

German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat)

Article

Science-Policy Statement on the Status and Future Development of the German Data Forum (RatSWD), Berlin

Schmollers Jahrbuch – Journal of Applied Social Science Studies. Zeitschrift für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften

Provided in Cooperation with:

Duncker & Humblot, Berlin

Suggested Citation: German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat) (2010) : Science-Policy Statement on the Status and Future Development of the German Data Forum (RatSWD), Berlin, Schmollers Jahrbuch – Journal of Applied Social Science Studies. Zeitschrift für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften, ISSN 1865-5742, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, Vol. 130, Iss. 2, pp. 269-277, <https://doi.org/10.3790/schm.130.2.269>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/292297>

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Documentation

Science-Policy Statement on the Status and Future Development of the German Data Forum (RatSWD), Berlin

By German Council of Science and Humanities
(Wissenschaftsrat)

Preface

In July 2007, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) asked the German Council of Science and Humanities to develop recommendations concerning the scientific infrastructure in German humanities and social sciences (including economics). In this context, the German Data Forum (RatSWD), Berlin, was also supposed to be evaluated.

As the recommendations of the working group on “Infrastructure for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities” are only expected to come in the second half of 2010 and as future funding arrangements for the RatSWD need to be decided before that date, the German Council of Science and Humanities asked its evaluation committee to conduct the appraisal of the current status and future development perspectives of the RatSWD before the report of the overarching working group is endorsed. In March 2009 the evaluation committee established a separate working group for this purpose. This group visited the RatSWD on April 16 and 17, 2009, and subsequently composed an evaluation report based on this visit and the information submitted by the RatSWD. On the basis of the report of the working group, the evaluation committee of the German Council of Science and Humanities, during its meeting of October 5, 2009, drafted a science-policy statement concerning the RatSWD in the larger context of German research and higher education policies.

The working group partly consisted of external experts who are not members of the German Council of Science and Humanities. The Council is particularly indebted to these experts and everyone who was involved in collecting and reviewing the data.

The German Council of Science and Humanities adopted these recommendations on November 13, 2009.

1. Parameters

The German Data Forum (*RatSWD*) is an independent body of selected experts, the members of which are appointed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*BMBF*) in consultation with the other federal ministries.

The Founding Committee of the *RatSWD* assumed its work in 2001 on the basis of recommendations by the Commission to Improve the Informational Infrastructure between the Scientific Community and Official Statistics (*Kommission zur Verbesserung der informationellen Infrastruktur zwischen Wissenschaft und Statistik*, KVI).¹ The constitutive session of the *RatSWD* took place on November 1, 2004. The *RatSWD* is assisted in its work by a business office (...). The *RatSWD* is financed by the *BMBF* (...).

The twelve members of the *RatSWD* receive no financial compensation for their work. (...)

2. Core Tasks

The expert report of the KVI contains a basic description of the future work profile of the *RatSWD*. In particular, the commission recommended that the *RatSWD* should address the following tasks:

- Provide a systematic appraisal of the German informational infrastructure and formulate recommendations concerning its future development;
- Advance the quality of social and economic data and boost the monitoring of German society, taking European harmonisation and the results of structure reports within Europe into account;
- Offer advice and recommendations for the establishment and work of Research Data Centers (*Forschungsdatenzentren*, RDCs) and Data Service Centers (*Datenservicezentren*, DSCs);
- Suggest relevant research infrastructures for funding.

The Conference for Social and Economic Data, held every two years, at which participants elect the scientific representatives of the *RatSWD*, may elaborate further guidelines for the *RatSWD*'s work. The *RatSWD* currently considers its main fields of activity to be:

¹ For the English summary, see "Towards an Improved Statistical Infrastructure – Summary Report of the Commission set up by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Germany) to Improve the Statistical Infrastructure in Cooperation with the Scientific Community and Official Statistics," *Schmollers Jahrbuch* 121 (3), 443–468. For the full report, see *Wege zu einer besseren informationellen Infrastruktur*; Kommission zur Verbesserung der informationellen Infrastruktur zwischen Wissenschaft und Statistik (ed.), Baden-Baden 2001.

- Supporting the strategic planning of research infrastructures;
- Promoting better access to data;
- Promoting research in survey methodology;
- Contributing to capacity-building (particularly among young scholars).

3. Role in the Development of the Informational Infrastructure

In the relatively short period of its existence, the RatSWD has successfully implemented many of the improvements and changes proposed by the KVI and thus made a considerable contribution to improving scientific potential and research conditions in the empirical social and economic sciences over the past few years. Before the RatSWD was established, there was no platform in Germany for advancing the further development of the data infrastructure with targeted involvement of both data providers and researchers at the same time. The successful self-coordination of a number of social science disciplines may serve as a positive example for similar endeavours in other areas of infrastructure planning.

The RatSWD plays a central role especially in expanding scientific researchers' access to microdata from official statistics agencies. In this context, the founding of RDCs, as promoted by the KVI, the founding committee of the RatSWD, and the RatSWD itself, in cooperation with official statistics agencies and sponsors, is judged by the German Council of Science and Humanities to be a particularly noteworthy success. In this field, a dynamic development is currently to be observed, which will continue in the medium term. By setting up common standards, providing support in the approaching of sponsors in a coordinated way and by giving a case-by-case assessment of project applications, the RatSWD also performs an important coordinating function. Moreover, it represents the interests of the data users, among others through its commitment to prevent prohibitive fee models and through promoting quick data access. The number and quality of publications by external researchers based on data from the RDCs is following a very positive growth trend. The support provided by the RatSWD for the development of the RDCs will also be vital in the foreseeable future. In particular, this support is essential to guarantee a reliable financial and legal basis for the RDCs.

The development of DSCs also proposed by the KVI all in all has been less successful to date. The RatSWD recognised the need to be proactive in this area and developed proposals for further conceptual development of the DSCs. Furthermore, the German Council of Science and Humanities deems an unbiased discussion on the future role and strategic focus of the DSCs by the RatSWD and other relevant institutions to be desirable.

In addition to establishing the RDCs and DSCs, the RatSWD serves as an important platform for communication between data users and data providers. Since the RatSWD was founded, a large number of expert hearings have been conducted and strategic questions concerning the further development of the data infrastructure have been addressed in a number of working groups and within the framework of conferences and workshops. These have made a clear contribution both to raising awareness about the need for data-related research infrastructures in various disciplines and to working out specific solutions. However, the German Council of Science and Humanities takes a critical view of the fact that the RatSWD's publication strategy and choice of topics for the expert report competitions, which are cost intensive in relation to the overall budget, are not always directly relevant to general issues of strategic further development of the data infrastructure.

Another essential contribution to the further development of the research infrastructure in the social, economic, and behavioural sciences is the stocktaking currently being carried out within the framework of the project "KVI Updated". The project, aiming to provide a detailed, multidisciplinary overview of the present situation and future opportunities for developing the research infrastructure landscape in the social and behavioural sciences, has the potential to provide essential stimuli to improve the research environments in question.

A successful stocktaking process would also support the RatSWD's claim to play an appropriate role in future general research infrastructure planning. However, in the RatSWD's current form and with its present staff levels, it cannot feasibly provide a comprehensive comparative evaluation of research infrastructure projects in the relevant disciplines owing to the lack of representation of policy makers, the still incomplete representation of the social and behavioural science disciplines, and the focus on research infrastructures in the area of data collection and dissemination (and thus on a subset of all research infrastructures).

Over the past few years, the RatSWD has significantly increased its commitment to promoting young scholars and to teaching. In addition to expert report competitions for young scholars, this also includes workshops for training young scholars in data analysis and the development of a teaching module on research ethics and data protection.

Against the backdrop of scarce human and financial resources, it seems necessary for the council to concentrate on strategic tasks in the structural development of the data infrastructure. The RatSWD should therefore endeavour to encourage other bodies to continue the initiative already underway to promote young scholars and teaching.

The RatSWD plays an increasingly important role in securing the quality of official statistical data collection. Here, the very existence of the council has been having an increasingly positive impact. In particular, data providers have

been made aware that public funds should be used to make collected data accessible to the scientific community swiftly and in a user-friendly way. In addition to establishing these informal standards, the RatSWD has been increasingly successful in passing on its expertise right from the planning stage of the data collection and thus in increasing the scientific usability of the collected data. This is illustrated, for instance, by the appointment of members of the RatSWD for the German “Census Commission”. In the interest of quality assurance of projects in the field of data infrastructure, it is also to be welcomed that before funding relevant research infrastructure projects, research funding bodies (in particular the BMBF) obtain reports from the RatSWD. In the light of this, it is not necessary for the RatSWD to also act as a funding agency itself in the future.

At an international level, the RatSWD maintains contacts with the few institutions responsible for carrying out similar tasks, and observes their activities. Within the European Union, with involvement of members of the RatSWD, the *European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures* (ESFRI) has contributed to intensifying national and EU research infrastructure planning. The German Council of Science and Humanities encourages the RatSWD to also actively promote international coordination activities outside Europe. For example, it could provide new stimuli in the framework of the *International Data Forum* (IDF) established in 2007.

Important areas at the national level requiring more attention from the RatSWD in future are long-term archiving of social science data, increasing the availability of qualitative data, and monitoring of German society. Greater use should be made of existing opportunities for cooperating with other institutions (e.g., the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, GESIS, or agencies conducting large-scale surveys).

4. Organisation and Resources

The RatSWD consists of six elected members representing different disciplines in the social, economic, and behavioural sciences and of six appointed representatives from the data providers². Elections of the user representatives are held bi-annually at the Conference for Social and Economic Data. Re-election is possible only once. Seven professional associations³ from the relevant

² The following data providing institutions each nominate one representative: the Federal Statistical Office, the Statistical Offices of the Länder, the Institute for Employment Research or the German Federal Employment Agency, one institution representing the German social security system, one institution that has either a Research Data Center or a Data Service Center, one other data providing institution.

³ German Society for Political Science, German Association for Political Science, German Psychological Society, German Sociological Association, German Statistical

disciplines are entitled to make proposals, while other professional associations may be granted right of proposal through a majority vote at the conference. A group of ten persons entitled to vote can also nominate a candidate.

The election regulations have proven to be appropriate so far. However, the German Council of Science and Humanities welcomes the changes planned by the RatSWD so as to make it possible to take into account a larger number of data providers in the future and to allow a broader representation of different disciplines.

The RatSWD must convene at least twice per year, but usually holds four to five scheduled meetings. It elects a chairperson and a deputy chairperson from among its own ranks. Despite the considerable demands in terms of time investment placed on the chairpersons of the council, there currently is no teaching buy-out relieving them of their teaching duties. (. . .)

5. Statement and Recommendations

The RatSWD's key tasks are of an open-ended nature, of considerable significance for the research potential of the German social, economic and behavioural sciences, and should be continued to be carried out accordingly. This means that in the medium term the present project funding must be replaced by institutional funding. Overall, the RatSWD has by far exceeded all expectations and is in a position to continue to make a vital contribution to the development of the research infrastructure landscape in the mentioned disciplines. It has brought about a lasting improvement in the access to official statistics agencies' microdata and assumed essential coordinating and platform functions in the further development of the research infrastructure landscape.

There is no significant overlap with the fields of activity of other institutions. Therefore, it is recommended that the RatSWD's funding should be extended for another six years with a view to subsequent permanent funding of the institution. In view of the future development and permanent institutionalisation of the RatSWD, the following recommendations aim at strengthening the council in its core tasks:

- Sharpening the profile of tasks: After some of the original tasks have been at least partially completed, the RatSWD should define its future core tasks in a new *Mission Statement*. Core functions that should be included in such a document are, among other things, the RatSWD's platform function and coordinating function, its role in representing the interests of both data users and data providers, its various advisory functions, its activities in setting

Society, German Economic Association (*Verein für Socialpolitik*), and German Academic Association for Business Research.

standards and evaluating the work of RDCs and DSCs, as well as its role as a common point of contact for these centres, its involvement in the strategic planning of the data infrastructure, its role in the assessment of individual projects, and finally its role in the development of a European and international data infrastructure.

- **Focus:** The redefined profile should serve to tighten the focus of the RatSWD's activities. Financial and human resources should be concentrated on the core tasks directly derived from this. All these core tasks are directly related to the strategic structural development of the data infrastructure. Derived tasks, particularly in the field of teaching and promotion of young scholars and in the field of publishing research results, that are not directly relevant to the strategic development of the research infrastructure, should be passed on or discontinued.
- **Inclusion of new types of data and new data sources:** In the course of focusing on the strategic development of the data infrastructure, the RatSWD should increasingly include in its activities data types not previously considered or only considered peripherally. This applies particularly to qualitative data, geographic data, data from economic research institutes, administrative and commercial transaction data, public-health data, and data relevant to psychology und educational research.
- **Broadening of the disciplinary basis:** The opening to additional types of data should be a means of mobilising new disciplines for active cooperation in the RatSWD. This refers both to colleagues of the already represented disciplines working with qualitative data and to other disciplines such as social geography, health research or educational research. The RatSWD should step up its efforts to actively make its relevance to these disciplines known. If it succeeds in broadening the range of disciplines involved, the RatSWD will be able to argue with even more conviction in future that it is speaking on behalf of all the social, economic, and possibly behavioural sciences in the field of data infrastructure. This is the prerequisite for strengthening the RatSWD's political role. Accordingly, the RatSWD should not wait for the needs of these fields to be articulated, but instead take the initiative and make suggestions concerning the further development of the data infrastructure so as to stimulate discussion about possible research infrastructures needed in other disciplines.
- **Further development of Research Data Centers:** The dynamics of the establishment of new RDCs require particular attention from the RatSWD. Here, considerable efforts to integrate and coordinate must be made in future in order to guarantee the continuous quality of data provision. The RatSWD should carry on lending its support to quick, user-friendly, and open data access and the avoidance of prohibitive fee models. In the light of this, devising sustainable models of funding is a top priority. The RatSWD should

further increase its efforts to establish the label “Research Data Center” as a mark of quality for those institutions that meet the standards of the council.

- Internationalisation: The RatSWD should engage more actively at an international level and, apart from internationalising its own activities to a larger extent, play a facilitating role in the internationalisation strategies of RDCs and DSCs. Within the European Union, the RatSWD should act as an antenna for important infrastructure developments and represent the interests of German data providers and users effectively. The objective should be to constantly improve both international researchers’ access to German data and German researchers’ access to data collected abroad.
- Future funding and institutionalisation: Due to the long-term nature of the RatSWD’s tasks, a more far-reaching institutionalisation and permanent funding of the institution is recommended. Since it is not feasible to implement the recommendations on conceptual development and take the necessary decisions concerning future funding in the remaining year of the current funding period, the German Council of Science and Humanities recommends a further funding phase of six years with the objective of developing a clear institutional perspective and a long-term funding model based on this by the fourth year, at the latest. With this end in mind, the RatSWD should coordinate its activities with other relevant bodies in the research and higher education system and explore both solutions that involve affiliation with or integration into existing larger institutions and solutions that aim at the RatSWD continued existence as an independent body. Although the RatSWD’s human and financial resources and its business office have been adequate during the development phase, a corresponding gradual increase in funds should be planned for the expansion of its range of tasks and its disciplinary representation (for example, along with an increase in the size of the RatSWD). At the same time, the above-mentioned focus on the core tasks must be adhered to. (...)
- Future mandate: In the case of a permanent institutionalisation of the RatSWD, it is recommended that members of the council are in future to be appointed by the federal government so as to ensure that the recommendations are more binding.
- Strengthening of relations with other relevant bodies in the research and higher education system and with data providers of official statistics: Irrespective of the type of permanent institutionalisation opted for, the RatSWD should further develop its relations with other political and funding bodies in the research and higher education system. In particular, the RatSWD should decide on an individual basis whether permanent seats in the RatSWD should be offered to other institutions. The RatSWD should also expand its institutional function within official statistics. Inclusion in the preparations for the Census 2011 is a trend-setting example of how this may be done.

- **Organisational adjustment:** In order to do justice to the increased number of data providers and to the desirable expansion of the disciplinary basis, the RatSWD should adapt its structure and election regulations. A permanent committee of representatives of all RDCs and DSCs should be established at the RatSWD and be represented within the council. The council's period of office should be extended to three years with the possibility of being re-elected once. Electoral procedures should be adapted to ensure a broad disciplinary representation. In the light of this, the German Council of Science and Humanities welcomes the RatSWD's plans to increase the number of its members to 16. A teaching buy-out to relieve the chairperson and deputy chairperson from teaching duties during their period of office is recommended.

The German Council of Science and Humanities reserves itself the right to make further recommendations on the RatSWD's role within the research infrastructure landscape and the RatSWD's further development in its upcoming overarching recommendations on "Infrastructure for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities."

The German Council of Science and Humanities asks the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) to also report on the RatSWD's further development in the context of the overarching recommendations on the infrastructure for research in the social sciences and humanities.

Reference

Statement on the Status and Future Development of the German Council for Social and Economic Data (RatSWD), Berlin: <http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de>.