



"The role of peer reviews as an important instrument in the context of monitoring and enhancing quality of official statistics"

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Abstract

Policy developments around the world have put statistics in the forefront. Every national statistical system has been devoting increased attention to the production, dissemination and communication of official statistics in order to ensure their credibility, soundness and appropriate understanding. Sound high-quality data and statistical analysis are required for policy-making at national and European level. A clear path to strengthen quality of the European statistics have been part of the European Statistical System's developments from the adoption of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) in 2005, the regular monitoring of its implementation, including the first peer review exercise, the adoption of the European Statistic Law in 2009, the second round of peer reviews in 2014/2015.

The CoP and its principles set out a framework for credible and trustworthy European statistics. Assessing progress in adhering to the CoP and strengthening its implementation by promoting the use of innovative practices developed by different countries are an integral part of the development of the European statistics. The Quality Assurance Framework is an important evolving tool in assisting the implementation of the CoP.

Peer reviews are a key instrument in this context. They have evolved in terms of scope, coverage and mainly approach. The second round (2014/2015) of peer reviews to the national statistical systems of the Europe Union including Eurostat, are a clear tribute to an independent and objective exercise based upon a clear methodology applied throughout the European Statistical System using an audit-like approach, based upon clear evidences of policies, practices, processes and methods. In addition the assessment and recommendations made by the peer reviewers give raise to concrete action plans towards improvements in a given time frame. A strong and regular monitoring of the progress made in implementing the agreed actions is key to the peer review exercises. Overall annual reports on progress will be publicly available. This paper describes the rationale and the methodology of the second round of peer review to the ESS, the scope and coverage and yet a preliminary evaluation of the improvement actions to enhance the quality of official statistics as they emerge from the various country exercises.

Keywords: quality, monitoring, credibility



Peer Reviews: crucial pillar for credibility and trust in European Statistics

1. Introduction

Policy-makers, researchers, users in general are requiring more and more from producers of official statistics. More innovative dissemination of more detailed information, more promptly available data, a greater number of areas and domains to monitor closely developments of economic, financial, social and environmental aspects of today's society are being continuously demanded. One thing, however, has not changed: users of official statistics require high quality and robust statistical products to maintain trust and credibility in statistical systems. The European Statistical System (ESS) is no exception to this environment. Moreover the ESS is a partnership based on legislation (general and sector-related), on the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) and monitoring of its implementation by Eurostat (European Statistical Authority), the National Statistical Institutes (national statistical authority of each Member State/NSI) and the Other National Authorities (ONAs). The pursuing of a strong emphasis on monitoring and enhancing the quality of European statistics (ES) is the cornerstone of the ESS and has been recognized by all actors as such.

2. European Statistics, its legal framework and relevant bodies

The ESS and the production of ES are based on European legislation which is anchored on the so-called European Statistical Law, i.e. the Regulation (EC) 223/2009, amended in 2015, which defines six statistical principles and seven quality criteria which in turn are further elaborated in the CoP.

The CoP, adopted in 2005 and revised in 2011, as the centerpiece of the strengthening and comparability of the ESS, ensures the production and dissemination of high quality statistics and therefore the full implementation of the CoP provides users with credible and trust-worthy products. The CoP consists of 15 principles covering the institutional environment, statistical processes and statistical output. They set out the standards for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics. These Principles together with the general quality management principles represent a common quality framework in the European Statistical System. A guide to assist the CoP implementation, the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), was approved together with the new version of the CoP. The QAF identifies activities, methods and tools to help demonstrate compliance with the CoP.

Two key bodies play an important role in contributing to the trust and credibility of the European Statistics. The European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) provides an independent overview of the ESS as regards the implementation of the CoP. ESGAB also advises Eurostat on CoP-related matters. ESGAB prepares an annual report to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the CoP in the ESS.

The European Statistical Advisory Committee (ESAC) ensures that user requirements and the response burden on information providers and producers are taken into account in developing the annual and multiannual statistical programmes.



3. The methodology of peer reviews in the ESS

The implementation of the CoP follows a voluntary self-regulatory approach. In such a context the main tool for assessing progress in implementation is the ESS peer reviews.

A first evaluation on the compliance with the CoP was launched just after the adoption of the first version in 2005 with a self-assessment against the principles and indicators of the CoP. This was followed by peer reviews in 2006-2008 in the 31 EU Member State and EFTA/EEA NSIs and Eurostat. The peer reviews covered principles 1 to 6 and 15 of the CoP (institutional environment and dissemination) and the coordination function of each NSI.

A new round of peer reviews was launched in 2013 with the establishing of an ESS Task Force to develop a methodology and instruments for this. Upon adoption by the ESS Committee of the new methodology the second round of PR was launched mid 2014. The overall outcome of the PR exercise will be presented to the European Parliament and Council before the end of 2015.

The ongoing round seeks to:

- enhance the credibility of the ESS
- strengthen its capacity to produce high quality European statistics
- further reassure stakeholders about the quality of European statistics and the trustworthiness of the ESS
- assess progress made in compliance with the principles of the CoP, and
- assess progress made in the development of the ESS.

The new round builds on the previous round but it is more ambitious against changed circumstances – several developments in European statistical governance (the new Statistical Law, the creation of ESGAB and ESAC, Commission Communication ‘Towards robust quality management for European Statistics’, the revised EDP regulation) and the changed economic and financial climate. It covers:

- all 15 Principles of the CoP
- the coordination role of the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) within their National Statistical System
- cooperation within and the level of integration of the ESS, and
- involves all producers of European Statistics (Eurostat, NSI and ONA).

In addition it requires broader self assessment questionnaires to assess performance, policies, practices and procedures in supporting the CoP implementation and it involves all above elements. These completed questionnaires were submitted to Eurostat in May 2014. Furthermore each peer review exercise is conducted by independent experts in line with an audit-like approach where all answers in a questionnaire must be supported by clear evidence. Three-member peer review teams are responsible for assessing replies to the questionnaires. These assessments are complemented by a five-day visit to each country, during which a broad range of stakeholders are interviewed. Representatives of the main users of statistics, the scientific community and the media are also interviewed by the peer reviewers. These interviews will help the peer reviewers to gain an external view on the NSI and on its functioning. Thus the peer review exercise is based on a well –documented process and ambitious dialogue in the country and is expected to produce a rich, well-balanced, objective and comparable report by country.



It should also be underlined that there is a fundamental difference between the reports in the previous round of peer reviews conducted in 2006-2008 and the reports from 2013-2015 round. In the 2006-2008 round compliance with principles 1 to 6 and 15 of the CoP was assessed by means of a four-level scale (fully met; largely met; partly met and not met) and improvement actions were agreed on all 15 principles. After five years of continuous development most of the improvement actions have been implemented and significant progress towards full compliance with the CoP has been made. Therefore, rather than stating the state of play for all principles of the CoP, the reports from the 2013-2015 round mainly focus on issues where full compliance with the CoP has not been found or further improvements are recommended by the Peer Review team.

The second round of peer reviews seeks to assess progress made in adherence to the principles of the CoP and to identify areas where further progress should be made. In view of stimulating the transfer of knowledge, it also seeks to highlight innovative practices that different countries have developed when implementing the CoP.

As in the previous round, each peer review will result in a report on compliance with the CoP published at the Eurostat website. The reports are structured according to the issues identified by the peer reviewers for each country rather than by principles of the CoP. NSIs have an opportunity to correct any factual errors, and set out, in a separate chapter, their views of the findings and recommendations if these diverge from those of the peer reviewers. Recommendations are addressed mainly to NSIs or ONAs but can also be addressed to other responsible national authorities that play important roles in providing means and legal tools to support NSI compliance with the CoP. This chapter is part of the final report. The reports on integration and cooperation within the ESS feed into an Eurostat summary report to the ESSC on the level of cooperation within and integration into the ESS.

4. Peer reviews from NSI and ONA view point

The peer review exercise is quite demanding at the preparation phase, namely the completion of the self-assessment questionnaires and elaboration of core documents submitted by the NSIs and the need to back with clear evidences the self evaluation made. There is an intensive interaction with reviewers prior to and during the actual visit to the country for NSI and ONA. It is however perceived by all involved as a big investment with high pay off given the opportunity to deeply increase the knowledge of each institution and to innovate, modify, in one word adopt improved actions, practices and procedures. Another side of such an investment is the opportunity to learn from good practices and to get advice from independent experts.

At NSI there is a need for establishing the adequate structure to ensure not only fulfilling of all requirements of the peer review exercise but also the involvement from the beginning of all national players. Such a structure will operate during the preparatory phase, follow the process and evaluate the impact with other national authorities. The NSI is expected to ensure that all departments, divisions, other national authorities and any other entities involved in the peer review process are well briefed on the purpose, nature, and timetable of the peer review as early as possible.

This requires the establishment of a team headed by the national coordinator and composed of different representatives of the NSI (departments/ divisions/other entities), be established in order to support that is clearly established with a strong mandate within the NSI and in the context of relations with external stakeholders. Once an effective co-ordination mechanism at national level has been established, all the activities connected with the peer reviews have to be coordinated. A meeting with other national authorities should be planned in order to explain the



purpose, timing and the content of the peer review as well as to reinforce collaboration with the national coordinator to streamline the process and networking.

A constant information flow among all players has to be guaranteed not only in the preparatory phase, but also throughout the whole process. A well-functioning coordination mechanism is important in view of the significant workload caused by the exercise. Key stakeholders like main users, policy-makers, scientific community, trade unions, media representatives can be involved to provide a broader assessment of the National Statistical System, its functioning, its independence and professionalism, its credibility within the society.

5. Improvement actions and monitoring process

The peer review exercise will not be completed without the identification of improvement actions and the monitoring of their implementation over the next years (it has been agreed to set as monitoring horizon of the ongoing peer review round up to 4 years after the dissemination of the country report. NSI will identify these improvement actions following a common procedure allowing an objective monitoring and an overview of ESS progress. The NSIs shall propose improvement actions formulated on the basis of the recommendations in the final peer review reports. These improvement actions should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time scaled) in order to avoid situations where the status was on-going for several years. As indicated above a timeline of up to four years for putting the improvement actions in place has been agreed.

Annually, starting in January 2016, the NSIs will report on the progress of implementation. In case of delays, the NSIs will explain reasons and set out an adjusted timeline for the action/s concerned. New improvement actions might be proposed by the NSI to better reflect modified conditions. On the other hand, Eurostat will produce an annual progress report to the ESS Committee and the ESGAB which would include the list of pending issues, the delays and their reasons and an agreed timeline for addressing them. Accountability and transparency will be key features of this common approach to ensure high-quality statistics and increased credibility and trust in the ESS.

As described above the peer review exercise does not end with the publication of the country report. It will live through at least four years and will frame developments in the NSI and its relations with key players in the national context. This will ensure to reaping the benefits of such a high investment in a transparent and objective manner.

The experience of all NSI and ONA associated to replying to the Self-assessment questionnaires and lessons learned will be used to revise one of the fundamental tools of the ESS Quality Framework, the ESS QAF. In fact the ESS QAF has played a crucial role in supporting the assessment of compliance with each of the indicators of the CoP in the 2013-2015 round of peer reviews, both for NSIs and ONAs and for peer reviewers as well. Still the ESS QAF should evolve on a regular basis and be enhanced by new methods and activities proven to be best practices in the context of the peer review exercise.

6. Conclusions

The European Statistical System is committed to make the peer review exercise a regular and an integral element of a continuous focus on improving the credibility and trust of the ESS ability and commitment to produce high-quality statistics.



The implementation of the CoP follows a voluntary self-regulatory approach. The main tool for assessing progress in implementing it is the ESS peer reviews while involving all producers of official statistics and listening to the views of all stakeholders and partners. It has also proven to be a very powerful tool from the NSI and ONA point of views when assessing their activities against the CoP. In addition the broad and intense internal evaluation across the organization has resulted in new areas of improvement to enhance performance.

From such a continuous process quality management will be strengthened and enriched with lessons, good practices and innovative approaches. Improved framework for ensuring high quality management statistics throughout the ESS will incorporate lessons from the peer review rounds.