



Istituto Nazionale di Statistica

17TH MEETING OF THE OTTAWA GROUP

Closing remarks by Gian Carlo Blangiardo,
President of Istat

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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues

In a speech given in 1936, British Member of Parliament Sir Austen Chamberlain invoked an ancient Chinese curse that he had allegedly learned of from a British diplomat, and which took the curious form of saying, "May you live in interesting times."
"There is no doubt that the curse has fallen on us," Chamberlain observed. And we feel the same is true for us.

We do live in interesting, tragically interesting times. Times that defy our capacity for insight, measurement, and analysis, and at the same time invite us to respond quickly and with new, sharper tools, improving rapidly our ability to measure accurately new phenomena that surface so tumultuously and to produce independent, reliable, quality statistics indispensable for adequate policy responses.

Despite some exceptions, even important ones, in many countries the pandemic is beginning to loosen its grip. Its short-term impacts on the world economy have been severe, and the recovery process may suffer from long-lasting scars. Inflation is among them.

We were barely beginning to think that the health crisis was behind us when the outbreak of war in Ukraine, together with the human tragedy, produced new and profound upheavals in our interconnected societies and economies. Economies, which were slowly on their way to regaining their health after the pandemic, now face new disruptions.

Yet, even before the war, and before the pandemic, the professional world of official statistics was aware of major changes taking place and the need to respond to them with new forms of process and output: (i) a more complex and diverse society to measure; (ii) an unprecedented wealth of information, new unstructured sources; (iii) the availability of new methodological and technological tools; (iv) the crisis of traditional data collection systems (high costs and response burden, lower response rates); (v) the existence of new competitors on the market; (vi) a growing demand for more flexible, agile, and cost efficient National Statistical Institutes.

Somehow, the call for the profound transformation of the processes and products of economic statistics, necessary to achieve the very high quality required, precedes the



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latest international shocks. Undoubtedly, these shocks produced an abrupt acceleration and multiplication of demands.

As far as the specific area of interest of the Ottawa Group is concerned, the task ahead is challenging, as the impacts of the pandemic and the war in terms of a sharp rise of inflation do need new insight, new sources, and techniques to collect and treat the data necessary to produce timely and trustworthy analyses and estimates.

Within the framework of the international debate and research, Istat is strongly committed to innovations related to new data sources (scanner data, administrative data) and new techniques (web scraping) to improve the measurement of inflation. Starting from 2018, scanner data were included in the production process of Italian CPI/HICP for food and since then they are currently used (in 2020 its coverage was extended to hard discount-supermarkets, small shops and shops specialising in cleaning and personal care products). Currently, we are researching multilateral methods aimed at making the most of the potentialities of scanner data. Since 2014, our Institute started testing and adopting web scraping techniques to collect basic data to be used in the CPI production process and it is now engaged in testing APIs (Application Program Interfaces) to scrape data from the web.

These last days, we have witnessed a generous and ready response from the Ottawa Group of experts. Just a few figures: 8 sessions, 34 papers, 1 keynote speech, 3 thematic presentations, and 8 room papers may give a quantitative idea of the intensity of the effort, but the quality of both the contents and the discussions does exceed the capacity of mere numbers to account for it.

The topics on the table range from the estimation of the weights of consumer price indices to quality adjustment, from the measurement of housing on CPI to measurement of inflation related to digitalisation and shared economy. Not to mention the new frontier of multilateral indices to measure the temporal evolution of consumer prices. An ambitious program, and satisfactory achievements!

Istat and the Banca d'Italia consider it an honor to have been able to host such a significant scientific event. And I take this opportunity to thank all the people from both Institutions who contributed with their work to the success of this meeting.

We gladly pass the baton to the Canadian colleagues, sure that interesting times may be challenging, but are also blessed by intelligent and dedicated people.

Thank you all, and have a safe trip back.