



# Opinion on the Draft 2024 Work Programme for European statistics

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## General comments

The ‘2024 Work Programme for the European statistics’ (‘the work programme’) will be the 4<sup>th</sup> annual work programme under the Single Market Programme 2021-2027 (SMP) that covers a period that has already seen major crises with the pandemic and the war in Ukraine adding to the major challenge of the ecological transition and the Green Deal.

As we enter the second half of the SMP period, and therefore a turning point for the overall implementation of the 2021-2027 programme, the draft work programme presented in the three annexes to the letter of the Director-General of Eurostat to the ESAC<sup>1</sup>, corresponds very well to this stage with many projects to be completed in 2024. It reflects well both the SMP objectives and the statistical developments that have been and will continue to be made to meet the challenges of the successive crises outlined in the letter from the Director-General of Eurostat.

However, the ESAC believes that the draft work programme would benefit from being presented in a slightly more detailed way to make it easier to understand, with indications of the main areas of development for each section and their expected impact.

With a total of 33 projects still underway in 2024, some of which began in 2023, the draft work programme shows relevant and growing activity which is much appreciated by the ESAC.

This draft work programme will be marked by a number of important new regulations, some of which are due to be implemented as early as 2024, and others which will hopefully be adopted soon. ESAC welcomes these developments, which should bring considerable improvements to the ESS:

- The new ESOP regulation (*‘European Statistics on Population and Housing’*), which will base the compilation of statistics mainly on the use of administrative data, should make it possible to obtain the basic statistics required at EU level more quickly. Other means will be needed to get statistics on discrimination, a very sensitive issue in many Member States where the collection of such data is not allowed, particularly in the case of administrative data.
- Several regulations implementing Regulation 2022/2379 in the field of agriculture will provide important data for environmental issues.
- ESAC welcomes the modernisation of the *‘Labour Market Statistics on Businesses (LBC)’* regulation. It is essential to extend the coverage to enterprises with fewer than 10 employees. Should this lead to difficulties for small enterprises, it is recommended that a balance is struck between the burden on data providers and the significant value to users.
- ESAC also supports the general objectives of the proposal to amend Regulation 223/2009. It is essential to facilitate the use, for official statistics, of the full potential of the digitalisation and in particular of new data sources. Moreover, sharing of data within the ESS and with other producers of European Statistics is essential to ensure high quality and consistency of statistics. ESAC reiterates its wish to give greater visibility in the regulation

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. ARES (2023) 3273151 of 10/05/2023.

to the role of users (ESAC and NUCs) in the ESS programme and to cooperation with academia.

Some of these important developments will require significant additional work for the ESS, particularly in terms of the methodology for making full use of the new data sources. The 2024 programme's activities in terms of innovative technologies, for which cooperation with researchers is strongly recommended by ESAC, are very much in line with these needs.

The Committee also wishes to draw attention to the accelerating challenges posed by climate changes, the major efforts required for the ecological transition and sustainable development in a deteriorating context of weak growth, high inflation, and international tensions, while certain inequalities continue to pose risks. The statistical system used to measure economic growth is facing new problems, having to integrate environmental impacts into its measurement. At the same time, the long-term effects of the pandemic combined with increasing digitalisation, are beginning to have a major impact on the work processes of part of the economy and society, creating opportunities but also new risks of inequalities.

Public policies will play a crucial role and their effective implementation will require both new data that are nationally and internationally comparable for dealing with global issues, and new data that are locally available. Therefore, priorities and the levels of geographic disaggregation, which may vary from one domain to the other, need to be discussed with users.

Against this backdrop, the Committee is of the opinion that the demand for new statistics will continue and even accelerate in the future, posing new challenges and requiring a high degree of flexibility in the work programme:

- The need for appropriate, timely and high-quality official statistics is more important than ever. The Committee appreciates and supports the draft emphasis placed by the draft programme on innovative technologies, for which three projects are still underway and are expected to be completed in 2024 or 2025. The Committee will be pleased to see the results of the methodological developments to facilitate the use of data from mobile network operators with a proof of concept for population and tourism statistics, and the launch of a beta version of the IT platform that will make it possible to better exploit the multiple sources of data in the transport and mobility sector, of great importance for the Green Deal. The Committee will also be closely observing the '*Trusted Smart Statistics - Smart surveys hub*' project, which is highly important in enabling the ESS to conduct smart surveys and move towards citizen statistics, which will be crucial in the current context.
- The increasing use of administrative data and new data sources (as foreseen in the amended version of Regulation 223/2009) will be most useful, as it will provide new rich data without any additional burden on respondents. The use of these new data sources requires important efforts to ensure data quality and comparability, as highlighted by ESAC in previous opinions. This aspect could be given further consideration in the draft programme.
- However, in many cases, additional information in existing surveys and/or new surveys will be required. One example is the growing demand for data on groups discriminated against on the basis of the six grounds of discrimination set out in the EU Treaties. The Committee welcomes Eurostat's initiative to discuss the way forward for such sensitive data. The Committee stresses that, because of their sensitive nature, administrative data are not good candidates for equality related statistics. Surveys should clearly be preferred here, outside the scope of the ESOP Regulation.
- The green transition will require a significant amount of new data as well, which will increase the workload of the ESS and the burden on respondents. Coordination of

requirements already imposed on companies by public policies is recommended to avoid duplicating the burden on respondents. In particular, there are potential synergies with '*Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)*' reporting (corporate carbon footprint). With the Commission's new initiative on sustainability requirements linked to the '*Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive*', reporting will be mandatory for large companies and a large proportion of small companies will be involved through the supply/production chains, a rich source of information. To be able to fully exploit this information, easy accessibility by both humans and machines will be of the essence.

With this in mind, ESAC wishes to recommend the following:

- Resources: ESAC reiterates its recommendation to support official statistics and not go any further in reducing statistics; resources for new surveys will also be needed.
- More flexibility in the annual work programme for European statistics: ESAC supports more experimental data; grants can also be used for this purpose.
- New needs and priorities: Consultation with users at national and European levels will be crucial for defining priorities. In this perspective, ESAC supports the view that its activities for developing relations with the National Users Councils (NUCs) – one of the recommendations of the European Court of Auditors (ECA) made in its 2022 report<sup>2</sup> on EU Statistics - should be included in and supported by the programme. ESAC reiterates its wish to give more visibility to the role of users and NUCs in the development of the ESS work programme in the amended Regulation 223/2009.
- Greater cooperation with the academic world: The academic community plays a special role, and discussions on new indicators, new data and innovative tools require deeper cooperation with researchers. The Committee notes that researchers can apply for grants directly or as sub-contractors. In the current context, the Committee suggests comprehensive planning to ensure and monitor cooperation with researchers on the many important issues facing the ESS.

### **Recommendations on key areas of the draft annual work programme and important on-going changes**

As indicated in the general comments, the activities and grants in the draft work programme are not sufficiently detailed in the current presentation. For example, details on the implications of the amendment of part of ESA 2010 core statistics would be very much welcome. Activities are indexed according to SMP headings, which is important. However, this does not make it easy to see where the main trends of the programme are and how the different activities contribute together. As a result, the following comments and recommendations focus on some key issues in the current context with only a few references to the list of activities described in the draft programme.

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<sup>2</sup> [ECA Special Report 26/2022](#)

- ***Regional statistics to support the design and evaluation of territorial development policies, by providing timely and comprehensive statistical indicators on regions, cities and rural areas***

As mentioned in the general comments, indicators at local level (regional and sub-regional level) are crucial for monitoring public policies on issues that are high on the EU agenda. Eurostat's work in the field of regional statistics is commendable. In particular, the regional yearbook is a unique tool for raising awareness on existing data and current developments in this field.

Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in the indicators used in important composite indicators or scoreboards. These gaps have been highlighted in previous and recent studies carried out by the European Committee of the Regions in areas such as the '*Sustainable Development Goals*', the '*Social Scoreboard*' or the '*Regional Innovation Scoreboard*'<sup>3</sup>. The European Committee of the Regions is in the process of identifying data gaps at regional level. The European Commission's current work on foresight has many gaps in this area, leading to a lack of foresight capacity when it comes to designing policies at sub-national level.

With this in mind, ESAC stresses the need to further reflect on these gaps and to plan the provision of indicators available at regional and local level, prioritising those for which the logistical, technical and financial limitations may be easier to resolve. For example, the "*introduction of a regional dimension into Resilience dashboards in particular and Strategic Foresight approaches in general, making use of existing regional statistical datasets e.g. those already collected for the various regional indices collected at EU level*"<sup>4</sup> could be a good way of improving the monitoring of territorial development without entailing excessive new costs for Eurostat.

- ***Inflation***

Given the current situation, price data for all EU Member States is extremely important. The Committee appreciates the large amount of information and data on this subject, for instance the very useful '*Harmonised Indices of Consumer Prices (HICP)*'. ESAC stresses the importance of assessing the impact of public policies (subsidies, contracts, etc.) on the comparability of energy and food prices and supports the efforts made in this direction. Price developments related to housing, including the owner-occupied segment, should receive more attention, possibly including the publication of experimental statistics.

- ***Substitution effects***

The combined effects of inflation, digitalisation, energy issues due to the war in Ukraine, the long-term effects of the pandemic and the requirements of the Green Deal are leading to multiple substitution effects for which data are important to monitor the changes for public policies. This could be further highlighted in the draft programme.

#### *Energy:*

Statistics on energy are at the top of the EU agenda, and the Committee appreciates the important work undertaken by the ESS under emergency conditions which will continue under the 2024 work programme to collect adequate, timely and comparable data necessary to meet the requirements of policies and Commission Regulation (EU) 2022/132. A large amount of valuable statistics is available on Eurostat website. Additional efforts towards implementing more frequent data collection on energy markets

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<sup>3</sup> See study reports "[Integration of Geographic and Statistical data for better EU policy making](#)", "[European Regional Social Scoreboard](#)" and "[The Future of Regional Smart Specialisation Strategies: Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient](#)"

<sup>4</sup> In [https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/studies/Documents/CoR\\_Geodata\\_report.pdf](https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/studies/Documents/CoR_Geodata_report.pdf), Conclusion, page iv.

and prices (including taxes, duties, charges, etc.), with the ultimate aim of obtaining monthly data, would be highly appreciated. Monthly frequency would allow users to analyse and react in a timely manner. In this case, for example, a more granular breakdown of energy-related categories in the input-output tables would allow a better tracing of the pass-through of different energy inputs (and their prices) across the production network. This is not only relevant in the context of the recent energy crisis, but also from the perspective of assessing the impact of changes in the energy system implied by the transition to a low-carbon economy. Furthermore, it is not straightforward to find data to monitor substitution effects and changes in the behavior of businesses and citizens which are essential for the Green Deal. As far as price data is concerned, there is a need for a more timely and detailed understanding of the factors driving changes in energy prices.

- *Transports:*

There is an urgent need to invest in new transport statistics so that public policies can keep pace with the necessary changes in this area. Several activities are underway and will be facilitated by investment in methodological tools with a beta version of the IT platform that will enable the multiple sources of data in the transport and mobility sector to be better exploited. The linking of available data from different sources, including the linking of microdata and the use of complementary sources, should be promoted to generate the desired information, while avoiding excessive reporting burden. It is also suggested that consideration be given to streamlining the joint questionnaire on inland transport statistics (Eurostat/ITF/UNECE).

- *Circular economy and second hand-market:*

The development of the circular economy is at the heart of better development. The Committee appreciates the related activities in the draft work programme and supports more developments in this very broad domain, particularly through grants. Currently, the statistics available focus on aspects very much related to public policies. It is also important to monitor the second-hand market driven by citizens behaviours. The popularity of the second hand-market, which began before the pandemic and was stimulated by it, is set to increase, driven by the digitalisation, environmental awareness, and inflation, with many consequences for certain sectors in the economy.

o ***Digitalisation***

The digital economy and the introduction of artificial intelligence ('AI') are rapidly transforming a growing part of the economy with new ways of producing (transformation of work processes) and selling new goods to meet new needs, which creates new challenges for statistics. In the draft annual work programme, activities in the context of 'digital transformation' are mentioned without much detail. There is no information on the planning of new statistics with the possible use of privately held data sources, the timetable or content. There are conceptual and methodological issues that require discussions to share definitions and better measure the digitalisation of the economy and its impacts, ensuring comparability between countries. Strengthening European and national legal frameworks for data sharing and access to new data sources, as proposed in the current process of amending Regulation 223/2009, would enable progress to be made.

o ***Industrial dependency, re-industrialisation***

Dealing with strategic dependencies and re-industrialisation is another topic high on the EU agenda. The coverage of indicators, data availability or the existence of users' needs for this important topic could be made more visible in the current draft programme.

- ***Social cohesion***

ESAC welcomes the draft programme activities on social cohesion. More than ever, as mentioned above, it is crucial for users to have statistics at adequate local levels, which might vary depending on the statistical domain. The Committee would also like to draw attention on the impact of digital technology and the artificial intelligence on the whole functioning of society, which can rapidly generate a significant digital divide impacting social cohesion.

- ***Health***

Health is a top priority for European citizens, and the pandemic has highlighted the need for more and more up-to date data in health-related fields. Climate change is also contributing to raise the visibility and political importance of this issue which is now part of the ESS priority-setting mechanism. The ESAC welcomes this process very much, which underlines the importance of involving users and producers from the outset of discussions.

- ***Ecological transition and the Green Deal***

The ecological transition and the Green Deal are of paramount importance. They require several new statistics using new data sources. The Committee welcomes the activities for monitoring the ecological transition, spread across different areas of the draft work programme. Given the acceleration of climate change, new demands may emerge, which would require some flexibility to be retained in the programme. An important question, given the increasing amount of data required, is how to maintain the balance between the need to provide statistics at the international level for such a worldwide issue and the needs to provide statistics at the territorial level that users require to monitor policy implementation. In this regard, the Committee would welcome a more visible place in the draft programme for a continuous dialogue with users on how to move forward, taking into account priorities and available data.

- ***Cooperation with academia***

As noted in the general comments, cooperation with academia will be more crucial than ever in addressing the significant new challenges facing the ESS. ESAC welcomes the support of the EMOS in the draft programme. However, cooperation cannot be limited to the EMOS objectives. Although researchers are probably involved in discussions on new indicators, new data, and innovative tools and in some cases benefit from grants, there is no tool available for ESAC for monitoring the involvement of researchers in these discussions. ESAC also wishes to draw attention to access for research purposes to detailed microdata (*'Secure Use Files'*) for which a remote access has been set up. ESAC welcomes the long-awaited implementation of this access, more than ten years after the regulation authorising the use of this data. However, for the time being it remains fairly limited and restricted to two surveys. Many research projects (particularly those focusing on immigration and integration which are important themes on the EU agenda) require the use of detailed data of the *'Labour Force Surveys (LFS)'* and the *'Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)'*, which are currently only available in the form of *'Scientific Use Files'* and not as *'Secure Use Files'* via remote access. The Committee would also recommend increasing the visibility of the new remote access system on the dedicated section of Eurostat website.

- ***Communication and dissemination***

ESAC welcomes the ongoing development of the Eurostat website and will remain attentive to the implementation of well-differentiated sections according to the type of user. The Committee also

wishes to emphasise once again the need to improve the statistical knowledge among the general public. The annual draft work programme devotes only one reference to this issue (in the initial part of the document: *'objectives pursued'*). ESAC cannot find any action in the draft work programme to address this issue, as better communication, production and dissemination of European Statistics, is not synonymous with improving statistical literacy. Also, the concept of the *'general public'* is very broad, and covers multiple types of citizens, with different levels of statistical knowledge, interests etc. The ESAC considers that a majority of users would presumably belong to the group of *'Non-users who might be Potential-users'* (people who are not looking for data, thinking it is something difficult to understand and who are not aware of the relevance and richness of the data). Therefore, the promotion of European statistics as a trustworthy source should include actions aimed at this audience, notably by strengthening the dialogue, not only with users of European statistics, but also with *'potential users'* or *'occasional users'*.

The action 6<sup>5</sup> includes three topics: the first and the second are very concrete. The third – *'Other activities related to Better communication of European statistics and its values by promoting it as a trustworthy source in tackling disinformation.'* – is quite vague and should be clarified by adding more topics. The ESAC suggests considering the inclusion of a *'light metadata'* with easy-to-understand explanations and definitions associated with data indicators or other activities. Better communication is very important, but it is also important to develop topics on better understanding of data by the general public.

Finally, and echoing what has already been written in the *'Opinion of ESAC on the final evaluation of the implementation of the European Statistical Programme 2013-2020'*<sup>6</sup>, the proposal for a new measure for statistical literacy is important: *"Many initiatives to promote statistical literacy exist. But it would be crucial to measure, regularly and in a comparable way across countries, the impact of those efforts and why statistical literacy is so important for democracy and the well-being of society."* In fact, we all recognise the importance of this issue, but no one knows where we stand or whether we are on the right track.

As possible actions, ESAC suggests:

- Include a *'light metadata'* on the website – aimed at the general public – to make the data indicators easier to understand. Definitions are a good example about this difficulty: apparently, most of them are written by and for specialists. An effort to have simple descriptions as well, and not just the official ones, could be very useful.
- Develop content material for statistics produced by Eurostat and the NSIs, to be included in school curricula, from secondary level of education upwards, on the role of statistics in everyday life and the importance of statistical literacy for social cohesion, which also means increasing the proximity of the dialogue with schools and universities.
- Evaluate the potential of AI (i.e., chatbots) for the correct use of statistical data by young citizens. The link to official statistics should be considered from an early stage onwards and EU institution could take a proactive role here.
- Prepare an update of the DIGICOM (*'Digital communication, User analytics and Innovative products'*) project, to identify new user needs, cooperation with stakeholders and new ways of communicating European statistics. The last one took place in 2016-2019<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Action 6- Award of grants without a call for proposals in the area of 'Better communication of European statistics and its values by promoting it as a trustworthy source in tackling disinformation'

<sup>6</sup> [ESAC Doc. 2021/14](#)

<sup>7</sup> <https://cros-legacy.ec.europa.eu/DIGICOM>