

## **Official statistics: a lot of light, but also some shadow**

**Klaus Reeh, Adviser to the Director General, Eurostat, Luxembourg**

The role of official statistics has increased considerably over the last decades. Ever more areas of our life are cast officially into statistical light. More statistical information is perceived to be better than less, especially the more official this information is, as we are living in the so-called information age.

Official statistics shape very much the way we see almost the world around us: our economy, our environment, our social situation. They influence our view not only of the world at large but also close up, of course as transmitted to a large extent by the media. Personal anecdotal evidence is ever more replaced by official statistical evidence.

It is therefore almost natural, that official statistics (pre-) determine even a lot of our political decisions. Evidence based decision making is to a large extent official statistics based decision making. Therefore we see also a considerable increase in the demand for official statistics from all parts of our societies: from businesses and public institutions at all levels, from advocacy and special interest groups, from the media and all sorts of analysts.

Under these circumstances we, the official statisticians, have to ask ourselves a couple of serious questions.

- Can we really live up to all these expectations and deliver?
- Isn't our role grossly overestimated? Aren't we a little bit too pompous? And biased?
- Are the ever growing user needs really legitimate or at least sufficiently legitimised?
- Are the ever so often evoked citizens really using official statistics so eagerly and if so are they really sufficiently statistically literate to make adequate usage?

And we have to put also some more general questions to ourselves.

- Aren't we predetermining the topic of our public debate through what is (or can be) described statistically and what not? And if so, how should we cope with this responsibility?
- Aren't we creating perception patterns that push the political debate right from the start into a certain direction? Are our methods and concepts really as neutral as we seem to believe?
- Shouldn't we be a little bit more humble and admit that our statistical light is just one light amongst others, probably as value-loaded as any other light?

In my contribution I will try to give some answers to these questions. Some of them, no doubt, are already given, once the question has been put. My objective is to make official statisticians much more aware of their political responsibility and to invite them to reflect more profoundly on their societal role.