



UN Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks (NQAF) – answers to initial questions

Experiences

Statistics Norway

Statistics Norway has for about 10 years had a programme of systematic quality work based on the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM). We have followed a pragmatic approach, integrating quality principles and tools into our activities such as the planning processes step by step.

International cooperation has supported quality work, by providing frameworks and good practices. Today, the European Statistics Code of Practice (ESCoP), general principles from TQM and a set of quality assurance tools and procedures constitute the quality management system of Statistics Norway. ESCoP itself constitutes a quality framework.

A framework provides a reference and guidance for work on quality assurance and improvements. Examples of activities and measures in this area are work on performance indicators, standardisation, systematic assessments and evaluations, internal control, portfolio and project management and risk management.

Relevant paper:

“Linking management, planning and quality in Statistics Norway” – paper for the Q2010 conference in Helsinki 4 – 6 May. 2010, by Hans Viggo Sæbø and Peder Næs, see <http://q2010.stat.fi/papers/>.

The European Sponsorship on Quality

Statistics Norway has participated actively in the development of European quality work. Together with Eurostat we are chairing the European Sponsorship on Quality. The Sponsorship has participants from 11 European countries and started its work in September last year. It shall finish by 2011.

The objectives of the Sponsorship are:

- to promote a common view and understanding on the ESS quality management shared within the ESS and other important partners,
- to develop recommendations for possible modifications of the Code of Practice in the area of quality,
- to provide recommendations on how to proceed with quality work in ESS.

It is in the mandate of the Sponsorship on Quality to clarify and if appropriate harmonise quality work across international statistical organisations. The ECB and OECD will be involved in its work. There is of course an interface to the UN work on National Quality Assurance Frameworks (NQAF). In fact the NQAF proposed fits very well with the ESCoP.

The main work of the Sponsorship will be to formulate some minimum requirements to the *implementation* of quality assurance. Communication of quality issues to users and other stakeholders is also an issue to be considered in the Sponsorship on Quality.

Relevant paper:

“[Quality Assurance in the European Statistical System](#)” – paper for the Q2010 conference in Helsinki 4 – 6 May, 2010; by Øystein Olsen and Hans Viggo Sæbø, see <http://q2010.stat.fi/papers/>.

Problems and obstacles in developing and implementing an NQAF

The main challenge when implementing an NQAF is to ensure support throughout the institution, and management support in particular. This is a precondition for succeeding with quality assurance in practice. On the other hand practical results are necessary to maintain support over time. Some issues linked to this are elaborated in more detail in the following.

From theory to practice

Systems and frameworks are necessary, but not enough to assure quality and improvements. There is a danger that work in this area tends to be theoretical or conceived as theoretical, and hence does not have enough practical implications (discussion on which framework is the best is an example of a typical theoretical exercise). It is important to move quickly from a framework to concrete measures by use of tools and other actions. Examples of implementation measures comprise the use of indicators, quality reports, self-assessments, audits and standardisation programmes.

Management support

Management support is the first precondition for embarking on a work on and promoting a quality framework in an organisation. This includes support from managers at all stages. It is often more easy to get support from top management than middle management that is responsible for the daily production of statistics. One reason for this is of course that production must go on all the time, but it might also be the case that all parts of the organisation do not necessarily benefit from a quality measure, at least not in the short run. An example is standardisation that facilitates quality assurance and reduces risks. But benefits are first seen on the level of the organisation as a whole.

The variety of systems

There are many quality management systems and frameworks (broadly defined), ranging from general systems such as the basic system of Total Quality Management (TQM), Six Sigma, European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), Common Assessment Framework (CAF), and ISO. In addition we have the frameworks developed by international statistical cooperation, e.g. the ESCoP, the African Charter for Statistics as well as the quality frameworks of IMF (DQAF), OECD and other international institutions. All such systems are based on a common set of principles (such as user and process orientation), but they differ with respect to main focus and degree of formalisation. In EFQM and ISO emphasis is for example put on rating and certification, whereas Six Sigma focuses on quality control. Some National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) apply several or parts of several of these systems for different purposes. Others have established their own systems adapted to their values and activities, but based on elements from the general systems.

The “competition” between quite similar systems might lead to long (and not so fruitful) discussions. It is important to realise that the systems are based on same principles, and when some systems have been selected the institution should stick to those and go on with practical implementation (see below).

In Europe it is natural to use the ESCoP that has been developed for statistics in addition to some general quality principles as a *minimum common quality framework*. This will probably be recommended by the Sponsorship on Quality. The need to take both the nature of statistics and national conditions into account makes it inconvenient to recommend a common *general* quality

management system here. This has to be adapted to our role as statistics producers and to national requirements and systems. But all systems have a lot of common elements.

Defining a *minimum common framework* for quality management systems is not inconsistent with raising the level of ambition by using another general quality management system, also depending on national requirements.

Continuity

It is important to realise that quality work is a continuous effort, and that implementing a quality framework takes long time. This is mentioned in the report of Statistics Canada on NQAF: *"Because many aspects of quality are dynamic and deteriorate without pro-active effort there is a continuing need to invest in quality simply in order to maintain status quo."*

To explain this is critical for ensuring long term support for quality work in an institution.

Needs and priorities from a country perspective

Minimum framework and quality assurance requirements that allow for national adaptations and different ambition levels (see below).

Initial comments

The draft on National Quality Assurance Framework (NQAF) provides a good overview of different initiatives and quality principles, frameworks and tools.

We agree that general quality systems and models should be adapted to statistical work (values and roles of official statistics and statistical production processes), and the European Statistics Code of Practice provides a good framework for this. We think the distinction between products, processes and institutional environment made here is clarifying and useful, and compliant with general quality models (e.g. TQM). However, different national requirements might make it inconvenient to go much further in recommending a common quality management system for all statistical institutions. This normally has to be adapted to the requirements of each institution. But all systems have a lot of common elements which should be followed.

To put it short: Statistics Norway would be pleased with a minimum NQAF (at least) compatible with the ESCoP.