Old and new risks for the credibility of official statistics: comments from a user

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# Introduction

Credibility is a key issue for official statistics. The role of statistics as an essential instrument for the healthy functioning of a democratic society cannot be effectively played without credibility. Statistics that are not credible are not useful any longer. For this reason, the credibility of official statistics has to be carefully nurtured and protected in democratic societies..

Credibility has a very significant subjective component. It is certainly related to governance issues, such as independence from governments, quality or timeliness, but on the end, it is to a great extent a perception. It is the perception of the users, and of the citizenship at large, what finally make statistics credible.

Preserving the credibility of statistics has always been a challenge for statistical systems, as it has been threatened by many facts and incidences. As examples of risks that have traditionally affected the image of credibility, several can be mentioned: interference of the governments in the appointment of the staff or in the assignment of the budget, lack of a clear differentiation between official and private statistics by the public at large, diverging or contradictory data published by different government agencies on similar variables, or erroneous interpretations of statistics by the media.

These are what can be called old risks. They have been experienced largely during the last years. So, robust statistical systems are used to them and know more or less how to deal with them-

But society is changing dramatically, new technologies are developing very quickly, and as a result we are now witnessing the appearance of a number of new risks, new challenges requiring new answers and solutions. Among them can be mentioned:

The trust of the population in their governments and in the official institutions in general is rapidly decaying, and this lack of trust is naturally extended to the producers of official statistics.

Democratic practices are being lately exerted with a rather lighter attitude than they traditionally were. Voting decisions are less and less taken on the basis of economic and social indicators meant to measure the performance of the governments, and more and more influenced by messages disseminated through the social nets, or by skilful marketing ad-hoc campaigns. The role of statistics as an instrument for democracy is losing relevance.

The changes originated by the new technological developments and the new systems of organizing work are particularly difficult to capture, and require new and imaginative methods to be adequately measured.

There is an increasing number and variety of users and an increasing and more diversified type of demands, with sets an additional challenge to official statisticians. Particularly, official statistics are bound to compete with other sources of information which may not reach the same levels of quality, but which are cheaper and more timely.

# Methods

In order to face these problems, statistical systems are making use of several instruments. They can, among other activities,

Improve the legal basis and the status of independence in issues like the appointment of staff, the allocation of budget, the coordination of the system or the establishment of a statistical programme.

Adopt principles of good practices that can complement the legal frame.

Implement total quality frameworks

Reinforce the image of credibility through activities oriented not only towards the different sectors of users, but also towards the public at large. In particular, seek the support of the media.

Develop links and common grounds of cooperation with other statistical systems. International and supranational statistical bodies have an increasing role to play in face to these new challenges.

# Results

All these instruments are being regularly used by advanced statistical systems, with a positive impact in the enhancement the credibility .Still, the outreach of this impact is very much related to the characteristics of the type of users to which it is mainly addressed.

On the other hand, new instruments will have to be developed in order to counteract the risks arising from the new society emerging from the technological revolution. A more open attitude towards cooperation with the private sector appears as advisable, but official statisticians are bound to build a frame in which credibility can be preserved.

# Conclusions

The goals of this paper are: a) to review some of the factors that can jeopardise credibility of official statistics, with an emphasis on the new risks arising from the context that the social nets are conforming, and b) to reflect, from the point of view of a user, on the effectiveness of the methods that are currently being applied by developed statistical systems and on the need to develop some new instruments to protect and enhance credibility in the emerging new society.