

# Malta's Statistical Institute

## A Concise History

1947-2011

Catherine Vella



**Malta's Statistical Institute: A Concise History  
1947-2011**

**Catherine Vella**

National Statistics Office, Malta

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## **DEDICATION**

To all employees, past and present, who have contributed to the development of Malta's statistical institute



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## **FOREWORD**

It is not easy to collate over 60 years of the history of Malta's statistical institute into 60 minutes. However, that is what Catherine Vella has done in this concise publication, tracing the first circular for the post of Government Statistician in 1946, to the marking of the tenth anniversary of the setting up of the Malta Statistics Authority.

The author traces the development of the national statistical agency from its beginnings in post-war Malta, amid the questioning of setting up such an office, to its current position of reference point for economists, sociologists and policy makers.

What is today known as the National Statistics Office started as a rather obscure organisation in British colonial times, progressing through makeshift measures. It went on to become a government department intent on acquiring statistical and technological expertise, and became known as the Central Office of Statistics. In time, it became evident that the organisational structure had to change to empower it to live up to its mission.

Eventually, it transformed into an office governed by the Malta Statistics Authority, enabling it to operate as an independent national statistical institute and geared to meet the new challenges of EU accession and adherence to the euro area. This passage was not without pain, but held incalculable gains for the NSO's name, as well as for the services rendered to the country.

This was a story waiting for the opportune moment to be written, and represents a slice of the history of Maltese public institutions.

I would like to thank all the members of staff who have contributed to the compilation of this booklet.

Michael Pace Ross  
Director General

1 March 2011





## **BIRTH**

The Central Office of Statistics (COS) was set up in March 1947. One year before, on 7 February 1946, Circular No. 12/46 issued by the Lieutenant-Governor's Office had called for applications to the post of Government Statistician. In effect, Captain George Stivala O.B.E. was selected for the post and, close upon his appointment, one clerical officer and two temporary clerks were recruited. In sum, this was the original human resource base of the COS.

From the vantage point of hindsight, it might seem that the main contribution of Captain Stivala was the founding of the Office. In fact, a second major achievement was the Census of Population carried out in 1948. The time at which he took office was propitious for a census because, since a first census held in 1842 some forty years into British rule, population censuses had been held regularly every ten years, from 1851 to 1931. The break in this series occurred in 1941 on account of the onset of the Second World War. A second break would come about in 1977 when, according to the ten-year criterion, a census should have been held, but was not. Perhaps the need for the 1948 Census was perceived by Government to be acute on account of

the wholesale destruction of dwellings caused by the continuous air strikes, as well as the internal migration of thousands of people from urban to rural areas. Whatever the reasons, the Government Statistician found himself organising a full-scale census barely a year after the inception of the Office. He was appointed Census Officer on 23 March 1948 – the detailed and comprehensive report that incorporated the findings saw the light of day on 22 December of the same year. In the letter addressed to the Minister of Finance, in which he presented the census results, Captain Stivala attested to the particular significance of this post-war Census:

“... it will be found that, in the 1948 Census, much fresh ground has been explored which former Censuses left untouched.”

The 1948 Census was therefore a rich and unique social portrait of Malta in the years immediately after the Second World War.

## LEGISLATION

Even before the 1948 Census and notwithstanding the rudimentary set-up of the Office, the first *Statistical Abstract of the Maltese Islands* was published in December 1947. This publication was a compendium of what statistics were available on the demographic, social and economic conditions of the country. As yet, the COS had no legal basis on which to collect statistical information. Prior to the formation of the Office, the collection of statistics was fragmentary and served solely the scope and needs of the institution gathering them – for example, the Health Department kept a record of the number of deaths, the Customs Department of imports and exports, and the Department of Labour carried out partial surveys on workers' earnings for the purposes of working out a retail price index. Incidentally, this responsibility would devolve on the COS in 1960. That said, it is proper to mention here the 'Blue Books'. These were statistical publications compiled at a time when the British Administration was at a peak. The first Blue Book appeared in 1851 with the title *The Blue Book of the Colony of Malta*, while the last issues referred to the first few decades of the 20th century.

In May 1950, Arthur Colombo, then Finance Minister and responsible for the COS, moved a motion for a legislative act to provide for the establishment of a "Central Office of Statistics". The proposed bill immediately met with resistance from the three main political parties of the time and therefore fell through. Opposition to the bill revolved on three principal counts: that if the bill were enacted, it would be an "enabling law" which the British Governor in Council would be able to amend according to need; that it had fiscal implications; and that the act would incur an increase in public sector employment at a time when Government could ill afford it. The Finance Minister emphasised the purely statistical scope of the bill, arguing that a steady and systematic collection of statistics would ensure a sound information basis for planning and policy making. Years of effort to introduce the necessary legislation followed, largely on the part of the Government Statisticians heading the already operative COS. In May 1955, the act became law and has gone down in history as the Statistics Act of 1955. One may reflect here on the contrast between the tardiness in the enactment of this act and the speed with which the Census Act of 1948 was passed. While the Statistics Act provided for the collection and compilation of a broad spectrum of statistics, among them economic and financial information, the Census Act had enabled the

taking of a 'snapshot' of the population and housing situation which, in the post-war scenario, was sorely needed by Government.

## **MERGERS**

An event now came to pass which, from the balcony of retrospect (five decades and more), must seem little short of extraordinary. To quote from the first annual report on the working of the COS,

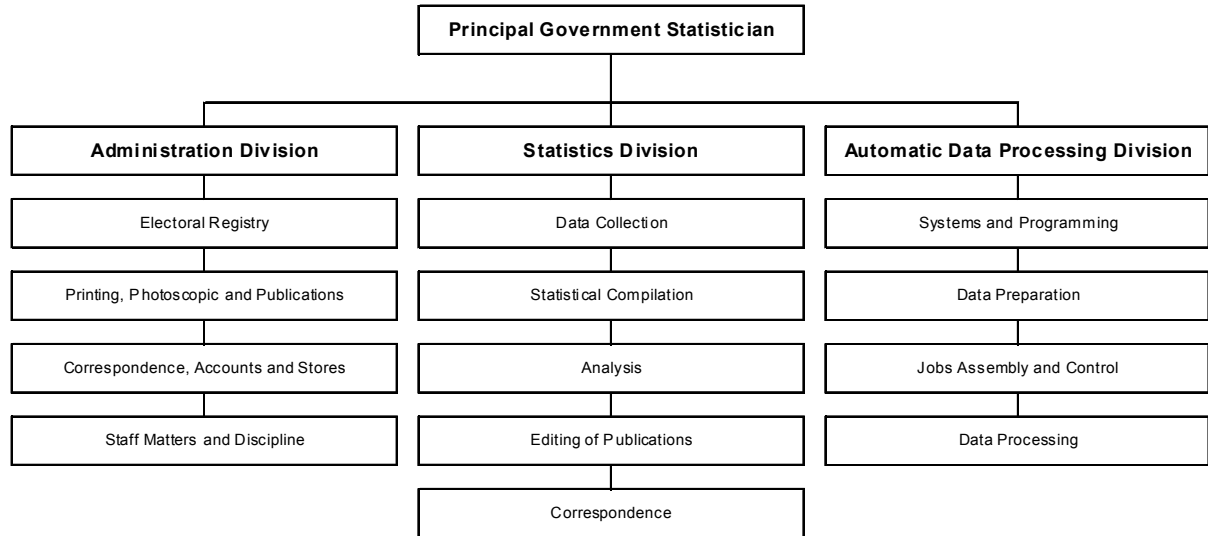
“On the retirement from the Service on the 27th February, 1956 of Mr C. Agius Gilbert, Principal Electoral Officer and Electoral Registrar, the Electoral Office was incorporated with the Central Office of Statistics and Mr A. Wirth was, on that date, duly gazetted Principal Electoral Officer and Electoral Registrar whilst retaining his appointment as Government Statistician.”

Thus, the Electoral Office became part of the COS fold with the 1956-57 report carrying the bracketed sub-title “Incorporating the Electoral Registry”. But the brackets did not signify that the Electoral Office was

a lesser son – this report was neatly divided into three sections: the first devoted to Administration, the second to the Statistics Division, and the third to the Electoral Registry Division. From 1956 therefore, the COS had three different functions. These were: (a) the collection and compilation of statistical records of the Government of Malta; (b) the compilation and publication every six months of a revised electoral register; and (c) the conduct of elections – general and casual.

The 1970s acquired a distinctive stamp especially as regards dress, music, culture and lifestyle. But to the researcher on the development of the COS, the early stages of this decade marked the end of the series of COS annual reports – documents whose beautiful writing style, quaintness of expression and wealth of minute detail gladden the heart of both authors and readers. The detailed annual reports would be rehabilitated over three decades later, in 2002, on the setting up of the National Statistics Office. For the purposes of the COS story, the annual record of the Office's activities would henceforth be relegated to a cursory entry in the annual report on the working of government departments.

**Organisation Make-Up of the Central Office of Statistics as at 1970**



**The COS organisation chart in 1970, with the Electoral Registry forming part of the Administration Division.**

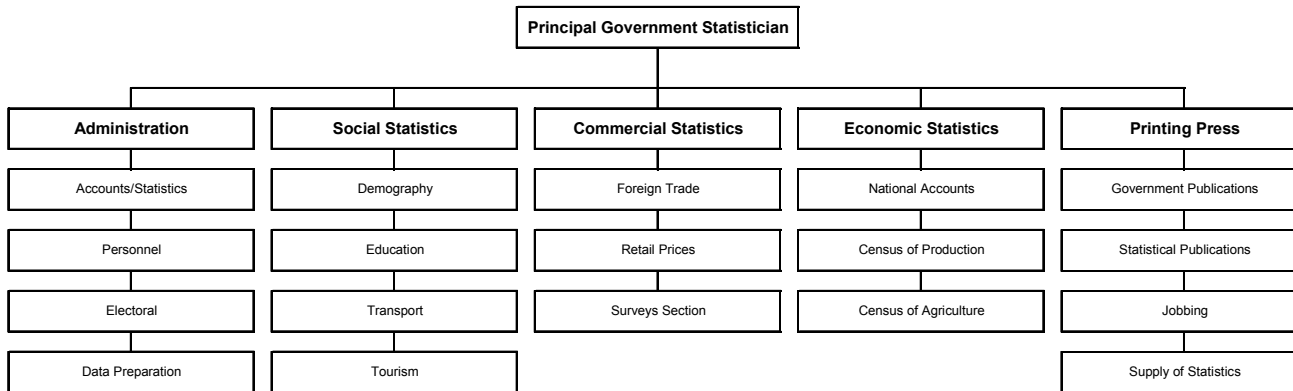


1973 brought another adoptive son into the COS family. That year, the COS "...was called to take over the Government Printing Press..."; accordingly, in May, this facility which was housed at the Grand Masters' Palace in Valletta was incorporated with the Office. Not only that – plans were afoot for the eventual move of the Government Printing Press from the Palace to St James Cavalier. Therefore the COS had to contend not only with an enlargement, but also with the task of re-housing a printing division with all the related pieces of machinery and equipment. The transfer took place in July 1974 and, according to the Principal Government Statistician in office at the time,

"...was effected very efficiently and smoothly and did not interfere with the normal printing works."

At this point, it pays to pause a little and take a look at how the Office was faring. In the first place, 'Central Office of Statistics' was subtitled 'including the Electoral Registry and the Government Printing Press'. The organisation structure comprised three central statistical pillars – social, commercial and economic – flanked on one side by an administrative section and on the other by the Printing Press with its attendant sub-sections.

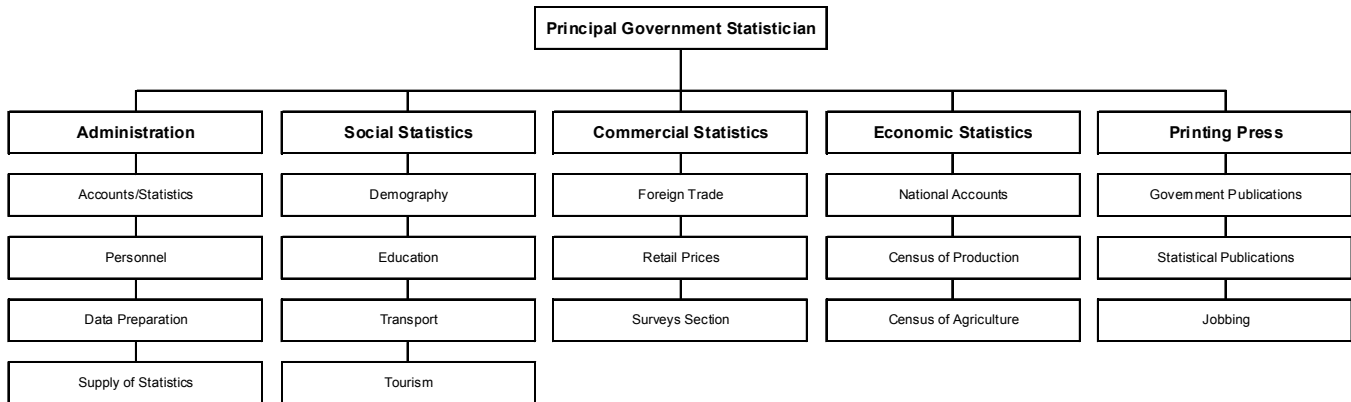
**The Central Statistical System of Malta as at 1980**



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**The COS organisation chart in 1980, with the Electoral Registry at one end and the Printing Press at another**

The Central Statistical System of Malta as at 1982



10

The COS organisation chart in 1982, minus the Electoral Registry but with the Printing Press still tagged on

The mission statement attempted to gather in the proverbial nutshell the disparate functions of the Office,

“Developes (sic) a single coordinated system and enforces quality and comparability of data, keeps an up-to-date register of voters and undertakes the printing requirements of all Government Departments and Parastatal Bodies.”

An examination of the productivity of the Office in 1980 is also telling. The National Accounts and Balance of Payments rubbed shoulders with two electoral registers, manifold issues of the Government Gazette and an assorted printed output of two million National Lottery tickets, 48 million lotto and tombola tickets, 65 million bus tickets, excise duty banderoles (affixed stamps on an article signifying that stamp duty has been paid thereon), receipt books and others.

## **SEPARATE WAYS**

The first step towards the decoupling of the Electoral Registry from the COS was taken on 11 July 1980 with the appointment of Mr Alexander A. Grech as Electoral Registrar and Chief Electoral Commissioner. By the following year, the Electoral Registry had moved to different premises and, in April 1983, the Government

Printing Press was also hived off the COS and merged with the Information Division.

## **ECONOMIC PLANNERS**

Among the many indicators compiled, four are the pride of a country's statistical institution. The Gross Domestic Product measures, in monetary terms, the value of a country's combined work efforts in a given period. The validity of the calculation is benchmarked through the taking of a number of different approaches. The Gross National Income is the total value of the incomes earned by individuals and business enterprises, normally estimated for one calendar year and which also includes the income earned by Maltese persons working abroad. The Balance of Payments, also technically referred to as the Balance of Payments Statement, is a record of the flows of all forms of foreign transactions in and out of the country. An understanding of the Balance of Payments Statement leads to a crucial analysis of the positive or negative effects of a country's economic policies, and is an exercise which is undoubtedly conducted by policy makers. The Retail Price Index measures price changes over time, by means of a number of observations of a given group of goods and services, and is a useful tool for detecting inflation, setting the minimum wage, and determining the cost of living increases, among other purposes.

The first figures for the main economic statistics were estimated by the COS and included in the statistical appendix to a key report written in 1955 by Thomas Balogh and Dudley Seers<sup>1</sup>, respectively Fellow of Balliol College and Senior Lecturer in Economic Statistics at the University of Oxford.

The Balogh and Seers Interim Report constituted an early text on development planning in the history of modern Malta.

Its last stated term of reference was,

“to state what economic measures should be adopted to implement a closer union with Britain in conformity with the views of the Maltese Government.”

The Report, therefore, has to be seen in the context of the debate surrounding integration with Britain which culminated in a referendum held among the population of Malta in 1956. A facsimile copy of the Report is extant at the NSO Library.

Returning to the Report’s statistical appendix, one may trace an early economic analysis for Malta. Table 1 presented Malta’s national

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<sup>1</sup> Dudley Seers also wrote an analysis of the results of a fertility survey of the Maltese Islands carried out in June 1955. This was published as an article in the March 1957 issue of ‘Population Studies’, a demographic journal published by the London School of Economics.

product and expenditure for 1954; Table 2, the Balance of Payments; Table 3, private income and expenditure; Table 4, capital investment; and Table 5, composition of expenditure by the British Services in Malta. The set is accompanied by minutely detailed notes, what we today call metadata. All in all, if the Balogh and Seers Interim Report makes for an insight into the problems besetting a British colony in the mid-20th Century, the statistical annex affords the reader an equally riveting examination of the statistical techniques used by the COS in its early years.

The provenance of a properly weighted index of retail prices can be traced to 1936 when the Commissioner of Labour and Emigration held an enquiry on household expenditure and income among 100 working-class families. A first cost of living index was constructed on the basis of this exercise. A further enquiry in 1943 enabled the revision of the 1936 weighting structure. 1960 marked a period of changes in household income patterns and, in response to the times, Government set up a committee of users of the Retail Price Index. An interim index with April 1960 as base period was launched, which tidied the situation over to 1969 when detailed plans for the first full-scale Household Budgetary Survey (from August 1971 to July 1972) were made.

## **MANUAL TO MECHANICAL**

The COS may be regarded as a technological trendsetter, mechanising several of its processes many years ahead of other departments and even of the commercial banks. The Office's annual reports throughout the 1950s and 1960s are peppered with references to mechanical punches, verifiers, sorters, collators, tabulators and electronic calculators. In 1967, an airconditioner was installed in the room housing an electronic data processor in order to control the air temperature. As early as 1966, the Principal Government Statistician was in a position to state, with regard to the Annual Abstract of Statistics,

"This important publication is, like the other publications issued by this office, varityped and mimeographed at this Office."

Nowhere was this accelerated mechanisation more in evidence than in the administration of the population censuses. For the first census conducted by the COS in 1948, no machinery was used. All the work was done manually by means of worksheets and by transcribing headcounts onto summary sheets. These were then used for compilations, and tables were prepared to show the relevant variables.



By contrast, in the 1957 and 1967 Censuses, the completed enumeration sheets were centralised. Data were coded, checked and tabulated, followed by the transfer of the information onto Hollerith punch cards by the machine operators. The Hollerith punch card system had been invented specifically for an American population census by one Dr Herman Hollerith, whereby a machine could count the perforations on a card, the position of which gave them a numerical significance. Data processing technology was first used in the 1985 Census, while the 1995 and 2005 Censuses were fully automated, with data being processed by a pool of about 20 operators whose entry and verification processes were linked in a single network.

The Office even turned its mechanical by-products to a worthwhile secondary use. An entry in the 1968 COS Report states that departmental revenue consisted of £13 ordinary revenue and £68 through the sale of used Hollerith cards.

## **ADVISORY ROLE**

Its status as a forerunner in mechanisation thrust the COS into a primary position as advisor to Government in the transition from manual to mechanical procedures. Thus, as a case in point, COS

personnel were closely involved in the automation of water and electricity billing both from the aspect of mechanical know-how and from the statistical techniques angle.

Alfred Wirth, Principal Government Statistician in 1957, gives a precise and fascinating account of the mechanised billing procedure. This shows that, in the late 1950s,

“the only part which is done manually is the marking of the meter reading card for mark sensing. From then on, the machines take the matter in hand...”

By 1966, jobs undertaken by the COS for other departments included a quarterly total of 106,000 water and electricity bills sent out to the public.

## **PREMISES**

On the issue of office space, the COS had to trundle its bags on many an occasion. In 1956, the Statistical Office was located at 3, Old Mint Street, Valletta. With the prospect of integration with the Electoral Registry, alterations were made to a building vacated by the Royal Air Force (RAF) authorities in March 1957. This edifice was next door to 3, Old Mint Street but stood on a corner with Windmill Street, thus

facing towards Hastings Garden. In August 1957 the Electoral Registry moved from 69, St Nicholas Street to the newly converted offices. Accordingly, the COS would for several years display the address '1, Windmill Street'. Some time later another house was taken over and adapted to house the Machine Accounting Division – 1B, Windmill Street.

For the rest, the searches for a suitable home for the burgeoning COS are reminiscent of the stuff which musical chairs are made of. For instance, in October 1957, the Department set up temporary house in 158, Old Mint Street in order to carry out the population census. For a similar exercise in 1967, it appropriated a hall in Old Hospital Street known as 'little theatre'; this had been temporarily ceded by the Education Department. In 1970, a section of COS staff moved to 53, Archbishop Street for the taking of the Household Budgetary Survey, thanks to newly vacated space by the Department of Agriculture.

By this time, the Windmill Street complex was very crowded and part of the yard was roofed over to accommodate budding machinery. At around this time, one should bear in mind, the other branch of this complex organisation – the Printing Press – was operating from the Palace in Valletta and soon to transfer to St James Cavalier, which also housed the NAAFI shop. In the 1970s, the Principal Government Statistician was stationed at St James Cavalier, overseeing the Printing Press works while simultaneously being within easy reach of

the statistical branch which operated from the opposite building, in rooms that are currently occupied by the Foreign Office.

Eventually, the COS made its way to the upper floors of Auberge d'Italie in Merchants Street, but with sections of its administration being conducted from the Castille office block. When the time came for the taking of the 1995 Population and Housing Census, the COS occupied mainly the top floor of the Auberge, with a few employees situated one storey below. The National Accounts, Balance of Payments and Retail Price Index sections, as well as a newly organised library, were based in rented office space at National Road, Blata-I-Bajda.

Early in 1999, the COS migrated to offices within the Lascaris bastions, situated beneath Valletta's Upper Barrakka Gardens. These premises had originally belonged to the British administration and had been in use by the Education Department. With some imagination and a lot of hard work, they were transformed from a state of abandonment and reconstructed to meet the needs of a 21st century statistical office on a par with most of its European counterparts. Coincidentally, the building was constructed in 1947, the year in which Malta's statistical office was set up.

## **EUROPEAN MISSION**

In the 1980s the COS continued in its role of a middling government department engaged mainly in the publication of statistics on the economy, demography, education, agriculture and transport. However it was Malta's ambition for EU accession in the mid-1990s that catapulted the department into higher fame. Malta's capability to meet the requirements set out in the Acquis Communautaire was a pivotal pre-condition of EU membership. The statistical Acquis refers to the body of legislation that has been developed by the European Union on statistics. With Mr Alfred Camilleri at its helm, the Office widened and diversified its statistical programme, putting special emphasis on national accounts, economic governance statistics, and all types of social statistics.

A new remit called for a modern set-up. The turn of the century brought into being the Malta Statistics Authority, with the COS becoming the National Statistics Office on 1 March 2001, and Mr Alfred Camilleri appointed as its first director general. The new Authority was chaired by Mr Reno Camilleri, and exercises a regulatory function regarding resources relating to the collection, compilation and publishing of official statistics. The Authority has a distinct legal framework and the NSO is the executive arm of the Authority.

In the subsequent decade, the NSO has not only built up its products in terms of quantity, but has put a lot of energy and effort into improving quality by means of attention to methodological updates, by seeking to gather new and reliable sources of information and by renewed emphasis on making its data harmonised and universally available.

## **DISSEMINATION**

The mid-1990s also saw first steps being taken on the organisation of a specialised statistical library. With the centralisation of all COS sections at the offices in Lascaris in 1999, the library could function better as an information hub for its internal users and external clients. In keeping with its early record of accelerated mechanisation, the Office was quick to automate, being among the first public agencies to have its own website. Today, the website ([www.nso.gov.mt](http://www.nso.gov.mt)) is the Office's main dissemination medium with virtually all NSO publications available on the web free of charge. It is also one of Malta's most accessed sites, with hits increasing as time goes by.

The dissemination of its information is an issue of overriding importance. When it was still the COS, it prepared for and contributed to the General Data Dissemination Standard of the International Monetary Fund. In this regard, a landmark was reached on

1 December 2009 with the adoption of the Special Data Dissemination Standard. In effect, through its EU obligations and its observance of international standards, the NSO has elevated its dissemination activities from the local platform to the international circuit.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

The Office believes that the route to its identity as the country's official statistical agency lies in its publications. Throughout its existence, it has backed this view with substance. Publications are many and varied and attest to the reach and range of statistics, contradicting the perceptions of some segments of the public, including opinion leaders, that this particular field is as dry as dust. Some books remain memorable, for different reasons, such as *The Maltese Islands on the Move*, the millennium book that the COS published on the cusp of the 21st century; *Women and Men 1999*, its first gender publication; *Benchmarking Malta in Europe*, on accession in 2004; and the thematic volumes on 'Children' published by the NSO in 2002 and 2010.

## **THE OFFICE TODAY**

In addition to its core business, the Office has contributed several noteworthy projects to the progress of our country. The 1995 and 2005 Censuses of Population and Housing were conducted as truly national exercises, making full use of the print, electronic and audio-visual media. Two household budgetary surveys were held in 2000/2001 and 2008/2009. The NSO carries out its part of the major EU social surveys, which are harmonised with those conducted by the other Member States. The Labour Force Survey was launched in 2000 and is now a well-established statistical exercise. The Survey on Income and Living Conditions was launched in July 2005 and has since been a prime source for deriving indicators on income, poverty and social exclusion.

The Office was not only a pioneer in the collection and publication of gender statistics. It also attaches great importance to gender issues in practice, by ensuring equality between the sexes in work and progression opportunities. On 15 October 2010, the NSO was among the first group of employers to be certified with the Equality Mark of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality. This award formally recognises organisations that show a concrete commitment to gender equality as true equal opportunities employers.



From an international perspective, the Office offers its statisticians and other members of staff constant opportunities of exposure to the work practices of other countries, through courses and study visits. Staff members have gained valuable knowledge through their attendance at international meetings, including EU working parties, and have contributed to voicing Malta's specific concerns.

On their part, foreign statistical offices have awakened to the potential of Malta. In 1997 and 1998, the COS organised two MEDSTAT conferences which brought together high-level delegates from the statistical institutions of Europe and the Mediterranean littoral. In 2009, the NSO followed suit with its hosting of the DGINS conference, the most important event for Directors General of EU statistical offices in their annual calendar. On 20 October 2010, Malta joined many countries in observing the first ever World Statistics Day, by means of a seminar at which several technical contributions were presented.

## **THE ROAD AHEAD**

At present, the NSO is harnessing its resources for future projects, among which, the Census of Population and Housing of 2011. This will bring Malta in line with all the EU Member States in the holding of population and housing censuses.

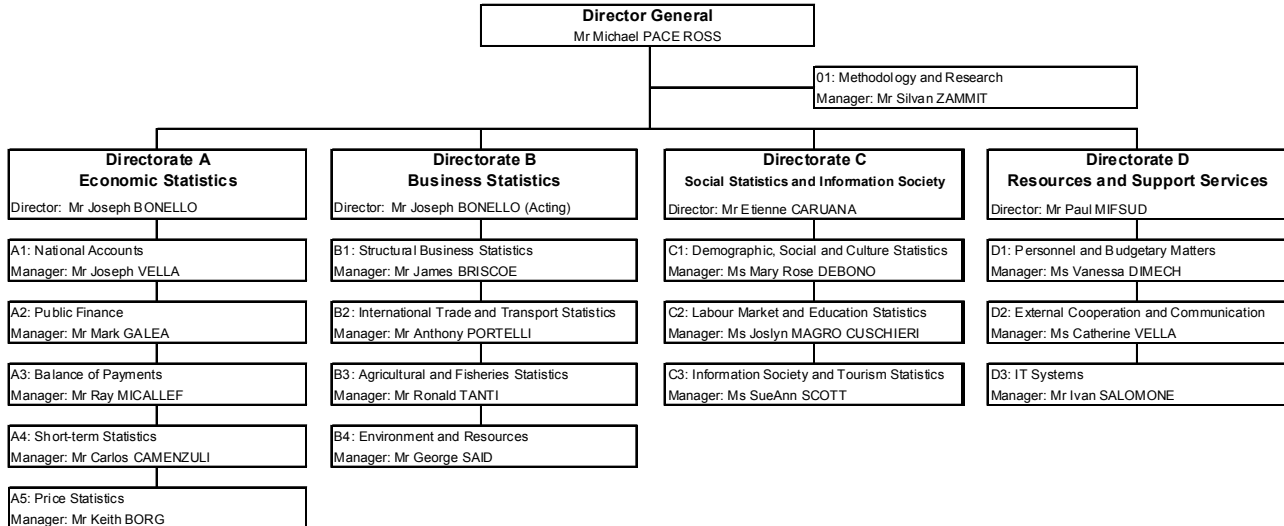
Today, the NSO's mission statement is,

"To produce efficiently and with minimum burden on respondents high-quality statistics that are relevant, reliable and comparable, and to disseminate them in an impartial, independent and timely manner, making them available simultaneously to all users."

This statement encompasses the aspirations of the NSO as the country's official statistics provider, as well as the philosophy which underlies its data collection and dissemination processes, keeping the needs of respondents and users at the forefront.



**Organisation Chart for the National Statistics Office (Malta) as at 1 January 2011**



## NOTES AND REFERENCES

The principal sources for this concise history were:

1. The *Report on the Working of the Central Office of Statistics* 1956-57 edition, up to the 1970 edition.
2. *Reports on the Working of Government Departments* 1973-74 edition, up to the year 2000 edition.
3. National Statistics Office (NSO) Annual Reports, 2002-2009 editions.

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Seers, D. (1957). A Fertility Survey in the Maltese Islands in *Population Studies* (a Journal of Demography issued by the Population Investigation Committee of the London School of Economics), vol. 10 no. 3, March 1957.



# **APPENDIX**



## **List of Principal Government Statisticians, Directors and Directors General**

**1947-2011**

### **Central Office of Statistics**

Capt. George Stivala	March 1947-March 1952
Oscar Paris	March 1952-June 1955
Alfred Wirth	June 1955-May 1959
Maurice Abela	May 1959-June 1966
Henry A. Frendo	July 1966-October 1970
Anthony C. Busuttill *	October-November 1970
Capt. George Zammit *	November 1970-July 1972
Laurence Baron	July 1972-February 1980
Maurice Pace	July 1980-December 1983
Reno Camilleri	January 1984-August 1988
Anthony Muscat Baron	September 1988-August 1990
Reno Camilleri *	August 1990-February 1991
Vincent Grech	February 1991-April 1994
Reno Camilleri *	April 1994-May 1995
Alfred Camilleri	May 1995-February 2001

### **National Statistics Office**

Alfred Camilleri	March 2001-August 2006
Gordon Cordina	August 2006-January 2007
Reno Camilleri *	January 2007-November 2008
Michael Pace Ross	November 2008-

### **Malta Statistics Authority**

Reno Camilleri, Chairman	March 2001-
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\* Acting appointment



