

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)

By Rolf Uher

1. Introduction¹

The ISSP conducted its first survey in six countries some 15 years ago and carries out annual surveys in a growing number of countries since that time. The initiative for this international comparative data-collection programme had been taken by four social science institutions in 1983/1984, which stand for existing regular national social science projects. The idea was to add a cross-national perspective to the individual, national studies.

| Country | Institute | Survey |
|------------------|---|--|
| USA | NORC National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago | GSS General Social Survey |
| Germany | ZUMA Centre for Survey Research and Methodology, Mannheim (Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen) | ALLBUS German General Social Survey (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften) |
| Great Britain | The National Centre for Social Science (former Social and Community Planning Research – SCPR), London | BSA British Social Attitudes |
| Australia | RSSS Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra | NSSS National Social Science Survey |

In a bilateral collaboration between ZUMA and NORC a common set of question was included in their surveys ALLBUS and GSS in 1982 and 1984. So the question came up, why not making this kind of co-operation a regular one with more than two countries? So in 1984 representatives of the four

¹ Detailed and regularly updated information about the ISSP are available on the internet. The ZA's internet-address is: <http://www.gesis.org/issp> and the secretariat's address is: <http://www.issp.org>

institutions mentioned above held a meeting to establish a programme of continuing international collaboration, which they called ISSP, and agreed on four principles for this project:

1. jointly develop topical modules dealing with important areas of social sciences
2. field the modules as a fifteen-minutes supplement to the regular national surveys (or a special survey if necessary)
3. include an extensive common core of background variables
4. make the data available to the social science community as soon as possible

Each research organisation funds its own costs, there is no central funding.

Merging data and documentation of the national data-sets into an international comparative file and the distribution of these studies to the scientific community is performed by the Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung at the University of Cologne. Since 1997 the Zentralarchiv co-operates in processing and documenting the ISSP data-sets with ASEP (Análisis Sociológicos, Económicos y Políticos) in Madrid, Spain.

The ISSP secretariat administers and co-ordinates the organisational activities, the general meetings, membership-questions, working principles etc. The current secretary general of the ISSP is Tom W. Smith, NORC.

Since 1984, ISSP has grown to 34 nations in 1999:

| | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Australia | Japan |
| Austria | Latvia |
| Bangladesh | Netherlands |
| Brazil | New Zealand |
| Bulgaria | Norway |
| Canada | Philippines |
| Chile | Poland |
| Cyprus | Portugal |
| Czech Republic | Russia |
| Denmark | Slovakian Republic |
| France | Slovenia |
| Germany | South Africa |
| Great Britain | Spain |
| Hungary | Sweden |
| Ireland | Switzerland |
| Israel | USA |
| Italy | Venezuela |

2. Methodological aspects

The interpretation of results in international comparative studies is very much dependent on the circumstances under which the data was produced. Important issues in terms of equivalence are:

- the translation of the questionnaires into the specific country languages
- the comparability and operationalisation of socio-demographic variables across countries
- the modes of data-collection.

The ISSP has established a special committee, the ISSP Methodology Group², which organises subgroups that deal with these methodological topics in order to identify problems, to propose solutions and thus to increase data-quality. A few aspects will be mentioned here briefly.

2.1 Translation

The ISSP questionnaires are discussed and passed at the general ISSP meetings in British English. As there is no central funding available for these tasks, each country is responsible for its own translation into the country language or languages. The 'translation group' within the ISSP³ finds it useful to make these translations an interactive process, to give and have feed-back of the people involved in the actual translation and those who developed the questionnaire, to make annotations public and report about problems and decisions. It is also necessary to take care of the continuity. If a question has been asked already in an earlier ISSP module, the translation of the replicated item should be equal. Also a questionnaire version in one language e.g. French in France should in principle not deviate from the same language e.g. French questionnaire in another country e.g. Switzerland or Canada.

2.2 Standard Background Variables

The ISSP Standard-Background Variables have been a matter of discussion since the beginning of the ISSP. Already in 1986 a sub-committee met to discuss and define a set of socio-demographic indicators to be included in each ISSP module. The 'demographics group' within the ISSP⁴ has con-

² The convenor of ISSP Methods Group is Germany, the person to contact is Janet Harkness, ZUMA, e-mail: harkness@zuma-mannheim.de

³ Contact for this topic is Janet Harkness, ZUMA, Germany, e-mail: harkness@zuma-mannheim.de

⁴ Contact for this topic is Michael Braun, ZUMA, Germany, e-mail: braun@zuma-mannheim.de and Rolf Uher, ZA, Germany, e-mail: uher@za.uni-koeln.de

tinued these discussions and launched an initiative, for example, to try to improve the comparability of background information on education. Other indicators can be imagined which have comparability problems across countries like income, political parties or religious denominations. The discussion is still going on always under the light of the principle that standardisation should not lead to indifference. Original information should be kept as far as possible, but additional offers of derived measures or indicators should be made to support comparative research.

2.3 Modes of fieldwork

The ISSP questionnaires are designed as 'self-completion'-questionnaires. The administrative modes of fieldwork currently allowed within the ISSP are self-administration and face-to-face interviews. Different modes however can have effects on the answers of respondents e.g. when sensitive questions are asked, and thus also have effects on the comparability of results. The 'modes group' within the ISSP⁵ initiated a research-project to investigate the extent to which modes might affect results. Eight ISSP countries took part in this mode-experiment.

2.4 Further information

Additionally the ISSP takes care of sufficient background information about country-specific issues. They are collected in the country's study-descriptions supplying information about the field-process of the studies like 'date of fieldwork', 'sampling procedure', 'response rates', 'weighting procedures' etc. Furthermore background information about the distribution of 'age', 'gender' or 'years of education' and the 'unemployment rate' in the national population, taken from Census data or similar sources, are available in the documentation. This helps to compare the frequencies of these items in the ISSP survey-data with the distribution of these items in the population taken from external sources.

The points mentioned above are means to accompany the growth and development of the ISSP with self-critical reflection and to make problems, pitfalls and possible solutions visible.

⁵ Contact for this topic is Knut Kalgraff Skjåk, NSD, Norway, e-mail: Knut.Skjak@nsd.uib.no

3. Topics

From the beginning the ISSP intended not only to serve the cross-national aspect in survey-research but also wanted to support the time-perspective with this programme. Thus topical modules should be replicated from time to time. The following table shows the topics and the years in which they were or are planned to be fielded.

| Topic | Years |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| Role of Government | 1985, 1990, 1996 |
| Social Networks and Support Systems | 1986, 2001 |
| Social Inequality | 1987, 1992, 1999 |
| Family and Changing Gender Roles | 1988, 1994, 2002 |
| Work Orientations | 1989, 1997 |
| Religion | 1991, 1998 |
| Environment | 1993, 2000 |
| National Identity | 1995, 2003 |

The rules for replication of topics within ISSP say that at least two third of a certain questionnaire have to be repeated exactly and that one third of the questions might be modified or new questions could be added considering aspects of analysis and research with the existing data. In any event the complete questionnaire should not be longer than the fifteen-minutes field-time agreed upon as a principle, which is equivalent to about 60 variables in the final data-set. The socio-demographic variables are not counted and included in this calculation.

4. Access to Data and Documentation

From the beginning the ISSP was meant to be a public data-source to be used as well in publications and research projects as in teaching and analyses, to be used by students, post-graduates, university and school teachers, by the interested public, journalists and the administration. The ISSP Working Principles say: *“There are no time limits or other restrictions for the release of individual national data-sets by the Archive other than those imposed (temporarily) by a particular nation.”*

An analysis of the 1999 ISSP bibliography⁶ reported the different types of usages with ISSP data:

⁶ Tom W. Smith, ‘The 1999 ISSP Bibliography: A Report’, NORC, University of Chicago, April 1999 (see: <http://www.issp.org/trends.htm>).

| | |
|---------------------|------------|
| Book Chapters | 144 |
| Journal Articles | 186 |
| Conference Papers | 153 |
| Unpublished Reports | 56 |
| Newsletter Articles | 88 |
| Books | 44 |
| Student Degrees | 17 |
| | <u>688</u> |

The NORC (National Opinion Research Center) organises annually the 'General Social Survey Student Paper Competition', where students can deliver unpublished papers using either the General Social Survey or the ISSP data and can win a prize. Further information can be found under:

<http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/gss/student.htm>

By the beginning of the year 2000 the integrated data-sets and the respective documentation of the ISSP surveys 1985 to 1997 are available. Currently the 1998 and 1999 ISSP modules are processed at the Zentralarchiv in Cologne and at ASEP in Madrid.

The documentation is freely available on the internet, the data-sets can be supplied on CD-ROM, via ftp (File Transfer Protocol) and, in case of need, also on diskettes. According to the agreements within the international network of Data Archives⁷, data will be distributed on the 'short way' from the national Data Archives to users in their countries. In the case of the ISSP the Zentralarchiv supplies the final international data-sets to the national data-archives which then offer it to their clientele.

4.1 Documentation

There are two different places to access documentation of the ISSP on the internet pages.

General and administrative information about the ISSP is maintained at the site of the secretariat:

<http://www.issp.org>

You will find there the general introduction, the descriptions of the member institutions, the working principles, the option to subscribe to the list-server, the 'standard questions' which describe the conditions for membership-application and also the current ISSP bibliography which is updated once a year and currently contains about 700 reported entries.

⁷ The international network of Data-Archives can be accessed at: <http://www.nsd.uib.no/Cessda>

The Zentralarchiv's site

<http://www.gesis.org/issp>

contains a variety of pieces of documentation for the ISSP:

- A list of data-sets, which are available, including topic, participating countries and number of respondents per country.
- A search engine to retrieve information (keywords) from the ISSP codebooks on the item-level.
- Variable lists for all integrated files.
- The codebooks of all integrated files including the study-descriptions for each country, the question-text and the answer categories for all variables and also the unweighted frequency-distribution per variable by countries.
- The images of all original field-questionnaires for all participating countries in the original languages for all ISSP modules. These questionnaires can help to compare the questions in the country-specific languages with the English 'original' text and thus proof the equivalence of items.
- The basic questionnaires for future ISSP modules.
- Information about research related to ISSP
- Background information on the development of modules

4.2 Data

The distribution of data must be seen under two different aspects. One is the easy and user-friendly access of the social science community to this survey-material, the other aspect is the legitimisation of the data-processing archives against their funding institutions. The archives invest a lot of capacity to produce a homogenous data-base out of quite a number of single heterogeneous data-sets to make it a better usable comparative file. The processing work is being done at one place for many users instead of multiple processing of the same data at many places. So disclosure control is important to know and learn more about the structure of the clientele and their potential and actual needs.

The different ways and options to supply data to users depend very much on the technical developments. CD-ROMs replaced diskettes because of their bigger storage-capacity, DVD might be the future if they become a general standard, internet-access is common and the increasing speed of the network leads to increasing usage also for the transfer of bigger pieces of information.

Currently there are three ISSP CD-ROMs available.

1. The 1985 – 1996 ISSP CD-ROM contains all data-sets from 1985 to 1996 (twelve yearly international data-bases and one cumulative file for two time points, 1985 and 1990, and five countries: 'Role of Government I/II') in SPSS format, all codebooks for these surveys in PDF format and also all original field-questionnaires in the home-languages of the participating countries, also in PDF format. The price for this CD-ROM is – regardless of the status of the user – DM 50,-.
2. The 1997 ISSP CD-ROM – 'Work Orientations II' – was produced by ASEP (Análisis Sociológicos Económicos y Políticos) in Madrid and will be distributed by ASEP, CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas) and the Zentralarchiv, which supported the data-processing at ASEP. This CD-ROM is designed to provide the community of social science researchers with a source of readily understandable and accessible data of the 1997 ISSP module. The JD Survey Data Explorer (JDSysystem) is installed as the main data exploration utility, which allows the user to browse on-line the study documentation and the questionnaire index, to print tables, run cross-tabulations and produce graphics just with a mouse-click. Additionally the CD-ROM includes the original country-specific data, the integrated SPSS portable file, and the field-questionnaires of all participating countries in PDF format. It is a comprehensive product which can be used on it's own, because of the very convenient data-browsing facility, and it can be used for further advanced analysis using SPSS software. The CD-ROM is available at the ZA for a general price of US \$ 50,-. Students, who have to pay it from their own pocket, will be charged DM 50,-.
3. A prototype of an ISSP CD-ROM with the JDSysystem Data Explorer (as described above and also produced by ASEP) for the 1993 ISSP module on the 'Environment' is available for US \$ 50,-. The data for this international survey was processed by the Zentralarchiv.

On request individual ISSP data-sets can be supplied on diskettes by mail or via ftp-download (File Transfer Protocol) through the internet. As the fees are basically seen as handling charges the prices for these services are higher than for the distribution of comprehensive products like the CD-ROMs described above which are stored and immediately ready for sending. A general and free download of all ISSP data is not yet possible but ways and options to expand the services in this direction are being planned.

The currently valid fee-structure, which is also on discussion at the archive, is described on the Zentralarchiv's internet-pages:

<http://www.gesis.org/ZA>

5. The Future

The ISSP belongs to one of the most requested data-sets at the Zentralarchiv and is used as well for publications as for teaching.

As mentioned already about 700 publications are collected in the ISSP bibliography from 1999. There are only publications which are actively reported to the ISSP or discovered by ISSP colleagues. The estimation of the overall number of published results is much higher. The bibliography is updated once a year. Reports on publications to the ISSP secretariat⁸ are always welcome.

In 1999 the Zentralarchiv organised an international conference on 'Large Scale Data Analysis'⁹ where only ISSP data was used for the contributions. More than 60 papers were presented on very different topics and methodological views like 'National Identity', 'Visualisation', 'Handling Missing Data', 'Statistical Modelling', 'Religion', 'Correspondence Analysis', 'Patterns of Non-Response', 'Measurement' and others.

Even though there is no central funding for the ISSP and the programme does not actively recruit new member institutions, the participation has grown from 4 to 34 countries within 15 years and now covers all five continents.

The success of this unique data-collection is of course also accompanied by criticism concerning the cross-cultural comparability and the quality of the data. This is a topic which the ISSP is well aware of and which is being dealt with in the Methodology Group and their sub-committees. The efforts of these groups and the growing data-base with the documentation of deviations and further details allow for analyses over time and across countries to evaluate the data-base.

The perspective of the ISSP is positive, new countries apply for membership, the division of the data-processing between ASEP and the Zentralarchiv since 1997 had a productive impact and the vivid technical development will yield new forms of presenting data and documentation to the public. The yearly general meetings, which are held with a high democratic claim, will grow further and maybe new forms of administration or participation might become necessary in the future. But by now the structure works well and thus there is currently no need of change.

⁸ Please contact Tom W. Smith, NORC, e-mail: smitht@norcmail.uchicago.edu

⁹ Large Scale Data Analysis, Zentralarchiv, Cologne, May 25 – 28, 1999.

References

- Becker, J.W. / Davis, James A. / Ester, Peter / Mohler, Peter P.*, eds. (1990), *Attitudes to Inequality and the Role of Government*. Rijswijk, The Netherlands: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Beckmann, Petra / Mohler, Peter Ph. / Uher, Rolf* (1991), *ISSP International Social Survey Programme – Basic Information on the ISSP Data Collection – 1985 – 1994*, ZUMA-Arbeitsbericht, Nr. 15.
- Frizzell, Alan / Pammett, Jon H.*, eds. (1996), *Social Inequality in Canada*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.
- (1997), *Shades of Green*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.
- Jowell, Roger / Brook, Lindsay / Dowds, Lizanne*, eds. (1993), *International Social Attitudes: The 10th BSA Report*. Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing.
- Jowell, Roger / Witherspoon, Sharon / Brook, Lindsay*, eds. (1989), *British Social Attitudes: Special International Report*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Uher, Rolf* (1995), *ISSP 1985 – 1992 – Data and Documentation on CD-Rom*, in: *ZA-Information*, No. 36, pp. 40 – 42.
- Uher, Rolf / Müller, Irene* (1988), *The International Social Survey Programme – ISSP*, in: *IASSIST Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 3.