

# **Adding meaning to numbers and vice versa: The case of EU benchmark indicators**

**Bernhard von Rosenblatt**

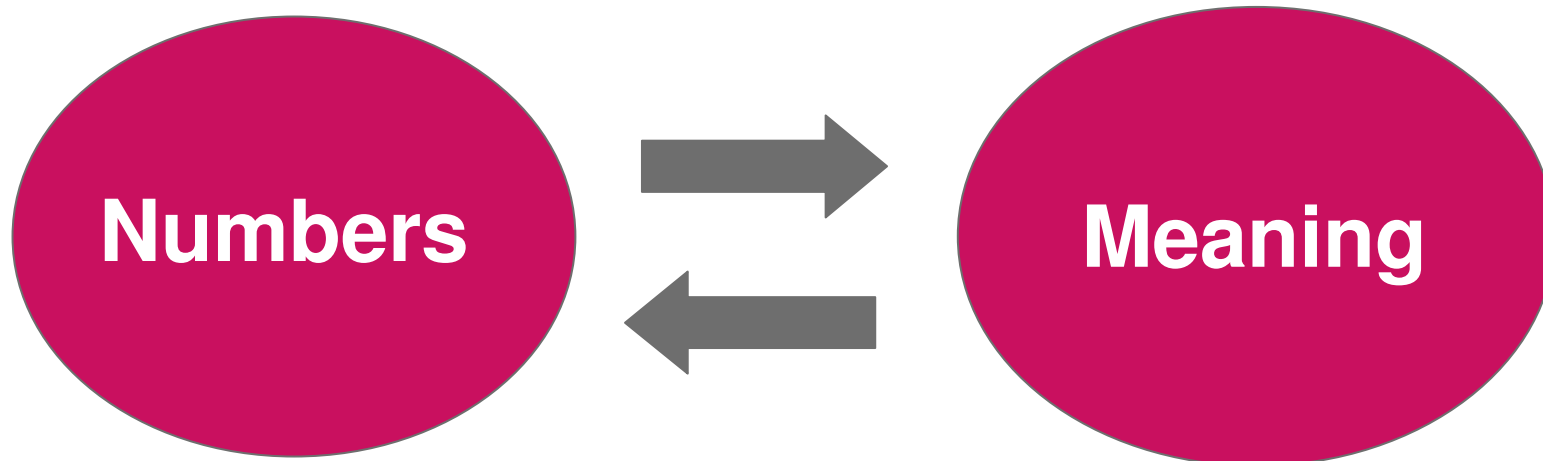
TNS Infratest Sozialforschung, Munich

Conference „Social Reporting in Europe 2009:  
Different ways of adding meaning to numbers“

Villa Vigoni, March 22-24, 2009

# Why “vice versa”?

Adding meaning to numbers



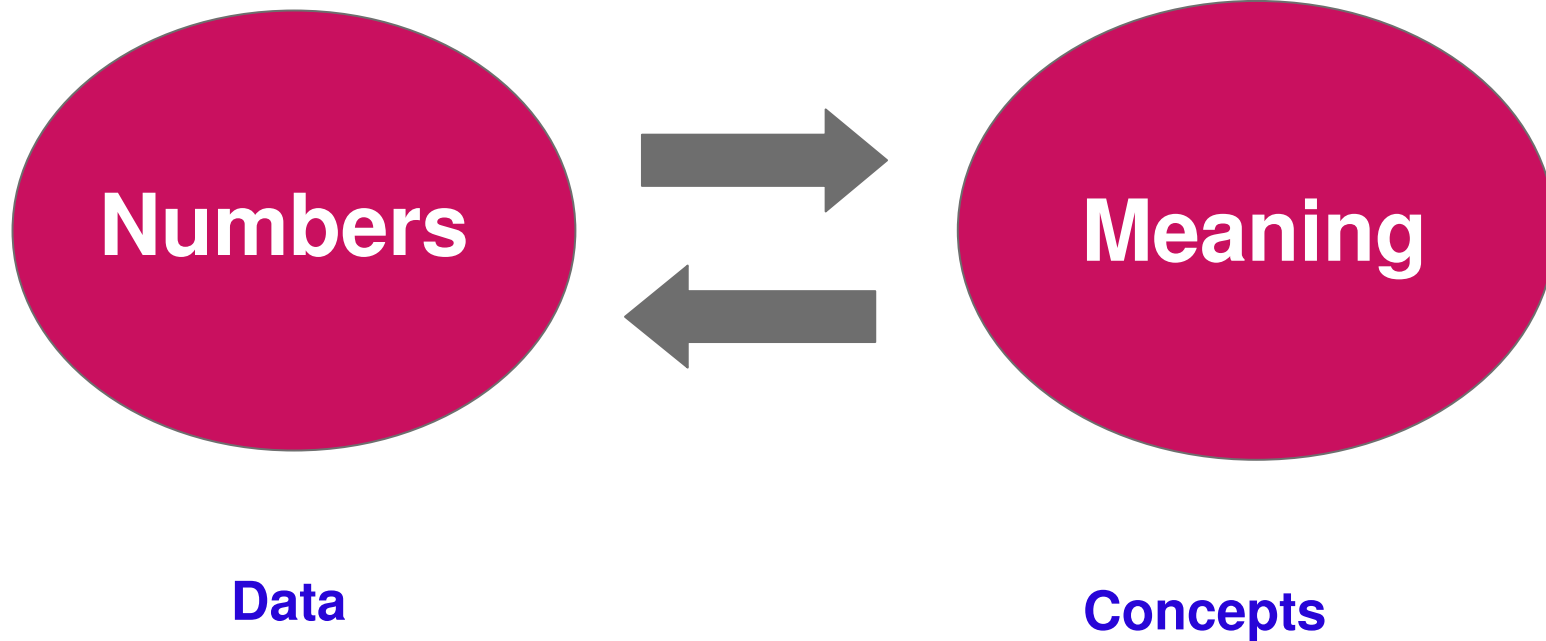
Adding numbers to meaning

# The meaning of “meaning”

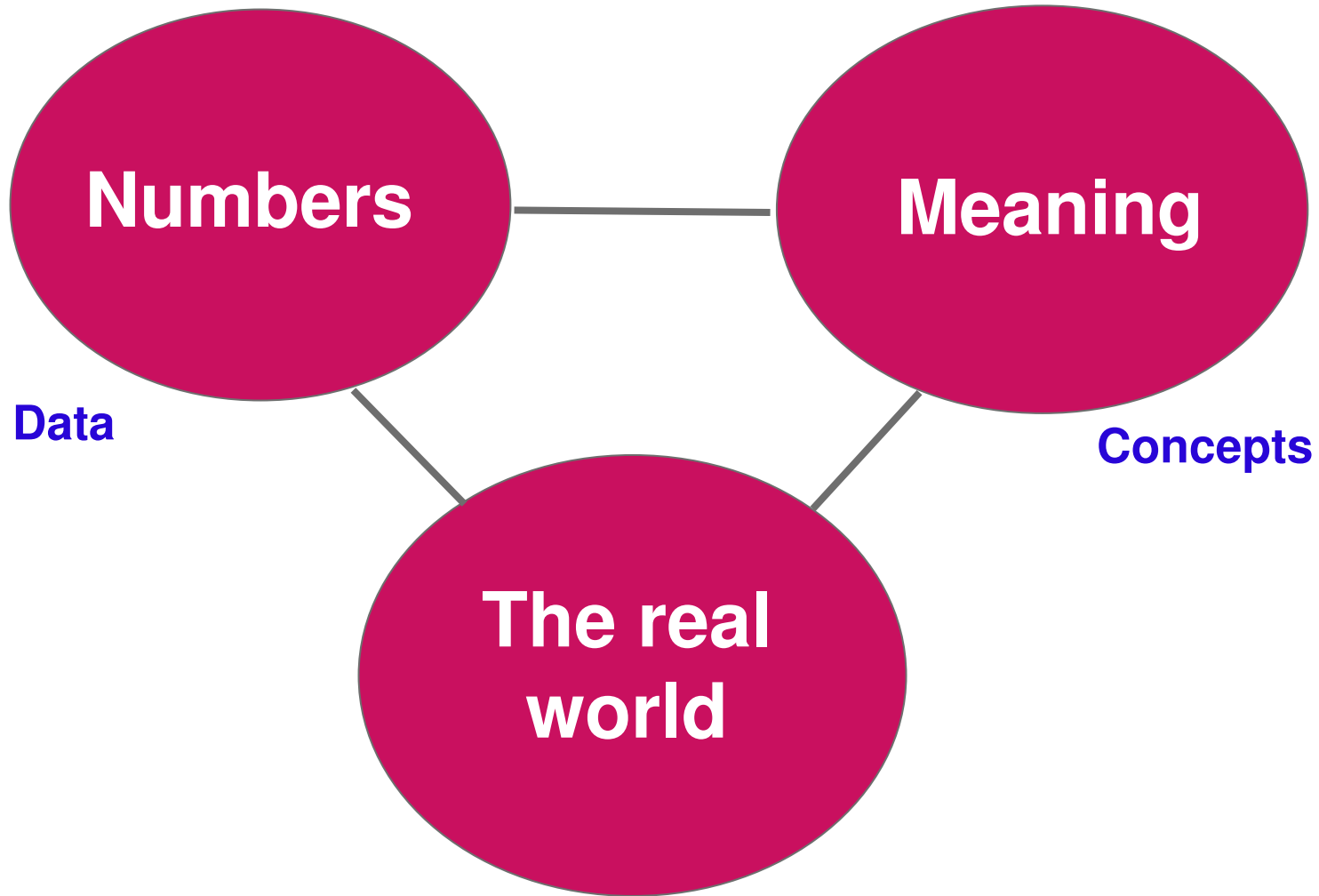
- (1) sense
- (2) relevance

derived from

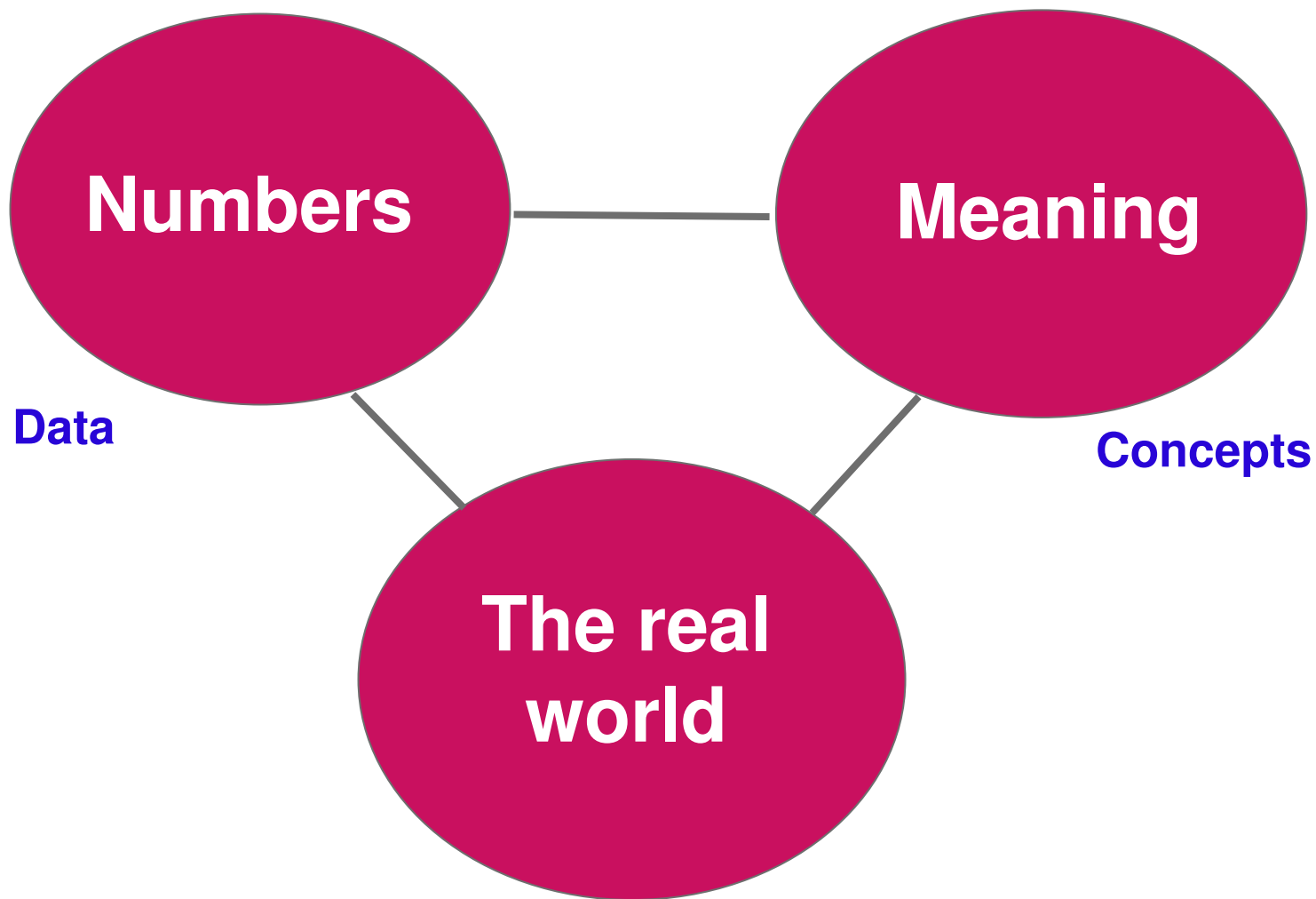
- theory
- political objectives



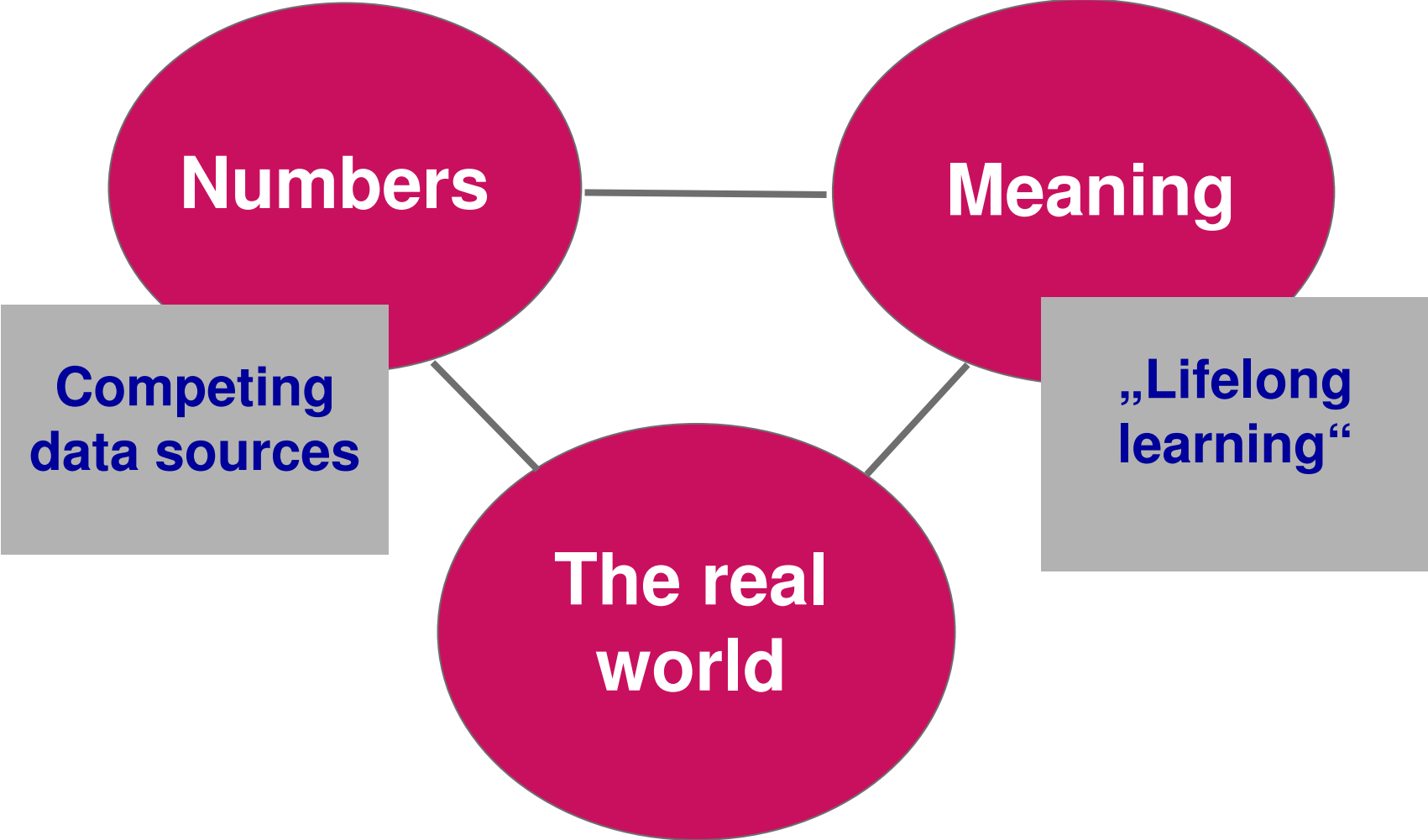
# “Reality” as a third party



**Interrelations may be different in different cultures:  
➔ the challenge of international comparisons**



# Example



# Relevant social reports

## At European / international level:

- Commission of the European Communities (2007a):  
**Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation.**  
Draft 2008 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the “Education & Training 2010 work programme”  
{SEC(2007) 1484}
- Commission of the European Communities (2007b):  
Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training.  
**Indicators and benchmarks.** Staff Working Document
- OECD (2005, 2007):  
**Education at a Glance.**

# Relevant social reports

## At national level (GERMANY):

- **Education and Training in Germany. National Report 2008.**

Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung: Bildung in Deutschland 2008.

Ein indikatorengestützter Bericht. Im Auftrag der ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung. Bielefeld: WBV.

- **Adult Learning in Germany. Research Report 2008**

Weiterbildungsverhalten in Deutschland. Volume 1:

Rosenblatt, Bernhard von / Bilger, Frauke:

Berichtssystem Weiterbildung und Adult Education Survey 2007. Bielefeld: WBV



# Lifelong learning: the „narrative“ (EU)

- Background:
  - European Council (2000): Lisbon Strategy - Knowledge Society
  - European Commission (2000): Memorandum on Lifelong Learning
  - European Council (2003): Adoption of Benchmarks in Education and Training
- Benchmark indicator „Participation in lifelong learning“:

„In a knowledge society individuals must update and complement their knowledge, competencies and skills throughout life to maximise their personal development and to maintain and improve their position in the labour market.“

— Therefore, by 2010, the European Union average level of participation in Lifelong Learning, shall be considerably increased (nearly doubled).

# Lifelong learning: the EU indicator and data

- Benchmark indicator „Participation in lifelong learning“:

**Indicator:** Percentage of the population aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training in four weeks prior to the survey

**Data:** Eurostat; Labour Force Survey.

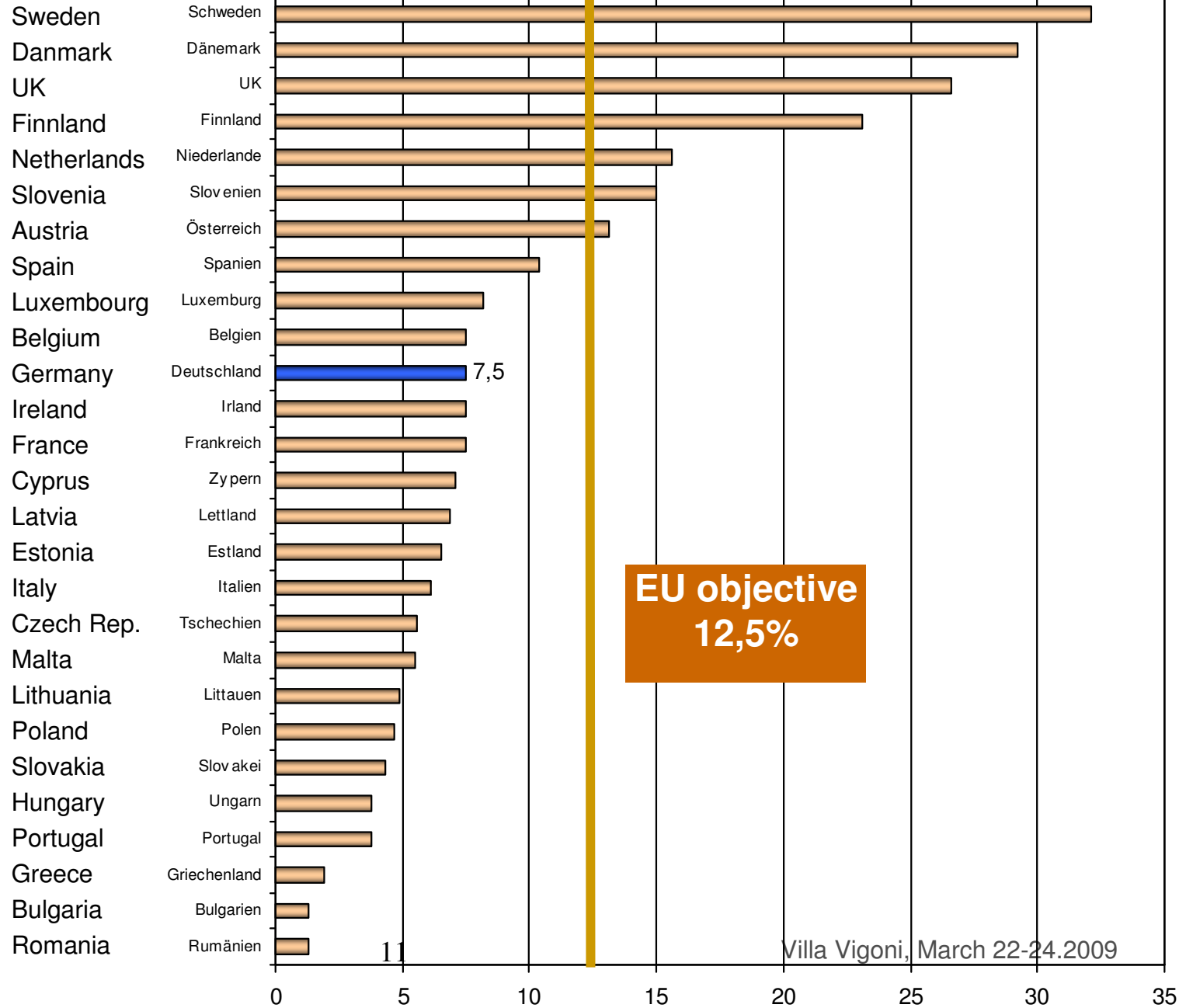
**Footnote:** A Eurostat taskforce is currently undertaking work on a new Adult Education Survey that would yield a better measure of participation.

**Objective:** Increase of European average (EU 27) from 7.1% in 2001 to 12.5% in 2010

**Political Evaluation:** Latest measurement is 9.6% in 2006.

„Since breaks in time series overstate progress, the real increase was limited. Additional efforts are needed to reach the benchmark.“ (Eur.Commission 2007a, p.20)

# EU benchmark indicator: Participation in lifelong learning (2006)



# International comparison generates new meaning

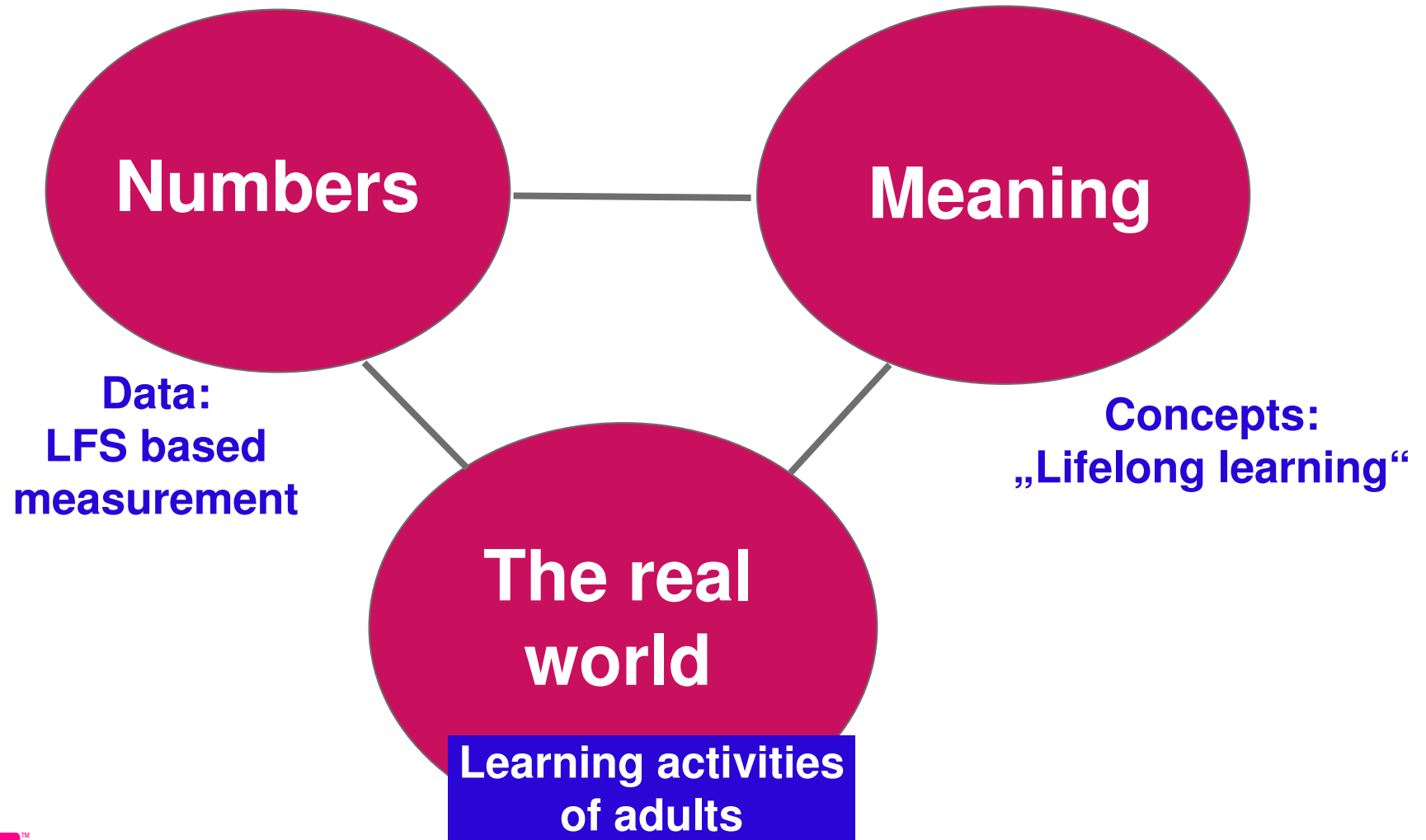
LFS data on participation in education and training existed before being made EU benchmark indicators. However, at least in Germany, nobody cared.

The numbers had no „meaning“ (sense, relevance). At national level, other data sources were regarded to be more informative and valid (BSW).

Making the numbers an international benchmark, changes the situation:

- A huge amount of „meaning“ is being attached to the figures („knowledge society“, „lifelong learning“).
- International comparison adds a new dimension of meaning. The story now is (in the case of Germany):  
„In regard to lifelong learning - a crucial prerequisite of the knowledge society – Germany is a poorly developed country.“

# Is it true? How good is the indicator?



# Shortcomings of an indicator

- Measuring „lifelong learning“ or „participation of adults in education and training“ is not an easy task.
- The EU benchmark indicator is far from solving the measurement problems. Shortcomings are:
  - Reference period „4 weeks“ is OK for formal education but heavily underestimates (shorter) non-formal activities. More adequate: „12 months“.
  - Degree of detail Little information about the kind of learning activities covered. You can't see „what is behind the figures“.
  - Comparability LFS has low standard of input harmonisation. Measurement concepts in detail vary between countries.

# A new database: Adult Education Survey (AES)

- New element of European statistics of education.  
Obligatory survey in all EU countries, starting in 2012, every 5 years.
- At present under construction. AES in 27 countries on a voluntary basis in 2007-2008. Comparative results for 18 countries available in CRONOS.
- Substantial analysis and reporting of national data in some countries (e.g. Germany). Still lacking at European level.
- Same basic concepts as EU benchmark indicator, but better solutions of measurement problems in the survey:
  - Reference period: 12 months
  - More detailed information about individual learning activities.
  - More standardized questionnaires.

# A different picture

AES and EU benchmark (LFS) in comparison:

**Higher level** of participation in adult learning (9,6% in LFS, 36% in AES)

due to

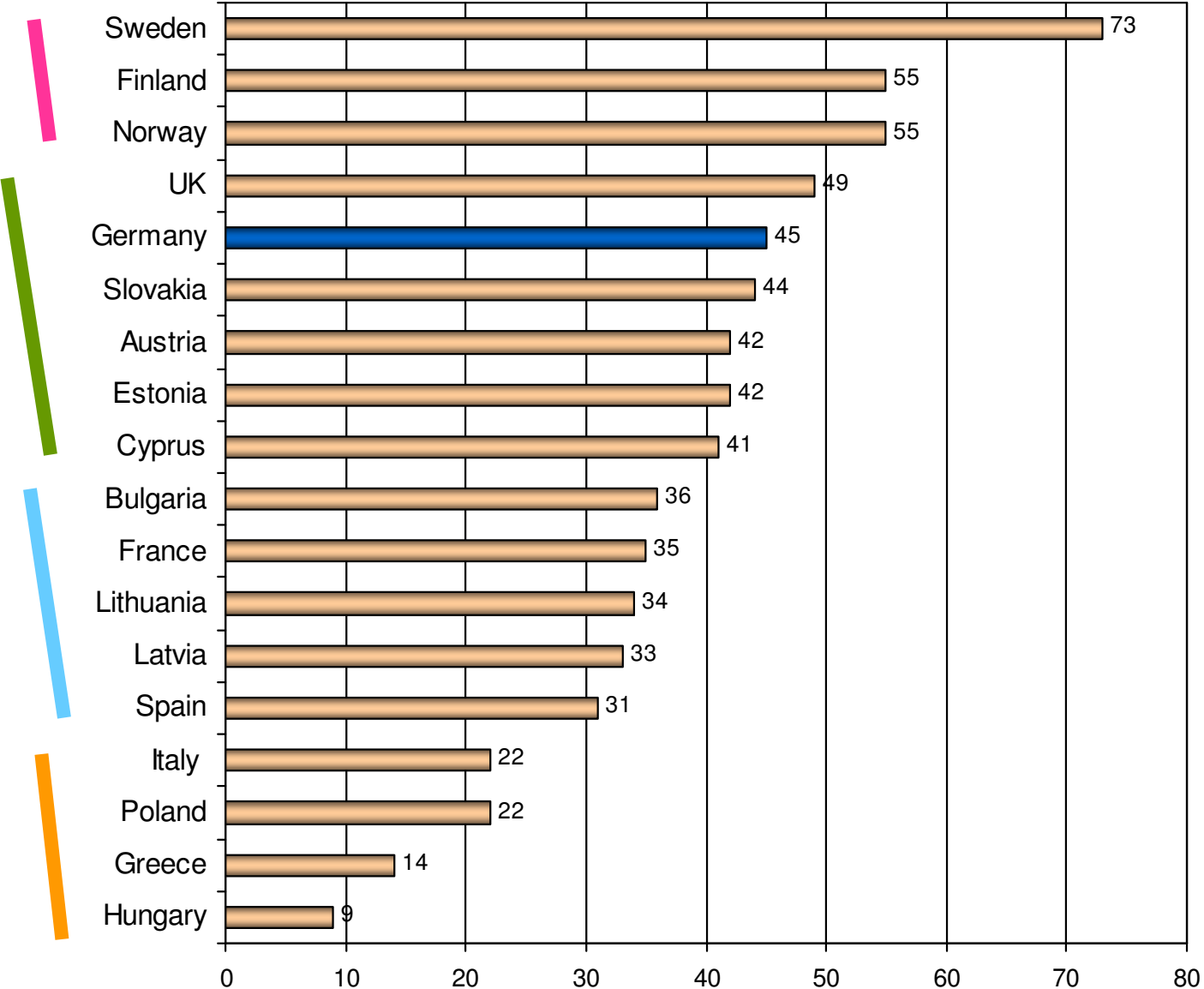
- longer reference period in AES
- higher reporting of non-formal education (NFE) in AES

## Differential effects across countries

- For some countries, e.g. Germany, differences between LFS and AES are far above the European average. The low positioning of these countries in the LFS-based EU benchmark may simply be due to underreporting of NFE in their national LFS.



# Participation in adult education (formal and non-formal), AES 2007



# Germany: Political monitoring will be based on AES

- Longstanding tradition in Germany to monitor participation in adult education via AES-type surveys, called BSW.
- Transition from BSW (national) to AES (european) implied some conceptual changes. Yet the resulting participation rate was nearly identical. Figures confirmed each other.
- German AES data were subject to substantial analysis and reporting, including conferences and publications to build awareness of the results.
- For the first time, the German government committed itself to the objective of growing participation in adult education:

Increase of participation from 43% (2007) to 50% (2015).

- The indicator is based on BSW-AES figures. The actual development will be monitored by regular AES surveys.

# Conclusion

- In statistics, one can observe „careers“ of specific data (or numbers). Often this is bound to the emergence of new political concepts or issues. Basically, this is a positive and exciting process for the statistical business.
- However, there can also be an „overload“ of meaning. This is the case if data or numbers are not really adequate to tell the story they are supposed to do.
- Therefore, the task is always both ways:  
Use public debates for adding meaning to numbers, but at the same time be aware of gaps between meaning and numbers, and search for numbers that correspond better to the intended meaning.

# Thank you for your attention!

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