



European Statistical
Advisory Committee

Opinion on the Annual 2017 Work Programme

1 March 2016

**Advice on the
strategic priorities for the draft 2017 Annual Work Programme**

Executive summary

The strategic priorities for the 2017 Annual Work Programme contribute to reaching the objectives set out in the multiannual programme and also take account new emerging initiatives. The strategic priorities also contribute to reaching the strategic goals of the European Statistical System's Vision 2020, while keeping a balance between economic, social and environmental issues.

The European Statistical Advisory Committee (ESAC) welcomes the initiatives in various statistical domains aiming at modernising the production system of European statistics. ESAC also fully supports exploring possibilities stemming from new opportunities such as Big Data and improving the interoperability of existing data sources.

Having said that, the feasibility of the 2017 Annual Work Programme is at risk. This is due to the need to develop the statistical system and services and maintain current production, despite having limited resources. These concerns were also acknowledged by the Ecofin Council in December 2015.¹

The European Statistical System (ESS) needs to be adequately resourced in order to anticipate emerging statistical needs and to cater for unexpected information needs. A pertinent example of this is migration. In order to cover present day migration in all its facets, we need sample surveys and innovative use of new types of data sources. When precise counts are not available, estimates should be used to meet the need for information on migration statistics.

If we are to have well informed decision-making at regional level, European statistics will need to provide sufficient geographical breakdowns of data. New partnership models for the provision of data and more intensive collaboration with academia might be key to meeting this challenge. Given that the quality of statistics largely depends on the accuracy of survey responses, statistics will need to be communicated better to many different stakeholders, including respondents.

The ESS provides the majority of data for the Commission's 10 main priority areas, but more development is needed to cover areas such as social indicators and statistics on energy. The increasing role of indicators in policy- and decision-making means that the ESS must pay attention to the way indicators are developed and used. Indicators and improved representations of uncertainties in indicators and statistics are designed to help us understand uncertain and complex phenomena. Indicators are much in demand, but there may be large differences in their respective types and usages. Eurostat and its partners in the ESS need to engage with other players and stakeholders in the indicator-setting process. ESAC will look at this subject from the user's perspective in 2016.

¹ Ecofin conclusions on EU statistics 8 December 2015

<http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15003-2015-INIT/en/pdf>.

INDICATORS

Europe 2020 (1)²

The consistency of Europe 2020 indicators throughout the whole period covered by the strategy is of high importance. In order to promote the use of common indicators for measuring progress towards strategic policy targets such as those in the Europe 2020 strategy, the indicator selection process should aim to be as inclusive as possible at all levels of governance. This will also make it possible to achieve sufficient buy-in of the strategy and its targets. Furthermore, more attention should be paid to developing outcome indicators that can measure the strategy's tangible impact on the ground.

Despite sharp differences in how national labour markets work, it is essential and urgent to produce reliable statistics on labour mobility in the context of the EU Single Market and also with regard to the refugee situation. ESAC highly appreciates the development of more indicators on labour market flows, especially on year-to-year transitions.

ESAC would welcome continuous yearly monitoring of progress in reducing social exclusion, particularly using the material deprivation indicator. The focus should be on monitoring specific groups such as less educated people, migrants, older people and the unemployed. The involvement of data users in the dialogue process is essential in order to take into account user needs.

Monitoring change in social conditions at sub-national level is also crucial. In addition, indicators are needed for setting targets and measuring progress at EU, national, regional and city level. Good quality and timely social statistics allow for the geographical breakdown of data. This gives a comprehensive picture of people and households, their living conditions and environment, well-being and lifestyles. For the statistics to fulfil cross-domain concepts and contents, more attention is needed on data interoperability and comparability, standards and sample size. The statistical data and survey data should make it possible to break data down to at least NUTS 3 level.

The timely publication of headline target indicators for Europe 2020 on the Eurostat website is an important input for national policy- and decision-makers. The role of statistics in supporting the Europe 2020 process and the 'GDP and beyond' initiative imposes an increasing burden on national statistics institutes. Therefore it is important to streamline and coordinate the processes of providing these data.

It will also be important to provide more information — including at regional and local level — on the investment gap identified by the Juncker Commission. There will be a particular need for information on public infrastructure to measure the impact of the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). It will also be important to gather more evidence on developments in sub-national public finance.

Economic governance (2)

The public sector is undergoing a lot of reform in many EU countries. This will add to the challenges involved in setting up the necessary framework for introducing European public sector accounting standards (EPSAS), which is a major project to harmonise highly disparate accounting systems. ESAC supports collaboration and

² The numbers in brackets refer to the heading number in the initial request outlining the strategic priorities.

the need for adequate resources to implement the EPSAS project successfully. Given the challenge and potential impact of EPSAS for local and regional authorities in many Member States (as indicated in the 2012 IPSAS consultation), local and regional authorities ought to be properly involved in the ongoing discussion. This also needs to be based on a realistic time-frame and an impact assessment.

Economic globalisation (3)

The work on the EU multi-country input-output tables will provide an additional input to international statistics. ESAC would like to be kept regularly informed of developments in this field.

ESAC welcomes the ongoing work on further improving the indicators and statistical information available on economic globalisation and global value chains, which could be complemented by sufficient geographical detail to support national and regional policy-making.

ACCOUNTING FRAMEWORKS

Economic and social performance (4)

ESAC welcomes the methodological and production framework for macroeconomic statistics as part of the implementation of ESA 2010. Indicators on poverty and social exclusion are relevant to the Europe 2020 initiative and ESAC supports increasing consistency in the fields of social protection, health and education. It is also important to pursue the geo-referencing³ of the data produced. Many social problems are clustered in a limited number of regions in Europe, so sub-national data are often more suited to providing a more detailed picture than national averages.

ESAC agrees with the proposed priorities. Timely social statistics have become increasingly important due to the economic and refugee crisis. The number and structure of the population is changing rapidly and population dynamics and migration flows are in constant fluctuation.

Since demography is interrelated in many ways with social, health, educational and economic issues, projections are needed, including short term ones. In the short term, migration statistics must focus on the number and geographical distribution of migrants. Migration statistics must be given even higher priority in the ESS at European, national and sub-national levels.⁴ A strategy for migration statistics requires making use of estimates when precise counts are not available. The information gathered on this subject should include broad documentation of migrants' qualifications and their cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. This work will require serious collaboration between academics and official statisticians.

Environmental sustainability (5)

In the light of the results coming from integrated economic–environment account frameworks and new environmental accounts modules, ESAC supports the 2014-2018 European strategy for environmental accounts, adopted by the European Statistical System Committee.

³ Mapping the social dimension of EMU, Committee of Regions:

<http://cor.europa.eu/en/documentation/studies/Documents/Feasibility-Mapping-Social-Dimension-EMU.pdf>.

⁴ See ESAC [opinion](#) on migration statistics of 23 November 2015.

DATA

Business (6)

ESAC recognises that the proposed framework regulation for integrating business statistics (FRIBS) remains an ambitious project with a number of issues yet to be solved. It also welcomes the efforts proposed in FRIBS to improve the coverage of statistics on the services sector and the accompanying public consultation. However, in ESAC's view, the questionnaires used in the public consultations could be better adapted to the target audiences.

People's Europe (7)

The proposed priorities cover the objective to improve robustness and timeliness of social statistics. Social research also needs longitudinal data on individual neighbourhood level in addition data at the EU, national and regional levels. Moreover, data on a range of factors relating to youth issues needs to be made available on regional level so that appropriate policy action can be taken. This will also make it possible to add regional data to the Youth Monitor of the European Commission.⁵

Geospatial, environmental, agricultural and other sectoral statistics (8)

ESAC values high quality data on energy statistics, which it regards as an important basis for an effective energy policy. ESAC also recommends publishing statistics on consumer prices for petroleum products (currently published by DG Energy). As a way to further reduce response burden, ESAC supports strengthened cooperation with other organisations, the use of appropriate administrative data and the adaptation of existing surveys before new surveys are drawn up. When preparing new legislative initiatives, such as the Regulation on the delimitation of geographical regions, cities and regions could be included in stakeholder consultations.

The systematic application of territorial impact assessments within the EU institutions as part of better and more targeted EU legislation requires high quality and timely data for regions and cities.

NEW METHODS OF PRODUCTION OF EUROPEAN STATISTICS

ESS quality management (9)

ESAC supports a revision of the European Statistics Code of Practice as everyday use seems to indicate that some indicators need to be made clearer. ESAC also recommends that the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) provide guidelines for future peer reviews, for example on arrangements for interviews or advance information for interview partners.

Multipurpose statistics and efficiency gains in production (11)

The ongoing modernisation process, which involves moving towards more integrated and comprehensive production systems, will facilitate flexible data processing and even lead to a customised statistical service. In the long run, modernisation will help balance the costs and resources of statistics. The innovative use of administrative

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/youth/dashboard/index_en.htm.

sources for various statistics will help, especially as administration is going more digital in all organisations, providing smarter opportunities for statistical products and services. Efficiency gains can also be expected from the merging of statistical and geographical data and from the fact that more and more data sources are available as open data.

ESAC wholeheartedly supports Eurostat exploring concrete Big Data applications with other DGs and actively participating in international initiatives to deploy Big Data in statistical production. Moreover, given the large-scale digitisation of our societies, the work programme could also mention the potential implications of citizen science, crowdsourcing and participatory sensing methods for the development of official statistics and indicators.

However, the emphasis on Big Data should not undermine other efforts to improve methods of producing reliable statistical information from traditional means such as surveys. Overall, the modernisation of statistical production should be accomplished uniformly across member states, with Eurostat having the central role.

Dissemination and communication (12)

ESAC fully supports free and easy access to European statistics for all. In order to strengthen the role of the ESS so that it becomes the first data source on European statistics for all users, ESAC recommends expanding the availability of Eurostat's statistical releases on other EU websites and vice versa.

To make statistics accessible to the general public, Eurostat should complement the existing metadata of statistical releases with a lighter, shorter version that focuses on the essential information, using language that can be understood by non-expert users. Short online thematic modules could also be developed. These would be based on European statistics and could be used in schools and integrated into curricula programmes (e.g. they could provide historical facts about population trends, urbanisation and environmental issues). The language and contents of such modules should be adapted so that they can be used at different stages of the education system.

More detailed user profiling would be helpful in order to achieve better targeting of communication. ESAC's views on this subject were summarised in the recent paper 'The Users of Statistics and their role in the European Society' and were incorporated into the DIGICOM (Digital communication, user analytics and innovative products) project. Given the ambition of the DIGICOM project and its planned duration over many years, it should deliver outcomes on a regular basis along the road to achieving its ultimate goals.

Training, innovation and research (13)

ESAC appreciates current European training and education activities in statistics, such as the European Statistical Training Programme (ESTP) and the European Master in Official Statistics (EMOS). The producers of European statistics should strive to share best practices and common innovative approaches in order to harmonise methodologies used to produce high quality statistics. ESAC would recommend having an explicit list of actions to achieve these goals.

Involving the academic community would be beneficial as this would improve statistical production and the quality of official statistics. In addition to joint conferences such as the Conference of European Statistics Stakeholders, other activities should also be envisaged.

PARTNERSHIP WITHIN THE EUROPEAN STATISTICAL SYSTEM AND BEYOND

Partnership (14)

Partnerships and networks are valuable for capacity building and efficiency gains. Common standards and data interoperability are reached through cooperation. This benefits each party and also benefits users of statistics and statistical data. ESAC would like to see strengthened cooperation with other statistics producers, especially with the European System of Central Banks (ESCB). As both the ESS and ESCB are main data producers, constructive and cooperative dialogue is a crucial precondition for achieving high quality data. According to the Scheveningen Memorandum, the use of Big Data in the context of official statistics requires the building of synergies and partnerships with experts and stakeholders from various domains, while also including owners of private data sources.

In times of declining financial resources, cooperation with the ESS and the coordination of national statistics systems are essential in order to obtain timely data and homogenous time series, especially for variables measured at regional level. Consultation with users and stakeholders on projects that could be expanded or possibly discontinued are crucial in order to make efficient use of the available resources

ESAC appreciates the increasing use of administrative data in statistics and research into the possibilities on Big Data. In this area as in others, ESAC recommends that the ESS set up partnerships with academic researchers both within and outside the statistical sphere to work together on social observatories, analysing data and improving methodology.