

Communicating through indicators

Topic 5 – Who uses statistics, what do they need and how should we engage with them?

Keywords: indicators, communication, information, context, interactivity

Introduction

Like the mediators who communicate between different parties finding their point of agreement, indicators communicate and overpass boundaries between policy, science, statistics and public life. Thus they are able to reveal various phenomena to different users – policy makers, researchers, citizens, journalists, statisticians, specialists in different domains. This inbuilt capability of speaking to various types of audiences, which makes statistics usable and useful, is defined by the communication function of indicators. To clarify the specificity of communication through indicators we need to consider the basic processes of communication. In particular the paper is going to deal with three key elements of communication: the theoretical/political/social context, the interactivity and the clarity of the message.

The main purpose is to explore what is the role of these key elements for a successful communication through indicators.

Methods / Problem statement

How the sound context, the interactivity and the clear message work for a successful communication through indicators will be explored at the creation and at the dissemination level of indicators. The role of the context at creation level is analyzed through the need of sound theoretical context behind the statistical message by using not only 'purely' statistical expertise but knowledge of other domains.

The dissemination techniques for communicating the indicator theoretical context are also analyzed. The interactivity is analyzed at creation level through summary of different statistical public consultations. The dissemination is addressed with a review of the role of the social media. The issue of getting a clear and simple message, is dealt with a segmentation of the user groups and their needs.

The paper develops a classification according statistical literacy and level of participation in the public life. The user groups identified are: specialists and citizens/general public (including the policy makers). The latter user group is analyzed through the prism of its heterogeneity outlining specific needs and the related communication channels. There is also a special focus on how to get clear message out of complexity with the pros and cons of the use of composites, indicator sets and aggregated dashboards.

The main question to be answered is how to make the right mix of the three main communication components in order to have effective indicator-based commun

Results / Proposed solution

To answer the above question one should analyze the best practices of the indicator-based communication.

Their summary is one of the main contributions of the paper. Based on it the following recommendations could be outlined:

- Official statistics should be not only highly precise but also very relevant to the needs of the different user groups. This implies that before speaking statisticians should listen to users. Therefore, there is a need for more extensive use of interactive communication including public consultations and use of social media.

- Taking into account the heterogeneity of the 'general public' user group:

- there is a need of a more detailed segmentation analysis. It should be based on various criteria: demographic and social status, geographical location and psychographics; education, lifestyles.

- the user group should be approached through variety of communication channels combining them in an eclectic panel. Having in mind the variety of approaches for getting clear statistical message there is a need for harmonization of practices, in particular in the area of the assessment of the indicator trends, in the guidelines for writing of statistical narratives, in the development of criteria for metadata quality assessment.

For getting a clear message out of complexity one should analyze different options like indicator sets, composites, aggregated dashboards not only from a quality point of view but also in terms of democratic accountability.

Conclusions

Among the key challenges of indicator-based communication belong:

- clarity and simplicity of the message;
- accessibility of the statistical messages;
- democratic accountability and ownership of the produced information.

As to the first point, the main challenge is to be clear and simple while remaining precise. Since this task requires cross-cutting expertise, a close cooperation between communication specialists and statisticians is essential. The second point poses the challenge of the adequate use of statistical indicators in the democratic governance of today's societies. In its very essence this assumes active involvement of the users from the very beginning in the process of the development of the indicators (sets). Several such initiatives have already taken place. Yet, there is still large room for innovative practices that can gradually lead to deranging users from their usual role of being just consumers of statistical services and put them in the track of becoming rather co-developers of statistical indicators.

This would further lead to changing the current unidirectional process of indicators dissemination towards the path of "communication" – a real two-way process of a democratic dialogue. Taking stock of the advancement of information technologies and the use of the interactivity Web2.0-style approach is already a step in this direction. Yet, there is still long way ahead.