

Statistics in my life

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When I was asked to contribute to the series of interviews with prominent statisticians in the ISLP newsletter, my first reaction was 'this is not for me; I am not a statistician by profession'. Nevertheless, the editors said my life with statistics would be of interest to readers and I accepted the invitation.

My first encounter with statisticians was at the Faculty of Economics of Erasmus University in Rotterdam. No, I did not study economics but got a job as secretary at the Office of the Economics Faculty in 1978. That marked the turning point in my life. I came into such an inspirational and extravagant environment. The professors were flamboyant persons with special attitudes. Shortly after my appointment, the head of the secretariat, my still dear friend Milou van der Kade and Professor Peter Klein, put a note on my desk: 'We have decided that you should do an academic study'. A few years later I would start my law studies at Erasmus University and move on to other positions at the Faculty: head of the secretariat, and later on, policy officer for research and international student exchange. I started the international student exchange on my own initiative, since due to a lack of structure, students wishing to study abroad lacked support. Together with the student members of the board and Prof. Jean Paelinck, we set up the student exchange. First with the London School of Economics, but soon after the European Erasmus programme was launched and we set up student exchange networks with universities across Europe. This was real pioneering as we developed English-language courses for foreign students, information programmes for our students who went abroad and mutual recognition of results. Above all, it meant a crash course in dealing with the cultures at universities in other countries. At Dutch universities, everything is informal, professors are often addressed as mister or even by their first name. But it is different in other countries, even our neighbouring country Belgium has a very different culture and is more hierarchical. I found the international work fascinating and realized that I wanted to do international work throughout my future career.



Photo: My good bye party from the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Three deans and a Rector Magnificus.

Fltr: Prof. W.J. Slagter, Prof. A.P.J. Abrahamse, me, Prof. S. Cnossen and Prof. W.J. Klein.

The combination of a full time job and part time study was very demanding but also awarding. At the end of my study, the dean of the Faculty was Ad Abrahamse, Professor of Statistics, who became the new Director General of CBS (Statistics Netherlands - SN). He pointed to a position at SN as policy adviser in international relations. SN made me an attractive offer: I would work there and they gave me a month to finish my studies and write my thesis about SN and European law. My specialization was business law but I had taken as many courses in international law as possible. I found European law very refreshing. The offer was just what I wanted. I completed my thesis on 'Statistics Netherlands and Europe, a legal analysis' and in 1993 I obtained my Master's degree in Law.

My thesis was an excellent basis for me in representing SN in different TFs preparing the European Statistical Law and participating in the formal decision making in the European Council. The first Task Force was in 1993, chaired by Eurostat Director Alberto de Michalis, assisted by Christian Engelage (Legal Adviser in Eurostat on secondment from Destatis). Gunter Kopsch from Destatis, Gerry O'Hanlon¹ (CSO Ireland), Alwyn Pritchard (ONS UK), Per Samuelson and also Jean-Louis Bodin and Claude Cheruy of Belgium took part in various meetings. The output was the Commission proposal for the Statistical Law which was ultimately agreed at Council under the Irish Presidency in the second half of 1996 and formally adopted under the Dutch Presidency in early 1997².

After the completion of the first 'Statistical Law' the discussions continued on the decision-making processes for new statistical requirements, the funding of the European statistical demands and on whether Eurostat could act as an independent statistical office within the European Commission. In 2002/2003, the Statistical Programme Committee (SPC) established a new Task Force, under the Chairmanship of John Kidgell³, who had just retired as Deputy Head of the ONS, to review the functioning of the Statistical Law. The TF reported to the SPC in 2003/2004 and recommended that the law be revised and that a Code of Practice be established to complement the law. It also introduced the concept of Professional Independence to replace the narrower concepts of Scientific or Statistical Independence. In 2004, Donal Garvey (CSO Ireland) as Chairman of the Partnership

¹ I am deeply indebted to Gerry O'Hanlon for filling in the gaps in memory when it comes to the various Task Forces.

² Council Regulation (EC) No 322/97 of 17 February 1997 on Community Statistics (OJ L 52 22.02.1997, p. 1.

³ In addition to some of us who had served on the first TF this TF also included, among others, Francois Elissalt (INSEE France), Claudia Cingolani (ISTAT Italy). Unlike in the first TF, the Member States made the running on this occasion - Eurostat was represented by the legal people (Stratis Chatzidoukakis and Pierre Bischoff).

Group asked Donal Murphy to chair a new TF to draw up a new draft Regulation and also the first draft of a Code of Practice. Other members were Paul Jackson and Richard Laux from the UK, and Yolanda Gomez from Spain, Francois Ellissalt from France (Paul J Crowley served as Secretary). We had 2-3 meetings in Dublin and, driven by the usual impatience of Donal Murphy, both drafts were submitted to the SPC towards the end of 2004. The Greek crisis was unfolding around then and the draft Code of Practice was seized by Eurostat and the SPC and, following some tinkering around the edges, was formally adopted and promulgated in 2005 as a response to the Greek situation.

In 2005, the Task Force 'Legal and Institutional Framework'⁴, co-chaired by Hervé Carré, Director General of Eurostat, and myself, drafted a revised statistical law and our proposal was supported by Eurostat, all 27 member states and the ECB. Our proposal ensured maximum involvement of member states in decision-making, a legal base for the Code of Practice on European Statistics, exchange of confidential data with the European System of Central Banks, access to micro data for scientific research etc. But to our despair, the draft legal act, when published, differed fundamentally on the most crucial points, owing to an intervention from the Commission's legal service. We then had the task of ensuring that the draft returned to its original form and that could only be done with a unanimous vote of the Council and European Parliament. Long story short: we made it and I was very proud when the statistical law was published⁵. We also managed to introduce an article⁶ on European statistics in the European Constitution under the Maastricht Treaty.



Photo: Preparing the conference 'Work in Progress' in the Hague with Gosse van der Veen and Carina Fransen, January 2009.

¹ Members: Sabine Köhler (De), Paul J. Jackson (UK), Michel Isnard (Fr), Werner Hölzer (Au), Daiva Norkeviciene (Lt), Per Samuelson (Se), Hana Slegrova (Cz), Marina Gondolfo (It), Gerry O'Hanlon (Irl), Efstratios Chatzidoukakis (Estat). Observers: Caroline Willeke (ECB), Pedro Diaz Muñoz (Estat), Pierre Bischoff (Estat)
⁵ Regulation on 223/2009 of the European Parliament and the Council of 11 March 2009 on European Statistics, OJ L87/164.

⁶ Article 338 — (ex Article 285 TEC):

1. Without prejudice to Article 5 of the Protocol on the Statute of the European System of Central Banks and of the European Central Bank, the European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure, shall adopt measures for the production of statistics where necessary for the performance of the activities of the Union.
2. The production of Union statistics shall conform to impartiality, reliability, objectivity, scientific independence, cost-effectiveness and statistical confidentiality; it shall not entail excessive burdens on economic operators.

Although I am not a statistician myself, I negotiated legislation on National Accounts, CPI, Labour Force Survey, Waste statistics, Transport Statistics, Classifications and every other possible area. The most important thing I learned is that you have to make alliances with other countries to get a (qualified) majority in Council in order to get a decision you want. For that purpose, we had a very strong and pleasant network and we often met for dinner or a drink in Brussels the evening prior to our meeting.

Another aspect of my work in international relations has been contributing to the statistical capacity building in the candidate EU member states after the fall of the Berlin Wall. We received numerous delegations from Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Poland for study visits at SN. This took place under the Phare programme. The Phare programme was not always very well coordinated. Visits were often one-off and it was not easy to assess effectiveness. Under the TACIS programme (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States), which was taking off in 1993, SN delivered a more coordinated programme to Central Asian Republics, the Caucasian states and Mongolia. Ronald Luttikhuis, Max Booleman and Willem de Vries were at the core of these programmes. I was very fortunate to be part of missions to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Mongolia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.



Photos: Factfinding mission to Statistical Office in Tbilisi, Georgia, and a photo with participants workshop 'Statistical Registers and Statistics' in Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan.

It was an incredible experience and I was impressed by the enthusiasm and motivation of the statisticians in statistical offices in those countries, who continued their work even in the most deplorable conditions. During our first fact-finding missions to Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia people worked in offices without heating and warm drinks or food when the temperature in the office was 7 degrees Celsius. I could write a book about our experiences in those countries, and it made me look at our own work and the technical assistance we provided from a different perspective.

In addition, of course, there were the ISI sessions (now WSCs). My first ISI World Statistics Congress was in 1999 in Helsinki, Finland. The ISI events were like the Holy Grail, one felt privileged to go there on the SN budget. The Helsinki event was special, as any other WSC has been. Timo Relander was the charismatic DG of Statistics Finland, who even took the (male) participants to the sauna. Heli Jeskanen Sündstrom, was deputy DG and she really contributed to making the session a success. It marked also the beginning of our long lasting friendship. Many ISI sessions followed: in Seoul 2001, Berlin 2003, Sydney 2005 and Lisbon 2007. A WSC has always been a good place to launch new ideas and explore how fellow-statisticians vie them. I remember how SN started investigating administrative data as a source for data collection, and there was a very heated debate on this. Some

delegates thought this could never replace a proper survey. How differently do we look at this nowadays.

Although I attended the ISI sessions and the ISI Permanent Office was located in the building of Statistics Netherlands, my interactions with the ISI were rather limited. Willem de Vries (my superior for international relations) and active at IAOS made me an IAOS member. At some point, I was elected IAOS Vice President, and organized the IAOS programme for the Seoul session. In 1995, I was elected an ISI member. I helped the then director Daniel Berze on a few occasions with advice on minor statute changes and met Denise Lievesley (ISI President) occasionally and sometimes met some ISI staff members, Ank Lepping and Shabani Mehta, in the smoking room. After finishing my work on the EU statistical law, I felt it was time for something different and was accidentally approached by the ISI interim director Wim Senden, about the position of ISI Director. I had a job interview with then President-elect Jef Teugels and Willem van Zwet and had several talks with Wim Senden. I decided to go for it and I officially started my work one week before the ISI Session in Durban, South Africa. It was completely different to as a Director of the organizing organization! The number of events and gatherings was incredible and it meant diplomacy at all times.

ISI is an interesting organization with a long history and many traditions. Yet, there was a need for immediate action and change. There had been an attempt to revise the statutes, but it had failed because the then required two third majority positive votes was not obtained. I was convinced I could succeed (after having convinced 27 member states and the European Parliament to vote in favour of our Statistical law), but also felt that we needed a more thorough revision of the statutes. We formed an editorial group with Jef Teugels, Jae C Lee, Vijay Nair and Hallgrímur Snorrason, and drafted new statutes and by-laws. We set up a campaign to mobilize the members, informing them about the necessary changes and the importance of expressing their votes, and we succeeded! The new statutes and by-laws came into effect in November 2011.

Another pressing issue was the redesign of the ISI website. The information was very outdated and the design so 'eighties'. I set up a small group and a consultation group, and we had several consultations. The new website could then be developed very quickly and go live in 2011. Website redesign is not always easy, everybody considers themselves an expert and everyone who has ever developed a website considers it the best one ever. I am glad that we just delivered the third revised website by the end of 2021.

At the office, I have implemented a different way of working. All staff were used to doing their own thing rather than being involved in the overall office operations. I introduced a weekly staff meeting (one hour max) and consultation of staff members when we were asked for advice. I am convinced that this creates more commitment than just passing on orders.



Photo: Preparatory meeting with for the ISI WSC 2019 in Kuala Lumpur with DOSM, Bank Negara Malaysia and ISM.

The WSCs (earlier Sessions) are a major part of our operations. Until 2020, the WSCs were always hosted by host countries, who offered their hospitality, their staff and resources to create an unforgettable experience. However, the international landscape is changing and it was not easy to find host countries willing to take on this challenging job. The EC decided to change this and organize the WSC 'in house', still with the support from the host country but with less reliance on their availability and budget. This was a major business model change for the WSC. The first one in new form would take place in The Hague in 2021. Unfortunately, COVID-19 made us switch to a virtual WSC, another major challenge for the organization. Our first test for an in-person congress according to the new model will now be in Ottawa, Canada in 2023.

As ISI Director I was involved in Durban (2009), Dublin (2011), Hong Kong (2013), Rio de Janeiro (2015), Marrakech (2017), Kuala Lumpur (2019), virtual The Hague (2021) and the start of Ottawa (2023). In fact, nothing beats a WSC, where so many people from all over the world coming together in an inspiring environment.



Photo: The 59th WSC in Hong Kong with left Leslie Tang and right Mrs Lily Ou-yang, Commissioner HK Census and Statistics Department.

The opening ceremonies and cultural activities have made each of them unique experiences. I cannot express enough gratitude to all the heads of the NSOs and their dedicated teams who have made the WSCs a success. There were many challenges, but the events were always great to attend.

In addition to the WSCs, we introduced the regional statistics conferences in Kuala Lumpur and in Bali (2017). Regional conferences are a great tool to enhance the regional cooperation and

networking. Due to COVID-19 and other reasons, no other RSCs were organized but they have great potential for the ISI. The ISI also attends the annual sessions of the United Nations Statistical Commission in New York, where heads of statistical offices, as well as all regional UN organizations and other organizations meet. ISI and the UN have a long history together (read the book by J. Nixon!). For ISI, the UNSC is a great occasion to meet with many of our institutional members and stakeholders.

At the occasion of the UN Statistical Commission in 2013, the ISI Delegation met Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon,

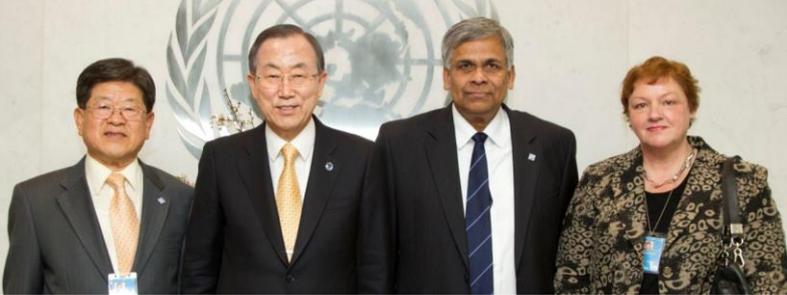


Photo: ISI President Jae C Lee, SG Ban-ki Moon, President-elect Vijay Nair and Ada van Krimpen

Statistical Capacity Building is a core task of the ISI. A grant from the World Bank Trust Fund for Statistical Capacity Building allowed us to fund participants from developing countries to WSCs and other events, as well as organize eight High Level Management workshops for leaders from African Statistical Offices. Each workshop lasted 3 days with introductions and interactive sessions. The first one, in 2011, was organized with Hallgrímur Snorrason, and many others with Irena Krizman, the energetic past president of Statistics Slovenia and ISI Vice-President and later co-chair of the capacity building committee. Also worth writing a book about.



Photo: First ISI High Level Workshop ‘ Leadership in Modern Statistical System’ in Addis Ababa in 2011. We organised more management workshops in Daejeon (Korea), Dakar (Senegal), Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), Yaoundé (Cameroon) and Tunis (Tunisia).

I hope to attend the 2023 WSC in Canada as a guest as I will retire in July this year. In answer to the question what statistics has brought into my life I’d like to say the following:

Great experiences and the pleasure of working with all those dedicated statisticians who are willing to contribute their time and skills to the ISI: the Presidents, Vice-Presidents, the Associations and committee members. The ISI couldn’t exist and maintain its prominent place in the statistical arena without the dedication of the Permanent Office staff. At the moment there are 10 staff members who take care of the membership administration, finances, WSC organization, website and

communication, committees' and associations' support, webinars, capacity building etc. Thank you Shabani, Liliana, Katie, Noline, Margaret, Simon, Sofia, Olivia and Valentina. And don't forget our volunteers Anco Hundepool, Jelke Bethlehem and Gerrit Stemerding, who has been a volunteer for more than 20 years.



*Photo: ISI Staff members during a virtual meeting:
Ada van Krimpen, Katie Junasova, Liliana Happel, Noline de Kraa
Gerrit Stemerding, Shabani Mehta, Margaret de Ruiter-Molloy, Sofia Kapnisi
Valentina Guran, Olivia van Dijck-Timbol. Our webmaster is not in the photo.*

I could fill many more pages telling about my experiences, and especially the people I've met ... Thanks to everyone I have had the opportunity to meet and work with. But I am most thankful for my partner Ben and family who supported me throughout my career and missed me often due to my international travels.

Last but not least: if you are not an ISI member yet, don't wait any longer and join now!

See you all in Ottawa in July 2023.