



European Statistical
Advisory Committee

**ESAC Opinion on
the Draft Strategic Priorities
for the European Statistics Annual Work
Programme 2020**

ESAC Doc. 2019/03

General comments

ESAC thanks the Commission for this important document, as the AWP2020 will be the last annual programme implementing the current European Statistical Programme 2013-2020. Therefore, the AWP2020 needs to ensure that the new elements introduced by the programme extension 2018-20 are adequately covered. The Committee also looks forward to the final evaluation report for the ESP 2013-2020.

The draft strategic priorities cover well the important issues that ESAC has underlined in its recent opinions, statements and comments. It is important that they focus on user needs, statistical literacy and capacity building among official statistics. The special attention given to migration, the European pillar of social rights or the energy union is also welcome. Striking the difficult balance between methodologically appropriate statistics and fit-for-purpose indicators with new sources of data is crucial, and this document envisages such work.

On a general note, the Committee stresses the importance of making data available a sub-national level whenever this is possible. More specifically, ESAC has several comments under the different headings below.

1. Political Context

ESAC believes that a reference to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and its impact on the production of harmonised and comparable statistics is crucial. Therefore, the ESS should reflect on how to continue statistical relations with the UK to anticipate as much as possible any consequences of Brexit on new aggregates, thresholds, confidentiality, etc. In this context, a communication strategy to explain that impact to the public, decision-makers and the media would be beneficial.

The Committee appreciates the reference to «new user needs from EU initiatives such as the European agenda on migration, the European pillar of social rights, or the energy union» and highlights the need to further develop migration statistics, in particular as regards clear definitions and different sources to capture stocks or flows (international migrations): administrative registration, surveys, estimates, population census, etc.

It also seems important to emphasise the role of official statistics in supporting EU trade negotiations, mentioned below.

2. Priorities related to key areas

Providing better insight into globalisation and international trade

Bearing in mind the EU commitment to the SDGs, ESAC believes that trade statistics should also cover the environmental footprint of international trade, mainly by collecting data about carbon footprint and resource intensity of imported goods. This would probably imply a life cycle assessment that would also include emissions from international transport.

The commitment to improved availability of data on international trade in services is welcomed to better satisfy user needs. Looking at the trends in society – both at national and global level – there is an obvious need that the official statistics embrace the service sector to a greater extent. This sector has grown in importance over the last decades, in terms of jobs, economy, societal impacts etc. New kinds of services emerge rapidly, and service production itself and exchange of service are taking new forms.

It would also seem important to develop a better understanding of trade asymmetries between different countries – especially the US and EU. There are many causes for such

asymmetries, some relatively easy to understand; however, ESAC believes that such issue needs to be addressed explicitly, and openly explained to users.

Fostering the relevance of business statistics

ESAC stresses that the exchange of microdata on trading goods within the EU between the national statistical institutes poses a real opportunity for a significant reduction of the response burden. However, this opportunity can only be realised after a trial period to adequately assess the quality of the exchanged data on dispatches of goods, so that the collection of the information on the arrival of goods can be reduced considerably, or abandoned, by the member states. The Committee invites member states to embrace the sharing of microdata for trade in goods while respecting data protection rules, and to improve overall data quality.

Delivering relevant statistics concerning the digitalisation of European economies is supported. Nevertheless, ESAC highlights that the term 'digitalisation' is used in many different ways and with various meanings across the ESS. Therefore, it is recommended that the ESS works on a clear definition to avoid confusion.

Enhancing the evidence base for economic governance and economic and social performance in the EU

ESAC welcomes the strategic priorities mentioned under this heading but would like to stress the need to make reference also to actions that will address social performance in this context.

Renewing European social statistics and preparing the 2021 census round

To monitor material living conditions of people, it is understood that income, consumption and wealth are the three key areas and a combined view of all three topics is desirable. However, the transfer of this requirement to the practise of statistical measurement is difficult because under each of the three topics different aspects have to be considered in a sampling concept. Therefore, ESAC views critically the integrated sampling of all three aspects in one single survey (like in the currently planned SILC-Module 2020). In developing income, consumption and wealth statistics, the issue of burden should be taken into account.

Projects on linking data from different sources are important to meet user needs. Therefore, ESAC welcomes the ambitions to combine micro- and macrodata. Additionally, projects on linking microdata from different surveys should be further developed, one obvious application being the combination of income, consumption and wealth mentioned above, as well as the access to other (national) administrative sources.

ESAC appreciates the emphasis on statistics on the integration of migrants. Integration can and should be measured in many different areas (e.g., employment, education, social inclusion, active citizenship, use of public sector facilities). Longitudinal data are required to monitor the situation of immigrants and the real impacts of integration policies. In addition, work on harmonisation of concepts should be pursued to further improve comparability.

Skill requirements and integration of migrants in the labour market are a current topic of utmost importance. Effort should be made within the ESS to meet the increasing needs for timely and in-depth data on these topics. In addition, the lack of availability of EU indicators on integration at sub-national level (notably city and regional level) prevents giving adequate support to policy decisions at all levels of governance. The results of the feasibility testing by Eurostat could be supplemented by actively developing the EU indicators through multi-governance cooperation whereby regional and city authorities would also be involved in the development of indicators.

Other domains where developments would be welcome are as follows: higher quality of the statistics on mobility (as the existing ones are based on the consular information, while many EU citizens do not register in their respective consulate in the mobility experience), more gender breakdowns, statistics on traineeships at national and European levels, increased use of administrative data.

Monitoring the sustainable development goals in an EU context and enhancing data in agricultural, transport and energy statistics

ESAC appreciates the interest in making the SDG indicators more encompassing and fine-grained. However, this process has led to a very large number of SDG indicators. ESAC wants to raise attention to the trade-off among: (a) the number of indicators; (b) the burden imposed on NSIs, citizens and companies; (c) the quality of indicators in each member state; and (d) the comparability and interoperability across member states. ESAC recommends a review of the SDG indicators with this trade-off in mind and with the intention to focus the selection of SDG indicators on quality and interoperability as well as on a strict link to strategic EU policy targets.

Further enhancing energy statistics is important. The release of disaggregated energy prices for all member states, more timely information for early estimates of energy balances and more detailed breakdowns of energy consumption in industry, transport and services is very welcomed.

Further development of transport-related indicators will deliver more information about the shift towards more environmentally-friendly transport modes, passenger mobility and road traffic. Particularly the development of statistics about the usage of light utility vehicles in urban areas will provide new insights. To ensure efficiency and limit the response burden, existing data and information should be used.

Specific attention should also be devoted to energy poverty, through the use of the EU Domestic Energy Poverty Index (EDEPI), which monitors the distribution of energy poverty in the EU, reflecting differences in geography, climate, income levels and policy action. In this context, reference to the EU energy poverty observatory¹ could also be useful.

It would be interesting to explore what can be achieved on the sub-national level for energy related statistics: energy poverty, energy consumption, energy related emissions, etc. can vary greatly between regions and data at sub-national level is not always readily available.

3. Horizontal Priorities

ESAC welcomes that the mentioned horizontal priorities stress the potential of using administrative data and data from private sources. However, these issues are addressed mainly from a technical perspective (e.g. integrating big data into regular statistical production, exploring innovative methods for processing privately-held business-sensitive microdata without requiring data sharing, etc.).

Towards comparative European statistics

ESAC appreciates the harmonisation efforts of NSIs and Eurostat and the emphasis on the use of new sources. On the other hand, differences in survey designs and outcomes, in the availability and accessibility of alternative data sources, stand in the way of comparing

¹ <https://www.energypoverty.eu/>

outcomes across countries and of truly European statistics. Input harmonisation can, to a certain extent, minimise the lack of comparability.

Implementing user-centred dissemination services and innovative production systems

ESAC appreciates the focus on users when it comes to dissemination services and innovative production systems. However, the Committee would like to stress that, first and foremost, it would be vital to ascertain who the users are and to which extent this group is heterogeneous (as is being attempted in the context of DIGICOM). Interactive communication and user analytics capabilities are useful tools to further the use and understanding of statistics. These tools should be directed at users with different levels of statistical literacy, including children. Without differentiating between types of users communication may prove extremely difficult.

Concerning access to privately-held business-sensitive microdata, ESAC refers to its letter sent on 25 July 2018 to the Eurostat Director-General pointing out the advantages but also the challenges of privately-held data in the production process of official statistics. The draft strategic priorities mention the exploration and testing of new methods for processing privately-held business-sensitive microdata without requiring data sharing between involved stakeholders. In this respect, the Committee looks forward to the implementation of the *Bucharest Memorandum on official statistics in a datafied society (Trusted Smart Statistics)*.

Investing in new skills for official statistics and promoting quality frameworks

As the main training instrument of the ESS, the European statistical training programme is important in the development of NSI experts. However, ESAC would also like to stress the need for comprehensive, concrete strategies to develop basic statistical skills/literacy and to identify who are the non-users and why they do not use European statistics.

The necessity of improving statistical literacy can never be overstated. The draft strategic priorities rightly mention this. The specific statistical needs of journalists, who have an important role in informing public opinion, should also be taken into account in this respect.

Developing partnerships and fostering statistical cooperation

ESAC warmly welcomes the development of closer partnerships with the research and academic communities as well as other stakeholders to reach new user groups, improve statistical literacy, exploit new data sources, develop methods, and benefit from new technologies and trends such as Artificial Intelligence.