

Organizing and Managing a Statistical System in a Small Country

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This paper is intended for discussion in the conference sessions on Organisation and Management of Statistical Systems and on Resources (Management of IT). The paper is based on experience gained at Statistics Iceland and in the Icelandic system of official statistics over the last two decades. It discusses a few policies and actions carried out there to widen the scope and improve the content, quality and relevance of the statistical output, which may be relevant in the context of the Conference.

1. The need for official statistics in small countries

In all countries, sovereign states and economies, whether they are large or small, there is a need for official statistics. The term official statistics is commonly defined as statistics on the economic, social and environmental situation and development, produced by the government or by an official agency (or agencies) on behalf of the government along the lines and practices laid down in the Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics as agreed by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 1994. Having said that it is clear that the size and the affluence of a country will determine to what extent the need for official statistics can be satisfied. Small countries have small budgets, small administrations and small government infrastructures. Also, as I will come back to, although the small countries may have a certain advantage over the large countries as regards obtaining a general overview of the economic and social conditions, it can be asserted that the cost of producing official statistics is relatively larger in a small country than in a large one.

If we accept these views we can further state that for generating official statistics in small countries the following prerequisites must be satisfied:

- A legislative framework must be in place.
- There must be an organisational structure for the production of official statistics.
- The statistical activities have to be carefully managed, particularly with a view to the setting of clear priorities and maintaining a high level of efficiency of the operations.

2. A legislative framework

Every country needs a legislative framework or what is often termed as a Statistics Act or Law. The purpose of such a legal basis includes the following:

- To legitimize the operation of a national statistical institute (NSI) and, as the case may be, other official statistical agencies and to oblige them to operate in a transparent, professional and impartial manner.
- To ensure the professional autonomy of the NSI and other legitimate statistical agencies and oblige them to conduct the statistical operations purely on the basis of professional considerations, free from interference from politics or interest groups.
- To charge the NSI with the role and responsibility to coordinate the statistical activities of public institutions engaged in official statistics.

* See *Background Note on Iceland and Statistics Iceland* at the end of this paper.

- To grant the NSI and, as the case may be, other statistical agencies the authority to collect data for statistical purposes; from households, businesses and institutions, and from administrative records in so far as these may be used for statistical purposes.
- To oblige the statistical agencies to safeguard the data collected for statistical purposes, to keep such data confidential allowing neither direct nor indirect identification and to ensure that data collected for statistical purposes are used solely for such purposes.

3. Organizational structure

Traditions for organising public services or official institutions vary a lot between different cultures and countries. However that may be, in the small countries it is very important that specialized activities are organised in a close knit fashion and are not scattered between several institutions. The experience of my own country, Iceland, is in my opinion a clear indication of this.

Two decades ago, Icelandic official statistics were quite decentralised. Statistics Iceland was the national statistical institute but substantial parts of the official statistics were produced elsewhere. Statistics Iceland was charged with powers of coordination and leadership, but the very thin spread of the human and financial resources between the different institutions engaged in the statistical activities, gave rise to substantial inefficiencies. These took for instance the form of duplication of work and some misguided competition rather than cooperation. But the main reason for inefficiencies was probably that with the exception of Statistics Iceland, the institutions involved did not have official statistics as their main role but rather as secondary activities supporting other responsibilities. This had among other things the effect that neither economies of scale nor of specialization were realized in the system as a whole.

Starting in the late 1980's, most of the decentralized activities have now been merged with the activities of Statistics Iceland. These changes have in some instances come about at the request of the relevant institutions themselves and in others as a result of decisions by the Government. In some cases the transfers of activities have required legislative changes and in all instances the transfers have been confirmed by changes in the central government budget. The largest transfers have involved moving human resources along with the activities.

As a result of this development, the system of official statistics in Iceland has become quite centralized. The system is presently built on two pillars, Statistics Iceland for all the main economic and social statistics and the Central Bank of Iceland for monetary statistics. Apart from this, some specialized agencies (such as in the fields of farming and fishing, the environment, of social security) produce statistics for their fields, often in cooperation with Statistics Iceland as regards coverage, standards and accepted practices. Many of these statistics are also inputs into the activities of Statistics Iceland. It may be worth noting that as a result of consultations between Statistics Iceland and the Central Bank of Iceland some of the current account statistics, traditionally generated by the Bank on the basis of its data collection for control purposes, is being transferred to Statistics Iceland. This follows a trend which has been evident in Europe for the last few years.

It is commonly recognized that the process of centralization has brought large gains in coverage, efficiency and in quality. Some of these gains may of course be attributable to the changes as such since the resources involved, both human and financial, had to be redeployed in a new setting. Such gains would, however, only be short-lived without more substantial changes taking place at the same time. The main lasting gains from the centralisation are considered to be the following:

- The coverage of the official statistics has become larger and more comprehensive than before. This is the result of the increased clarity of responsibilities for the statistical production in the various areas.

- The activities transferred to Statistics Iceland were merged with and aligned to the existing framework and infrastructure of the institution. Furthermore, methodologies have been revised and harmonised, common European or international classifications been applied and standard good practices of NSI's been introduced, such as on data security and confidentiality, transparency of both processes and practices, the application of pre-release calendars and pre-scheduled publication dates of both outcomes and revisions.
- Major gains in both efficiency and in quality have been realised through the application of the common system of dissemination, in particular after the development of web-based dissemination policies.
- The transfer of activities and human resources to Statistics Iceland has raised the professional standard and competence of the staff, both the existing and the transferred one. The new staff have had to learn and apply established practices of official statistics while they have in many instances brought with them subject matter knowledge which the old staff were less familiar with.
- Finally, though perhaps not a main issue, international representation of a centralised system of official statistics is much more focused and efficient than that of a decentralised system.

4. The need for managing demand and for priority setting in a small NSI

The National Statistical Institute and other public institutions engaged in official statistics in a small country will inevitably be faced with a demand for statistics that is greater than is commensurate with the size of the society and economy, not to mention the size of the NSI itself. The demand stems from the government for the conduct of economic and social policies, from the firms and the industries for gauging the economic outlook and measuring their performance, from households, educational institutions and from the international obligations the country has accepted through participation in international cooperation and membership in various multinational or international institutions. In the small countries, the demand for statistics is likely to be characterized by the following factors:

- The number of subject matters for enquiry and the number of surveys demanded is inordinately large.
- The frequency of surveys will often be much greater than can easily be justified by cost and human resource considerations, particularly when viewed against the marginal additional information obtained in each survey round.
- Owing to the need for relatively large representative samples, the cost of the data collection in traditional sample surveys will be relatively much greater in a small country than in a large one.
- The level of detail demanded is often greater than is easily obtainable from the relatively small economic actors in the small economies.

For these reasons, it is of the greatest importance that the NSI undertakes to manage the demand as far as possible, set clear priorities for the statistical activities which it intends to undertake or develop and to plan the activities accordingly. In order to do this successfully it is necessary for the NSI to engage its main users in a continuous dialogue of the main needs that should be satisfied within the limits of the scarce resources, both human and financial, of the statistical system. There are various ways in which such a dialogue can be conducted. At Statistics Iceland, we have good experience of organising user consultations in special user groups. In these groups there are representatives from the relevant ministries, the Central Bank, the main labour market organisations, the financial sector and from education and research institutions. These user consultations should have several aims:

1. To make the users realize that there are limits to the capacity of the agencies engaged in official statistics and a need for setting strict priorities.
2. To seek the cooperation of the users in setting the priorities.

3. To seek to coordinate the demand from the various users and not least to align the domestic demand with the international one.
4. To gain acceptance of the use of international definitions, classifications and practices, abandoning special domestic standards whenever possible.

Apart from this, there is always a need for the NSI's in the small countries to cooperate closely with the main international or multinational agencies which rely on the official statistics of the country in question for their activities concerning evaluation of the policies of the country and the conduct of the economic or social cooperation in which the country is engaged.

5. Collecting data

In Europe, the NSI's face increasing difficulties in collecting data for the production of statistics. There are various reasons for this. One is that firms and the public have become more reluctant than before to entrust the data collectors with their data which they often view as confidential information. Another reason is that the NSI's face increasing competition with private firms and other public institutions for data; the number and the activities of data collectors are increasing owing to the insatiable demand for information. Yet another reason is that providing data by firms and economic agents involves the use of time and resources. A particular problem for the NSI's in the small countries is that surveys will be relatively very costly for the agency and burdensome for the respondents; the smaller the country is, the larger will be the size of the representative sample and the greater is the likelihood that the same firms and households will be sampled again and again. These difficulties need to be dealt with firmly by the NSI. I will mention three possible ways in this respect:

1. The NSI's needs to follow and announce that it follows the best practices as regards collection of data and respecting confidentiality.
2. The NSI may seek to use administrative records instead of or in addition to collecting data through direct surveys which require the cooperation, time and effort of the data providers.
3. The NSI may seek to collect the data electronically from enterprises.

I will try to discuss these points a little further in the following.

Best practices as regards data collection

Following best practices as regards data collection aims very much at establishing trust between the data provider and the statistical agency. This requires the agency among other things to explain why the data are needed and how they are to be used. It is also necessary to explain that the NSI follows the principle of using the data collected for statistical purposes solely for such purposes, that it will keep individual data from firms and households alike confidential and take all reasonable precautions to hinder that the data provider may be identified through the statistics, directly and indirectly. In doing this, the statistical agency attempts to distinguish itself from the commercial data collector. Hence, it is not sufficient for the NSI to follow best practices in this respect but necessary to proclaim loudly and clearly that it does so. Another important factor is that the NSI is seen to use the data for statistical purposes; thus it is not sufficient to collect data for some good purpose; we must produce and disseminate the statistical results timely and regularly and be able to demonstrate that this is what we need the data for.

Utilising administrative records

In some countries, e.g. in Iceland and the other Nordic countries, there is a tradition for utilizing administrative records and registers for statistical purposes as far as possible. This practice is of enormous importance for the coverage and the efficiency of the statistical production in a small society like the Icelandic one for the simple reason that without the access to such source data, the data collection activities would in many instances be prohibitively expensive.

There are of course several preconditions for these practices such as the following:

- There must be ample administrative records and registers of high quality available for statistical exploitation. In particular it must be ensured that these are maintained on a continuous basis or with sufficient regularity to keep them both up to date and relevant for both the administrative and the statistical uses.
- The utilisation of administrative records and registers must be accepted as a natural and efficient way of collecting data, relieving businesses and households from the burden they would otherwise have to bear of supplying data themselves through direct surveys.
- The central statistical authorities should preferably be authorised in law to make use of and influence the content of administrative registers for statistical purposes.
- The laws on the collection and processing of administrative data should recognise and prescribe their use for statistical purposes by the central statistical authority.
- There must be full recognition by the administrations supplying the administrative records and maintaining the administrative registers of the use of these for statistical purposes and their duties in that respect. For instance, the coordination with statistical authorities must be observed.
- All the normal confidentiality considerations must be observed fully and systematically.

As is often pointed out in the debate on this subject, the register data need to be controlled, checked and edited in much the same ways as applies to sample survey data. For this purpose, specific procedures have to be designed and applied, both automatic processes and non-automatic ones. Such procedures are, however, by no means more burdensome than those applied in direct surveys.

Given that the preconditions outlined above are fulfilled, large efficiency gains may be realized through utilising administrative sources. However, it should always be recognized that these practices may rely heavily on tradition and their applicability will vary between cultures and countries.

Electronic data collection

Statistics Iceland has a long experience in electronic transfers of administrative databases for statistical purposes and of utilising such information on-line. This has been the case with the national population register, various tax registers and customs databases on foreign trade. In the last few years, such transfers have been improved a lot, not least through the application of web-solutions.

Even in countries with a tradition for the use of administrative registers for official statistics, there will still be a need for direct surveys, among both firms and households. In Iceland, the demand for such data has increased greatly in the last few years, mainly as a result of the intensified European cooperation in statistics. But sample surveys will invariably be very expensive in such small societies as the Icelandic. They will also be difficult to maintain over time as the survey population, both firms and households, is very small entailing that the same firms and households are too often hit by statistical surveys.

For these reasons, Statistics Iceland has sought to employ different methods for the collection of data where direct surveying is inevitable. One practice which is often used is to combine direct surveys and register based information. This is done for instance in the European Survey of Income and Living Conditions, EU-SILC, where data on income, housing and a few other variables are derived from registers.

Such practices are, however, often not possible which has driven the institution to seek alternative solutions for collecting data. One such solution employed in data collection from enterprises is to collect the data directly from the information systems of firms. Currently, this is done mainly in two fields, in collecting data for wage statistics and for the producer price index, PPI.

For a long time, data on wages in the labour market have been obtained electronically from a large sample of firms. The procedure is that after the firms have been sampled they are approached with a request that they deliver data electronically to Statistics Iceland on a monthly basis. For this they have to use any one of the most common wage calculation and accounting software packages utilised by Icelandic firms. At the request of the main labour market organisations and of Statistics Iceland, such software packages have been designed by commercial software producers with the particular statistical needs in mind. An account has also been taken of the obligations of the firms to supply the tax authorities with detailed data. Hence, Statistics Iceland is involved in the specifications of the wage data files. Furthermore, the institution is also involved in preparing the participation of the firms in the survey, for instance by assisting with defining and classifying the enterprises, their branches and their staff according to the appropriate industrial, occupational and educational classifications. Once started, the firms will send the data automatically from their wage files in an electronic format to be read into the Statistics Iceland database. It is of primary importance in this respect that the data submitted for statistical purposes is a bi-product of the wage calculation and accounting of the firm which are generated automatically at the end of each wage period.

For PPI data, Statistics Iceland has approached the firms sampled with the request that they supply monthly data on production, sales and product prices by electronic means. There are two solutions applied for this, either the firms send the information in text format to be read into the database or they use a specific web-solution for transferring the data to a specific slot assigned to them for that purpose.

There are several things to be born in mind using such methods as outlined here. One is that the implementing stage can be somewhat tricky. Here, it is of paramount importance that contact is established with a key person in the data-supplying firm. A first contact with the firm will always be established by a formal letter to the chief executive. Experience shows, however, that a positive response from a chief executive is by no means a guarantee for smooth cooperation. What is important is that the executive responsible for the wage accounting and calculation is prepared to commit him/herself to participating in such a project on a long term basis. Experience does also show that a continued friendly contact with the responsible executive or unit in the firm is very important for the continued cooperation.

Another experience of the wage data collection is that changes in the wage accounting software may upset the continuous flow of data and require specific actions to restore data deliveries. An even worse case is if the firms decide to throw out their accounting systems and replace them with completely new ones. In such cases the data deliveries can be seriously disrupted as the application for statistical purposes is unlikely to be given priority by the accounting units of the firms while they are grappling with the implementation of the new system.

Another method for collecting data by electronic means is to acquire the data as bi-product of public information systems. An example of this is the Icelandic system of comprehensive schools which uses a uniform registration and management software system concerning the operation of the schools, the students, teachers etc. The statistical requirements as specified by Statistics Iceland have been taken into account in the design of this system. Through this, the schools render electronic reports to Statistics Iceland.

The electronic collection of data discussed here is not only important from the point of view of efficiency of the statistical operation but also for quality reasons. As the source data are extracted directly from the accounts and information systems of the firms their quality should be basically consistent. Another factor is that these data are traceable which is of great importance for checking for quality and consistency.

6. Recruitment policies

A small NSI in a small country is bound to have difficulties with acquiring staff with sufficient skills and education. In the larger settings such difficulties may be offset by education within the institution. In the small Statistics Iceland it has proved very difficult to organise continuous statistical education. There have also been limited possibilities for utilising the formal education system for training in statistical methods and in official statistics. The institution has of course organised courses, not least for enhancing the technical skills of the staff, and made use of courses abroad but there has been very heavy reliance on on-the-job training by colleagues.

In the light of this, Statistics Iceland has for more than two decades followed the policy of recruiting as far as possible university graduates, in the last few years preferably people with post-graduate education. This has involved using every opportunity to redefine jobs, upgrading them as possible from low skilled tasks to high skilled ones. This has basically taken place when jobs have become vacant. The outcome of this is partly that the number of assistant and secretarial jobs has been much reduced. At the present time, 65 employees out of the total number of 84 are university graduates or have equivalent education. There is only one secretary in the institution whose secretarial duties are only part of that person's overall responsibilities.

It is the firm belief at Statistics Iceland that this policy and the highly educated staff have been one of the foundations for the evolution of the institution involving both substantial gains in efficiency and quality.

7. IT management

The main features of the policy applied at Statistics Iceland as regards IT have for quite some time been the following:

1. The institution has relied heavily on IT at all stages of the statistical production and dissemination.
2. Statistics Iceland has for many years followed a very strict policy of applying a uniform IT-platform within the house.
3. The organisation of the IT work has been rather "federal" with a rather a small development and service unit but a relatively large involvement and high degree of responsibility of the different departments in the utilisation of the IT.

The heavy reliance on IT is based both on considerations of efficiency and quality. The efficiency issue arises at all stages of the statistical activities. In data collection the use of modern IT concerns several factors, such as the transfer of large amounts of register data into the house, on-line utilisation of administrative records, the application of computer assisted telephone inquiries (CATI) and web-based solutions for data collection. Large efficiency gains have of course been realised over the years in the production process while the recent developments of web-based technology has revolutionized the dissemination of statistics at Statistics Iceland. The IT development has also been of great importance for quality management and control. Overall quality management will always be problematic in the very small institutions as these can ill afford the cost of modern quality management, TQM, EFQM or other "total" systems, which tend to claim large amounts of resources, not least human resources. Among the quality considerations we have found to be of importance is the uniformity in the data treatment, traceability of the data, the utilisation of computerised methods for data editing and consistency control, and the increased ease of access and utilisation of the statistical results by outside users.

At Statistics Iceland the reliance on IT has been taken to mean using state-of-the-art technologies, hardware and software. Another factor of the policy is that IT is used by all employees and that these receive sufficient training in their fields. The number of work stations at Statistics Iceland is substantially larger than the number of employees. There are three main reasons for this; some top and middle managers are supplied with work stations at home, there

are a certain number of laptops used on outside engagements, and there are some workstations which are used for training.

As stated above, the institution has for many years followed a very strict policy of applying a uniform IT-platform within the house. This means basically that all software is compatible or comes from the same family and that decisions on deployment of software and all equipment are taken by the central administration, not the individual units of the institution. This policy has proved to produce large cost savings and gains in efficiency. There are several reasons for this:

- Decisions on deployment are taken with a strict view to the relative cost of utilisation. For such a small institution as Statistics Iceland this means that most of the largest and most expensive statistical systems and databases, often designed to handle enormous amounts of data, are rejected in favour of simpler or more versatile database systems.
- Substantial cost savings have been obtained by signing contracts with software suppliers on comprehensive deals and services involving several compatible systems from the same supplier.
- Relying basically on one family of software brings important efficiencies in terms of training and learning of the staff and thus of application, both as regards the subject matter specialists and the software experts. Of particular importance are the possibilities and indeed practices of sharing experience throughout the institution of applying similar techniques and solutions.
- Statistics Iceland has for many years relied heavily on Microsoft software*. A particular advantage of that is that the very wide spread of the Microsoft family and great familiarity of people with that, which has meant easier recruitment and substantial time saving in introducing new employees to the IT platform.

For a long time, Statistics Iceland has maintained a relatively small specialised IT force within the house. Previously, the IT work has been separated in two units, one for maintenance of the system and client services and the other for development. For the last two years the IT work has been organised in one department. That structure is seen as preferable owing to the need at this small institution for having a certain amount of overlapping skills and a large amount of cooperation among the IT-experts. This is very much tied up with considerations of continuity of the running of the system and the provision of employee support. The small size of the IT department requires that the other departments of the house have relatively high IT skills, are relatively self supporting and ready to accept added responsibility in these matters. This seems to work most of the time with problems mainly rising if the turnover of experts is unusually large. Another implication of the small size of the IT supporting unit is that the institution relies to some extent on outside consultants or contractors for IT tasks. Here, the uniformity of the IT platform is of importance.

8. Streamlining the dissemination system

At Statistics Iceland, substantial gains have been realised through reorganising the system and practices of dissemination. During the last two decades the system of dissemination has evolved from involving basically the production of printed books and reports to the present stance of web-based publication policy. This has brought important cost savings, substantial savings in production times, and large improvements in presentation, readability and quality. Altogether, these developments have resulted in substantial increases in dissemination and the exposure of the official statistics.

The use of the computer technology and the web is very wide-spread in Iceland. This prompted Statistics Iceland in 2003 to adopt a completely new dissemination policy based on the web. This involved the following main changes or features:

* Particularly MS Outlook, SQL Server, Access and Excel. Other applications include the Blaise system for CATI and CAPI, SPSS, and the PC-Axis family for disseminating web tables.

- The web was reorganised so as to be capable of being the main medium of dissemination of all the statistics produced at Statistics Iceland for both domestic and international purposes. The web contains some 1,000 tables in Icelandic and about the same number in English, and deploys the PX-Web system for creating and publishing tables. The utilisation of the web is completely free of charge.
- With the exception of the Yearbook of Statistics, the practice of issuing large printed publications was discontinued. Furthermore, the issue of a printed (and electronic) Monthly Statistics was discontinued. It was recognized, however, that there may at some stage be a demand for larger printed publications, such as reviews containing long time-series.
- The former printed reports were replaced by thematic reports, organised in 16 series, which are meant to be short and concise. These are published on the web, can be read there or downloaded free of charge but are also available in a printed format on demand.

At Statistics Iceland, there is no doubt that this policy has been very successful, not least in increasing the exposure and the use of the statistics as all figures on the use of the Statistics Iceland website show large and continuous increases. This is also confirmed in user surveys.

9. Utilising international cooperation and multinational support

The development of Statistics Iceland over the last two decades demonstrates clearly that not only is the international cooperation in official statistics important as such but that it is particularly important and useful for the small NSI's and the small statistical systems. Furthermore, the small agencies may reap much benefit from cooperation with similar countries or agencies, in particular in neighbouring countries with similar social, political and cultural traditions.

The issue of the international cooperation may be considered along two main lines, the application of international definitions and standards and the participation in international or multinational cooperation. As regards definitions and standards, NSI's and other official statistical agencies have everything to gain by applying internationally agreed definitions, standards and methods. The main gains are:

- Saving of time and resources; the agencies only incur minimum development costs and receive learning and in many cases training without or at a low charge.
- The application of international standards is very important as regards the comparability of statistics between countries; having comparable statistics greatly enhances the use and the worth of the statistics.

As regards the participation in international or multinational cooperation it should be born in mind that official statistics around the world are much the same; they are based on the same scientific grounds, the same phenomena are being measured, and well proven and accepted methods and best practices are applied for the collection of data, the processing of the statistics and the dissemination of the results. Hence, the international cooperation undoubtedly strengthens the advantage of applying international definitions, standards and practices. Furthermore, it greatly aids the development of official statistics, of new methods and increases the awareness of new and innovative practices.

The experience of Statistics Iceland is that the international or multinational cooperation can be utilised to promote the professional development of the staff and increase job satisfaction. A very small NSI in a very small country will have limited possibilities of carrying out its own educational programme aimed at enhancing the learning and professionalism of the staff. Having experienced this, Statistics Iceland has for several years tried to utilise the international cooperation for this purpose; through participation in professional meetings, courses in methods and practices, and in conferences. This has been found to widen the horizon of the staff involved, raise the sense of commitment and quality and increase job satisfaction.

Statistics Iceland has also profited a lot from bilateral or multilateral cooperation with its counterparts in the neighbouring countries. The Nordic countries have for a long time cooperated closely in many fields, one of which is statistics. Statistics Iceland has over the last two decades participated very actively in the cooperation among the Nordic NSI's which has in particular been aimed at sharing experiences of successes and failures, of good and not-so-good practices as well as at concrete projects in specific areas. This cooperation is seen by all the agencies as very useful and enjoyable but it is also almost certain that the smallest agency in this group of five NSI's, Statistics Iceland, has been the one that has gained the most from this partnership and liaison between the NSI's. One of the concrete outcomes of the Nordic cooperation is a good example of gains to be had from this; the development of the software PC-Axis and related applications in which all the countries have participated but is now used in several other countries as well as the Nordic ones. Here, there is a particular advantage that should be emphasised, the existence of a user network which enjoys both a virtual existence and a real one through annual conferences, aimed at learning, sharing experiences and promoting this common tool*. This cooperation and this particular case could be an example for statistical agencies in other parts of the world.

* A similar and valuable user network is also active among the many European NSI's which use the Dutch Blaize software for CAPI and CATI.

Addendum:

Background Note on Iceland and Statistics Iceland

Iceland is a large, mountainous island in the North Atlantic Ocean, with an area of 103 thousand square km and a coast line of about 5,000 km. The climate is relatively cold, wet and windy. The country got settled some 1,000 years ago, mainly by people from the neighbouring Nordic countries. When the first population and housing census was carried out in Iceland in 1703 the population amounted to 50,000 but owing to plagues, poverty and the harsh nature it did not reach 100,000 until in the 1920's. At present, the population amounts to over 300,000. Through the ages, farming supplemented by sea fishing was the mainstay of the Icelanders. The industrial revolution started in Iceland at the beginning of the 20th century and took then the form of mechanization of the fishing fleet. The economic development in Iceland has mainly been based on fishing, and fish products have been the major source of export earnings. In the last decades harnessing of hydropower and of geothermal energy has contributed a lot to economic growth. Nowadays, the Icelandic economy is a very modern one, with services counting for almost 70% of GDP and with the share of banking and financial services in GDP having surpassed that of the fishing and fish processing industry. The Icelanders enjoy a very high standard of living with per capita GDP, measured at PPP's, amounting to around 39,000 USD in 2006.

Besides its membership of the United Nations, Iceland is a member of the European Economic Area (EEA) comprising the EU and EFTA member states and through that an active partner in the statistical cooperation of these states, the so-called European Statistical System (ESS). The participation in the European cooperation as well as the obligations stemming from the membership of the UN and its affiliated institutions, not least the International Monetary Fund, involves both large and specific obligations for data deliveries to these multinational fora.

Statistics Iceland is the National Statistical Institute of Iceland; it is responsible for most of the official statistics other than monetary statistics and represents the country in international statistical cooperation. Statistics Iceland is organised in three main divisions; economic statistics, social statistics, and services and development. The number of staff is just over 80, not counting interviewers. Hallgrímur Snorrason has been the Director-General of Statistics Iceland since 1985.

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