

Interview with Asta Manninen¹

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Asta Manninen has been the director of *City of Helsinki Urban Facts* since 2001 (retired in April 2015). City of Helsinki Urban Facts has grown from a small municipal Statistical Office established in 1911 to a significant city department in charge of and embracing urban statistics, urban research, and information services as well as the city archives. Networking and collaboration is a major feature at Urban Facts with established cooperation and partnerships with Statistics Finland, universities and research institutes, and

cities at home and abroad. Under Asta's leadership there has been much emphasis and work devoted to open data through the set up in 2011 of the regional open data service *Helsinki Region Infoshare*.²

Asta has experience in the fields of urban and regional statistics, urban research and information services including also knowledge of geographical information systems (GIS) and open data. She is experienced in official statistics, in standards and other measures in making statistics comparable and information systems interoperable on international level. At present, she is member of the *European Statistical Advisory Committee* (ESAC). She is also involved in projects in her expertise area, and is member of the Editorial Board of the *Statistical Journal of International Official Statistics* (SJIAOS). She is also an elected member of the International Statistical Institute, member of the IAOS and its Standing Committee on Urban and Regional Statistics and Research (SCORUS) (chair of SCORUS 1994–1997 and vice-chair 1992–1993). She is an Honorary Member of the Finnish Statistical Society. She has chaired numerous projects and networks, issued publications and articles on topic areas of her expertise and interest.

Asta holds a MSc. in statistics, mathematics, information technology, sociology from University of Tampere, Finland. In addition, she has worked and taken courses in related areas of management, business administration, economy, strategic planning as well as languages. She has done study trips and international conferences. As she says,

¹The views and opinions expressed in the conversation are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics nor IOS Press.

²For this collaborative effort creating a duplicable and scalable open data service, the European Commission awarded the European Prize for Innovation in Public Administration in June 2013 to City of Helsinki Urban Facts.

It's very much also about 'learning by doing.' You participate actively in various networks and projects, associations etc. and you take new responsibilities. It's about cooperation and collaboration, memberships and partnerships. You learn from colleagues and you share and exchange experiences. Open data has brought new forms of collaboration, for example design using open data provides services and innovations more sustainable and fit for purpose. Data visualisation is also design helping communicate information clearly and effectively, often interactively.

In this special theme issue "Urban, Regional and Small Area Statistics," Asta is the issue editor and thus, we wanted to learn more about her background and how she came to her expertise in this multi-faceted and increasingly important topic area. The phone interview with Asta Manninen was done by Katherine Condon on March 3, 2017.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for allowing us to interview you. Let us start at the very beginning and go back to your childhood in Finland. What was it like growing up in your country?

Thank you. It is a pleasure and honor for me to participate in the interview series.

I grew up in the countryside in Finland. In the northwest, approximately 450 km northwest of Helsinki. It was on the coast across to Sweden, in a municipality that is very close to Vaasa.³ Vaasa is an old city. It is one of our bigger cities in Finland. The area where I grew up was, by that time, totally Swedish-speaking and today being on the west coast, is the most Swedish speaking area of Finland. Depending on the municipality in the area, 85–92 percent of the population have Swedish as their mother-tongue, as I am myself. I also am fluent in Finnish, as well. Finland is a bilingual country.

My parent were farmers. When I think of my childhood, I was brought up in a caring family with support for education and schooling. I also appreciate that I grew up with four brothers. From early on we were

³Vaasa is a city on the west coast of Finland (see Fig. 1 for location of Vaasa.) It received its charter in 1606, during the reign of Charles IX of Sweden and is named after the Royal House of Vasa. In 2014, Vaasa had a population of 66,405, and is the regional capital of Ostrobothnia.

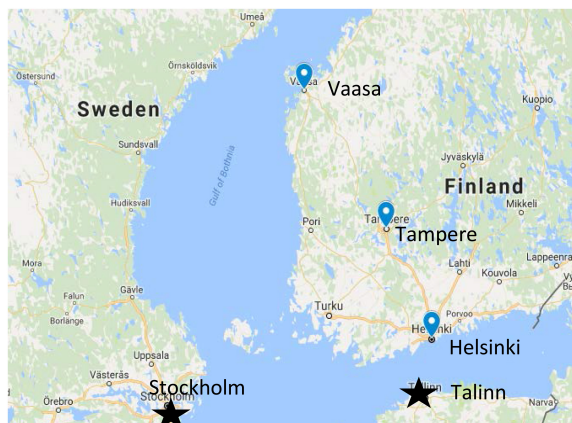


Fig. 1. Locations in Finland noted in Asta's life.

engaged in work, taking responsibilities, and learning new things. I am thankful for the entrepreneurial spirit I inherited.

INTERVIEWER: What was your education like before university?

I went to school in the classical way.⁴ After basic schooling, I took the upper secondary school with a theoretic direction. It was a clear choice for me to take mathematics. In the city of Vaasa in a Swedish school (Vasa Svenska Samskola) I took the track of sciences with mathematics, with physics, chemistry, biology, geography, and so forth. I also did languages and some humanities. It was a clear choice for me to do mathematics and then languages because Finland is a small country. The need to know more than one language was critical.

This need for knowing other languages also grew out of Finland's history. Asta helped me to understand a little of Finland's history. She told me that Finland was under the control of Sweden for 700 hundred years until 1809. In 1809, it became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire until 1917. Asta also mentioned that 2017 is a very special year in Finland – centennial celebration of independence.

⁴See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Finland.

INTERVIEWER: Looking back to our childhoods, we often find that a particular event or person had an impact on our later years. Did a particular person or event shape you into the person you are today?

I would say that my childhood and early years in my family gave me solid self-confidence and that's the best I could get. I think that this self-confidence was very good for my later life. It was important through taking responsibility, life-long learning, and relying upon one's self. It was my self-confidence that allowed me to know that I could manage whatever came my way.

INTERVIEWER: Your official biography states that you have a MSc in statistics, mathematics, informational technology and sociology at the University of Tampere.⁵ What made you choose this university and what did you study there as an undergraduate?

Thank you for the question. In Finland, you have to take an exam called the "Matriculation Examination," which if you pass gives you eligibility to apply to university. Within this examination, you have some obligatory subjects that you can choose from and some optional subjects you may pick. I had courses in mathematics and sciences, languages, humanities and so forth. So, I looked for universities that I could apply mathematics and related sciences. By that time, it was so long ago (1970), University of Tampere was one of the pioneers in introducing information technology to be combined also with social sciences. I also applied to other universities which I could have gone to, but I chose Tampere. An additional reason for why I chose Tampere was that it was in the Finnish area of Finland. I wanted to improve my Finnish language skills so that when I graduated from university I would have good competency in both Swedish and Finnish to apply for jobs, especially if one thinks about jobs in the public sector. Working in the public sector, one needs perfect skills in both languages.

At many universities, normally one connects mathematics and sciences for people to become either researchers or teachers. However, I thought of something else. Therefore, I was interested in going to Tampere with its focus on statistics, which is close to mathemat-

ics and its applied, as well it can be utilized in so many ways in society. That was why I thought it would be a good thing and then I wanted to learn about society and how it behaves, therefore I took sociology.

INTERVIEWER: From your education in Tampere, your work career has been in Helsinki – how did that come about?

While the majority of my work has been in Helsinki, I did work a short period in Tampere as a research assistant as well as did some teaching in mathematics in a smaller nearby city. But then I got married. We both had university degrees and finding attractive jobs for both of us would have been difficult in a smaller city, so we looked for a bigger labor market, a more diversified labor market. So, the only real choice then was to go to Helsinki. It was the right choice.

The other reason is that Helsinki is the capital city of Finland. In general, a capital city has a lot of international connections, so there were many attractive factors of choosing to move to Helsinki. My late husband was specialized in linguistic, so this was another reason that the international connection was very important

INTERVIEWER: You have been the director of City of Helsinki Urban Facts, retiring in 2015. Has your professional career always been at this agency? If so, how did you get started at the City of Helsinki Urban Facts?

When we first moved to Helsinki, I did some teaching. After that, I got a job at the Ministry of Interior with information systems, which was also part of my expertise. I worked there for a little bit. I then applied for a job as a researcher at the City of Helsinki Urban Facts, but at that time it was called "Helsinki Statistical Office." Later, the name changed to "City of Helsinki Urban Facts" because it was expanded to embrace also urban research, as well as the entire city of Helsinki archives and digital heritage.

The City of Helsinki Urban Facts has a long tradition of a well-established and broad cooperation with Statistics Finland.⁶ In addition City of Helsinki Urban Facts is special because we produce statistics and do applied research. We have a lot of information services

⁵For more information regarding the University of Tampere, please see <https://www.uta.fi/en>.

⁶For more information on Statistics Finland, see https://www.stat.fi/org/index_en.html.

Table 1
History of statistics in Finland

1500–1700	State descriptions for rulers on conditions in different countries, the origin of statistics
1748	Tabellverket (Tables Office) is established in Sweden
1749	The first Finnish population statistics are compiled
1865	The Statistical Office of Finland is founded on 4 October
1870	The Population Census is drawn in four largest towns
1879	The first Statistical Yearbook of Finland is published
1908–09	The first Consumption Expenditure Survey is conducted in Finland
1921	The Cost of Living Index is calculated for the first time
1934	The first Population Projection is made
1948	Calculation of gross national income begins in Finland
1950	The Population Census is drawn in the whole country for the first time
1953	The first Census of Business Enterprises is made (origin of the Business Register)
1971	The Statistical Office of Finland is renamed Statistics Finland
1975	The Interviewer Organisation is established
1990	Finland becomes the second country in the world to draw a register-based Population Census
1995	European Union membership increases the international element in Finnish statistics
1995	Statistics Finland becomes the first statistical organization in Europe to launch its online service on the Internet

and we use multi-source data, a lot of various data holdings – a lot of the data coming from official statistics through Statistics Finland.⁷ (see Table 1). We break it down on smaller geographical units, such as residential areas and neighborhoods where people live their lives. Then we also use all the materials produced by the city's administrative bodies. In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, the municipality is by law a powerful authority representing the local self-government with the right to also levy taxes. It has the responsibility for a wide range of basic services to the residents, such as social services, health care, and education. It keeps the infrastructure, such as transportation and environment. Noteworthy, the municipality is the local planning authority. In Helsinki, the City Planning Department oversees the preparation of the master plan (reaching till 2050) and all local and detailed plans. In the case of Helsinki, the city constructs a lot too, for example a good 4,000 housing units each year.

Therefore, it has been such an exciting job because working as a statistician or researcher in Urban Facts, you are working at the same time in the maintaining and developing the city. Helsinki has been steadily growing for years and the growth will continue according to the newest population projection drawn by Urban Facts. Today, Helsinki has 630,000 inhabitants and the Helsinki region (composed of Helsinki and 13 adjacent municipalities) 1,450,000 inhabitants. By 2050 the figures would be 760,000 inhabitants (even more in the case of fast growth) and 1,900,000 inhabitants re-

spectively. Projections for Helsinki's various sub-city level districts reach as far as 2026. These are used as information support for planning and design of various services and so forth. Some 7,600 to 6,000 new Helsinki dwellers each year, migration and mobility, new areas for business and living,⁸ and other dynamics transforming the city. This is challenging and interesting for experts engaged in urban statistics and research.

The City of Helsinki Urban Facts had its centennial celebration in 2011. So, we are a good 100 years old, but we have older cousins in German cities; in the capital city of Austria, Vienna; the capital of Denmark, Copenhagen; and the capital of Sweden, Stockholm. In the late 19th century/early 20th century, there started a tradition of establishing in capital cities their own statistical offices.

INTERVIEWER: Your biography states that you have had international experience through study trips and attendance at international conferences, as well as work experience. How did your international experience impact your views on government statistics and did it help you in thinking about the strategic direction or development at the City of Helsinki Urban Facts?

Yes, of course. My international experience is mainly due to having had the great opportunity to actively participate and have responsibilities in various networks, bodies and projects. I am thankful for the opportunity

⁷For a brief timeline of the history of statistics in Finland, see http://www.stat.fi/static/media/uploads/org_en/tilastokeskus/statisticsfinland_history.pdf. And also, http://www.rahamuseo.fi/vaihtuvat_naytelyt/kansakunnan-kuva/en/.

⁸For a brief look at future Helsinki see Helsinki New Horizons <http://en.uuttahelsinki.fi/>.

to be a member of the ISI family, ISI, IAOS and then SCORUS.⁹ The ISI has offered an invaluable mean to keep aware of what is going on, and what is topical and important in the broad field of statistics. I have met wonderful people and learned a lot from them, and I have got many friends. The SCORUS Conference held in Helsinki in 1994 and the ISI Session held in Helsinki in 1999 are highlights in my work I remember. All conferences under the ISI umbrella are unique and memorable, though conferences on your home base are special.

In addition to the international statistical track, I have devoted time and effort to international information activities connected directly to cities, urban policy, city development, and various pilot projects. Thirdly, not to forget the focus on standards and harmonization, information systems and open data.

A core principle at City of Helsinki Urban Facts is to apply official statistics standards in our work. Thus, Helsinki statistics are compatible with official statistics for the entire country and for other regions in Finland. Further, since we became a member of the European Union (EU), most of our standards derive from the ESS, the European Statistical System.¹⁰ The objective of the ESS is to provide comparable statistics at EU level. We are, then, able to compare the Helsinki region with other regions in Europe. So, as the city of Helsinki has been my employer, it has been my duty and pleasure together with my staff members and collaborates to answer the question “where does Helsinki and the Helsinki region stand in comparison with other urban regions in Europe, and even more far away”. This question has become permanent in the global economy where major cities compete and cooperate.

I can also add that very many new phenomenon, they occur for the first time in big cities. So, in our small country, Helsinki being the largest and only metropolitan region in the country, Helsinki introduces the new phenomena and trends. It's in the interest of the city to get an early insight on these new phenomena and trends. Thus, it is a task of the Urban Facts to do its best to meet this demand. Here good and talented partnerships help. We work together with Statistics Finland in various pilot projects. One example dates back to late 80's and early 90's when the challenge was to picture the evolving *information society*. We got our first ICT Statistics. There are many examples.

Spinning further on the concept of information society and new emerging clusters we started talk about the *knowledge economy*. Here again we needed cooperation with research and official statistics. In terms of research I want to mention one especially important example, namely *Helsinki Metropolitan Region Urban Research Program*.¹¹ The main goal of this program is to improve the use of scientific research data and results as the basis of decision-making as well as seek best-practices and new innovative operations models. The overarching theme of the present program is “*Sustainable growth and its challenges and opportunities in the Helsinki metropolitan area*”. The program is funded jointly by all the participating organizations and chaired by the University of Helsinki.

Finally, I want to put forward my thankfulness for the job that I had and the City of Helsinki. We have had good resources, amazing staff members and colleagues, and both support and challenging requests from the city leadership. We have enjoyed a favorable operating environment giving us independence and the culture of an open city. This has been good for us, the City of Helsinki Urban Facts, to bravely touch upon new things like launching the open data service *Helsinki Region Infoshare* in 2011. As I said earlier, I think we were among the first, in Europe. It was a really nice and special moment when we were received the European Union Innovation prize¹² and a sum of money for further development. It allowed us to share the experiences we had in this endeavor. That was the best work I had to promote Open Data. Not only in Helsinki and Helsinki Region, but also working with other big cities in Finland, in Europe, and even papers from overseas contacted us. The Open Data movement is global and still evolving.

You recently retired as director of City of Helsinki Urban Facts, what did you consider as some of the biggest challenges you faced?

That's a vast question, but let me first say that you can find a solution to almost every challenge and question. Normally not alone, but in cooperation. And, with

⁹Standing Committee on Regional and Urban Statistics.

¹⁰<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-statistical-system/overview?locale=fr>.

¹¹<http://www.helsinki.fi/kaupunkitutkimus/english/index.htm>.

¹²The European Commission awarded the Open Data Service Helsinki Region Infoshare with the European Prize for Innovation in Public Administration. The prize was given during the Week of Innovative Regions Europe IV (WIRE IV) Conference in Cork, Ireland on 6 June 2013. See http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index_en.cfm?section=admin-innovators.

challenges come opportunities. But if I think of the period 2000 to 2015, I think a great challenge we all had was in making the most of the digital environment, and simultaneously avoid the digital divide. You should keep everyone on-board; and now we have open data. That is really something which has motivated me because information is for all. We still have digital issues, because it isn't easy for all of us. Especially, we have to do our utmost and be strict on integrity and confidentiality issues. This is one challenge. To listen to the users and involve users from an early stage on in new development is always challenging and crucial.

Promoting and enabling inter-operability between various information systems, often spatial information systems and statistical systems have proved a challenging task. In the case of Finland I'll take the register-based census as a prime example. Census data are of utmost importance, we request them more frequently and rapidly delivered. Here, the success of Statistics Finland, was also perceived a success for the City of Helsinki Urban Facts. Statistics Finland was second in the world (Statistics Denmark was first) to implement a totally register-based census. This was in 1990. Amazingly, you get the first results within about two months. You have *everything* in less than a year. This was huge progress in the time table. It was a great achievement in efficiency and cost savings. From the point of view of the City of Helsinki, we got the possibility to get the data in digital format and delivery and we got the possibility to go on with our spatial analyses in just a short timeframe. This was really something.

Big challenges often result in big success and good things for society. Think of the progress in the field of statistics and geography. Geocoded data helps you use multi-source data, merge data sets, and produce spatial statistics of high granularity. You are able to meet a wide range of customer needs in a flexible way.

We will always have information gaps, many of them not easy to solve. At the moment, I see good migration statistics as a challenge. This is a question we have dealt with also in the ESAC. Migration statistics have a long history, but still an old phenomenon can get a new shape. We have barely scratched the surface on this with the global economies.

Overall, what are some of the challenges you see facing statistician working in government settings?

As a member of the European Statistical Advisory Committee (ESAC), which aims to ensure that users

requirements are taken into account in the strategic priority settings of statistics in the European Statistical System (ESS), I have learned how vitally important it is that that National Statistical Institutes are independent of their government. I have also recognized that user demand tends to grow, while resources do not always grow with this demand. So, when one looks up the trends of the day, it is challenging with the balance between resources and user demand. And, not to forget that utilizing new opportunities at hand or emerging also requests resources. In this scene cooperation and collaboration is important: together we are more and we can encourage each other. There is a lot going on, like Big Data and Internet of Things, to name only a few. These new opportunities require more involvement of stakeholders and introducing new stakeholders into official statistics work. I think we may call this a new statistical culture, which urges us to invite the users on-board from early on too – I would say.

For the moment, official statistics has a special role and asset. We live in information chaos. I see that official statistics brings clarity and continuity.

I'd like to conclude this interview with a little background on how you developed the special theme "Urban, Regional and Small Area Statistics" for this issue.

One reason [for this theme] is that it is close to my heart because it is what I have been working with for 37 years. I would also say, that when you look at the mega trends in the world, urbanization is one of the trends. So, it is simply because urban statistics, regional statistics and small area statistics in general (statistics on sub-regional districts, sub-city districts, neighborhoods and so forth) are gaining in importance. When I think of cities, I think of questions such as:

- What's on in my city and city region?
- What do cities have on their agendas?
- How is the urban dimension dealt with in EU policies?
- What do national governments have on their urban policy agenda?
- What are new and emerging trends or changes in the urban and regional scene?

To be able to answer these questions you need urban and regional statistics and research. Today, urban and regional development focuses much on inclusive growth, on fostering social cohesion and participation, and on advancing sustainability. These directions and

emphases request good information on cities and regions and also small areas to enable setting up targeted policies and to monitoring the outcomes. Sustainability is a topical global issue, and evenly topical on national, regional and local level. If you think of consumption and transportation, cities stand out. Cities focus a lot on sustainability. Obviously, there are many reasons why I say that these statistics are gaining in importance. You are also reminded of the role cities and regions play when you look at international organizations. Eurostat, OECD, UN and World Bank are all paying more and more attention on cities and regions, on cities and urban areas.

Finally, I would like to mention the SCORUS Conference held in Lisbon on June 29–July 1, 2016. This very Conference addressed significant gaps in the information requested for evidence-based sub-national and sub-regional policy making. The Conference was co-organized by SCORUS, Eurostat, National Statistical Institute of Portugal, and OECD. The Conference offered a grand opportunity to harvest submissions for this special issue. Glad to add that the theme has proved to be attractive in encouraging really many interesting submissions worldwide.

This concluded our interview with Asta Manninen, the Special Editor for the special theme of this issue of Statistical Journal of the International Association of Official Statistics – “Urban, Regional and Small Area Statistics”.