

Statistics Norway is very active in profiling official statistics and striving to play a role in the public debate. This comprises not only the pleasures of public exposure such as the appearance of the Director-General in the evening news but also less publicity effective tasks such as Statistics Norway's presence in a number of government commissions.

"We want to be present and recognised as the source", Longva explains. "If we are not visible enough people might start thinking 'Why should we give money and efforts to an institution that we never hear about?' That we are well-known and accepted by all political parties as a reference source is certainly the result of our efforts to familiarise the public and politicians with statistics and the difficulties of production."

An informed public debate

Statistics Norway (SN) takes its task "to strengthen and further develop democracy and a more informed public debate" very seriously and which, in fact, almost caused an upheaval once in the past: "Before the referendum concerning EU membership in 1994 we prepared a report on the economic effects and the differences of membership in the EU and in the EEA", Longva recalls. "It was strongly attacked. But we said to ourselves if we are to serve the public we have to especially do so in the time of crucial decisions and should come up with the information we have instead

A statistical office that in an opinion poll turns out to be regarded as one of the most reliable sources of information, its data being quoted in the news almost every day and its managers frequently asked by TV stations and newspapers for their comment... A statistician's dream? Sigma's BARBARA JAKOB found in Statistics Norway an institution in a very lucky position. She talked to its director-general SVEIN LONGVA.

An institution that COUNTS



Svein Longva (56)

has dedicated his entire professional life to statistics. When he started working at Statistics Norway in 1966, then a student of economics at the University of Oslo, he certainly would not have expected to end up as its Director-General having spent more than 30 years there.

He started his career in the research department constructing economic models and dealing with econometrics and becoming director of research in 1984 and Director-General in 1991. He also did a visiting scholarship at Harvard University and was professor of economics from 1989-1992 at the University of Bergen.

As Director-General – a nomination which came as quite a surprise to him – Longva enjoyed the opportunity "to discover the institution a second time from a completely different angle".

of keeping it back." The report was later published in an academic journal.

After this incident, SN decided to present regularly

before elections statistics that are relevant to the public debate. "We do interfere somehow", Longva admits "but we are doing so to serve the debate with facts.

At the international level he is known as President of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) and as member of the International Statistical Institute (ISI).

And it may happen that indirectly we support one or the other side. But it is our mission to ensure that policy is based on the best possible factual basis."

That leads us directly to the topic 'independence'. According to the statistics act SN is an independent institution under the Ministry of Finance which means that in budgetary and administrative matters it may be instructed by the Minister but not when it comes to the production of statistics. The budgetary provisions are very generally formulated and SN has a rather decentralised management system enabling the Office to decide on its own how to use and possibly redirect means.

In addition to producing most of Norway's official statistics, SN is also among the largest social sciences institutes of the country. As such, it does research in the economic and social field and also provides forecasts. This very special situation for a statistical office – to analyse its own statistics – increases the risk that it is reproached for being partial. "As soon as you get a bit further than simply producing the numbers, you inevitably take part in the public debate", Longva states. SN also develops and maintains the models used by the Ministry of Finance and other ministries. Under a special agreement with the Parliament it also serves the political parties with analyses and model simulations of policy proposals.

But he perceives the fact that research activity is part



A proud past

Statistics Norway will celebrate its 125th anniversary in 2001, being established in 1876 as a formally independent institution. A forerunner, the Tabulation Office within the Ministry of Finance, existed already since 1797 and the first population census was carried out as early as 1769.

SN is very proud of its past: It enjoyed from the very beginning a fairly prominent position and was well accepted by the public. One of its features is the institute's openness to new technological and methodological developments starting with its first director-general who strongly promoted sample surveys and arranged the first to be carried out in 1893. He was also one of the first to buy an electric punch-card machine that he personally brought over from the US.

On the occasion of the millennium change, SN published a booklet on 100 years of Norwegian history and the statistics that went with it.

of SN's activities more as one of its strengths rather than a burden since it helps to reveal deficiencies and improve quality.

Independence as an attitude

When it comes to the question of whether to give the Minister notice of statistics about to be released, Longva is strict: "We have an official release calendar which makes our publication plans transparent to everybody." And the Ministry is not in a favoured position concerning the receipt of the data. "They have to consult our internet site after release, just like anybody else.

"Politicians have recognised that we will not be useful for anybody if there are doubts about our independence", Longva says and adds "Independence is also an attitude. You can be formally independent by law but only in theory whereas in reality you get hints from the government not to release certain figures. And maybe even worse, it might even not be necessary to get a hint, you might already anticipate and act accordingly."

An equal partner

Longva, however, seems not at risk of doing so. Although there are powers that he has to accept. – After several times saying 'no', sometimes with a slim majority but still a majority, Norway is not an EU member. But it has, as member of the European Economic

Area (EEA), a number of statistical obligations to fulfil.

"The formal legal requirements are, in principle, the same for us as for the EU Member States and equally legally binding", Longva explains. According to the EEA agreement, the various EU Directives and Regulations have to be adopted by the Norwegian Parliament. Apart from some areas that are directly linked with EU or EMU membership such as Intra-stat, agricultural statistics or statistical requirements for Monetary Union nothing has been set aside in statistics. "Norway was in fact the first country to present its national accounts according to the new ESA 95 (European System of National Accounts)", Longva reveals not without pride.

As part of the EEA agreement, SN takes part in all working parties, task forces and meetings of the Statistical Programme Committee, regularly detaches national officials to work at Eurostat and also holds the EFTA secretariat in Luxembourg. "We are treated by Eurostat as an equal partner", Longva says. "We can't vote but we can take part in debates and make our position clear and, in fact, we are asked for our position.

"The main influence is through being an active partner", he states. "Voting is in most cases a formal exercise except in a very few tricky areas."

Open to the world

The importance of the work going on within the Union in the field of statistics has grown over the years and is felt more and more. Around 80% of the work at Eurostat is, according to Longva, of direct relevance for SN or an obligation. Cooperation with the EU obviously plays a dominant role, although SN is also very much involved in the work of the OECD, the IMF and various UN organisations.

Cooperation with the EU is, however, of a different quality. Longva: "Whereas other international work is very much related to the development of standards and recommendations, primarily on a voluntary basis, work within Eurostat is mostly an obligation and directly affects the production activity including obligations for the time scale etc."

But Longva does not perceive EU statistical cooperation as a burden – not in the first place. "We are also gaining a lot", he says. "Through this cooperation we are opening up our institute to the world."

Weak spots

Longva is very demanding in this respect. He wants all Norwegian official statistics to be published in English next to Norwegian and he perceives it as a weakness that this is not the case. "We are not publishing enough in English", he says. "And I am not really satisfied with the English version on the

USA, Canada, utvandring, på tredde, slerisk, lovgivning, krak, utnyt, sene søn, menn, som flere av, Årlig, og 1,5, om 15 og, 1900-, å etni, om gifte og, land fylke, utvand, 1900 til, og i disse, folketall, reise, mark, der stort, omge av, etter et

1912-året ble utvandring som et naturlig avløp for overbefolkning. Etter århundreskiftet var

de like store som utvandringen selv. slike indirekte virkninger på folketallet, men de kunne nok lett bli



Den oversjøiske utvandring i aarene 1901—1911

	1901-1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
Kjønn. Sexe.							
Mandkjøn. Sexe mæsc.	65 599	13 871	13 872	4 275	10 094	12 291	7 556
Kveindkjøn. Sexe fœm.	37 596	8 096	8 263	4 222	6 058	6 621	4 921
Ialt. Total	103 195	21 967	22 135	8 497	16 152	18 912	12 477
Ålder. Age.							
0—14 aar. Ans.	M. 7 153 K. 6 668	1 269 1 083	1 230 1 246	611 636	684 698	868 785	406 479
15—29 — — — — —	M. 46 513 K. 23 152	10 025 5 123	10 216 5 460	2 940 2 708	7 711 4 205	9 471 4 554	6 022 3 548
30—59 — — — — —	M. 11 365 K. 7 164	2 509 1 782	2 348 1 488	690 810	1 654 1 085	1 888 1 194	981 831
60 aar og derover	M. 512 K. 395	62 103	78 69	33 67	44 70	61 82	55 60
Uopgitt alder. Age inconnu	M. 56 K. 17	6 5	-	1 1	1 -	3 3	2 3
Bestemmelsessted. Pays de destination.							
Kanada. Canada	5 411	1 476	1 490	610	880	1 513	1 304
Amerikas Forenede Stater. Etats-Unis de l'Amérique ...	97 185	20 449	20 615	7 850	15 237	17 361	11 122
Mellem- og Sydamerika. Reste de l'Amérique	90	14	16	18	12	13	23
Australien. Australie	23	1	3	9	12	8	2
Afrika. Afrique	485	26	11	-	9	17	24
Asien. Asie	1	1	-	-	2	-	2

Kilde: Statistisk årbok for kongeriket Norge 1912, utgitt av Det statistiske Centralbyrå

Emigration statistics 1901-1911

The table from the 1912 statistical yearbook of Norway indicates that from 1901-1907, around 20,000 Norwegians left their country each year to make their way in the 'new world'. Interestingly, the second language used in the tables was French.

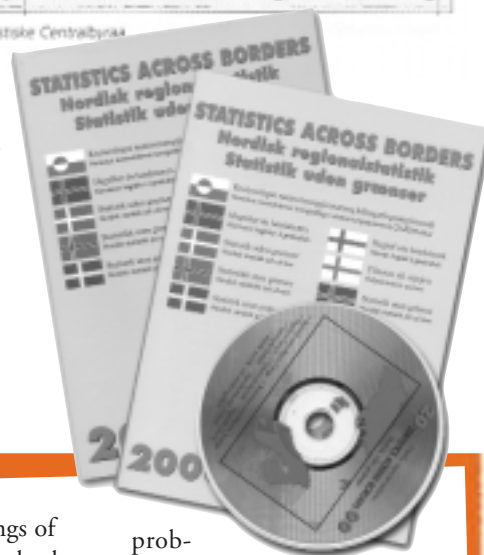
Long tradition of cooperation

Partly because the countries have a common history, partly because of size, statistical systems and cultural similarities – the fact is that the Nordic countries have a rather long tradition of working together, so long that Longva perceives it as something natural. "One big advantage is that we do not have to start explaining and we can really seek advice. We are very open about our problems and do not just tell each other success stories", he says.

The statistical meetings of Nordic countries date back to 1889. Nowadays the heads of the offices and their directors meet annually with a large meeting every three years. Additionally, there are a number of bilateral meetings to discuss specific subject matters.

Next to many projects carried out together and close cooperation in IT, databases, register use etc. the most visible outcome of the Nordic cooperation is

probably the annually published Statistical Yearbook and the CD-ROM 'Statistics across borders'. Based on data from the Common Nordic Statistical Database and on material supplied by Nordic statistical offices on large city regions it provides data on a wide range of statistical fields for Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Norway, Greenland, Finland, Sweden and Aaland.



Internet to be restricted as is currently the case."

Another weakness is felt in statistics for the public sector which according to the Director-General is not very well covered. "This is a very unsatisfactory situation since an important part of the public debate, e.g. on the health and education system, is related to this question."

A large project on the reporting of municipalities to the State aimed to improve the coordination of statistics on services and financial data for public administration is expected to bring major improvements but further efforts will probably need to be made. "Following the IMF data dissemination standard we are poor when it comes to timeliness of statistics for government accounts. We have special problems with the quarterly data for the government sector."

User databases and their ease of access and use is another weak spot for Longva. "We have until now not been at the front of providing a user-friendly database. Most of the people were obviously happy with what we offered on the Internet so that we were able to serve the few others who were asking for more on demand. We have now decided to work closely with Denmark and Sweden who are very much ahead of us in this respect."

Longva does not hesitate to continue his list of areas for possible improvements. He would, for instance, wish to see better statistics on a regional level – an undertak-



Svein Longva in front of paintings of his predecessors: A.N. Kiær (left painting), the first director-general of Statistics Norway stayed for 46 years. Longva's term of office is now restricted by law to a maximum of 15 years. The paintings represent a real value for Statistics Norway – they are from famous Norwegian artists, e.g. Edvard Munch

ing that in sparsely populated Norway becomes rapidly very costly. "The demand for regional statistics is pressing", says Longva "since regional policy plays an increasingly important role in Norway and is also probably the main reason for the no vote for EU membership in 1994."

A systematic quality approach

Being aware of the weaknesses of the statistical system, Longva aims for a systematic quality approach. Although producing high-quality statistics is not something new he feels that a more methodical attitude comprising the analysis and documentation of processes is necessary. Statistics Norway therefore just started this autumn a "more fully-fledged pro-

gramme" of quality management named 'Systematic Quality Work'.

"The expectations in quality are higher than ever before", Longva says as he explains this measure. "The use of statistics has radically changed. Whereas in former times statistics served more or less as general background, they are now often directly related to decisions whether concerning inflation as a target for the ECB's monetary policy, or the GNP as the basis to fix EU countries' contributions for Brussels or population and housing figures as the basis for the allocation of central government funds to the municipalities.

"Consequently, the demand to document and prove the quality of statistical data is much more pressing nowadays. We have started with

the quality project not because we think we are behind everybody else", Longva continues. "But we know that we have a great deal of areas where we can improve – maybe even without much cost, simply by thinking in other terms than just the same old rules, by redirecting resources etc."

Dream... or nightmare

Ranking Statistics Norway "behind everybody else", as Longva said, would without question be misplaced. One of its most apparent features – and strengths equally – is its right to use administrative registers.

The statistics act gives SN full access to all public registers for statistical purposes. This cannot be disputed by the owner of these records be it tax, labour authorities

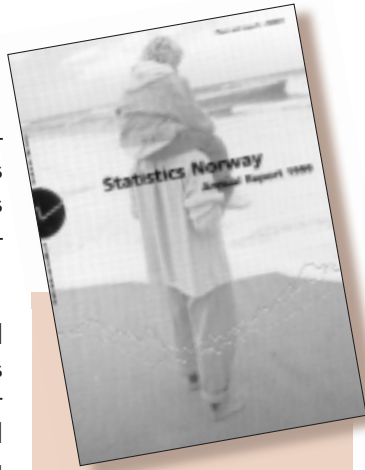
or public insurance companies. Currently SN makes use of about 60 registers operated by various government or municipality offices.

But what makes it a real treasure for statisticians is the identification code for individuals, businesses and buildings. What seems like a dream for statisticians might cause nightmares to others. The personal numbering code enables the linking of information related to an individual or business from different registers. It gives statisticians the opportunity to make the best possible use of already available information – something extremely important since complaints about the response burden increase.

On the other hand this is exactly what makes data protectors worry when thinking about a possible misuse. "Data confidentiality is tremendously important", Longva comments. "In fact, it is a question of life and death for such a system to stick to the rules strictly. Once you have lost public confidence it is impossible to operate it."

One-way traffic

But since a register system can only fully be used with a general numbering system and because data protection is such a delicate problem the conditions of register use are rigorously regulated and Statistics Norway is under strict surveillance. "We are the only institution to get access to all the different registers", Longva explains. "We are not allowed to give any individual information to



In its **annual report**, the statistical office informs about its main activities, its objectives and performance over the year.

Statistics Norway is an independent institution under the Ministry of Finance. It has around 900 employees at two sites: well over 500 in Oslo and almost 400 in Kongsvinger, in the South-East of Norway. More than 50% of its staff have a university degree. The 1989 statistics act, the second in the institution's history, provides the legal framework for its activities. That SN's directors-general tend to outlive by far (with terms of office between around 10 and 46 years) the governments by which they were appointed can be interpreted as a proof of its professional independence.

anyone else. The law only allows a one-way traffic of individual data, only to, and never from Statistics Norway."

The Norwegian Data Inspectorate is the separate independent agency watching over the rules and laws to be respected. It gives SN

the permission for generating links and fixes the conditions under which SN is allowed to store data and when it has to destroy them. To avoid leaks and unauthorized use, the SN internal network must be strictly separated from external systems which means, e.g., Internet connection only from stand-alone PCs.

Also researchers can profit from the possibilities offered by register use. Once researchers have the permission of the Data Inspectorate they can ask SN to get access to anonymised micro-data for research purposes. "I try to convince the research community that they live in paradise", Longva says, "but they continue to complain about the rules being too strict."

Although SN does not operate the registers itself, it is sometimes involved in establishing the infrastructure and influencing the data collection to better adapt to statistical requirements when it comes to building up a register. "We recently made big progress just by convincing the tax authorities to make a small change in the formulation of a question", Longva states.

The population census to be carried out in 2001 will be completely done by register. And the housing census will for the last time be carried out through questionnaires since SN is working on a project to complete its system for the identification of buildings that currently only allows identification of single family houses.

"That is for the moment the peak of the possibilities

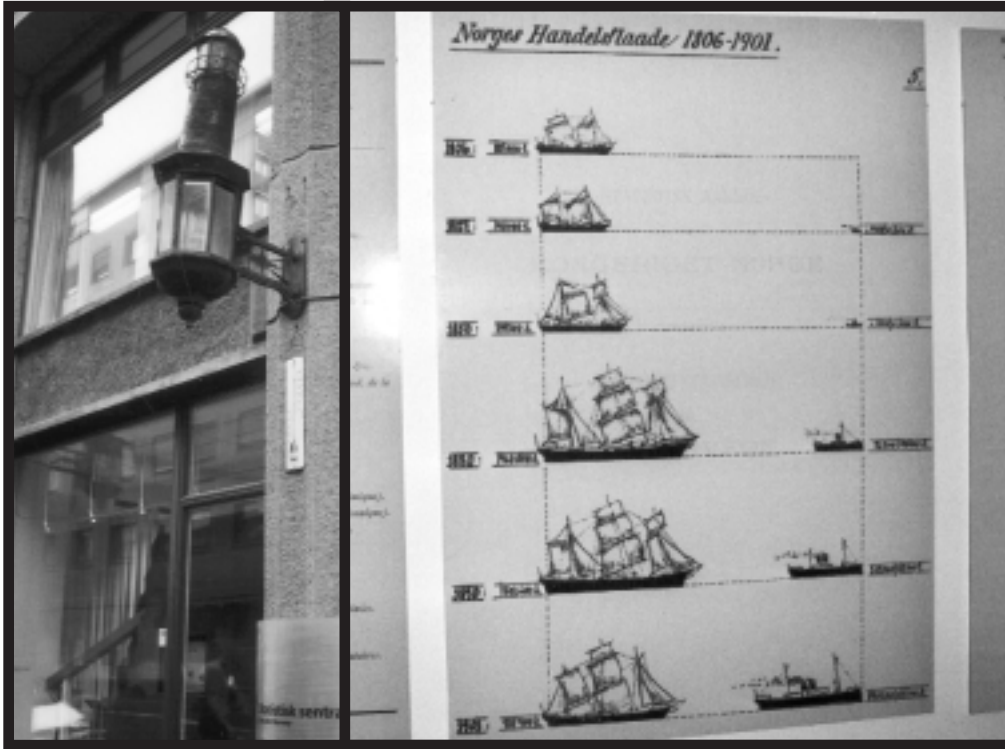
offered by registers that we can think of", Longva says. But, in fact, SN is already working on further possibilities of retrieving information in a simple way. Turnover, but also some data for the consumer price index, are on an experimental basis taken from the bar code systems in shops. These systems contain daily accounts of the stocks, prices and other information valuable for statistics.

Statistics for the citizen

"We also made big progress in dissemination", Longva reports. Two journalists make sure that statistics are presented in a form likely to interest the general public. "Our core tool for dissemination is the Internet. Everything is published there first." With up to two million hits a month, this quite comprehensive service seems to be appreciated by a population of 4.5 million.

The Internet also helps save money. It opens the opportunity to reduce the share of printed publications to the minimum and also downloading from the Internet is free of charge. SN's pricing policy is to charge the marginal costs for official statistics. Longva: "Our conviction is that we should not limit the use of statistics to a small fraction of the population and tax payers pay anyway for a large part of producing official statistics."

The part regarded as the basic core of statistics and as a public good makes up for around 75% of SN's



A nation of sailors – a light in the form of a lighthouse at the entrance of Statistics Norway

Graphs are not an invention of the computer age. Already at the beginning of this century they were used to illustrate how steamships gained importance in Norway's fleet compared to sailships

budget and is provided by the government. About 25% of the total budget is gained through the sale of publications and the production of tailor-made products that are payable at their average costs.

Simpler and more meaningful

One major challenge for Longva is to reduce the response burden for respondents. Since statistics in Norway is known to be register-based, one might think that Norwegian companies have no reason to complain. Only a very small fraction of companies is concerned by sample surveys. "But those who are asked do complain and they have the right to do so", Longva says.

"However, our share of the burden that we impose on

businesses is very limited – it is estimated to be around 2%, similar figures are suggested for Australia, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden. But official statistics are felt to be the worst", Longva explains.

"It is easier to understand why you have to fill out a tax form. You might complain about the taxes but you fill in the form without complaining. It is much more difficult for the business community to understand why we need statistical information. Many of them do not use statistics themselves and if they do so it is different departments.

"In addition, we are often mixed up with others: questionnaires of associations, research institutes, marketing companies – are all referred to us. We try therefore to do our best and to explain and

we give an incentive to reply by offering feedback information in return, e.g. about the market in which the company operates."

SN also established a project for electronic data interchange with the business community aimed at facilitating data exchange. Another attempt is made to relate the statistical information directly to the companies' internal systems so that, e.g., the accounting system produces as a sort of by-product the elements for statistical information.

"We know that the ability of systems to produce the elements for official statistics is very often a basic condition of the buyers of such products. So, we are in dialogue with the software providers dominating the market."

More than counting apples

Another future challenge for Longva is what he calls 'the loosening up of society's structure'. "It's not easy nowadays to distinguish between various economic activities in the information society age, the borderlines are blurred", he explains. "The units are changing quickly, small companies are coming and going, characterisation of the activity and definition are increasingly complex.

"Globalisation makes flows across borders easier. At the same time traditional checkpoints as customs declarations for trade are gradually vanishing, companies have no physical location any more – thus it is getting more and more difficult to keep track of both, the units and the flows. It is easier to count apples than flows on the Internet.

"That has profound influence on statistics. Statisticians in Eastern Europe were confronted with the problem that all traditional checkpoints broke down with Communism. New measurement points had to be reinvented and rebuilt. We are experiencing something similar now but due to economic developments, new technologies and globalisation.

"It becomes more and more difficult to produce a statistical system integrated over time, so we will face more difficult but also more interesting times. Statistics is not only counting and it becomes less and less so – maybe it has never really been." ■