the ministry itself or even in the same section as the statistical service. This makes for a quicker response and, generally speaking, a better understanding on the statistician's part of the political and institutional context of the inquiry.

9. The benefits of proximity and enhanced capability may, however, be partly offset by a loss of autonomy for statisticians. One of the tasks of coordination is therefore to enable SSMs to remain independent in their production and analysis work. But as the former Director-General of INSEE, Edmond Malinvaud, said, "You cannot order independence or ethics by decree: they must be developed over time through the practices of ministerial authorities, managers and staff."

COORDINATION OF THE SYSTEM

10. The official statistics system is defined as the combination of INSEE and all the SSMs. The latter include, by extension, the statistical services of decentralized ministry offices, which, as explained above, and with the exception of the departmental and regional services of agricultural statistics, do not strictly speaking count as SSMs.

11. Even according to the narrowest definition, this structure comprises around 20 units in all. In order to build up a "system", a number of tools and procedures must be provided to coordinate its component parts.

12. Coordination is achieved in four main ways:

(i) Through people

13. As in all human groups, interpersonal relations play a fundamental role in the understanding established between the various component parts of the official statistics system. Good relations are fostered in several ways.

- Common basic training

Many SSM managers received their initial training at the INSEE management training schools,² which means they have a common cultural base and a shared language, as well as a similar approach to statistical problems. This is not the case for the majority of their counterparts in the other ministry services, and it can at times prove difficult to overcome mutual misunderstanding or to bridge the cultural gaps that give rise to differing conceptions of the place and role of statistics in the work of a ministry.

All those who work in the official statistics system share a common goal and the same concept of the role of statistics: this does not of course preclude differences of opinion, but it does guarantee a common starting-point in the search for solutions to any such differences.

- High degree of mobility

Transfers of INSEE managers, whether within the Institute itself or in SSMs, are planned well in advance and involve all those connected with the official statistics system at some stage. The necessary regulations have been in place for a long time and are adjusted as necessary from year to year. One of the aims of this approach is to facilitate exchanges between INSEE and the SSMs. They help ensure that the current level of pay or future career prospects of staff are not adversely affected by working in an SSM. Indeed, a change of working environment, such as that offered by a transfer from INSEE to an SSM, is even seen as a positive factor for some appointments or promotions, and in the case of some promotions is considered a precondition. Such mobility leads to significant cross-fertilization in management, both between INSEE and the SSMs and among the SSMs themselves. For those with the same training background, it further improves mutual understanding, and it strengthens solidarity among those with comparable professional experience.

- INSEE-SSMs: structural links

The factors mentioned above are not by themselves enough to ensure good coordination between SSMs and INSEE; links between the two groups are also organized in such a way as to facilitate the circulation of information and the discussion of problems, having due regard for differences in size and the particularities of individual SSMs. Coordination is ensured as follows:

- Through plenary meetings of all SSM chiefs, basically to ensure that information is freely exchanged throughout the whole official statistics system;
- Through regular board meetings of SSM chiefs, for the purpose of organizing multilateral consultation between INSEE and the SSMs on major issues relating to their missions and operations or to the goals and activities of the overall system. This

² École nationale de la statistique et de l'administration économique (National School for Statistics and Economic Management - ENSAE); Ecole nationale de la statistique et de l'analyse de l'information (National School for Statistics and Information Analysis - ENSAI).

board may address matters relating to management - in the broad sense - of INSEE staff working in SSMs, statistical cooperation between services (e.g. on questions of access to, use and exchange of data, dissemination or methodological support), access to information, structural developments within SSMs, etc.;

- Through ad hoc meetings with senior INSEE officials on specific matters that may be of concern to all or several SSMs, depending on their field of interest;
- Through bilateral meetings, which are necessary because each SSM is a special case from the point of view of its place within its ministry, its structure and its tasks. Such meetings provide an opportunity to take a close look at specific questions and individual problems affecting them.

(ii) Through the use of tools

14. INSEE has developed appropriate communication tools to make sure that information circulates freely within the system as a whole.

15. The main ones, in chronological order, are as follows:

- A quarterly publication, the *Courrier des statistiques*, to which State-employed statisticians may contribute comments on the operation of the official statistics service, or innovative papers that break new ground in terms of subject matter, content or methodology. The *Courrier* also serves as a forum for exchanges of views on points of methodology or aspects of statistics that are the subject of public debate. It is distributed to all INSEE officials employed in the official statistics system and indeed to anyone interested in the workings of the system;
- An extranet site open to all SSM staff, which provides daily information on the activities of the official statistics system. It was developed several years ago and is regularly enlarged with new topics. The site is frequently visited by staff who are allowed access. It provides practical information on administrative questions and on the main tools used in the official statistics system;
- An Internet portal for official statistics is to be developed in the near future. This will be accessible to all web users and will enable them, using various search tools, to obtain information generated by the official statistics system but currently dispersed around the various ministry sites. The site is modelled to a large extent on the United States fedstats.gov site.

(iii) Through programmes

16. Good interpersonal relations, while necessary, would not be sufficient without a means of coordinating the work programmes of all services that make up the official statistics system. Such coordination is provided by the National Council for Statistical Information (CNIS).

17. The CNIS meets to deliberate and to comment on the general development of the statistical work of “services producing statistical information”, which are defined as INSEE, SSMs, government departments, public bodies or bodies which are mainly public, and private bodies responsible for a public service or for collecting and processing economic and social data on the basis of public subsidies or agreements with public services. It is thus broader in scope than the official statistics system per se.

18. The CNIS has around 100 members, representing the main areas of economic and social activity: elected representatives at the national and local levels, professional associations, trade unions, associations, public departments and universities.

19. It facilitates consultation between the producers and users of official statistics and coordinates the work and statistical surveys carried out by public services in order to ensure their social and economic utility.

20. It is thus in charge of programme coordination, and checks that the work planned by producers matches the requests made by the users of statistical information, that the surveys planned are appropriate in order to avoid duplication, and that the statistical quality of the surveys is of a high enough standard.

21. With ever-increasing demands from European bodies for statistical information used to manage European policies, the coordination of producer services is also essential to ensure that France speaks with a single voice. Responsibility for such coordination rests with INSEE’s Department of Statistical Coordination and International Relations.

(iv) Through unified concepts and nomenclature

22. Lastly, coordination is achieved by establishing a common framework of statistical concepts and nomenclature for use by the various services involved in data production and analysis.

23. Many concepts are defined at a higher level than the national level, such as the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations, etc. France’s contribution to the preparatory work on such definitions usually involves INSEE and one or more SSMs. Consultations are thus required before France adopts an official position in such working groups.

24. The subsequent application of these concepts at national level must also be coordinated in order to ensure that all producers and users of statistics speak the same language.

25. Primary responsibility for such coordination rests with INSEE’s National Accounts Department.

26. The same applies to statistical nomenclature, which constitutes a shared vocabulary for the producers and users of statistical data.

27. Although as in the case of concepts the broad principles of nomenclature are mostly, although not always, established at the supranational level, their application at national level requires coordination among the services.

28. Once definitions have been collectively agreed, the common concepts and nomenclature themselves facilitate the coordination of the various components of the official statistics system.

29. They offer a common language, whose terminology is understood in the same way by all those working within the official statistics system. This naturally helps to reinforce the other aspects of coordination mentioned above.

30. These common concepts and nomenclature are applied, for example, to make up the enterprises and establishments register (*Sirène*), which is the reference document used throughout the administration to identify economic units, and which thus constitutes a powerful vector for the unification of the French official statistics system as a whole.
