

Conference Summary

Truth in numbers: The role of data in a world of fact, fiction and everything in between



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This document contains a summary of the Conference “Truth in numbers: the role of data in a world of fact, fiction and everything in between”, which took place on 4 April 2018 in Bern, Switzerland. More information on the conference is available on the [PARIS21 website](#).

I. Welcome

Georges-Simon Ulrich, Director General, Swiss Federal Statistical Office, FSO

Johannes Jütting, Manager, PARIS21

Mr. Ulrich opened the conference by focusing on what can be done on the side of official statistics in a world that is constantly evolving and where the information landscape has completely changed. Mr. Ulrich emphasised the struggle between feelings and facts in today's information landscape, displaying a [CNN video on crime statistics](#). Mr. Jütting expanded on these points by highlighting the fact that the well-being of people in emerging and developing economies is also affected by data misuse, fake statistics and distrust in official data. Mr. Jütting also mentioned that despite recently emerging "negative" connotations around data, there is also a lot of hope placed into the provision of more and better data. The word "Data Revolution" has provided positive momentum around data, with the expectation that it will also enable the improvement of well-being for people in developing countries.

II. Opening Remarks: Global issues that require global solutions

Krystyna Marty Lang, Deputy State Secretary, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

Fekitamoeloa Katoa 'Utoikamanu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States

Ms. Lang's intervention looked at data abuse and fake news, especially in the framework of social networks and the role of the government. Social networks have been used to facilitate political deceit, such as in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Ms. Lang emphasised the need for global support to statistics, which is essential for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Ms. Lang also voiced the need for quality data and information to help every citizen make better decisions.

Ms. 'Utoikamanu's highlighted the need for policy responses to scandals related to data safety and manipulation. Today, there is a high degree of vulnerability regarding information distortion and governments need to ensure that existing divides do not grow further. Ms. 'Utoikamanu also highlighted the need for decision-makers to have access to real time data in the framework of the unprecedented increase in the amount of information. As some emerging economies still face difficulties in data collection, there is an urgent need to strengthen national statistical systems, as recognised by the 2030 Agenda. There is specifically a demand for investment in up-to-date hardware and a need to ensure data literacy. Ms. 'Utoikamanu emphasised PARIS21's demonstrated engagement in the past years to strengthen the national statistical systems (NSS) of developing countries and called for scaling up support to statistical institutions.

III. Keynote on Fake News, Bubbles and Official Statistics

Vincent Hendricks, Professor, University of Copenhagen and Director, Centre for Information and Bubble Studies

Mr. Hendricks provided the keynote presentation on "Fake News, Bubbles and Official Statistics". The unregulated information and news market in the digital age is similar to the market structure

ruling the financial markets of the 2000's. Mr. Hendricks stressed that, in the information market, having a voice is not the same thing as being heard; and the prime asset in the information age is attention, which is distributed according to power laws. For fake news, he outlined three gradual areas, zone 1: true statements, verified facts; zone 2: doctored statements (framing, cherry-picking etc.), undocumented statements (rumours); and zone 3: lies (false statements, intended to contradict facts), "bullshit" (diversion, dilution of distinction bet. true / false), fake news ("bullshit" or lies statements simulating journalism and truthfulness). On the potential of statistics to fight fake news, Mr. Hendricks recommended embracing emotions. He suggested that official statistics should fight factually incorrect information, replace facts and evidence as basis for political debate, opinion formation and policymaking.

IV. Panel discussion: How to better manage and tackle the misuse of data and information in the digital era

Moderator: *Marie-José Kolly, Data Journalist, Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

Panellists: *Georges-Simon Ulrich, Director General, Swiss Federal Statistical Office; Vincent Hendricks, Professor, University of Copenhagen and Director, Centre for Information and Bubble Studies; Robert Cuffe, Head of Statistics, BBC News; Pali Lehohla, Independent Accountability Panel*

The panel discussed how to make users interested in reliable data and the role public institutions, such as the national statistical office (NSO) could facilitate this.

The discussants initially addressed how to present information in an attractive way for users. The recommendations focused on having the right data, which targets users' needs. Mr Ulrich mentioned that FSO developed a thematic leadership system where one person is responsible for the relationships with the user community of a specific area. Concerning quality, NSOs and public institutions need to stay relevant and independent.

Innovative ways of informing the public were also described. Mr Cuffe explained that, for those seeking fast and short news, the BBC produces content that relates to the user. There is also a potential new market for 'slow' journalism that may be interesting to explore as well, with long articles and detailed information.

Regarding the question on the intervention of NSOs in policy debates, the need of being objective and neutral were addressed. NSOs need to build and maintain their reputation of being objective. Mr Lehohla mentioned that being honest and correcting mistakes helps build such a reputation. Clarifying when data is being misused or explaining when an incorrect data source is being used to produce a figure would help in debunking fake news.

While the NSOs need to account for their actions, there are other actors that do not have to do so. Establishing partnerships between institutions who have expertise in producing reliable data and those that have experience telling stories could be the most effective and efficient way of being

accountable and yet communicating information in an attractive way. The government should also consider regulating the spread of information through social media.

V. Key takeaways from the morning

Johannes Jütting, Manager, PARIS21

Mr Jütting thanked the audience. He mentioned three key takeaways. First, it is time to start acting now in combatting the spread of statistical humbug and misuse. Second, governments need to step up regulation against the misuse of private data and information and enable their NSOs to play the role of an independent watchdog. NSOs need to start acquiring the capabilities of communicating with users in a way that attracts them. Users also need to improve their data literacy. Third, he mentioned the need for the statistical community to step out of their comfort zone and interact with a larger public in a non-paternalistic way.

VI. Role of data in SDG implementation

Michael Gerber, Ambassador, Swiss Special Envoy for Global Sustainable Development

Francesca Perucci, Assistant Director, UN Statistics Division

Ambassador Gerber presented the role of data in SDG implementation and how the SDGs can affect data collection and official statistics. He stressed the importance of having the right means and instruments to track SDG progress. The SDGs are an opportunity for official statistics but also an obstacle for both sides: donors move slowly and recipients face political risks. A modernisation process must be launched for better capacity development and Switzerland is involved in this process through PARIS21, partner countries and engagement in the field of big data.

Ms Perucci's presentation focused on data for the SDGs. After a brief introduction on SDGs, she claimed that an unprecedented amount of data is needed under the 2030 Agenda. She listed the challenges we are currently facing and gave some examples on how we are addressing them. She also introduced the Cape Town Global Action Plan and its six strategic areas. The next steps were presented, including focusing on country implementation, looking at not only SDG indicators but also SDG data, reporting platforms and data hubs, implementation of CTGAP, new financing mechanisms and the 2nd UN World Data Forum, which will be in Dubai on 22-24 October 2018.

VII. Calling out bullsh*t in a digital world

Jevin West, Assistant Professor, University of Washington

Mr West presented on data reasoning for the digital age. He first claimed that lack of data reasoning does not only exist in politics, but also academia and other sectors. Because numbers appear to carry authority, we should be more careful when dealing with them. However, educators are not teaching their students to question numbers. He presented his eight tips for spotting quantitative but misleading information, including questioning the source, considering the different ways numbers can be presented, watching out for graphic manipulation, not being intimidated by the black box, staying careful for claims that seem too good to be true, avoiding confirmation bias, being

aware of unfair comparisons and thinking in orders of magnitude. He then gave a few examples of some of the tips.

VIII. Greetings by Alec von Graffenried, Mayor of Bern

Alec von Graffenried, Mayor of Bern

The session started with a welcome and greeting message from the mayor of Bern, Alec von Graffenried. He paid tribute to PARIS21 and highlighted the fact that politicians should rely on data because « Without correct data or high quality data, people are just persons with opinions ». Quality data for evidence-based policy is fundamental. He also strongly advocated for the NSOs in the data ecosystem, especially in the era of big data and fake news, where the role of the NSOs in producing data is crucial. In Federal states like Switzerland, national and local offices of statistics are responsible of data generation under the Switzerland statistics charter.

IX. Panel discussion: Data for Development: the role of official statistics within the new information landscape

Moderator: *Kali Taylor, International Institute for Sustainable Development*

Setting the scene: *Haishan Fu, Director – Development Data Group, World Bank*

Panellists: *Neil Jackson, Chief Statistician, Department for International Development, UK; Fekitamoeloa Katoa 'Utoikamanu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States; Pieter Everaers, Director Eurostat; Silja Baller, Practice Lead, Digital Economy and Innovation, World Economic Forum*

The Panel discussed the role of official statistics in an evolving landscape dominated by the emergence of a new data ecosystem, new data sources and fake news.

It started with some insight from Ms Fu. In the era of fake news, recent reports show that 2/3 of people have difficulty in identifying good journalism. The NSO is therefore encouraged to go beyond producing data and:

- Strengthen trust and raise awareness about data and privacy
- Bring relevant information to people
- Improve communication

Ms 'Utoikamanu discussed her role as USG and took the opportunity to advocate for the 91 countries covered by her Secretariat. Global frameworks and objectives, such as the SDGs, require reporting but it is a burden for countries with national priorities. There is a need to consider a simplified approach regarding SDG reporting for small countries that lack resources and a strong link between data and policy.

Mr Jackson discussed how the disaggregation aspect of SDG monitoring is important for the UK to leave no one behind. In the « Leave no one behind » era, one of the main challenges is the lack of population and demographic data for basic services. For example, programmes that use satellite imagery to detect polio in a geographic area are emerging but it is important to figure out how the NSS will fit into this.

Mr Everaers mentioned the importance of distinguishing between the capacity of developed and developing countries. The statistical community needs to strengthen its role in the following areas:

- Quality : Methodology, institution, statistical quality
- Communication : Raising awareness
- Literacy : Educating people

Ms Baller discussed the rise of the digital economy. There is a need to think about how to measure the digital economy (use, output, outcomes), to define new metrics because traditional data are no longer valid (e.g. GDP is not capturing e-commerce) and provide policymakers with the relevant information to make decisions. There are factors to leverage such as connectivity quality, skills and user identification, which will require collaboration between NSOs and the private sector.

X. Closing Remarks

Martine Durand, Chief Statistician and Director of the Statistics and Data Directorate, OECD

Ms Durand focused her closing remarks on the role we all have in combatting the misuse of numbers. She focused on the need to experiment, learn, adapt and form new partnerships with users, producers, journalists and all actors in the new data ecosystem. Some rules for these new types of engagements include:

- Adapt the information
- Engage with people you disagree with
- Talk to citizens
- Look at multiple platforms and sources
- Use the language of the people
- Make sure to monitor impact
- Develop a code of conduct, rules of the market

The SDGs are providing a great opportunity for partnerships, innovation, disaggregation and adequate resources to strengthen statistical systems.