

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

*This chapter describes the context in which these Guidelines were produced. The first part of the chapter sets out the motivation for producing these Guidelines and identifies some of the key international initiatives that are creating a need for better trust measures. The second part presents the scope and objectives of the Guidelines and provides an overview of the structure and contents of the full report.*

## 1.1. Introduction

Trust is a concept of fundamental importance to the well-being of individuals, and to society more broadly. At the individual level, in order to live comfortably, people need a personal feeling that the other members of the community with whom they interact daily can be trusted. At a societal level, trust is essential to the smooth functioning of society: every day-to-day transaction that we make involves some degree of trust in the people with whom we interact, and it is the trust in these interactions that supports the prosperity of the world's economy. As argued by Nobel Laureate Kenneth Arrow: "Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time. It can be plausibly argued that much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by the lack of mutual confidence" (Arrow, 1972, p. 357).

It is not just trust in other people that matters. Trust in institutions also underpins a successful society. Without some degree of trust in institutions such as the parliament, the civil service, the justice system and the police, it would be impossible for a community to perform effectively or for the individuals within a country to live the sort of lives that they wish to pursue. Trust in institutions requires that these institutions are competent and effective in delivering on their goals, but also that they operate consistently with a set of values that reflect citizens' expectations of integrity and fairness.

Although widely acknowledged as important, the measurement of trust does not have a long tradition, particularly within official statistics. This partly reflects a paucity of evidence on the validity and reliability of different measures of trust, as well as – until recently – a lack of strong policy demand for such metrics. However, this situation has begun to change radically. A range of recent policy initiatives has underscored the urgent need for better measures of trust – both in other people and in institutions – to help inform policies aimed both at improving the quality of governance, social cohesion and citizen engagement and at better understanding the drivers of well-being and economic performance.

The OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust aim to make the concept of trust measurable through official statistics by describing best practices in its measurement, by proposing a core set of measures that could form the basis for international comparisons, and by encouraging national statistical offices (NSOs) to include measures of trust in some of their regular household surveys. The Guidelines are intended to assist data producers in collecting and reporting measures of trust as well as to support users of trust data in understanding the different approaches to measurement and the implications of these for analysis.

## 1.2. Motivation

### **Recent initiatives**

Concern about levels of trust in society is highly topical. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, people's trust in a broad range of public and private institutions (e.g. banks) fell sharply in most OECD countries, especially those most severely affected by the crisis. In this context, OECD ministers, at the 2013 OECD Council meeting on Jobs, Equality and Trust,

called upon the OECD to strengthen its efforts to better understand how trust in public institutions shapes economic performance and people's well-being, as well as to identify its key drivers. This mandate led to the OECD Trust Strategy, a two-year initiative aimed at providing methodological, empirical and practical guidance to OECD governments wanting to restore people's trust in public institutions.

The importance of developing reliable measures of trust has been independently underscored as part of the OECD Better Life Initiative. Since 2011, measures of trust in others have been used as a measure of current social capital in the biannual *How's Life?* report, while trust in institutions has been considered in the same report as an indicator of civic engagement and governance (one of the 11 dimensions of current well-being identified in the initiative). Since the 2015 edition of *How's Life?*, both interpersonal and institutional trust feature as measure of social capital (in the chapter on "Resources for future well-being"). When discussing the statistical agenda ahead in the field of "social connections", the OECD (2011) stated that "it is important to ensure the standardisation and regular collection of official statistics for those measures for which there is a sufficient body of knowledge, in particular with respect to interpersonal trust". Similarly, the OECD (2011) identified a number of actions aimed at improving measurement in the area of civic engagement and governance and argued that:

...better measures are required to assess how people perceive the quality of the democratic institutions in the country where they live. While many unofficial surveys contain questions for measuring civic engagement and governance they typically have a narrow geographic coverage, small sample size and inadequate sampling procedures. Steps should be taken to include questions on civic participation and trust in institutions in large-scale official surveys, through a combination of a few recurrent questions in regular surveys and more detailed questions in (less frequent) dedicated modules, as is already done in some OECD countries (e.g. special modules of the Current Population Survey on voting and civic engagement in the United States).

Looking beyond the OECD, the statistical community today confronts a clear imperative to improve the measurement basis of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in September 2015 by the UN General Assembly. In particular, Goal 16 of the SDGs ("Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels") focuses explicitly on governance, institutional quality and political participation. Even when not explicitly mentioned, trust in others and in institutions is an essential prerequisite for the types of behaviours and policies that are needed to preserve those public goods and global commons that underpin inclusive and sustainable growth.

In response to this political demand, the statistical community has launched a range of new measurement initiatives (United Nations, 2015). In September 2014, representatives of NSOs and experts convened in Cape Verde to develop draft terms of reference for a City Group on Governance Statistics to be established under the auspices of the UN Statistical Commission. The creation of such a group was agreed by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2015, and this group – the Praia Group – is today developing a handbook of governance statistics as well as advising on governance measures related to Goal 16 of the SDGs. The programme of the Praia Group involves multiple work-streams covering different elements of governance, including people's trust in public institutions and their experiences with the performance of various institutions and with corruption. Given the scope of the Praia Group's

mandate, the group partly functions as a clearing house, bringing together advice and guidance from different sources on measuring various aspects of governance. In this context, these Guidelines on Measuring Trust are meant to constitute one of the OECD's primary contributions to the Praia Group.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the contribution of better measures of trust to the specific initiatives outlined above, these Guidelines are part of a broader OECD work programme aimed at improving the measures of key economic, social and environmental outcomes. Following the release of the *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* in 2009 (led by Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi), the OECD has played an important role in carrying forward the Commission's measurement agenda. This has included applying the Commission's recommendations to regularly monitor and analyse well-being and sustainability across the OECD area through the *How's Life?* series of reports (OECD, 2011, 2013a, 2015 and 2017a) and to engage ordinary people through specific communication tools (the Better Life Index). It also includes pushing forward the frontiers of measurement by producing guidelines for measuring subjective well-being, the distribution of household wealth and the quality of the working environment (OECD, 2013b, 2013c, 2017b). It is in this context that these Guidelines on Measuring Trust should be seen: as part of a broader effort aimed at building a coherent system of statistics on well-being.

### ***The need for guidelines***

For official statistics, statistical quality is grounded in the commitment of NSOs to follow best practice in data production. This involves the use of consistent international concepts, classifications and methods. The *UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* (2014) together with the enabling statistical legislation of many countries enshrine this goal in written form. However, official statistical standards do not simply emerge fully formed: they can be produced only when there is a sufficient body of understanding around the measures in question to support clear judgements about best practice. Thus, the development of formal standards necessarily begins in experimental and informal data collection.

Trust measures based on household surveys are already collected as part of the official statistical system in several OECD countries. This has largely been the result of demand from policy makers for better information on well-being, social capital and social cohesion. However, regular, timely and consistent measurement is much less common. In most cases, such as for many European Union countries, official statistics on trust have been collected only through an ad hoc module to one of the main Community surveys (the 2013 EU-SILC well-being module). Nevertheless, some European countries have started to implement national well-being modules of EU-SILC and recurrent general social surveys that include trust measures (such as Poland's Social Cohesion Survey or the Social Cohesion and Well-being Survey of the Netherlands). In Australia, Canada and New Zealand, trust measures have also been collected by NSOs as part of a regular general social survey. The Mexican NSO INEGI has been looking at trust through its National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Public Security.

Although some official data on trust are already available, most comparable information comes from unofficial sources. The most significant of these are the Gallup World Poll (for trust in institutions only), the World Values Survey, the European Social Survey, the European Quality of Life Survey and the Barometers carried out in many countries around the world. Questions on interpersonal trust are also included in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) and have been used to explore how skill acquisition helps to maintain and

increase people's trust in others. These surveys have allowed significant progress in understanding the degree to which trust measures are capable of providing useful information (discussed in Chapter 2). However, the available data still face significant limitations. In particular:

- Coverage from existing unofficial surveys is uneven, both across countries and over time.
- Most unofficial data are based on small samples (typically, of around 1 000 per country), which precludes looking at population sub-groups within each country.
- Available official data are not comparable across countries and are often collected on an ad hoc basis.
- Basic methodological information is lacking on which measures are most useful for different purposes, limiting the degree to which measures of trust can be used to inform policy.

These Guidelines on Measuring Trust aim to contribute to addressing these issues by setting out best practice, providing direction for methodological research, and encouraging NSOs both to collect more trust data and to do so in an internationally comparable manner. It is with these goals in mind that the OECD devoted resources to its production. It is hoped that these Guidelines will, in turn, contribute to a step change in the quality and availability of data on trust.

### 1.3. The Guidelines for measuring trust

#### **Scope and objectives**

These Guidelines are aimed, in the first instance, at NSOs that are either already measuring trust or that are contemplating new trust measures through additions to existing surveys or new data collection. In the former case, the Guidelines can provide guidance on which measures could be used to produce internationally comparable data and on how to present these data, while in the latter case much of the information on validity and methodological issues will also prove of relevance. NSOs are the primary audience for these Guidelines, both because the OECD is an inter-governmental institution where NSOs are directly participating in the work of the Organisation through the Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy, but also because policy-relevant trust data will require the large sample sizes and high levels of statistical quality that only official data can provide.

Beyond NSOs, other producers of trust data will also find these Guidelines of value. As noted above, much of the trust data currently available come from non-official sources. Better and more comparable trust data from non-official sources will remain the primary source of information for some years to come, until a significant body of official data begins to accumulate. Also, much academic work will continue to use non-official data because they offer both greater flexibility with respect to adding in new variables and easier access to microdata. Finally, these Guidelines will also be of value to data users, not just by providing information on the use and analysis of trust data but also for the evidence on the validity of different trust measures and on the impact of different measurement methodologies on reported trust.

The scope of these Guidelines is limited to measures of trust by individuals in other individuals and in institutions. This is partly driven by practical concerns – the Guidelines are aimed at NSOs and the sort of data that they can collect – but also because it is the trust of individual citizens that is of greatest policy interest. Hence, the main focus of the

Guidelines is on measures of generalised interpersonal trust, which captures the trust of individuals in people who are not known to them, along with trust in public institutions such as the police, parliament and the justice system. A more detailed discussion of the concept of trust and the specific aspects of trust that can be measured is the focus of the first part of Chapter 2.

It should also be noted that the scope of these Guidelines goes beyond providing advice on best practice for measuring trust. A strong focus is on assessing the relevance and accuracy of trust measures, particularly with respect to validity. This is not just because validity is of importance to potential data producers in assessing whether it is worthwhile to collect a measure, but also because there are significant knowledge gaps in this area. The Guidelines aim both to fill some of these gaps where possible and to indicate strategic priorities with respect to trust research for the academic research community.

A key element of these Guidelines is a set of prototype question modules on trust that can be used as a starting point by data producers in developing their own measures, and which will provide a basis for international comparison. In particular, the Guidelines are intended to:

- Improve the international comparability of trust measures by establishing common standards that could be used by NSOs and other data producers, grounded in best practice in question design.
- Summarise what is known about the validity and reliability of measures of trust and, where possible, extend this body of information through empirical analysis of existing survey and proxy measures of trust in government.
- Act as a catalyst for broader work by NSOs and researchers to broaden the evidence base on the validity and reliability of trust measures.
- In the longer run, increase the number of countries for which official measures of trust are produced, so as to contribute to the monitoring of critical elements of the SDGs.

As a last point, these Guidelines do not aim at providing the final word on the measurement of trust or at developing a formal international standard for measuring trust. While formal statistical standards are an important part of official statistics, it is appropriate to produce these only when the measure in question is well understood and when there is a well-developed body of statistical activities pursued by NSOs, conditions that are not currently met in the case of trust. The Guidelines aim, rather, to bridge the gap between, on the one hand, the current situation of scattered measurement in official statistics and the more widespread, but still inconsistent measurement elsewhere, and a formal standard on the other. By encouraging NSOs to collect trust data more systematically, including a core set of internationally comparable questions in their surveys, the Guidelines aim to support the development of the evidence base that might in the future underpin decisions about developing a true international statistical standard for measuring trust.

As the evidence base on trust develops, the information in these Guidelines will eventually become outdated. For this reason, it is not envisaged that the Guidelines should be viewed as “carved in stone”. Ideally, a review of these Guidelines should take place some time after their release to assess the degree to which the evidence base has improved subsequent to publication. This review should assess whether the Guidelines themselves are in need of revision and identify any next steps that should be taken in order to move towards greater standardisation of trust measurement in the official statistical system.

## **The structure of the Guidelines**

These Guidelines include four substantive chapters and two annexes. Chapter 2 addresses the issues of concept, relevance and validity. For meaningful measurement to be possible, it is essential to have a clear understanding of what is to be measured. The first part of Chapter 2 addresses this topic by reviewing the main definitions of trust found in the academic literature and discussing how these relate to each other. A working definition of trust that covers both interpersonal and institutional trust is proposed; it forms the basis for the survey questions proposed by these Guidelines for measuring trust. A brief account of the main approaches to measuring trust is also provided, which is used as the basis for organising discussion around measurement later in the Guidelines. The second half of Chapter 2 focuses on statistical quality, with a particular emphasis on the issues of relevance and validity. This section aims to provide a clear account of why and how measures of trust are useful to policy makers and the general public and sets out what is known about the accuracy of trust measures.

Chapter 3 brings together information on the key methodological issues that should inform the design of questions on trust. The chapter is structured under broad headings relating to measurement error, question wording, response formats, survey context, survey mode, response styles and cultural context. Each of these issues is wide-ranging, and the Guidelines do not attempt to cover all aspects of these issues in depth. The main focus in each case is on summarising findings that apply specifically to measures of trust. Beyond this, where there are issues that are likely to be particularly important to designing trust questions but for which no trust-specific literature exists, a brief summary is provided, drawing evidence from other areas (such as the design of subjective questions more generally). As users of the Guidelines are assumed to have a good grounding in the essentials of question design, the aim here is to summarise information that is particularly relevant to designing questions on trust, rather than starting from scratch.

Chapter 4 provides specific guidance on best practice in measuring trust. This chapter is structured around the different stages of the research process, covering planning, survey and sample design, question design, and implementation. More than the other chapters in these Guidelines, this chapter is prescriptive. In particular, it provides specific recommendations on issues such as sample size, frequency and duration of enumeration and provides the rationale behind the specific choice of questions included in the prototype question modules attached to the Guidelines.

Chapter 5 focuses on the output and analysis of trust measures. The main goal for the chapter is supporting basic descriptive outputs of trust data, including examples of how such data have been reported in the past. The chapter also covers the interpretation of trust data, such as evidence on what can be considered as *large* or *small* changes in trust levels. The chapter also reviews the analysis of trust data to help users who are approaching the data with a research question requiring more sophisticated analysis.

There are two annexes to the Guidelines. Annex A brings together a wide range of trust questions currently in use in different surveys around the world, sourced from both official and unofficial surveys. This annex is intended to serve as a reference point for the discussion of questions from specific surveys in the main text of the Guidelines and as a resource for analysts wanting to know about the range of available measures. It should also help in gaining an understanding of what sorts of measures are available from different sources. Annex B also features questions on trust but has quite a different focus. It contains five

prototype question modules on trust that are intended to be used by data producers as a starting point for developing their own questions. The first question module – the core module – includes a limited set of measures that are intended for widespread use. A single “primary measure” defines the absolute minimum that should be included in relevant surveys and forms the basis for cross-country comparison; another four questions – also intended to be used as written – round out the module and provide basic information on the most important types of trust. The other four modules each cover a different approach to capturing information on trust. Unlike the core module, these modules are not intended to be used as written, but rather as a resource for data producers in designing their own questionnaires.

#### 1.4. Conclusion

Key points made in this chapter are as follows:

- The OECD Guidelines on the Measurement of Trust aim to make trust measurable by setting out best practice in the measurement of trust, providing guidance towards a core set of measures that can form the basis for international comparisons and encouraging NSOs to include measures of trust in some of their regular household surveys.
- There is currently a strong policy need for better measures of trust, underscored by international measurement initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and work aimed at improving the measures of key economic, social and environmental outcomes, such as that initiated by the *Report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* in 2009 and carried forward by the OECD through its Better Life Initiative.
- The Guidelines are aimed at producers and users of trust data, with a particular emphasis on NSOs. The main focus is trust by individuals in other individuals and measures of trust in public institutions.
- These Guidelines are not a formal international standard, but are aimed at supporting data producers in their own initiatives to measure trust.
- As high-quality official measures of trust become available, it will be necessary to review these Guidelines in light of the new information. It is envisaged that a review of the Guidelines will take place once a sufficient body of national experiences has emerged, with recommendations for next steps in the measurement of trust.

#### Notes

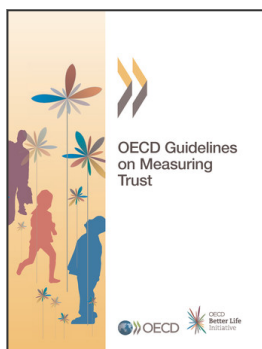
1. OECD contributions to the Praia Group also include the statistical work undertaken in the context of the bi-annual report *Government at a Glance*, inputs provided to the in-depth review of government statistics carried out by the Conference of European Statisticians in 2016, and the special chapter on “Governance and Well-being” in the 2017 issue of *How’s Life?*.

#### References

- Arrow, K.J. (1972), “Gifts and exchanges”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 4, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 343-362.
- OECD (2017a), *How’s Life? 2017: Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- OECD (2017b), *OECD Guidelines on Measuring the Quality of the Working Environment*, OECD Publishing, Paris.



- OECD (2015), *How's Life? 2015: Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/how\\_life-2015-en](http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/how_life-2015-en).
- OECD (2013a), *How's Life? 2013: Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201392-en>.
- OECD (2013b), *OECD Guidelines for Micro Statistics on Household Wealth*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264194878-en>.
- OECD (2013c), *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264191655-en>.
- OECD (2011), *How's Life? Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264121164-en>.
- Stiglitz, J.E., A. Sen and J.-P. Fitoussi (2009), *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, [www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport\\_anglais.pdf](http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf).
- United Nations (2015), "Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", A/RES/70/1, United Nations General Assembly, New York.
- United Nations (2014), *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics*, A/RES/68/261, United Nations, Geneva and New York.



**From:**  
**OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust**

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264278219-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD (2017), "Introduction", in *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264278219-4-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to [rights@oecd.org](mailto:rights@oecd.org). Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com) or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at [contact@cfcopies.com](mailto:contact@cfcopies.com).