Panel discussion: "Statistics Beyond 2020: challenges and risks"

Outline by George Arnett, moderator

Fake news and legitimacy of public statistics

All of the panelists identify a variety of ways in which trust in public statistics could potentially erode in the future. Both Maria Helena Figueira and Maurizio Vichi will highlight the danger of "fake news" in their presentations, although they refer to slightly different things: on one side is the intentional/unintentional misuse of public statistics while on the other is alternative and, possibly erroneous, sources of information being treated as fact. We could explore both of these types of "fake news" and the responsibility that public statistics providers and stakeholders have in combating their use.

Development of technology and digitisation

The next area I want to move onto will be how public statisticians adjust their work to respond to rapidly changing technologies. Aurel Schubert references the growth of the shadow banking sector and Bitcoin, which he suggests requires new skills and cooperation with Fintech companies for the ECB to adapt to. Figueira similarly notes the challenges for measuring developments in service sectors given the worldwide nature of some of these innovations. New sources of information are obviously an opportunity for statistical providers, but what safeguards are needed to maintain the quality of public statistics? We will also talk about how the use of new technologies in public statistics raises potential concerns about privacy and public consent.

Competition from big data sources

A linked subject to technological development is the competition public statistics will face from the proliferation of commercial competitors to public statistical providers. This also means a build up of big data that, like with the shadow banking sector, is relatively inaccessible to statistical bodies. What are the steps that statistical institutes need to take to ensure their continued use and relevance in the face of this competition from private industries?

Maintaining quality with limited resources

Vichi notes the "enormous developments of statistical algorithms and methodologies", Figueira talks about the need for "monetisation" of statistics and to communicate their value thanks to pressure on budgets. With more possibilities than ever for advancement in the field of statistics, will budgetary constraints mean that public statistics lag behind the curve of developments? In countries where budgets are being cut, how should people working with statistics defend their importance as a public good?

Statistical literacy and education

Are the ways statistics are taught sufficient for today's world? Giorgia Zaccaria will refer in her presentation some important skills that could "foster a better comprehension of statistics as a whole". Carlos Coimbra will refer to the need for staff at statistical agencies to develop new skills. Meanwhile, Figueira will talk about the need for increased statistical literacy as non-experts make up a bigger proportion of those using public statistics. What are education systems and governments more generally doing right in statistical education? And what more could they do to get the most out of the statistics being published?