

TRINITY WEEK ACADEMIC SYMPOSIUM

DATA FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH

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G. O'Hanlon*

Central Statistics Office

The availability of high quality statistical data on economic and social conditions is a fundamental prerequisite for ensuring an effective partnership between policy makers and academic researchers in contributing to the development and monitoring of public policy. The increased focus on Evidence-based Policy Making in recent years has highlighted the need for such partnerships and also for the development of the Official Statistics system to provide the basic raw material.

The Central Statistics Office, in conjunction with the National Statistics Board, has been actively responding to the challenge of developing a high quality official statistical system in Ireland. The National Statistics Board's *Strategy for Statistics, 2003-2008* is the reference template for these developments. The Board is seeking to develop a whole-system approach to the collection and dissemination of statistics through greater collaboration between the key producers and the key users of statistics. In particular, the Board is actively encouraging the exploitation of the statistical potential of administrative data.

Statistical quality is now commonly defined in a multidimensional context that takes account of such factors as relevance; reliability; timeliness; objectivity; accessibility; protection of statistical confidentiality; and minimisation of the burden on respondents. For the purposes of the Symposium I will focus on two aspects, namely: relevance and accessibility.

Statistics are expensive and often take a long time from the initial conception to the provision of data that meet the real needs of users. Thus there must always be a clear focus on **relevance** at all stages of the statistical process. Much of the development of Irish statistics in recent times has been driven by the need to meet the demands of the European Statistics System (ESS). The latter aims to install a world-class statistical system through the use of best methods in a harmonised manner throughout the EU. The intensive consultation at EU level prior to the agreement of the ESS requirements normally ensures that they are "fit for purpose" and the process has the additional advantage for national users of allowing comparisons between countries to be made with a high degree confidence. In order to ensure that specific national needs are also taken into account, the CSO actively engages with users (in particular, policy makers and researchers) at various levels and at different stages of the statistical process. Examples include: the Steering Group on Social and Equality Statistics, which reported in 2003;¹ the Consultative Committee on the Census of Population; and the Expert Group that advised on the development of the first National Disability Survey in 2006. CSO staff participate widely in a range of inter-departmental

* Abstract of presentation

¹ NSB (2003): "Developing Irish Social and Equality Statistics to meet Policy Needs"

policy and other groups where data requirements may be an issue and are also involved in a number of technical groups established under the National Partnership process (e.g. Towards 2016).

Statistics are, of course, not an end in themselves and their effective use is therefore a key strategic objective for the CSO. Improving accessibility to our statistics and data is therefore pursued as a high priority on an ongoing basis along three dimensions. Firstly, we continuously seek to improve the scope, content and style of our releases and publications. Second, we are developing our website to facilitate electronic access to all our statistical output in a user-friendly manner. Third, we are developing a web portal that will enable users to access official statistics through one access point irrespective of where the data are held. Facilitating access for research to anonymised micro-data is also a priority issue for CSO. We routinely lodge anonymised datasets from all the major household surveys (i.e. Census of Population, QNHS, EU-SILC and HBS) in the Irish Social Survey Data Archive (ISSDA) although to-date usage by the research community has been disappointing. Access to business micro-data is somewhat more restricted because of the disclosure risk. Nevertheless, CSO is prepared to facilitate researchers in duly justified cases.