

Données sociales

A one-of-a-kind publication*

The triennial report entitled *Données sociales* (“Social data”) was founded by Alain Darbel in 1973. For over three decades now, readers have looked forward to its rigorous overview of French society and its trends. A publication with such a long track record is inevitably informed by a doctrine or—to use a more business-like term—an “editorial line.” Just what is this much-vaunted editorial line, on which, of course, editors and authors are supposed to stay focused? Quite simply, it’s a set of choices, i.e., trade-offs between goals and the constraints of reality. This article describes the main compromises and the rationale behind them.

A not-so-linear history

The long lineage of *Données sociales* might give the impression that the editorial life of this reference work has flowed like a quiet river. The truth is quite the opposite. In each successive issue, the editors have had to strike careful compromises and assume responsibility for them, dispel doubts, and overcome preconceived ideas. Ultimately, the notion of producing a periodical collection of social data at INSEE may have been a gamble. And the result is anything but conventional. As we shall see, the editorial line of *Données sociales* is rather unique.

What do we mean by “social”?

The term “social” encompasses two meanings: in the first—the “collective” sense—it refers to the community in the aggregate; in the second—the

“individual” sense—it refers to the range of individual situations.

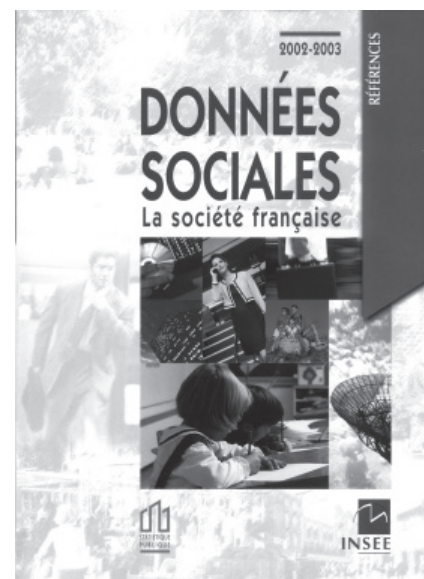
In the collective sense, “social” covers the description of an entire society, with its disparities and differences between social groups. In the individual sense, “social” connotes the focus on people’s everyday problems and the relevant social policies in such areas as employment, unemployment-benefits policies, family, health, and welfare.

Données sociales initially emphasized the first approach. The trend began to reverse in the fifth edition (1984).

The 1980s: a turning point

The first editions (1973, 1974, 1978, and 1981) sought to produce a synthesis of data on social fields, consistently with notions in vogue during the 1970s. This concern was reflected in the search for a systematic presentation and for convergence between fields. The aim was to apply to the social field the national-accounting model, which, at the time, was basking in glory in the economic sphere. What survives of this initial approach is the work’s overall arrangement: a sequence of about ten chapters running from “resources” (demography, education) to the fruits of economic activity and their distribution: living standards and redistribution.

In the early 1980s, having recognized the difficulty of fitting social data into a model-based framework, the publication’s editors opted for a “fragmented” approach. Henceforth, emphasis would be placed on



individual facets of the social field and the relevant policies, without attempting to superimpose an overall vision. In formal terms, *Données sociales* became a collection of several dozen articles, written by as many authors from a variety of backgrounds. The role of the editorial team shifted from acting as a single supervisor to coordinating a collaborative volume.

Social issues and quantification

In a book that discusses social topics and puts INSEE’s responsibility on the line, the reader necessarily expects “rigorous” and “objective” studies, i.e., resting on properly compiled and referenced statistical data. All of this assumes that (1) the fields studied are

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effectively covered by quantitative data, (2) the authors construct rigorous arguments, supported by the data in question, and (3) the validity of this type of study is fairly widely recognized.

Concerning point (1), we should bear in mind the robust growth of information on social fields since the 1960s, including household surveys and the use of administrative sources.

Point (3) is tied to the debates on quantitative sociology. Until around the 1960s, sociology was a purely literary discipline in France: most French sociologists felt that social analysis was too subtle an exercise to benefit in any way from a table of numbers. However, quantitative sociology made a rapid breakthrough by imitating U.S. studies and thanks to support from figures such as Pierre Bourdieu. *Données sociales* accompanied its rise.

As for point (2), the editorial team's obvious duty is to ensure the quality of the articles. However, there is a risk of taking the easy way out—namely, downsizing one's ambitions and merely presenting and describing quantitative results. So far, *Données sociales* has maintained its profile as a collection of articles rather than a yearbook of figures.

A collective work

The emphasis on an “individualized” approach, as practiced since the fifth edition of *Données sociales*, has entailed a broad coverage of the field studied under the “social” label. A set of authors affiliated with INSEE alone is no longer adequate for the task. The editors have had to tap the expertise of the ministerial statistical offices in such areas as education, employment, health, and culture. These offices also have special experience in monitoring and assessing social policies.

But it would be a pity, of course, to restrict coverage to issues involving economic and administrative

management. The need for a complement—for example, the introduction of sociological studies—has already been recognized for many years. Admittedly, in a limited volume containing statistical information not always refreshed from one edition to the next, we cannot apply the exhaustiveness requirement literally. However, some special topics can be analyzed in turn, every two or three editions. For this type of input, the main source of contributors is the academic world.

Communicating to non-specialists

Most readers of *Données sociales* are non-specialists seeking general information on social issues. A typical example is teachers.

Naturally, special editorial work is required to make an article filled with statistical information accessible to non-experts: one needs to explain why the topic is worth discussing, follow a clear, natural line of argument, simplify the wording as much as possible, and remove elliptical expressions and allusions that are understood by specialists but impede comprehension by others. Tables and charts should be accompanied by perfectly explicit captions and commentaries. For readers who want to find out more, data sources and basic bibliographical references should be provided.

The long history of *Données sociales* and the efforts of successive editorial teams to improve its legibility have made it easier to produce: the editorial line and author guidelines are increasingly well known and accepted.

The 2002-2003 edition

The overall plan of the 2002-2003 edition of *Données sociales*, the eleventh in the series, is consistent with that of earlier editions: demographic and educational status of the population; economic activities; working conditions; health; income and wealth; lifestyles;

and “collective solidarity”—with a distinction between social links and social protection. A new chapter, “Spatial Dimension,” contains studies based on data from the 1999 population census. The “Social Links” chapter features articles on sociological values and religion, topics last covered many editions ago.

As far as possible, the chapters are arranged in an identical sequence: one or two articles to define the broad framework; an analysis of the collective policy and its resources; an analysis of needs and risks; and a study of specific cases.

There are nearly 70 articles in all, extensively documented with quantitative data set out in tables, charts, and maps. The number of authors is well over a hundred. In a sign of the growing openness of *Données sociales* toward ministerial statistical offices and academia, more than half the contributors do not belong to INSEE.

A three-year undertaking

The preparation of *Données sociales* is a lengthy undertaking that calls on many different participants.

The editorial team launches the process, which lasts three years and is roughly divided into three stages: validating the broad outlines of the new edition; defining the contents; developing the articles.

First, we contact the major contributing agencies to see if they are still available, if they have any requests or changes to suggest, and so on. For the 2002-2003 edition, the creation of the “Spatial Dimension” chapter was decided at this stage. Once the broad outlines have been defined, we contact the future authors to get a general idea of the articles they will submit and the deadlines for the first drafts. The provisional contents of the new edition are compiled, and the editorial team starts to worry about deadline compliance. Naturally, this

concern will only increase over time. The third and final stage involves standard editorial work, putting the articles in shape in consultation with authors and other participants.

All this adds up to a considerable task for a compact editorial team (three people for the 2002-2003 edition: Agnès Dugué, Ravi Baktavatsalou, and the present author), although there is no shortage of helping hands. In particular, the senior echelons of the contributing agencies are involved in preparing the articles in various ways: rereading, suggesting changes, and vetting (official approval).

The technical phase includes chart harmonization, overall layout, cover design, and—of course—printing. For the 2002-2003 edition, these tasks were performed respectively by the AFDEC company (Mme Marmouget), INSEE's technical secretariat for publications (Mme Quesada and her team), the Inéaiki company, and the Jouve company.

A French cultural exception

A major benchmark for *Données sociales* was the British *Social Trends*, which appeared in the early 1970s at

the very time when the French project was taking shape. However, these two works—besides the fact that one is annual and the other (more or less) triennial—exhibit deeper differences, reflecting the contrast between a statistical yearbook and a collection of analyses.

Essentially, *Social Trends* consists of annually updated statistical series, organized into fifteen broad areas, plus two articles analyzing specific topics that vary from one edition to the next. *Données sociales*, it will be recalled, offers more than 50 articles (69 for the 2002-2003 edition). While most themes studied are repeated in successive editions, some may be added or removed, and all the articles in each edition are new. The need to draft each edition from scratch explains the slower pace of *Données sociales*. Another reason is the inertia of the social sphere: an analytical article—interpreting trends, searching for factors, and assessing policy—does not grow obsolete in a year.

In the social sphere, publications of the “statistical yearbook” type are indeed the most common, in Europe as well as the U.S. In France, two well-known serials in this category—but not confined to the social field—are *Tableaux de l'économie française*

(TEF) and *Annuaire statistique de la France*. The first is aimed at the general public, the second at a more professional readership. We should also mention *France portrait social*, which contains a high proportion of tables.

In its present form, shaped by a thirty-year experience, *Données sociales* is truly an exception. The French statistical organization may explain this originality. Our official statistical system is, in fact, less centralized than is often believed: alongside INSEE, it includes almost twenty ministerial statistical offices. Also, nearly all of the system's management-level staff is trained in the INSEE-linked national statistical schools: ENSAE (École Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Administration Économique) and ENSAI (École Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Analyse de l'Information). This accounts for the potential richness of studies conducted in a “common language” on a wide variety of subjects addressed from different viewpoints.

Philippe L'Hardy

Philippe L'Hardy was chief editor of Données sociales for ten years before retiring in April 2003

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2002-2003

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DONNÉES SOCIALES

La société française



Tous les trois ans, depuis trente ans, « Données sociales - La société française » dresse un panorama rigoureux et attendu de la société française et de son évolution.

Sous la plume d'une centaine de spécialistes des sciences sociales, de l'Insee et d'autres organismes, sont réunis les chiffres, les informations et les arguments qui permettent d'appréhender la réalité sociale d'aujourd'hui.

L'impact de la réduction du temps de travail sur l'emploi, le bilan de l'enseignement secondaire des années quatre-vingt, les pratiques et croyances religieuses actuelles, les bénéficiaires de la couverture maladie universelle, l'évolution de la place des femmes dans le monde du travail, l'effet des innovations techniques sur l'emploi... sont quelques-uns des nombreux thèmes traités dans cet ouvrage.

Chaque nouvelle édition de « Données sociales - La société française » est saluée par l'ensemble de la presse qui souligne que la richesse de son contenu, la fiabilité de ses données et la rigueur de ses analyses en font une référence unique.

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