

ON PRODUCERS AND USERS OF STATISTICS

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INTRODUCTION

It is always somewhat difficult for presidents of societies like The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society to decide on an appropriate topic for a presidential address. It is not normally an occasion for an in-depth assessment of any particular issue but frequently takes the form of a "state of the art" expose relating to some areas of current interest. Some suggestions as to future directions to be followed may also be indicated. Broadly speaking I propose to follow (or attempt to follow) this course in relation to my chosen topic. The main reason why I have selected this particular issue derives from the fact that I have some experience as both a producer and a user of statistics. I spent some eighteen years in the CSO and for more than eight years now I have been engaged in research of a socio-economic nature. I felt that there might be some benefit therefore in expressing my views from both points of view. I might add of course that throughout this paper, even though it is not always said, my comments relate only to Government statistics.

I must apologise for my tardiness in giving this presentation. Some of you will recall, however, that I was out of the country for much of my first year of office. Subsequently, as frequently happens in such circumstances, time slipped by and I now find myself offering my contribution rather late in the day.

When I began to engage in some background reading for this exercise it soon became apparent to me that, in recent years at any rate, much more has been said about the activities of producers of statistics rather than of users. Producers are of course a more readily identifiable group while users tend to be dispersed across society generally and as such it is not easy to typify their needs or characteristics in a succinct fashion. There has been the NESR report on *Information for Policy*, the Government White Paper *A New Institutional Framework for the Central Statistics Office*, the symposium organised by this Society on "Statistics for Policy and Research" (all of which relate to 1985) and the first report of the National Statistics Board *Strategy for Statistics 1988-1992* produced in May 1988. However this intense degree of concentration on the activities of producers of statistics must obviously have derived from a perception among users that new developments were called for.

Indeed, I began to have some misgivings about my chosen subject in view of the range and extent of the above-mentioned work. However, what I have decided

to do, which I consider to be worthwhile, is to review the position now that the dust has settled somewhat, and to emphasise what I consider to be the major issues which Government Statistical Services will have to address in the run up to the twenty-first century and beyond. All the indications are that we are about to embark on a period of fundamental societal change which will, in a measurement context, require new approaches and the adoption of new concepts. It may well be a trying time for national statistical systems as in a rapidly changing society it may be difficult to develop a timely response to the shifts which occur, and it may be particularly difficult to preserve the central ground of objectivity. This longer-term approach I might add, to some extent, gets me off a hook since as a member of the National Statistics Board it would hardly be appropriate for me to proceed to disagree with the sentiments expressed in the Board's 1988 report which, however, covers the period only up to 1992.

I propose to deal with four aspects. There are:

- (1) Perceptions of producers and users of official statistics, i.e., how each group views the relevant issues. In doing this I will set out briefly what I consider to be the role of the Government Statistician.
- (2) For whom and for which groups in society should statistics be primarily produced?
- (3) By what means can the activities of producers and the requirements of users best be reconciled?
- (4) What, in the context of the changing society to which we live, are the main issues (in a very broad sense) on which information should be provided in the years ahead?

1. PERCEPTION OF PRODUCERS AND USERS OF STATISTICS

The Producer: The Role of the Government Statistician

Government statisticians see themselves as primarily providing data for the needs of Government in regard to aiding the formulation and administration of policy and thereafter meeting the requirements of society generally in the form of the business community, researchers, trade unions and the general public. Apart from the provision of an adequate body of statistics designed to meet perceived requirements, producers of statistics also have an essential function in ensuring the accuracy and timeliness of data (and this would include the non-publication of figures in whole or in part where they were considered to be unreliable) and in framing workable and relevant concepts and definitions. Clearly, to some extent these requirements conflict. The speed with which any set of figures can be produced may be adversely affected by the need to ensure

reasonable levels of accuracy. The application of a particularly complex set of concepts may have also the same effect. I might add that the concepts adopted in particular circumstances may not necessarily meet with universal approval, but they may be necessary in order to maintain consistency throughout the statistical system as a whole, or to accord with established international norms.

The very essence of a Government statistician's work is therefore based on the premise that his efforts will yield an end result which is truthful and as accurate and as objective as possible. With regard to actual measurements or statistical compilations, in many instances truthfulness or objectivity does not present a particular problem as the form or method of calculation is not seriously open to question and the end result, statistically, is reasonably unambiguous. This would be the case, for example, in Census of Population results or in other aggregates based on total enumerations (e.g., the Census of Industrial Production). Indeed this may also be the case even when estimates are based on samples as the computations may involve well tested techniques which have attained a high level of acceptability (the Consumer Price Index is an example of this). The position is not always this clear-cut however. There are instances when national statistical offices have to produce important estimates which, because of the difficulties of providing a full range of basic data, cannot be based on precise mathematical or arithmetical procedures but are derived partly in a judgmental way against the background of a relevant but not necessarily perfect or complete sets of statistical indicators. This would be the case for example in some of the national accounts aggregates and for the compilation which underpin the annual population estimates. In these circumstances it may be said that the statistician's work becomes more of an art than a science and requires not only mathematical expertise, but also a deep grasp or awareness of the subject matter being dealt with. While the circumstances referred to here (i.e. an incomplete data base) may not be ideal in practical terms there may be little alternative. What is important here however is not so much the unavoidably tenuous nature of the estimates, but that the statisticians are left free to compile these data in an objective way, unencumbered by political or other sectional pressures. This is not to say that the methodologies concerned should not be open to question. However if such questioning does take place then it should be done in an ordered and constructive setting, and if possible well separated in space and time from any controversy related to the figures in question.

A feature which weighs heavily on the minds of Government statisticians in particular is the fact that the estimates produced by them, however tenuous, are the "official" figures (and are sometimes so described, even though I doubt the wisdom of this). Statisticians shudder at the sight of users (often pursuing sectional interests) presenting and interpreting data as if they were the Tablets from Mount Sinai when in fact the figures are the best estimates that can be derived in the circumstances, and may be subject to margins of error and possibly to revision at a later stage.

Apart from the fact of actual measurement, statistical exercises must in the first instance be proceeded by a stage of conceptualisation which involves the

formulation and adoption of definitions. This is an area of statistical work which is not too well understood and it is worthwhile therefore to give it some further consideration. The manner in which these concepts are developed differs. Some have evolved over time; others may have been drawn up on the basis of agreement with interested parties, while quite a number of them are based on accepted international norms (recommended by either the United Nations or the European Community). Whatever the manner of their formulation however it is essential that once such concepts are in place that they should be adhered to. Obviously changes in society and in the economy will in time call for alterations but again any such modifications should be relatively infrequent and carried out on the basis of well considered assessments.

To quote some examples, there has, for instance, been controversy surrounding the groups included among the registered unemployed; questions have also been raised regarding the inclusion of imputed rent figures for owner-occupiers of dwellings in the rent estimates in the National Accounts. Currently the manner of treating withdrawals of agricultural goods from Intervention Stocks in the National Accounts' figures is also a matter of some query. Here the impact is so large as not only as to cause a sizeable diminution in national stocks levels, but also a noticeable retardation in overall growth. However this is a transient and uncharacteristic problem and one which does not, therefore, call for a basic alteration in the system in order to cater for it.

Essentially therefore it may be said that it is a sense of loyalty to the tenets of truthfulness and consistency in measurement, and to the maintenance of a standard set of definitions and concepts, which form the bedrock of objectivity in official statistics. Were it to be otherwise, either in the form of overt fiddling of figures or in a more subtle fashion by the suppression of information or by the manipulation of definitions, the national statistical system would soon be on a slippery slope and would quickly lose all credibility. In that event society as a whole would be the ultimate loser.

It is inevitable however that when a group of individuals is cast in what may be described as a defensive role a certain conservatism develops. Defenders of the Holy Grail lean towards cautiousness and tend to see danger in change. This can arise not only with groups such as statisticians but for other groups in society who are charged with responsibilities which require a high degree of public confidence. Judges, and the need to preserve the independence of the judicial system, constitute another obvious example. However a government statistical service has in the first place a basic responsibility to provide information and in this sense, while not in any way diluting its integrity, it must be prepared to unbend and lend a listening ear to its customers – the users of statistics.

Users of Statistics

It is rather more difficult to categorise the characteristics or perceptions of users of statistics as they are a rather heterogeneous group. Their needs vary depending on their interests. Individual groups understandably wish to have the

maximum amount of information relating to their particular disciplines. If, however, one attempts to identify common threads in relation to requirements it can be said that these would relate to (1) reasonable access to data, (2) a desire for timely figures and (3) in the case of time series, a reasonably long run of consistent figures so as to enable users to adequately track changes in economic and social conditions.

By accessibility in this regard I mean that statistics are presented in such a way that the informed user can find what he wants without too much trouble. This is not meant to imply that users should have their data requirements presented to them on a plate, but that one has reasonable access to information as a result of adequate planning and design of publications and the use of other more up to date forms of communication. This is an area to which in my view, insufficient attention had been devoted, but where recently the CSO has made significant strides.

Timeliness is an area in which there will always be some conflict between producers and users of data. In Ireland some progress has recently been made in this regard with, for example, the earlier release of the annual labour force estimates and with the annual Census of Industrial Production results. However this is an area where, by and large, further advances can often be achieved depending on priorities and the allocation of resources. Much of the dissatisfaction on the part of users stems from an insufficient appreciation of the fact that accuracy and in some instances the use of particular concepts or definitions, require more time in the production process. On the other hand, for the reasons as already outlined, producers may be unduly overtaken with the need for precision. Users may well ask, for example, as to why the annual labour force estimates were not available with the current time lag prior to 1988.

It is a not uncommon characteristic of users in general that as long as they can identify a broad pattern in data, or a general trend, they are usually not too concerned about the niceties of further statistical precision. This derives from a view that it is the statisticians job to produce accurate figures in intelligible form. This is a stance which may be unreasonable in some (but not all) circumstances, but it is one which, inevitably, the statistician must be prepared to live with. Despite my earlier fairly lengthy experience in official statistics I now occasionally find myself adopting an attitude of this kind. I might for example, associate or merge two sets of data which have a different conceptual basis, but with the knowledge that even allowing for this, a reasonable picture emerges which enables one to draw broad inferences and conclusions. This may well meet with the disapproval of the professional statistician who places a high priority on consistency and precision, but the user may well argue that, while making allowance for the discrepancies involved, the utility of the data is being maximised. The real problem exists with the totally cavalier user who interprets data with little or no regard to the basis on which they are compiled and who, as a result, is led to make erroneous judgements. It is not an altogether uncommon event; I have seen it happen.

I have said rather less about users of statistics. However I will have more to say about their problems when I consider consultative mechanisms later in the paper.

2. STATISTICS FOR WHOM?

The next issue which I would wish to discuss relates to the question as to for whom and for which groups in society a national statistical service should be providing information. In this regard the National Statistics Board expressed the view that over the five years to 1992 the development of national statistics should focus particularly on satisfying the requirements of Irish Government policy making, both in the domestic and European Community contexts. In its recently published strategy it states that "as far as new activities are concerned, relevance to policy formulation and assessment must be the paramount criterion". However the document goes on to say that "the Board intends to deal with the CSO's wider supplier and user environment in its further work", (para. 1.4, Chapter I).

In the context in which it was operating the Boards' views are sustainable. When it was set up a number of pressing issues of policy relevance were identified (the emphasis on services, reorganisation of agricultural statistics, improvements in the Balance of Payments and in the National Accounts etc.) and these had to be addressed. If, however, one is to take a longer term view and consider issues in a wider societal context a more global perspective is needed. These matters are of particular relevance now as in some countries, notably in our near neighbour the United Kingdom, official statistics policy has taken a direction which is causing some controversy. Basically the principle being followed by the present United Kingdom Government is that only statistics of use to Central Government should be collected by the Government.

This is a view with which I fundamentally disagree. Let me preface my remarks by saying, however, that I accept that any duly elected government in a democratic society has the right to expect that a sufficient body of statistical information should be made available to enable it to administer and monitor its policies. In this sense the first priority of a national statistical system should, and invariably will, always coincide with this objective. However, a Governments reasonable rights in this regard are not exclusive. In the first place it is essential that the information needed to monitor government policies be sufficiently transparent so as to allow an objective assessment of the effect of these policies. A national statistical service has a wider responsibility to society as a whole and within this wider framework it may consider it appropriate to highlight social or economic aspects of society on which the Government of the day does not set too much store. Governments, all Governments, are ideological to some degree and will naturally tend to look with a jaundiced eye on information which supports a different stance from the one they adhere to. The confrontational nature of democratic politics renders it necessary for Governments, as they see it, to stress those items of information, statistical or otherwise, which support

their policies. However this can not be allowed to preclude the availability of a sufficiently wide body of information necessary to allow reasoned debate both inside and outside the political arena, on a wide range of economic and social issues. In raising this issue I am not implying that there is any current threat to the objectivity of Irish official statistics. Indeed the previous and present Governments are to be commended for initiating and pursuing the re-structuring of the statistical system, particularly the introduction of the National Statistics Board which, apart from its essential planning function, can be regarded as a bulwark against interference.

One may well ask what is the basis of the foregoing proposition. Why should decisions on the availability of statistical information involve inputs from sources outside of Government? In the first place it should not be forgotten that any Government is an agent of the people and as such society has a right within reason to be provided with sufficient information to assess the Government's record. Then there is the argument that information, and statistics in particular, is a "public good" involving the characteristics of "non excludability" and "non rivalness". "Non excludability" means that it is technically difficult to exclude people from using or benefiting from the good concerned. "Non rivalness" means that use of the good by one person does not prevent others from also using it. Information clearly satisfies these criteria. However in my view the source of statistical information and the manner of its initial provision is even more important here. All information necessary for the production of national statistics is provided by the community at its expense, and for the most part on a voluntary basis. The information is provided by business undertakings, or other groups, households and by individuals. In this sense it is only reasonable that society generally should benefit from this information since the community itself plays an essential role in its compilation.

It is all very well to express such highminded sentiments but it is another matter to give them practical expression. The determination of statistical needs for Government policy purposes is, within certain limits of course, an achievable objective. However how does one realistically cater in practical terms for wider societal needs, particularly in circumstances of financial constraint (and there will always be some such constraint). In this wider context the CSO cannot satisfy everyone and there has to be some means of distilling down the multiplicity of stated needs in order to be able to produce a basic corpus of information which addresses the most relevant and urgent problems. In this regard the structures associated with the national statistical system are important. The existence of the National Statistics Board is vital since, despite its compact size, it represents a fairly wide range of interests. The Board is representative of government departments, business and agricultural interests and the trade unions as well as containing two further members who are not representative of any particular group. If there is a lacuna here it is perhaps that there is no direct voice for broader community wide interests, even if it is difficult to achieve this in representative terms. This is not to say, however, that some needs in relation to this area are not mediated through the other groups

represented. However the broader constituency to which I refer does highlight the need for a wider and more detailed consultative mechanism which would feed into the decision making process and into the determination of priorities. It is to a consideration of this that I now turn.

3. MECHANISMS FOR IDENTIFYING THE REQUIREMENTS OF USERS

The whole area of consultation and priority determination in regard to statistics, both strategic and in detail, is one where up to recently at any rate more could have been done. Apart from occasional once off exercises, such as the Committee on Statistical Requirements and Priorities in the early 1970s, prior to the institution of the National Statistics Board there never was a permanent structure designed to facilitate planning and to identify priorities. When the *Strategy for Statistics 1988-92* was in the course of preparation a round of detailed consultations was engaged in, aided by the formation of five ad hoc advisory groups on which different interests were represented. However as on the previous occasions, this was in the nature of an intense once off exercise designed to give the National Statistics Board a detailed and rapid resume of needs in different areas. Some years earlier, in 1984/85, the CSO organised a quite successful series of in-depth seminars on specific statistical issues, involving written contributions from both inside and outside the CSO. Given that the National Statistics Board can be deemed to cover the strategic aspect, the question now arises as to how the more detailed consultation process, which is a very necessary input to the overall planning function, should be continued.

There are a number of different ways in which users can be brought into the consultation process. One can have ongoing or permanent advisory groups or sub committees constituted on a sectoral basis – like those set up to facilitate the detailed investigative process engaged in when the National Statistics Board was producing its first five year plan. Alternatively it is possible to have more in-depth assessment exercises for different sectors on a less frequent basis.

While the first option has the advantage that the consultative machinery is of a more constant or fixed nature, in practice it is likely to suffer from significant drawbacks. It is difficult to maintain a sufficient degree of interest and involvement within permanent groups which may meet only a few times a year. Their very routine nature is such that they are likely to fall into a groove whereby they deal with matters of current or short-term interest. In short they are likely to merely tinker at the edges of the problem and not stand back and identify deeper and more fundamental changes.

I consider therefore that it would be more beneficial to have less frequent but in-depth assessments of a seminar type with contributions from both producers and users, – particularly from the latter since the exercise is primarily designed to afford users the opportunity to express their views. These producers/users seminars should be organised by the Central Statistics Office according to a set rotational schedule covering different socio-economic sectors every three to

four years. There would be little point in holding them too frequently as the related socio-economic structures may not have altered sufficiently to warrant new approaches. However, neither should they be too infrequent or it would be difficult to use the results as a coherent input into the overall determination of statistical priorities. In order to formalise the system and give it substance, the proceedings of these seminars should be published by the CSO so as to form a permanent on going record of the evolving views on the issues in question. Invited speakers (particularly those from outside the Government Statistical Service) should be requested to make contributions of some substance.

4. THE FUTURE PATTERN OF STATISTICAL NEEDS

Having discussed question of the consultative mechanisms needed to facilitate decisions on statistical requirements, I wish to conclude Mr. Chairman by expressing some views as to how I see these requirements evolving in the years ahead. I might add that this is not going to be an in-depth consideration but rather to attempt to identify some likely basic or fundamental changes in the overall pattern of needs in the light of the likely changes in the society in which we live.

The first aspect I wish to refer to relates to the need to respond to the structural changes which are taking place in the economy in a sectoral sense. In Ireland, as in other countries, the services sector is assuming a much more important role in the overall economic structure, and aside from questions of its contribution to output, it provides the only real hope of achieving a significant expansion in employment. This fact is already recognised in the 1988 National Statistics Board Report. The Board's first priority is the development of service sector statistics. Activities in this area are in fact already in train. The 1987 Census of Services incorporates not only a traditional style Census of Distribution (which covers retailing and wholesaling and some services) but also a census of all service establishments designed to obtain information on type of activity and numbers engaged. The latter exercise is intended to provide a springboard for further more detailed enquiries into specific subsectors. The CSO has also initiated (in 1988) a quarterly series on employment and earnings for the Public Sector and for Financial and Insurance enterprises, the first results of which will soon be issued.

Across many countries however, efforts to investigate the services sector have been marked with a certain hesitation mainly because of the daunting task involved in obtaining usable information from such a heterogeneous area involving a great many small undertakings. It presents a completely different challenge to the industrial sector for example where, in an Irish context, one can obtain information on a significant chunk of overall economic activity by surveying some 4,000 to 5,000 establishments (or a sample of same). In the services sector the number of undertakings is more than ten times this number and the multiplicity of different activities involved significantly limits the benefits

which one would normally expect to achieve with a sampling approach. Unless therefore administrative sources can be successfully tapped, the costs involved are high and these need to be weighed against the results obtained. However the changing nature of the economy requires that extra attention be paid to assessing the services area, otherwise there will be a growing gap in our knowledge of how the economy operates.

The very fact of a greater emphasis on services also helps to concentrate the mind on the question of measuring output for such activities. This is, of course, a wider question related to measuring output in the National Accounts as a whole, and one which will require increasing attention according as the nature of economic activity and of society generally changes.

The second aspect which I consider will require more attention in the future is the need to know more about the impact of economic and social changes (whether government promoted or not) on individual families or households. Whatever about the indirect effects of general policies, the nature of the impact of even measures designed to provide direct assistance to specific groups is not always clear. In some instances assistance does not even reach those targeted; there are also situations where groups are inadvertently disadvantaged, for example as a result of poverty traps due to the inappropriate specification of income limits. In this regard it should be noted that information derived from the administration of a scheme can give an incomplete or even distorted picture. Such information is, for example, obviously confined to those who utilise the services provided and it cannot give an indication of the plight of those who for various reasons (illness, infirmity, geographical isolation) cannot avail of such services, even when they are entitled to them. This brings to mind the notion of the "capability aspect" in a social policy context as referred to by Amartya Sen in his 1982 Geary Lecture. The only way to obtain a proper perspective of the aspects referred to is through the medium of the household and this suggests the need in future years for a regular and frequent general survey of households which enables one to link aspects such as income, expenditure patterns, employment situation and the utilisation of state and other services (such as private medicine) which individuals are obliged to use. Such a suggestion was made in the 1985 NESR Report "Information for Policy". At present some information of this kind can be obtained from the Household Budget Surveys (which however, are taken only every seven years or so) and from the annual series of Labour Force Surveys which however cover only demographic and employment characteristics.

The 1987 ESRI Survey of Life Styles and Usage of State Services provides an example of the kind of enquiry being suggested. It should be noted that this survey, which has come to be known as the Poverty Survey, presents a much wider range of possibilities than is generally known and was designed initially to shed light on a wide range of economic and social issues. This will become more evident according as further reports dealing with a range of issues are published from this source.

Were such an enquiry to become a regular event this of course raises the question as to who should carry it out. This is clearly an area that I in particular do not want to become too deeply involved in. The ESRI may lay claim as it has broken the ground, but it can also be argued in view of the regularity and the costs involved that the CSO should be the agency to do it. However if this were to be so there would need to be satisfactory arrangements regarding access to the results by responsible researchers. In this regard the likely inclusion in the new Statistics Act of a provision to allow the introduction of Public Use Samples is of particular relevance.

The final issue on which I wish to comment concerns viewing employment and unemployment issues in broader context. As in the previous discussion the household or family context is also important here. For example there is the desirability to assess the extent to which unemployment is or is not mitigated by the fact of a spouse or other household member working; the link between the presence of dependents and the degree of labour force participation is another aspect on which further information should be made available. These are issues on which greater light could be shed by the further exploitation of the Labour Force Survey results and through the more general household enquiry of the kind just referred to.

There is also a need, in my view, to review the adequacy of existing conventional measures of employment and unemployment (particularly the latter) if one is to view issues in a wider social setting. What I am referring to here is the need to take account of the emergence of large marginalised groups such as those in peripheral forms of employment, "discouraged" workers and persons accommodated on manpower schemes. These issues were discussed in some detail in a recent paper presented to the Society (Garvey, D., 1988). In saying this I am not implying that the more tightly drawn conventional measures of unemployment are basically unsound. The needs of pragmatic labour market planning, and economic efficiency considerations generally, require the identification of that core segment of labour supply which can be most readily absorbed into employment. Furthermore it is clear that the characteristics of many marginalised persons (in regard to age for example) are such that any policy responses designed to assist them would have to involve many options, and would not necessarily be centred on their full re-integration into the normal labour market. This does not imply however that their plight can be ignored. In a broader socio-economic context they still have to be catered for, and, in many cases their basic needs provided for from public funds. This consideration, and the fact of their sheer numbers, suggest they should be systematically enumerated in a wider social framework.

Lest I be accused of exaggeration I would like to illustrate my point in terms of some broad numbers in relation to the aspects discussed. In a study of long-term unemployment which I carried out for Eurostat in 1987 I attempted to assess the size of some of the marginalised groups referred to across the twelve countries of the Community. Broadly speaking if one considers both the "discouraged" and persons accommodated on special manpower schemes the

related Community total in 1985 was nearly 7 million, at a time when the conventional unemployment aggregate was 15 million. Even though these figures cannot be regarded as "additional", as there are significant deadweight and substitution effects involved, they raise questions in my mind as to adequacy of existing unemployment figures in reflecting the full extent of social deprivation in Europe. It also calls into question the meaningfulness of the recent unemployment decreases in some countries and prompts one to ask to what extent these have been achieved by increased, but unrecorded, "marginalisation".

That, Mr. Chairman represents the extent of what I intend to cover this evening. If time allowed there are many other matters of importance that I could have touched on. One could say for example that areas such as the environment and energy use will warrant greater consideration in the years ahead. I have said nothing about resources (no doubt others will). I have touched only fleetingly on the EC dimension with regard to statistics even though I suspect that much of what I have said would accord with views in that quarter. Basically all I have done is to isolate a few issues in the domain of official statistics which I consider to be of particular importance, and by expressing my views on these I would hope to encourage a wider debate.

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DISCUSSION

T.P Linehan: The President of the Society has indeed chosen an opportune time to put the focus once again on the broader aspects of official statistics, doing so in terms of producers and users in the light of his own experience as one and then the other. I am sure it is not his intention to polarise us into two groups – there can be quite an overlap. In CSO itself, particularly in National Accounts work, one could best describe activity by joining the two terms to coin a new one – *PRODUSERS*. There are also suppliers – respondents who may be users in their own right. In the years ahead with every effort being made to develop the statistical potential of administrative records of Government Departments and other public agencies, joint activity by all three, suppliers, producers and users, will be vital.

We are here concerned with the broad consideration of several factors – the assessment of needs, the mechanism of meeting needs, and the uses of official statistics. These are all dynamic in nature – they interact and are affected by the resource position – which is another variable.

There was a time, which I still remember, when the statistics we speak of were not the “in thing” in Ireland and CSO had to take most of the initiative in pointing to gaps and trying to fill them. I have in mind particularly the 1950s and early 60s when the innovations were:

- National Accounts
- Household Budget Survey
- Monthly Retail Sales
- National Farm Survey
- Quarterly Industrial Production
- University Statistics
- Quarterly Hotels Inquiry

Since then things have changed a great deal. Some gone, some grown out of all knowledge. The GNP is now an everyday topic.

The population of users of statistics in Ireland has grown and grown leading in turn to demands for more, sooner, more often, more detailed. Some of these have been met; innovation did not end in the earlier period by any means. It was not possible to meet all demands – partly for reasons of limited resource increases – partly for other practical considerations.

The future, which has indeed already begun!, brings with it the enhanced impact of the European Community in the substantial implications for official statistics of the Single Market at a time of severe resource constraints.

As seen from that centre, harmonised, integrated statistical systems in each Member State must produce statistics in respect of all sectors with sufficient detail and timeliness to provide the Community with the statistical information it considers necessary to compete successfully with countries such as USA, Japan etc. etc.

In terms of finding out the needs – I should say rather the desires – of different categories of users – the European Commission is the most active and demanding; desires of domestic Government Departments are also readily expressed; research bodies are not slow to express views; the position for other users varies. I welcome Professor Sexton's suggestions for periodic sectoral exchanges with a broad spectrum of users to be organised by CSO and I would appreciate any other views in this context.

In his paper he emphasises several common threads in regard to users requirements. On the question of timeliness I must put on record that other improvements have been made in recent times – advance estimates for Retail Sales Index, substantial improvement in the availability of the Annual Census of Production results, final Population Census Results in County Bulletins (just 3 years after Census data information on almost all Census items is available for most Counties).

I'm sure the user query – why preliminary estimates from the LFS were not introduced before now – was phrased with tongue in cheek – as, in his earlier incarnation as Producer he was the LFS man! More seriously, the answer is that this was the result of efforts to meet users expressed needs.

The precision aspect is not a straightforward one. Users reactions after a revision i.e. after a firmer figure is made available, can depend very much on the nature of the statistic and the use the user has already made of it. In measuring a year to year change, a revision of 1.0% may get a very different reaction in going from 5.8% to 4.8% compared with a change from +0.5% to -0.5%.

The question "Statistics for whom?" raises intriguing issues – what needs should be satisfied and in what order? The President has indicated the expressed view of the National Statistics Board for the immediate future – "a focus on satisfying the requirements of Irish Government policy making both in the domestic and European Community contexts" and in that section of his paper he has teased out some of the implications. I mentioned earlier the European Community impact. This might be described as a Colossus – I have in my hand a copy of the EC Statistical Program for 1989–1992 – approved by Resolution of Council ten days ago.

It is interesting to note that the approach of that program envisages a broader category of user than that expressed domestically. This is being reflected in various ways – such as the level of detail specified in compulsory standardised classification of activities – the new NACE.

In our discussion a resource question could also be asked "Who pays for what?" Increasingly I believe, we have to develop an approach whereby the user or demander pays. This has many variants of course – I mention two.

1. Where Community policy, accepted domestically, in a particular area calls for statistical information involving new or enhanced statistical inquiries, then (a) the statistical implication should be determined explicitly when the policy is being discussed and (b) the additional resources needed should be provided by the domestic department responsible for that policy.
2. Where special analyses are sought from existing data bases or where extensions to existing inquiries are made for specific users, appropriate charges should be made to domestic clients.

In mentioning the various interacting factors entering into the broad considerations of our subject I included "the uses of statistics". A recent EC development has been the incorporation into legislation of the use for administrative purposes of what were previously statistical measures. A prime example is GNP which now enters into the determination of Own Resources contribution to the Community financing. There are other examples particularly in the agricultural area.

This development which may be regarded either as a new use, or the emergence of a new type of user has several consequences. There is increased importance attached to absolute levels for comparison between member countries as distinct from comparison of rates of change. There may be complications arising from revision of estimates. There may be auditing aspects. Perhaps it is in this general context that Professor Sexton says, referring to the future "it may be particularly difficult to preserve the central ground of objectivity". I have no such fears as long as we can retain our existing system.

Much as I would like to I cannot take up all the points raised by the President in his very interesting address. It gives me great pleasure to formally second the vote of thanks to him and to conclude with a little verse entitled "The Producer of Official Statistics".

THE PRODUCER OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Information for the nation!
That in short is our vocation.
If others have the facts we need,
Then give us access too, we plead.

But confidentiality,
The height of topicality,
We protect with strict propriety
As we get into our stride.

The individuality
Of each and every entity
Is grouped with Other Company
– Its identity we hide.

We publish then an aggregate.
This makes the user cogitate
and sometimes even speculate
On *which* is *what* and *where*.

Some do not even hesitate
To make themselves an estimate
– Sometimes it is a guessimate
– Plucked figures from the air!

The constrict of an aggregate
Does some users irritate
We do our best to mitigate
The impact of our rule.

Apart from this protectiveness,
We practice no selectiveness,
Our aim is user friendliness,
Our goal – a data pool.

J. Blackwell: This paper is a timely one, especially at a time like the present when resource constraints mean that there is a premium on getting the most from existing statistics and for good contacts between producers and users of statistics. A few brief points can be made.

First, the idea of statistical seminars is a good one but one dilemma is how to involve industry (which itself plays a vital role in providing the raw material for statistical inquiries). The ideal is where industry is fed back the results of statistical inquiries in a way which relates to their concerns and thereby giving an incentive to firms to provide the raw material for industrial statistics.

Second, the liaison groups which were formed at the time of the compilation of the Statistical Board plan, played a more useful role – not least in opening the eyes of users to many of the problems of providing statistics. Some way of retaining the liaison groups in an active form at least from time to time, would pay dividends.

Third, one way to build bridges between producers and users of statistics would be through exchanges of personnel between official statisticians and those who use and analyse statistics.

Fourth, there remains an underutilisation of administrative records, despite the hopes held out from time to time that the use of these records could be a way around current resource constraints. Two striking cases are Revenue Commissioners data and data on public sector employment and earnings. It is exasperating to say the least that the Department of Finance cannot find it worth its while to issue a regular bulletin on the latter. One of the problems here is the narrow view of the public interest on the part of bodies who have the potential to provide statistics.

Fifth, there remains the potential to market CSO data, to “add value” to these data – with the Small Area Statistics of the Census of Population being one of the more obvious cases.

Finally, a heart felt plea for (a) an improvement in our deplorable earnings statistics (b) a regular household survey on economic and social conditions, as is quite rightly highlighted by Sexton. There is a potentially crucial role to be played by brokers who could ease the paths of users given the cumbersome access to existing cross-sectional surveys. And whatever happened to the idea of a Data Archive?