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**THE EUROPEAN STATISTICAL SYSTEM PEER REVIEWS:
RESULTS, EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNT**

MARTINA HAHN, EUROSTAT

1. Introduction

With the adoption of the European Statistics Code of Practice several steps have been agreed for Eurostat monitoring of its implementation in the European Statistical System (ESS). A crucial step is an ESS-wide round of 3-days peer reviews conducted during 2006-2008 in all National Statistical Institutes and in Eurostat. The peer reviews focused on the institutional environment in which the statistical authority operates and its dissemination practices. Inspired by the IMF Data Review (Data ROSC)¹, they were organised in a harmonised manner following the Eurostat peer review methodology which has been outlined in detailed guidelines for peers and participating NSIs. The peers participated in a seminar organised by Eurostat which could benefit from the results of two pilot peer reviews. To foster its application and to give guidance and support where needed, Eurostat provided a quality assurance function during the process.²

This paper gives an overview on the main results at the level of the ESS (chapter 2) and reviews the experiences and lessons learnt (chapter 3).

2. Peer review results

Each peer review resulted in a comprehensive report on the main findings per principle and indicator. A grade summarised the assessment following a scale ranging from "fully met" to "not met". With many statistical systems being organised in a decentralised way, the report also contains an appreciation of the National Statistical Institute/Eurostat co-ordination function within the system with a view of spreading the implementation of the Code of Practice across all relevant actors at national level. The peer review reports also contain a list of good practices identified by the peer review teams. The peer review reports and a summary of the good practices are published on the Eurostat quality website³.

2.1. Strengths and weaknesses

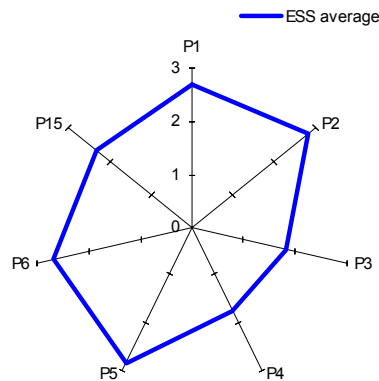
While overall compliance with the Code of Practice has been found to be rather high across the ESS, with almost two thirds of all the indicators for all statistical authorities being assessed as "fully met" and another quarter as "largely met", the peer review reports at the same time underline the high ambition of the Code as not an individual statistical authority was yet found to fully comply with the Code's principles covered by the peer reviews. 12% of the indicators were reported to be partly met and only 0.8% were assessed as not met. In total, the peer review findings to a large degree confirm the results of the self-assessment carried out by statistical authorities prior to the peer review.

Graph 1 gives an overview on the peer review results for all statistical authorities:

¹ For further information: www.imf.org

² See Hahn (2006) for a more detailed description of the peer review methodology.

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/quality>



Main strengths of the ESS lay in the areas covered by Principle 1, Professional Independence; Principle 2, Mandate for data collection and Principle 5, Statistical Confidentiality, mainly dealing with the legal framework as well as implementing policies and practices. Areas for improvements for these principles target rather specific policies or clauses in the statistical law of individual statistical authorities rather than issues on which ESS-wide improvements would be needed. While overall high standards were reported in the area covered by Principle 6, Impartiality and Objectivity, many statistical authorities, in order to move towards full compliance with this principle, will need to improve the arrangements regarding publicising information on methods and procedures as well as informing the general public about pre-release access.

The peer review results call for additional efforts in the area covered by Principle 4, Quality Commitment dealing with quality guidelines as well as process and product quality monitoring. The results are highly correlated with Principle 3, Adequacy of resources, indicating that addressing the shortcoming would probably need to go hand in hand with improvements of the statistical authority's resource equipment. A deeper analysis of the findings also call for ESS-wide actions as improvements planned are very similar across statistical authorities and can build upon existing tools and standards. Box 1 gives an overview:

Improvement actions planned by National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) in the area of quality assurance:

- TQM strategy: 11 NSIs
- Quality unit, quality manager: 2 NSIs
- Quality guidelines: 17 NSIs
- Quality training: 9 NSIs
- Quality audits (internal and external) and self assessments: 16 NSIs
- Quality indicator-based process monitoring: 10 NSIs
- Quality reports: 8 NSIs
- Other activities: 9 NSIs

The picture with regard to compliance with Principle 15, Accessibility and Clarity is mixed. Strengths are reported for the majority of the NSIs with regard to those indicators dealing with dissemination, presentation, statistical services and micro-data access, while documentation and metadata, in particular quality metadata, need improvements.

2.2. National system compliance

While the share of European statistics produced outside the National Statistical Institute varies to a large degree across the ESS, co-ordination of the production of official statistics at national level is an important issue for almost all countries. As it is considered crucial for an extension of the implementation of the Code to all relevant actors, the peer reviews focused on the National Statistical Institute's/Eurostat's legal competence and mechanism employed for co-ordinating the statistical system. Main findings relate to:

- the importance of the statistical law covering all relevant actors at national level rather than the National Statistical Institute only and thus forming already a solid basis for compliance with the Code in particular with regard to the principles relating to the institutional environment;
- the necessity of clearly delineating the statistics function from administrative or policy tasks in particular when statistics is produced in a Ministry/ policy department;
- good practices with regard to co-ordinating a statistical system ranging inter alia from ethical standards adopted on a system-wide basis to a quality labelling function and a common dissemination platform.

3. Experiences and lessons learnt

Below some experiences and lessons learnt from the 2006-2008 round of ESS peer reviews are described from the Eurostat perspective. They are structured along the main steps of the peer review process.

3.1. Preparation of the peer review

The peer review teams were matched by Eurostat following various considerations, among them to ensure a high degree of independence of the team and a good mix of expertise. For each peer review two experts were selected from a list of nominees provided by the Statistical Programme Committee and one expert from Eurostat. While the broad bandwidth covered by the peers in terms of origin (country, statistical system, mother tongue) and expertise foster an understanding of the peculiarities of a national system and the identification of good practices, they may pose a threat to the cross-country comparability of the results. In the process of developing the peer review guidelines, Eurostat discussed these issues with the ESS Task Force on the Implementation of the Code of Practice. It concluded that a high degree of overlap across peer review teams would be desirable. This was accomplished for two thirds of the peer reviews. For the other peer reviews an attempt was made to employ peers experienced in terms of similar reviews carried out in the past or in terms of involvement in the implementation of the Code of Practice, e.g. as a member of the Eurostat Task Force dealing with it.

In line with the Eurostat peer review guidelines, peer reviews were preceded by a desk review of a comprehensive information package provided by Eurostat and the National Statistical Institute. It comprised a detailed self-assessment against the principles and indicators of the Code and relevant legal and policy documents. It also included the findings of a user satisfaction survey carried out by the statistical authority, building on a proposed methodology largely based on a corresponding survey requested by the IMF prior to a country's Data Review. As an effective way of dealing with the information

provided, peer review teams divided main responsibilities for individual principles among the members of the team and in several cases made an attempt to pre-assess compliance based on the documents' evidence. While sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer number of pages to be digested, peers considered the information provided broadly adequate as in only few cases they had to come back to the statistical authority for additional information requests.

From a Eurostat point of view, improvements could be envisaged with regard to the methodology for the user satisfaction surveys as they revealed a number of issues widely shared comprising inter alia low response rates, doubts about the representativity of the replies, low degree of comparability of the results across the ESS due to the high degree of flexibility allowed. Accordingly, improvements could relate to the questionnaire design, the data collection methodology and steps towards further harmonising it within the ESS. Eurostat undertook to raise these issues with the ESS Working Group on Quality.

3.2. Conduction of the peer review

While several peers considered the time spent on the peer review and its preparation as a rather high investment, basically all agreed, no matter if they participated on behalf of Eurostat or were nominated by the ESS, that it yielded lots of benefits both personally and professionally and accordingly many of them agreed to carry out more than one. A similar positive résumé has been given by the statistical authorities reviewed. The burden for preparing the peer review was considered high by many statistical authorities, although Eurostat could observe some ESS-wide learning curve realised for those statistical authorities entering the process at a later stage. Few statistical authorities felt there was not a lot to learn from the review. And indeed, one of its main tasks was to review and substantiate the replies to the self-assessment questionnaire. On the other hand, basically all statistical authorities agreed in highly valuing the process as such, be it the interviews with other main stakeholders, the involvement of junior staff or the discussions with senior and top management prior and during the peer review. They all contributed to deepening the understanding of the Code, to a general awareness rising, a knowledge transfer and exchange of good practices within the ESS and within the national statistical system. In so far the peer reviews themselves, while designed as a monitoring instrument, contributed to enhancing the implementing of the Code of Practice.

While the peer reviewers undertook to base their assessments to the extent possible on factual information, limitations of the peer review process relate to the fact that peer reviewers are dependent upon the resources made available to them. This holds both in terms of interlocutors selected to participate in the interview and information provided. Country's traditions and culture could play a role in addressing openly shortcomings with regard to compliance with the Code, although experienced reviewers can be expected to identify where appropriate information is not forthcoming.

In addition the reviews are conducted on a strategic, organisation-wide basis. Accordingly, it is not straightforward to ascertain that certain practices or behaviours or systems operate in all statistical domains.

3.3. Peer review reports

The peer review reports provide a unique information basis for the ESS covering all National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat and being conducted during a relatively short time period.

An analysis of the results shows that the peer review methodology worked well in delivering comparable results across the ESS. A high validity of the assessment grades was confirmed from a quantitative point of view leading to meaningful correlations, high coherence within individual principles and e.g. identifying principle 3 (adequacy of resources) as a good predictor for the overall results.

Limitations relate to some few indicators, where interpretation and importance attached to those indicators or parts of them differed among individual peer review teams, even after recommendations were provided by the Eurostat peer review desk in the ex-post clearing round of the peer review reports. While this is probably the "costs" of a high degree of independence of the peer review teams, this lack of comparability holds for the application of the assessment scale only. It has no impact on the evidence and findings reported which in fact make these latent differences in the application of the assessment scale visible. Some of these differences relate to the fact that the "case law" on how to assess which situation evolved over time. Alternatively, it could have been envisaged to withhold the peer review reports and publish them all together after some kind of clearing round. This idea however was dismissed as running counter the transparency the process was designed to promote. In so far Eurostat recommends refraining from a mere quantitative interpretation of the peer review results and even more from using them as a basis for ranking individual statistical authorities.

References

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