SCB
Ingegerd Jansson
David Sundström

Meeting with the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) of Statistics Sweden (SCB)

24th September 2020

Attendees

Board members

Jan Björnstad, Statistics Norway and University of Oslo
Barteld Braaksma, Statistics Netherlands
Anders Holmberg, Australian Bureau of Statistics
Per Johansson, Uppsala University
Annette Jäckle, University of Essex
Sune Karlsson, Örebro University
Thomas Laitila, SCB and Örebro University
Johanna Laiho-Kauranne, Statistics Finland
Xavier de Luna, Umeå University
Natalie Shlomo, University of Manchester
Daniel Thorburn, emeritus

SCB

Joakim Stymne, chair
Folke Carlsson
Lilli Japec
Mats Bergdahl
Gustaf Strandell
Joakim Malmdin
Cecilia Wass
Helena Kaplan
Ingegerd Jansson, secretary
David Sundström, secretary

SCB

Welcome

Joakim Stymne welcomed three new members to the Board:

Dr Johanna Laiho-Kauranne, Deputy Director General, Information process, Statistics Finland

Dr Anders Holmberg, Chief Methodologist and General Manager, Methodology Division, Australian Bureau of Statistics

Prof Per Johansson, Professor of Statistics. Uppsala University

Current Issues at Statistics Sweden

Joakim Stymne

The current Covid-19 pandemic has required a number of changes and adaptations at Statistics Sweden.

A crisis management group is acting since early March. There are two major goals: to ensure the health and the work environment for the staff and to ensure the production of prioritized statistics. Three managing groups are in place: For prioritizing and planning the production, for special analyses and quick response to new user needs, and for external and internal communication.

Statistics Sweden follow the recommendations from the Swedish Public Health Agency. Most of the staff work from home since mid-March. Initially, an important issue was to prioritize among products in case of large outbreaks of Covid-19 among the staff. So far, this has not happened.

The staff seem to have coped well with the new situation. Managers have handled it well and the human resources department offers support. A survey among staff revealed that a surprisingly large share of the staff would like to telework five days a week in the future. A contributing factor is the possibility to avoid commuting.

When the pandemic has passed, it is unlikely that society will return to the same conditions as before the pandemic. This will have an effect on working conditions. For example, extensive teleworking is probably here to stay. It will be a challenge for Statistics Sweden to handle this change in the future. With employees working from home, good management is paramount and the role and responsibilities of managers will be different.

Comments and replies

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is trying to measure how teleworking works, what the effects on productivity are, and what will happen when the pandemic has passed. It is a difficult task, and sensitive.

Statistics Sweden has not been given commission for a special Covid-19 survey or any other special Covid-19 related activity. However, Statistics Sweden reached out and offered support to other agencies and institutions.

The pandemic has not caused any effect on the development work at Statistics Sweden, and it has not been necessary to prioritize among development projects. Statistics Sweden has a unique position in Sweden with the available microdata registers. Several projects where microdata are used for health related research are now given priority.

Statistics Sweden's strategy

Joakim Stymne

Since October 2019, Statistics Sweden has an updated strategy. The vision of Statistics Sweden is a starting point for the strategy: Statistics Sweden provides society with useful and trusted statistics. There is always a risk that the focus of the organization is internal and that adaption to a changing environment is slow. The new strategy focuses on user needs, and our responsibility towards citizens. It has a hierarchical structure with four prioritized overarching goals that are further broken down and described.

The four goals are that by 2022:

- The number of references to Statistics Sweden in media has increased by 100%,
- Open data is a general principle at Statistics Sweden and within the system for official statistics,
- The total response burden has decreased by 50%,
- There is a design for modernised and sustainable labour market statistics in place, in agreement with other relevant government agencies.

A strategy is a top-down process, and a management responsibility. It is important that it means something, and that it has an impact on the daily work at the departments. It is also a question of the culture in the organisation.

Comments from the Board

There is often a tendency at NSIs to look inside out instead of outside in. To what extent does Statistics Sweden engage and align with the large issues in society, in particular in Europe, like the Green deal or migration? Statistics Sweden recently joined an AI initiative with academia, as an example. Statistics Netherlands (CBS) did something similar, the organisations can share experiences.

There is a user-founded dependency at Statistics Sweden since a long time, and it is visible in the attitude towards users. Compared to Norway, Statistics Sweden has a good position on this kind of view. However, there is also a need to be ahead and not depend too much on what the users want.

Reply to Recommendations

Lilli Japec

Five topics were discussed at the meeting in November 2019.

Models and modelling for official statistics- the past, the present and the future. The Board recommended a new modelling strategy. This fall a team of methodologists at Statistics Sweden will be given time to study models and modelling for production of official statistics.

Redesign of the Swedish labour-market statistics and its implications for an increased use of models and modelling. The Board recommended more resources to ensure higher response rates, consultations with users and changes in the design of the LFS. All these recommendations have been considered. Contrary to the recommendation that external contractors should not be hired for data collection, Statistics Sweden has decided to continue to do so.

A call scheduling strategy for telephone surveys. The Board gave detailed feedback on how to develop the model further, and the recommendations have been considered.

On the VAT data in creating estimates of monthly turnover in Short Term Business Statistics. The Board recommended to asses different models for imputation, to look at the work at other statistical agencies, and to pursue this work further. The detailed recommendations have been considered, for example to study historical data, to use all available data and not only a subset, and to test available auxiliary variables. With more development, this is a topic for further discussion at an upcoming SAB meeting.

Estimation of price elasticity for electricity demand in residential and service sectors with new data. The Swedish Energy Agency responsible to the topic has not provided a reply to the recommendations.

Topic 1: Official Statistics in a Rapidly Changing Environment – Implications for Statistics Sweden

Folke Carlsson, Gustaf Strandell

Initially, the main concern was that too few interviewers would be available for our surveys targeting individuals and households, due to illness. Some actions were taken to mitigate these effects:

- The Labour Force Survey, the Consumer Price Index, and the Swedish Crime Survey were prioritized.
- The PIAAC survey was postponed.
- ICT went from mixed-mode with web and telephone to web and paper based questionnaires.
- External interviewers were contracted for the Party Preference Survey.
- Actions were taken so that interviewers could work from home.

There was also a fear of lower response rates in business surveys. Some actions:

- Goodwill instead of fines.
- Data collection for the Occupational Register and the Survey of Industrial Raw Material Consumption were cancelled (affected about 17,500 companies).
- Redesign of the SBS (lowered the sample with approximately 3,000 companies).
- Temporary strengthening of the monthly turnover statistics.

So far, there has not been any major effects on the response rates in the business surveys.

As a further precaution, recommendations were issued on the following topics:

- Data editing: Relax hard controls and instead allow respondents to comment on deviations.
- Seasonal Adjustment: Perform outlier treatment and seasonal adjustment as previously and do not change threshold values.
- Nonresponse: Monitor the inflow of data closely, direct non-response follow-up for underrepresented groups, evaluate and adjust methods used for non-response correction.

For more information, see the background paper (Topic 1 SAB 24 Sept 2020.pdf).

Questions to the Board

The current crisis might lead to a different view on the relative importance of the quality components, implying a re-weighting between components: relevance, accuracy and reliability, timeliness and punctuality, coherence and comparability, accessibility and clarity. It is obvious that timeliness is of great importance during a crisis. Statistics Sweden uses the concept of temporary statistics during the pandemic, implying that the importance of timeliness has increased. But is this at the cost of lower accuracy?

Has relevance become even more important, and how should NSIs act in order to react faster to changes in society (i.e. to capture turning points)? A methodological issue raised by an ASPIRE evaluation in 2019 concerns measuring the movement of economic indicators (Statistics Sweden, 2019). The swift economic change during the pandemic makes this topic quite relevant.

The demand for new statistics is rapidly growing, and even more so as the effects of the pandemic must be evaluated. Statistics are discussed everywhere and important decisions are based on figures that have been produced within a very short timeframe. Suddenly issues such as comparability and timeliness are discussed not only between statisticians but also widely in society. How does this changing environment affect NSIs, and what role should the NSIs take, without jeopardizing their reputation?

Comments from the Board

The Board agreed that currently timeliness and relevance is more important than ever, and that accuracy can be compromised with to a certain extent. Relevance is of utmost importance, but the agency needs to monitor the trade-off with accuracy carefully, and measures of uncertainty are important (or at least a good disclaimer).

Statistics Sweden should not be afraid to try new things. It is important to give an earliest possible view of the lay of the land. There is a huge demand for new statistics in addition to existing statistics, and attention is now shifting to after the pandemic. How will people behave in the future? The agency needs to be fair and transparent on what they can do and for example investigate new sources.

Policy makers need to have a better vision of the social and economic conditions for households and enterprises. The effects of the pandemic cannot be forecasted. The NSIs need to rethink their vision. What are the services the NSI can provide, can they for example provide more analytical information? The statistical systems are in many cases old-fashioned, can they be redefined?

Some examples in other cases:

ABS cut down on editing in order to speed up. Introduced rapid household- and business surveys.

CBS tried to increase both timeliness and accuracy. The death statistics were speeded up with only minor effects on quality. The agency has access to online payment data, which would not have happened without the pandemic.

In economics, there has been a history of early publications related to the Covid-19 pandemic based on data collected on line. These data were not accurate, but still better than the alternatives.

Questions from the Board

- Was there a mixed mode effect, did it have an impact? Do you have ongoing studies on mode effects?
  - There are ongoing discussions about mixed mode effects at Statistics Sweden but there are no ongoing studies. Due to finite resources and many pressing methodological questions it is not likely that any studies will be conducted in the near feature.
- Does SCB calculate excess deaths/births among business from the business register?
  - SCB calculates deaths/births among companies for the business demography that is delivered to Eurostat.
- Does SCB have a web first strategy?
  - The new strategy focus on the use of data from registers, M2M and new data sources first and only traditional survey when there are no other options.
- To what extent did SCB try to use the registers to make new statistics on the economy?
  - The Swedish system has built on registers for a long time. When new possibilities appear, SCB tries to increase the use of registers. With the new register infrastructure of monthly income declaration that was mentioned during the meeting, SCB tries to redesign the labour market statistics area.
- "Experimental statistics" was mentioned, explain?
  - During the pandemic SCB has produced a set of new indicators that was set up rather quickly. Eurostat uses the term experimental statistics, but SCB has decided that the term preliminary statistics better explains the character of these statistics. See also https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/ess/experimental-statistics

Topic 2: Flash Estimate of GDP

Helena Kaplan

Starting in 2020, Quarterly GDP is disseminated 60 days after the end of the reference quarter. For each quarter, a GDP flash (the GDP Indicator) estimate is disseminated at T+35.

Due to the quick economic developments due to the pandemic, the demand for high frequency statistics increase substantially. The Activity Indicator, a flash estimate for GDP on a monthly basis, was disseminated for the first time in the beginning of June 2020 for the reference period April. It is based on the same methods as the GDP Indicator, but with less information on the expenditure side. The Activity indicator is timely but less reliable, and appreciated by the users.

For more information, see the background paper (Topic 2 SAB 24 Sept 2020.pdf).

Questions to the Board

What is your opinion on Statistics Sweden producing a monthly estimate of economic progression?

How large deviation is acceptable between this estimate and the final GDP estimate?

During the pandemic, users of official statistics have asked for timelier statistics. Is T+37 days after the end of the reference month fast enough for "quick statistics"?

Would it be sufficient to calculate GDP from the one side of the economy that is considered as more reliable?

Comments from the Board

The Board agreed that the work with the Activity indicator is important and useful. Statistics Sweden should continue to develop the indicator further.

- Accuracy and precision need to be evaluated. It is expected that a monthly indicator is less accurate than the quarterly regular statistics.
- Present precision figures for at least some sectors. Acceptable deviations might differ between sectors, and some sectors could maybe be published even earlier.
- Ask the most advanced users about their sensitivity to lower accuracy. They will always want information fast, but what kind of quality do they tolerate?

- Is the accuracy of the indicator overestimated? Old data are already edited and reliable, new data are more unreliable.
- Can the indicator be complemented with other relevant figures to give a complete picture?
- Is it possible to develop an indicator that is even timelier? If so, move away from the national accounts approach and look more at nowcasting.

The policy makers require this type of information, the impact of subsidies to save the economy need to be evaluated and reflected.

A lot of cooperation between countries already exists. France is for example already producing flash estimates already twice a month. Finland uses nowcasting. Several sources can be used; traffic data on heavy vehicles are for example well aligned with GDP estimates.

Sune is available for more discussion on this topic. Sebastian Ankargren at The National Institute of Economic Research (Konjunkturinstitutet) recently presented a relevant thesis.

Questions from the Board

- Will the Swedish government sponsor further development of flash estimates and evaluation of subsidies?
  - Interesting idea but there are currently no indication in that direction.
- Would it be possible to distribute raw data to advanced users and let them calculate their own figures?
  - SCB is only allowed to deliver raw data for scientific purposes.
- Are there more detailed data from employers available in Sweden?
  - There is a common web-portal were different authorities have coordinate information to employers what they will do if they are starting up, running or closing activities. This portal give some sort of overview of the question. https://www.verksamt.se/en/web/international
- Are there new questions added to the LFS?
  - Yes, a few additional questions about the current situation, similar across countries such as; did your work situation change due to the pandemic, do you work from home, etc. Questions about the effect on individuals due to the corona virus, see (only in Swedish) https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/arbetsmarknad/arbetskraftsundersokningar/arbetskraftsundersokningarna-aku/pong/tabell-och-

diagram/icke-sasongrensade-data/extrafragor-relaterade-till-covid-19-manad/.

Concluding words

Joakim Stymne

Joakim thanked everyone for their participation and the good discussions.

There was no decision on how to proceed with recommendation from the Board, these minutes are a starting point if the Board wishes to formulate recommendations.