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## Opinion

### of the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) concerning the ESS response to the coronavirus pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak has brought significant challenges to the European Statistical System (ESS). The quick responses of Eurostat and of National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) has allowed the continuity of statistical production processes, notwithstanding the difficulties concerning the provision of data especially by companies. For example, the low response rate to business surveys (due mainly to the shutdown of enterprises) and the impact of lockdown and mobility restrictions on household and price surveys have created difficulties for most NSIs. This lower response rate, combined with the reduced availability of administrative sources, has increased the need for more data imputations and estimations and resulted in significant adaptations of ongoing production processes, with a potential impact on the comparability of data over time and across countries.

At the same time, the crisis called upon the ESS to produce data and new indicators quickly in order to assess the impact of the pandemic on the economy, the society and the environment, and to underpin very important and impactful policy decisions. Requests for new information are being placed on statisticians and new needs will continue to emerge at national and European levels, obliging the ESS to address those new requirements quickly so as to be even more relevant in the fight against the pandemic and its consequences.

The European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) acknowledges the challenges faced by the ESS and welcomes the significant efforts being deployed to overcome them. These include

- the publication by Eurostat, in consultation with NSIs, of methodological guidelines in several domains to ensure the quality of European statistics,
- novel initiatives and ways of working undertaken by the NSIs to handle source data restrictions such as an enhanced access to new data sources (in particular, privately held data via agreements with private holders such as mobile phone operators or commercial surfaces),
- inclusion of COVID-19 relevant questions in traditional surveys, flash estimates, voluntary data collections, closer interaction with researchers, or the production of new indicators to measure the impact of the crisis (such as weekly deaths).



ESGAB Secretariat  
Eurostat – BECH Building  
L-2721 Luxembourg  
Telephone: (+352) 4301 33251  
E-Mail: [estat-esgab@ec.europa.eu](mailto:estat-esgab@ec.europa.eu)  
<http://ec.europa.eu/esgab>

While recognising these efforts, ESGAB notes that some initiatives undertaken by NSIs due to the disruption of ongoing production processes may have an adverse impact on the comparability of the resulting data, as methodologies and definitions may not be fully harmonised. This risk is higher when data are collected and produced by Other National Authorities (ONAs, i.e. other entities, apart from the NSIs, designated by Member States as responsible for the production of official statistics). Therefore, the Board urges Eurostat and the NSIs to continue ensuring the comparability of the main economic (e.g. prices, GDP) and social (e.g. employment, risk of poverty) indicators, recognising that this may eventually involve accepting larger revisions of early estimates. In this respect, it underlines the importance of close and regular contacts among members of the ESS (Eurostat, NSIs and ONAs) during the current crisis, which is very dynamic and requires innovative and agile solutions.

The Board shares the view that harmonised communications with users, respondents and the society in general are more needed than ever and emphasises the importance of a coordinated ESS approach. Clear and transparent messages are key to keep the trust in official statistics, and they should stress the quality of European statistics and the associated quality framework. In this context, ESGAB commends the ESS's efforts to pre-warn users of potential quality issues or greater revisions in the future. In this perspective, it could be useful to produce additional guidelines for data releases, including flagging, metadata and transparency of the approaches undertaken to overcome the difficulties for production processes. Moreover, NSIs could develop and disseminate additional indicators to help users to better evaluate the evolution of the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on economic, social and environmental phenomena.

NSIs also need support to maintain statistical production in spite of the difficulties of collecting and accessing data. Therefore, ESGAB invites the European Commission to raise the attention of national governments to support primary data collections and to promote access to administrative records and new data sources. This will help preserve the successes achieved and ensure the medium-term sustainability of the innovative solutions found, contributing to a higher resilience of the ESS to future shocks.

Finally, ESGAB underlines the importance of a strong coordination of the ESS and leading role of Eurostat under the current extraordinary situation triggered by the COVID-19 outbreak. This crisis is also an opportunity to enhance the ESS partnership by increasing collaboration, support and exchange of best practices within the system, and to further improve the new initiatives undertaken and the progress achieved. In this perspective, the ESS should also stress its cooperation with National Statistical Systems of neighbouring countries, including the United Kingdom, as well as other non-member countries, through the UN system and the OECD.



**ESGAB Secretariat**  
Eurostat – BECH Building  
L-2721 Luxembourg  
Telephone: (+352) 4301 33251  
E-Mail: [estat-esgab@ec.europa.eu](mailto:estat-esgab@ec.europa.eu)  
<http://ec.europa.eu/esgab>