

Code of Practice



Introduction

The availability of reliable statistical information is indispensable for a democratic society. To fulfil their role in this respect, official statistics they must have the trust of the public, of respondents and of users. Indeed Statistics Netherlands' motto expresses this sentiment: *undisputed figures for everyone*.

The following principles are crucial to the fulfilment of this role:

- impartiality;
- reliability;
- relevance;
- cost effectiveness;
- statistical confidentiality;
- transparency.

The figures should be unbiased and reliable, they should never be influenced by political or other interest groups and should be produced in accordance with certain professional standards. Undisputed information available to everyone, that is what official statistics are all about. This not only implies that the information must be unbiased and reliable, but also that it should be as relevant as possible and must be compiled cost effectively. Above all, individual data must be kept confidential, as people and companies will be more willing to provide truthful – and thus reliable – information to Statistics Netherlands if they know it will *only* be used to make statistics, not for other purposes. Lastly, it must be clear to everyone concerned how and why Statistics Netherlands decides which statistics to make, and subsequently how they make them.

The six above-mentioned principles become more meaningful when they are placed in the context of society as a whole, and of the groups within society that are in some way involved in Statistics Netherlands' figures: users, respondents, and Statistics Netherlands' staff. This *Code of Practice* starts with a brief definition of the principles and subsequently sets out how each principle is relevant for the four separate groups.

The principles play a part in the day-to-day work at Statistics Netherlands. Inside the organisation they can be applied to answer all sorts of practical questions, while for the world outside Statistics

Netherlands they reflect the organisation's position, tasks and working methods.

The principles

Impartiality

The statistical information Statistics Netherlands produces is intended to contribute to the effectiveness of public debate on a wide range of topics. Not only must this information be accessible and available to all parties in society, but everyone must have access to the same information at the same moment in time. Statistics Netherlands remains impartial with regard to the various interested parties in society.

Statistics Netherlands also applies the principle of ‘impartiality’ to specially requested tasks: the results of work requested and paid for by third parties are not made available exclusively to these third parties. To guarantee its impartiality, Statistics Netherlands publishes release dates for information well in advance.

Reliability

Statistics Netherlands’ figures must be above dispute. This means that the figures must be reliable. Only then can they fulfil their role as a collective starting point for public and private decision making. ‘Reliable’ in this respect usually means that the figures are sufficiently accurate, that they are sufficiently close to the (unknown) real value.

‘Above dispute’ places a heavy demand on the Bureau, as nearly all its figures are estimates based on incomplete information. Statistics Netherlands always tries to use all the information at its disposal to compile estimates that are as accurate as possible given the available sources. Where relevant, a clear explanation of the margin of error is given. If the figures are seen as the best possible approximation, users will be justified in considering them to be reliable.

Relevance

Statistics Netherlands gauges users’ information needs in all sorts of ways to determine the relevance of the figures it publishes. From its position as a knowledge-based institute, Statistics Netherlands provides information and instructions on how the figures should be interpreted and how they can be used; but it also provides meta-information, i.e. information about and explanations of the data themselves.

Statistics Netherlands’ figures describe developments and trends in society as accurately as possible. The statistics are relevant for society,

they describe social and economic trends and enable users to compare developments in time, and between countries.

Cost effectiveness

Statistics Netherlands produces statistics cost effectively, making use of all available means. It strives to keep costs as low as possible and to minimise the burden for respondents. Where possible, Statistics Netherlands makes use of existing registrations and databases.

Statistical confidentiality

Statistics provide information on all sorts of groups in society (for example: young people, the elderly, married people, students) and on various phenomena (trade, inflation, economic growth, etc.) The figures are based on information supplied by a large number of individual persons and companies. This information is used only to make statistics, and for no other purposes.

As Statistics Netherlands may not publish data from which individual persons or companies can be identified, their privacy is guaranteed. All identifying characteristics in the data are removed as soon as possible.

Statistics Netherlands never passes on data concerning individual persons or companies to other organisations. There are some legally based exceptions to this rule, such as the supply of information to Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, but this is done under very strict conditions and only for the purpose of compiling statistical tables. Eurostat, too, is committed to keeping individual data confidential.

Transparency

Statistics Netherlands does what it says and says what it does. Its authority and reputation is based on its independent status and its scientific methods. Transparent procedures befit the organisation's position as an autonomous agency in a democratic constitutional state, and also its scientific-methodological principles. Statistics Netherlands puts transparency into practice by at all times being willing to give account to society and at a scientific level, among other things by being able to reproduce the figures.

Statistics Netherlands aims to be clear in its communications. It uses simple language everyone can understand, examples that are relevant for the public, and avoids 'small print'. Naturally more jargon is used in communication with experts.

Statistics Netherlands has nothing to hide. On the contrary, it puts its work on display so that everyone has the same information at the same time, and can use it in as they see fit.

1. *Society*

Impartiality

Statistics Netherlands aims to achieve definitions that are agreed upon by the various interest groups in society. In no aspect of its work is the bureau influenced by insights or opinions held only by certain groups.

Statistics Netherlands publishes statistical information in such a way that it becomes available to everyone in the Netherlands at the same time. Although the bureau responds to opinions and wishes of various groups in society concerning the statistics it makes, none of these groups is given priority over others.

The moment statistical information is released is determined by the moment the production process is completed, and is planned long beforehand. There cannot therefore be any suspicion that Statistics Netherlands publishes information at a time that is favourable or unfavourable for some group.

Reliability

Good quality statistics are statistics that portray developments in society reliably, in accordance with the information available at the time they are compiled. They constitute a starting point for effective societal decision-making processes. Reliability is a relative concept. It is directly related to the accuracy of the information. Statistics Netherlands aims to inform the public about current issues topically and accurately. However, these concepts cannot always be combined: accuracy takes time, while users want to be informed as quickly as possible.

Reliability also depends on how the figures are used. A price index to be used in a legal contract must be more accurate than, say, an estimate of the hidden economy in the Netherlands.

Statistics Netherlands strives to publish information that is topical and meets accuracy requirements to such an extent that it can live up to its reputation of 'undisputed figures'.

Relevance

Statistics Netherlands conducts surveys to obtain information needed by the public, by policy-makers and by scholars. It takes into account not only current wishes, but also information needs that are expected to arise in the near future. The surveys show how various aspects of Dutch society are interwoven and place today's society in a wider

context, comparing it with Dutch society in the past and with societal developments in other countries.

The Central Commission for Statistics (CCS) is the body responsible for reviewing which information the public, policy-makers and scholars require.

Statistics Netherlands' surveys are a basic provision for a modern-day democracy like Dutch society. They provide information which the public can use to form opinions on social issues, enabling society as a whole to function more efficiently. Different groups within the community use the same information from Statistics Netherlands. The surveys fulfil the role of referee and touchstone. Statistics Netherlands also strives to be the *Bureau of Standards*, in other words it promotes the use of comparable, (preferably international) classifications, definitions and concepts.

Cost effectiveness

As official statistics are paid for from public funds, Statistics Netherlands is accountable for how it spends its money. It explains clearly that the money it receives is spent as effectively and efficiently as possible. The administrative burden and costs involved in the production of statistics must be in proportion to the significance of the results as laid down in the work programme. The statistical results are made available to everyone, for example via the website.

Statistical confidentiality

Statistics Netherlands is obliged by law to treat information about individuals and companies confidentially. The bureau must honour this guarantee of confidentiality in all its work and everything it publishes. Statistics Netherlands may link all sorts of data on individual companies, persons or households with each other, even data that are considered sensitive, such as those on ethnicity, health status and crime. By doing this Statistics Netherlands can report on the well-being and health of certain groups, for instance, while guaranteeing the privacy of the individual persons in these groups. The information stored at Statistics Netherlands may never be used for things like checking individual incomes of people claiming rent subsidy or social benefits.

However, statistics may have consequences for certain groups if they are used as a basis for policy decisions. For example, collectively agreed wage levels and the amounts of family allowance are adjusted on the basis of price indices calculated by Statistics Netherlands .

Transparency

Society is entitled to know how and why priorities are set in official statistics. Statistics Netherlands therefore regularly accounts for its current work programme, reviewing it critically at regular intervals. The work programme is laid down by the Central Commission for Statistics (CCS), an independent body that is assisted in its work by twenty advisory committees. Statistics Netherlands is also accountable for the methodology, concepts, etc. it uses. Statistics Netherlands cannot comply with every demand for statistics. It gives account of demands emerging from society which it cannot meet or which are not included in its work programme.

2. *Users*

Impartiality

Statistics Netherlands never takes the side of any specific user in its production process. Users have no say in the methods and techniques used to produce statistical information. Statistics Netherlands compiles statistics solely on the basis of objective scientifically tested statistical methods and techniques.

New statistical information is made available to everyone at the same time. It is released in such a way that it is easily and consistently accessible for groups of users.

Reliability

Users may be certain that Statistics Netherlands makes coherent use of all available sources to produce its data. For all statistics, the extent of uncertainty and margins of error are clearly explained. The resulting reliable statistical information thus constitutes the best possible starting point for effective decision making.

Relevance

Statistics Netherlands' publications aim to provide users with the statistics they need. The publications are written in clear and readable language and the results are unambiguous. Each publication shows how the statistics relate to each other, and each is couched in terms appropriate to its user group. The publications examine current social issues, but also topics that are expected to become issues of debate in the near future. This is true for both printed publications and the all information published on the website. Users must be able to find the information they need on the website easily. They must also be able to place this information in an appropriate context.

Requests for information should be answered satisfactorily if Statistics Netherlands has the available information to answer them. It is important in this respect that the bureau responds promptly (or in any case within such a time that the information is relevant for the user), that it gives users a good background so that they can place the information in context, and that it explains to what extent the information can be compared with previously published information.

Cost effectiveness

Users of statistics may be assured that work undertaken for individual customers is not paid for from collective funds. Custom-made information is paid for by the customer requesting it. If

Statistics Netherlands expands a survey at the special request of a government department, for example, that department pays for all costs incurred by the extra work. The results of this work, however, are made publicly available.

Statistical confidentiality

Statistics Netherlands never releases identifiable individual data. It may make databases available for scientific research, but only after they have been treated in such a way that no individual person, company or institution can be identified from them.

Statistics Netherlands does make it possible for researchers to analyse data under very strict conditions on-site, at Statistics Netherlands. All results of such analyses are checked by Statistics Netherlands before publication, to verify that they contain no identifiable individual information.

Transparency

Users are entitled to know where the original information comes from and what Statistics Netherlands does with it before it becomes official statistical information. Of its own accord, Statistics Netherlands gives account of the methods and techniques it uses. All processes are well documented, and can be replicated. The main conclusions of the statistical outcomes are described in words, including an indication of the degree of accuracy of the figures. In this way Statistics Netherlands tries to minimise the risk that misuse can be made of its information.

3. *Respondents*

Impartiality

Every person, company and institution who completes a questionnaire, or is interviewed personally or by telephone is a respondent. Authorities in charge of official registrations used for statistics (e.g. the municipal population registers) are also respondents.

Respondents may be certain that the information they supply will not be used to make 'biased statistics'. Statistics Netherlands has an impartial position with respect to the various parties in society.

Reliability

As the reliability of statistics mainly depends on the quality of the basic information, Statistics Netherlands asks its respondents to supply information that is as accurate as possible. Statistics Netherlands has developed instruments to monitor the information it receives from individual people, from companies and from registries.

Relevance

Statistics Netherlands ask respondents to supply only information that is relevant for making statistics, nothing more. Before approaching respondents, Statistics Netherlands finds out whether it can obtain the information through other channels, for example from existing registrations. Moreover, the request for the information corresponds as much as possible with the administrative practices and language used by the respondent concerned. Where possible Statistics Netherlands explains why the survey is important for the respondent, as well as for society as a whole.

Cost effectiveness

Statistics Netherlands does its very best to keep the response burden to a minimum. This means that it asks no more than strictly necessary, and where possible it uses information from available administrative sources.

Statistical confidentiality

Statistics Netherlands does not publish figures on individual persons or companies. Individual information concerning one person or company can never be identified from published tables. The individual data are never used for other purposes, such as fiscal, judicial or detection purposes. Statistics Netherlands may only

publish such individual information if the person or company concerned requests them to do so, or gives them permission to do so. Companies are often under a legal obligation to cooperate with surveys, as voluntary participation would result in insufficient response. This legal obligation is an extra reason to keep the information secret.

Transparency

Although respondents have a right to know which of their data Statistics Netherlands uses and why, they may not withhold information. Statistics Netherlands takes great care to explain how it protects the data and how it transforms these basic data into useful information.

When relevant, Statistics Netherlands informs respondents how their information is used. In the case of personal surveys, for instance, it explains that the information obtained through these surveys is linked to other information taken from registrations. If people then participate in the survey, Statistics Netherlands may assume that they have been sufficiently informed and that they agree with the way Statistics Netherlands uses their information.

4. *Statistics Netherlands' staff*

Impartiality

Statistics Netherlands has responsibilities towards the various interest groups in society. This has consequences for people who work at Statistics Netherlands. They may not let themselves be influenced by political and/or social pressure groups to steer statistics in a certain direction. In their statistics they use standards which can be widely applied and which are recognised by all interested parties concerned. They weigh the pros and cons of alternative methods and techniques and their final choice is made on the basis of professional arguments.

If they foresee that information can be misinterpreted, Statistics Netherlands staff take steps to prevent this. In principle deadlines for production and publication of statistical information are always enforced. As soon as it is ready, information is published in a way that is easily accessible for everyone. When staff act on behalf of Statistics Netherlands they stress the results and statistical analyses; they never choose sides in political debate.

Reliability

Statistics Netherlands' staff are committed to developing and compiling statistics in the correct manner. In the design stage of the statistics, statisticians take stock of and evaluate all possible data sources. The degree of inaccuracy of the figures is analysed and statistically charted. In the production stage, all tasks are carried out carefully, and sources and figures are checked in accordance with current work instructions. The reliability of the ultimate figures is expressed as truthfully as possible. Figures which are suspected to be below standard are not published.

Relevance

Statistics Netherlands' staff are receptive to new developments in society; they are aware both of what is happening now, and of what is about to happen in the future. Statistics Netherlands' staff make sure they know what society finds relevant or will find relevant in the future, not what they themselves think that society should find relevant. They always put aside their own prejudices. Statistics Netherlands staff make statistics that users can apply as widely as possible.

Cost effectiveness

Statistics Netherlands' survey designers weigh the costs and benefits for each survey and aim for the most efficient processes. As Statistics Netherlands may not waste the taxpayers' money, its publishing style is characterised by austerity.

Statistical confidentiality

Not everyone working at Statistics Netherlands has access to individual data. Staff only have access to the data they need to do their work. When publishing data they make sure that no one can identify individual data from tables or other statistical overviews. The information supplied by persons, companies and institutions to Statistics Netherlands may only be used to make statistics. This also means that – as is laid down in the law – Statistics Netherlands staff may not use information on, for example, individual companies for personal gain, such as share trading. All identifying characteristics of information entering the bureau are removed as soon as possible, and all Statistics Netherlands' staff are obliged to sign a declaration of confidentiality on appointment.

Transparency

All processes for compiling statistics are clear and well documented. The advantage of this is that knowledge is not lost when staff change position or leave Statistics Netherlands. Statisticians are obliged to document their work; this is an elementary demand for transparency and reproducibility. This means that when staff move on, the production process can continue uninterrupted, and continuity is guaranteed.

Reference documents

Statistics Netherlands' code of practice is partly based on international agreements. The European Union member countries, for example, have drawn up a set of principles on which they base their work; these include impartiality and reliability. The following documents describe these statistical principles.

- Fundamental principles of official statistics (United Nations).
<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/goodprac/bcabout.asp>
- Council Regulation (EU) No. 322/97, 17 February 1997, on Community statistics
- Commission decision of 21 April 1997, on the role of Eurostat in the production of Community statistics (97/281/EU)
- The proposal for a law on the Netherlands central bureau of statistics, and the explanatory memorandum. Second Chamber, 2001–2002, no. 28277.