

## INTRODUCTION

### OECD past and present – the importance of statistics

Statistics have always been at the heart of OECD work. Since its creation 50 years ago, the Organisation has been providing statistics to assess and benchmark the performance of its member countries. It has also been continuously pushing forward the frontiers of statistical knowledge by developing new tools to measure the economic and social challenges of the day. Over the past 50 years, the OECD has produced reliable, comparable, timely and respected statistics that lay the foundations of the policy advice provided by the Organisation to its member countries and to countries in the rest of the world. The compilation and dissemination of such statistics has brought the OECD to the forefront of international statistical providers and intrinsically linked its name with that of a trustworthy producer of statistics.

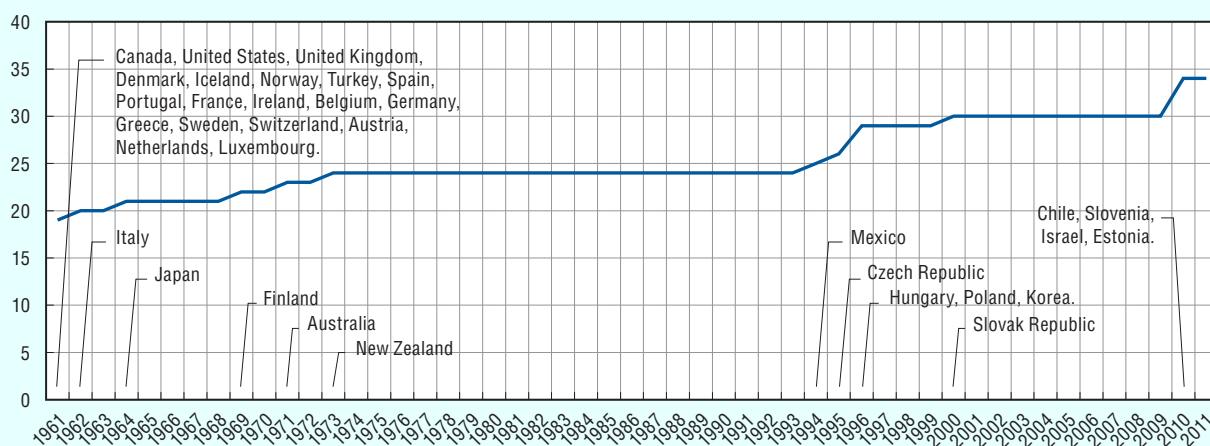
This year's "Special Focus" of the OECD Factbook is an occasion to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Organisation by highlighting its continuous commitment in producing high-quality, internationally-comparable statistics. This special chapter presents the evolution of selected economic and social statistics for OECD countries over the past five decades.

The structure of this chapter slightly differs from that of the rest of the publication. As most of the data presented in this special chapter are also presented (with a shorter-term perspective) in the following chapters of this publication, this special chapter does not include headings on "Definition", "Comparability" and "Overview" used elsewhere, but rather describes the key patterns highlighted by each of the indicators considered. Definitions and comparability issues surrounding these indicators can be found in the main body of the publication and further references are provided under the heading on "Sources".

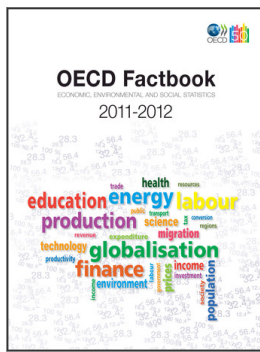
Presenting consistent series of data spanning five decades is challenging, particularly for countries that joined the OECD recently, whose statistical systems were not as developed fifty years ago as they are today, or that simply did not exist then. It is also difficult due to the progressive increase in the number of OECD members, which – as shown in the Figure – increased from 19 in 1961 to 34 today. In some cases, estimates have been used to compile data for the OECD average or total, while consistent long-term series are generally available for the major seven economies, which constitute the bulk of the OECD area. In other cases, presenting consistent time-series has required making use of specific indicators, tailored to the goal of allowing long-term comparisons. This is the case for the indicator of educational attainment shown in this chapter, which draws on the data on educational attainment for different age cohorts that were included in the most recent issue of *Education at a Glance*.

Patterns highlighted by these long-term series are, by and large, well known but the size of these changes, and their different intensity among OECD countries, deserve attention. The OECD population has increased by almost half over the past 50 years, but its share in the world total has continued to shrink, and is projected to be less than 15% of the world population by 2040s. Life-expectancy at birth, the most commonly used measure of people's health conditions, has increased on average by more than 11 years since 1960 but this has also implied, in a context characterised by falling fertility rates, that the share of the dependent population, after having fallen for the past 50 years, is now rising and is expected to exceed 40% by 2040s. Many more people are completing higher education than in the past, with almost half of the cohort now aged 25 to 34 expected to attain tertiary education by the time they will reach their middle age. Over this 50-year period, international trade in both goods and services has grown exponentially, price inflation for most OECD countries is at historically low levels, and gross domestic product per capita has attained levels never reached before despite a continuous easing in its growth rate. However, with faltering GDP growth, unemployment rates for a number of countries are higher today than in the 1960s, and the share of people in paid jobs has levelled off for a number of countries since the 1970s and 1980s. The long-term perspective provided by the selected series included in this special chapter provides the common background for some of challenges that OECD countries are facing today... and in the next 50 years.

### Number of OECD countries



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