Peer reviews in the European Statistical System

1- The European Statistics Code of Practice and the bodies governing European statistics

Regulation (EC) 223/2009 on European statistics as amended defines six statistical principles and seven quality criteria which are further elaborated in the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP). 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. The indicators developed for each principle provide a reference for reviewing the implementation of the CoP.

The CoP was adopted in 2005 and revised in 2011. A guide, the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), was approved together with the new version of the CoP. The current version was adopted in May 2015. The QAF identifies activities, methods and tools to help demonstrate compliance with the CoP.

European statistics are governed by the European Statistical System (ESS). The ESS is the partnership between Eurostat, i.e. the European Union statistical authority, the national statistical institutes (NSIs) and Other National Authorities (ONA) responsible in each Member State for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics. This partnership also includes the EEA and EFTA countries. The European Statistical System Committee (ESSC) is the decision making body of the ESS. Members of this committee represent their countries and act as coordinators of the respective national system.

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. In 2014 the ESGAB annual report focused on the peer review of Eurostat which was conducted by ESGAB.

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.

A reporting and monitoring system complements the above, and peer reviews and the monitoring of their outcomes play a key role therein.

2- Peer reviews in the ESS

The implementation of the Code follows a voluntary self-regulatory approach. The main tool for assessing progress in its implementation is the ESS peer reviews.
a. The first round of peer reviews

The 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 Code. 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 Code (institutional environment and dissemination) and the coordination function of each NSI within its statistical system.

The peer reviews were based on a standard information package including NSIs’ replies to a self-assessment questionnaire and the results of a user satisfaction survey. Each peer review teams comprised two peers from the NSIs nominated by members of the Statistical Programme Committee (the predecessor of the ESSC) and one Eurostat expert. The peer reviews included a 3-day visit during which the review team met with NSI representatives (top and middle management and junior staff), and the main stakeholders (other data producers, various user groups and respondents’ representatives).

The peer reviews resulted in reports published on the Eurostat website. These assess the level of compliance with the Code according to a four-level reporting scale (fully/largely/partly/not met). For each indicator of the CoP where compliance with the Code was lacking the peer review team and the NSI agreed on improvement actions. These are attached to the reports together with an implementation plan.

The improvement actions have been subject to annual monitoring by Eurostat and ESGAB. The last follow-up report was discussed at the ESSC meeting in November 2013, where it was agreed that the next monitoring report will refer to the improvement actions stemming from the new round of peer reviews.

b. The new round of peer reviews

Framework

The 2008 Commission Report on the implementation of the Code of Practice envisaged another round of peer reviews within five years. In addition, the European Court of Auditors recommended, in its special Report N°12 2012 Did the Commission and Eurostat improve the process for producing reliable and credible European statistics?, launching a new round of peer reviews in 2013. In November 2012 the ESSC endorsed a set of recommendations for a new round of peer reviews and set up an ESS Task Force to develop a methodology and instruments for this.

The new round, which was launched in December 2013, 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
- assess progress made in the development of the ESS.
The new round builds on the successful elements of the previous round, but is more ambitious against changed circumstances – developments in statistical governance (the Regulation on European statistics, the creation of ESGAB and ESAC, Commission Communication ‘Towards robust quality management for European Statistics’, the revised EDP regulation\(^1\)) and the changed economic and financial climate. The new round of peer reviews is therefore more ambitious than the first one, covering:

- all principles of the CoP
- the coordination role of the NSI and
- cooperation within and the level of integration of the ESS.

The ESS Task Force developed self-assessment questionnaires to assess these elements. The peer review exercise was conducted by independent experts in line with an audit-like approach where all answers in a questionnaire must be supported by evidence. Three-member peer review teams were responsible for assessing replies to the questionnaires. The assessments were complemented by a five-day visit to each country.

As in the previous round, each peer review results in a report on compliance with the CoP published on 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 had 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. The chapter is part of the final report.

In response to peer reviewers' recommendations, NSIs' have elaborated improvement actions plans which will be monitored annually. The improvement actions plans are available on the Eurostat website.

The reports on integration and cooperation within the ESS feed a Eurostat summary report to the ESSC on the level of cooperation within and integration into the ESS.

**Involvement of ONAS**

In addition to the NSIs, other national authorities (ONAs) may be responsible for the development, production and dissemination of specific parts of European statistics. In these tasks both the NSIs and ONAs must respect EU statistical principles set out in Regulation (EC) 223/2009 as further elaborated in the Code of Practice, as well as agreed quality requirements. Therefore the ESSC decided that also ONAs should be part of the peer reviews. However, in order to take different national settings into account, a flexible approach was agreed. The NSIs selected a limited number of ONAs for the peer review based on their role in the production of European statistics and on the risk to the credibility of European statistics in case a problem were to occur. The NSIs decided whether these ONAs would complete the full NSI self-assessment questionnaire on compliance with the CoP or a lighter version. The ONAs invited to a peer review meeting were interviewed by the peer reviewers based on replies to the questionnaires and other documentation assessed by the peer reviewers.

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Involvement of stakeholders

Representatives of the main users of statistics, the scientific community and the media were also interviewed by the peer reviews. These interviews helped the peer reviewers to gain an external view on the NSI and on its functioning.

National Central Banks

National Central Banks (NCBs) also contribute to some specific parts of European statistics governed by legislation adopted under Article 338 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (balance of payments, financial accounts, government finance statistics). They are subject to a parallel peer review based on the Public Commitment on European Statistics of the European System of Central Banks (ESCB), which is similar to the European Statistics CoP, and on their current audit procedures. Depending on the country NCBs were also involved in the ESS peer reviews and were invited to be interviewed by the peer reviewers.

Timeline

The last peer review visit took place in mid-June 2015, and the last final reports on compliance with the CoP and coordination were published in August 2015. Eurostat is preparing a report to the EP and the Council on compliance with the CoP and coordination and a summary ESSC report on cooperation within and integration into the ESS which will be presented to the February 2016 ESSC. Adoption by the Commission of the report to the EP and the Council is expected to take place in the first half of 2016.