Standardisation in the European Statistical System – the Process of ESS Standardisation

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Abstract

The European Statistical System (ESS) is dedicated to improve efficiency through systematic collaboration of the ESS members. This collaboration is intensified by sharing of data, services, methodologies, tools, knowledge and experience. The implementation of this collaborative system, reaffirmed by the ESS Vision 2020, is based on a wide range of common tools enabling common production, use of integrated data and systems and share of tools and infrastructure. Standardisation in the ESS is aimed at the enhancement of this collaboration by providing a common production framework and arrangements to develop, share and maintain standards in the ESS. The foreseen approach for ESS standardisation establishes a system in which standards in the ESS are established by consensus with the involvement of potential stakeholders in a transparent process; therefore standardisation in the ESS is aimed at the realisation of efficiency gains and improvement of quality by the establishment of standards for the ESS members. In order to achieve this goal, the process of standardisation has been developed for the ESS by the Sponsorship on Standardisation (regarding strategic issues) and the project ESSnet on Standardisation (with a more operational approach). The process is the backbone of the proposed standardisation system in the ESS as it provides the guarantees to realise efficiency gains by ensuring consensus, transparency, openness, balance, due process and proportionality. In order to support this process and the standardisation activities in practice, some additional instruments have been designed, such as an inventory of normative documents (including methodological handbooks and regulations). The paper presents the process of ESS standardisation, its main drivers and characteristics, the standardisation principles and highlights the benefits that standardisation can offer for the ESS and its stakeholders.

Keywords: standards; standardisation process; European Statistical System; ESSnet.

1. Introduction
Development and use of common systems and tools has always been a key area in the European Statistical System (ESS) to enhance collaboration and harmonisation within the ESS and beyond. According to the shared view of the ESS members, these common solutions should be based on the

consensus of stakeholders and transparent processes. This paper describes the approach recently developed for the establishment of the ESS standards that fully fulfill these requirements.

The term 'standard' is meant to be a guarantee for the ESS members that the common solutions have been set according to essential expectations (later referred to as: principles of standardisation). Thus a standard is *"a document, established by consensus and approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context"*. This definition complies with the ISO approach to standards (see: http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards.htm).

The goal of setting standards in the ESS asks for a procedure providing these guarantees. This process is referred to as the ESS standardisation process. The idea of elaborating the process of standardisation at the ESS level goes back to the time when the elaboration of a standardisation system at the ESS level started. The first step towards the elaboration of standardisation system was taken with a Workshop on Standardisation which was held on 14th-15th October 2010 in Brussels. Since then three major initiatives have been launched in this domain: the ESSnet on Preparation of Standardisation, the Sponsorship on Standardisation and the ESSnet on Standardisation.

This paper introduces the ESS standardisation process as proposed by the ESSnet on Standardisation, based on the life cycle ESS model of the standard-setting process proposed by the Sponsorship on Standardisation and on the ISO standardisation terminology.

2. Importance of standardisation in the ESS

The ESS Vision 2020 identifies „efficient and robust statistical processes" as one of the five key areas to deliver the vision of the ESS. In this context, the Vision 2020 document highlights that

> *„we will improve our efficiency through systematic collaboration within the ESS, while fully respecting the subsidiarity principle. We will intensify our collaboration by further intensifying the sharing of knowledge, experiences and methodologies but also by sharing tools, data, services and resources where appropriate. The collaboration will be based on agreed standards and common elements of technological and statistical infrastructure".*

The ESS already uses tools in different forms enhancing collaboration across the ESS: statistical legislation, methodological handbooks, gentlemen's agreements, code lists, etc. The implementation of the system envisaged by Vision 2020 should be based on a wide range or more precisely on a system of common tools; normative documents enabling common production, common use of integrated data and sharing common tools and infrastructure.

In this regard, the standardisation process at ESS level, connected to the Business Architecture, is aimed at providing a framework for setting standards for the ESS in order to further enhance collaboration. Essential to this process is adherence to the following the five principles of standardisation:

- Consensus. Acceptance by consensus ensures that all views are heard and the resulting standard is generally agreed to. Consensus means a general agreement, characterised by the absence of sustained opposition to substantial issues by any important part of the concerned interests and by a process that involves seeking to take into account the views of all parties concerned and to reconcile any conflicting arguments. Consensus does not imply unanimity.

- Transparency and openness. Involvement of all stakeholders ensures transparency of the process, provides advance public notice of a proposed standard and helps to promote usage of the forthcoming standard.

- Balance. This means that no one group's interest dominates the approach. This implies that special attention should be paid to applicability in countries/institutions of different sizes and different levels of development and that different local context can be dealt with.

- Due process. This principle ensures that anyone with a 'direct and material interest' has a right to express a position and to have that position considered (where necessary including the right to appeal). If a position is not adopted the reason should be well explained.

- Proportionality. This means that the ESS standardisation process must be lean. It should be applied in such a way that the cost of application is reasonable compared to the possible standardisation results that are envisaged. All standardisation activities are pertinent, but the effort put into any activity has to be proportional to the expected benefits.

By fully respecting the above listed principles when setting standards for the ESS members, the envisaged efficiency gains and improvement of quality can be realised.

3. ESS standardisation process

The ESS standardisation process is meant to be the backbone of all standardisation activities in the ESS, ensuring full compliance with the standardisation principles. The model defines 5 process stages, comprising 18 activities for the standardisation processes as shown on Figure 1.
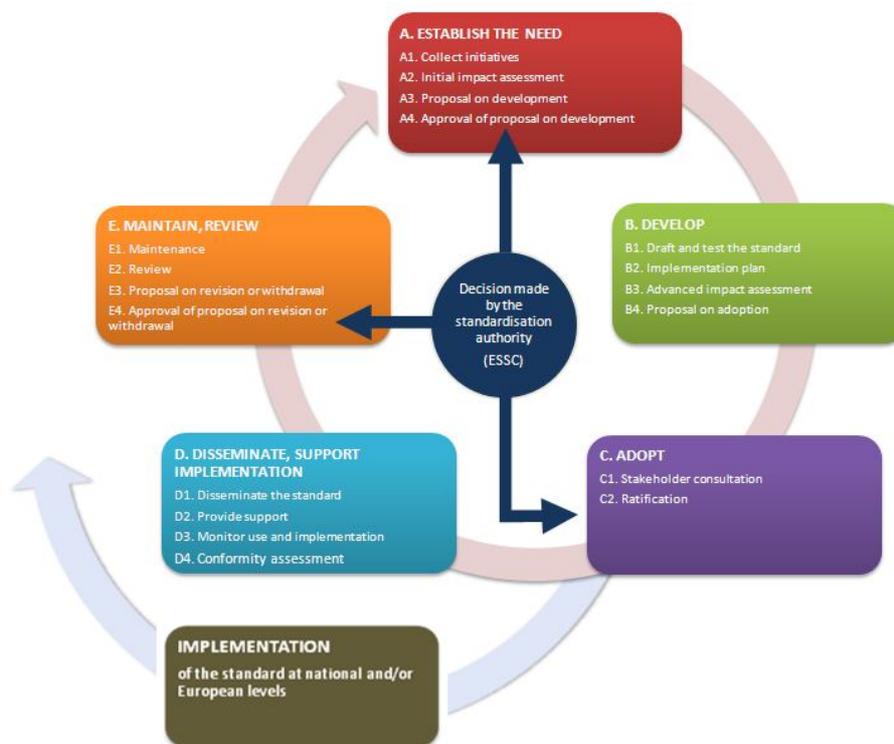

Figure 1. – The ESS standardisation process

The standardisation process is the generic model proposed for all standardisation activities in the ESS. The operation of this process requires several day-by-day activities to be carried out. In order to assure ownership of the process and full compliance with the standardisation principles, a so-called permanent body for ESS standardisation is currently being put in place to monitor and support all ongoing standardisation activities in the ESS, with active involvement in different activities throughout the process. The presence of the permanent body necessitates active cooperation between

this body and the developers, owners of standards and the standardisation authority. This cooperation between different bodies is also a tool to strengthen and implement the common concept of standardisation in everyday practice of the ESS.

The starting point of the standardisation process is the choice of an initiative to be considered. This means the definition of the aim of the proposed standard, identification of all main stakeholders and the elaboration of a business case based on an initial assessment of its impact on the ESS and its stakeholders. The standardisation authority is to make a formal decision on the development of the proposed standard as actual development may only begin if the authority gives its formal approval. In the ESS this standardisation authority is the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC), chaired by the Commission (Eurostat) and composed of the representatives of Member States' National Statistical Institutes.

Following the decision on development, the standard itself is developed (in active consultation with stakeholders) and plans are elaborated for the dissemination and maintenance of the standard in the form of an implementation plan. The developed proposed standard is once again discussed by the ESSC as it makes it formal decision on the adoption of the given initiative as an ESS standard. This is based on an elaborate impact assessment. The owner of the ESS standard is also assigned at this activity.

The ESS standard is then disseminated, supported and maintained by the owner of the standard until its revision or withdrawal is necessary. This occurs when regular maintenance of the ESS standard is no longer possible (safisfactory result cannot be reached by its further modification) or a new standard is available for ESS members for use, making the old standard obsolete or ineffective. Once this stage is reached, the ESSC is once again making a decision on the revision or the withdrawal of the given ESS standard.

The philosophy of the standardisation process is that it should be carried out for each initiative separately. Even though the standardisation process is meant to provide a whole cycle for the establishment of standards in the ESS, starting with the establishment of needs for their development and finishing with their revision or withdrawal, the whole cycle is not followed in all cases. At the three strategic decision points of ESSC, it is not straightforward to assume that all decisions will be positive in all cases. Especially at these points, decisions might result in a step-back in the process (e.g. further develop the standard or further develop the business case to make a decision on its development). There is also a „move further / step back" relationship between several activities within the five stages of the process (e.g. test the developed standard then further develop it again before another testing can take place). These characteristics are integral part of the whole process.

4. Fast track ESS standardisation process
It is everyday business in the ESS to use normative documents developed outside of the ESS as common tools and there also exist normative documents today in the ESS that are used and considered as if they were „standards". In these cases, the full process does not have to be applied (As these normative documents are usually already developed tools, establishment of needs is not the first step in their standard-setting processes).

As a result, the ESS standardisation process in these cases should be fastened, preferably starting with the adoption phase (Probably case-by-case analysis will be necessary to determine the „starting point"). This fast track solution is an integral part of the ESS standardisation process but the details of this approach still have to be developed. There may also be other cases justifying a fast track approach.

5. Implementation of ESS standards

It is a fundamental assumption for the ESS standardisation process that ESS standards are not developed without a purpose: they are developed to meet the established needs. In practice it means that ESS standards are developed with a goal that they will be implemented and gains will be realised as a result of their use and implementation.

Implementation of ESS standards, however, is not mandatory by definition. The Sponsorship on Standardisation explicity recommends to strictly decouple the standard-setting process – development and adoption – from the implementation processes. This is reflected in the ESS standardisation process as well, as shown on Figure 1. Following the decision of the ESSC on the adoption of the developed standard, the actual implementation processes begin at the national and European level. As a parallel activity, the ESS standardisation process continues with the dissemination of the standard and support of the implementation. These activities are aimed at the promotion and motivation for implementing ESS standards in practice.

6. Other key ESS standardisation initiatives

The ESS standardisation process is operational if supported by the necessary initiatives. One crucial element of this set is the so-called repository of normative documents that contains information on all normative documents in the ESS (especially ESS standards). This repository is crucial for users as they can get up-to-date information on the current state and availability of standards and other normative documents in the ESS; plus it is a key information base for the developers of standards to identify similar or connecting normative documents to assure their consistency.

The repository of normative documents is also an important source for decision-makers to decide on the areas for which standards are needed in the ESS and what potential normative documents are already available to be further developed into ESS standards to further enhance collaboration and harmonisation in the ESS.

7. Conclusions

The ESS has recognised the need for a system that provides standards to the ESS that fully comply with the standardisation principles of consensus, transparency and openness, balance, due process and proportionality. In order to foster practical implementation, the ESSnet on Standardisation proposes the ESS standardisation process for adoption in practice.

The model of the ESS standardisation process follows the whole life cycle of standards: from the statement of needs for the establishment of ESS standards, through development, adoption, dissemination and maintenance of the standard to its final withdrawal or revision. The ESSC as a standardisation authority and the permanent body for standardisation are the two key players in the process as they provide the necessary day-by-day activities and support of the standardisation initiatives and also assure the crucial formal decisions on the development, adoption and revision/withdrawal of standards. The ESS standardisation process is accompanied by other key standardisation initiatives such as the repository of normative documents that provides an up-to-date information base for all potential stakeholders interested in the use and development of standards in the ESS.

The development of the ESS standardisation process is now complete and is ready for practical implementation. It is envisaged by the ESSnet on Standardisation that standards in the ESS are developed according to the process of standardisation and the necessary governance environment is in operation to support the day-by-day activities and the coordination related to ESS standardisation.

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