



European Statistical
Advisory Committee

34th Meeting

23 November 2020

10.00 – 13.00

Videoconference

Minutes

ESAC Doc. 2020/13

1 – Welcome and adoption of the agenda

The Chair welcomed Mr Petru Sorin Dandea, new representative of the European Economic and Social Committee, replacing Mr Petr Zahradnik. The Chair reminded Mr Dandea's background as the Secretary General of the National Trade Union Confederation in Romania, and his long experience working with the Romanian advisory body. ESAC will benefit from the experience of Mr Dandea as a frequent user of statistics in daily activities.

The Chair also welcomed the Eurostat Director-General, Ms Mariana Kotzeva, and the Director of Eurostat's Directorate B (Methodology; Dissemination; Cooperation in the European Statistical System), Mr Eduardo Barredo Capelot.

The ESAC members adopted the agenda with two additional points, suggested by the Chair: 3.1 (Organisation of the activities of ESAC in 2021) and 3.2. (Future CEES Conference).

2 - Recent developments – Feedback from Eurostat

Ms Kotzeva thanked ESAC for its continuous interest in European statistics. She updated the ESAC members on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the production of European statistics and on the most relevant Covid-19 related topics.

- Covid-19

Ms Kotzeva explained that in the first weeks of lockdowns, the attention had focused on understanding the difficulties that the Member States were facing and the risks that the confinement measures were generating to the continuity, quality and timeliness of the primary data.

In response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 outbreak, Eurostat has quickly taken a number of concrete actions that answered the need to develop immediate solutions, guaranteeing the continuity of producing comparable and timely official statistics:

- Producing and publishing on the Eurostat website methodological guidelines to ensure comparability of the data. This step was highly appreciated also by the users from countries outside the EU.
- Considering users of new statistics as a high priority, Eurostat created a new Covid-19 dedicated section on its website to communicate and disseminate new data adequately.
- Sharing best practices with NSIs on producing experimental, more frequent and more timely data on business statistics, social and economic statistics as well as on measuring the social repercussions of the Covid-19 effects. This point is particularly important for the purposes of social inclusion and cohesion in the context of the current crisis.
- Focusing on the data relevance and the need for new data. The classical social statistics indicators became insufficient and new, more relevant and high frequency data came to play: labour market slack, monthly data on employment, weekly data on causes of deaths, etc. In terms of macroeconomic statistics, timely and accurate information on government interventions became essential.
- Reflecting on using data of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) to complement Eurostat data. However the differences in the definitions used by the ECDC and Eurostat need to be taken into account.

In concluding, Ms Kotzeva also reminded that the crisis has affected the way Eurostat works and the way in which Eurostat interacts with Member States. As an example, Eurostat has been using more digital ways of working (hybrid meetings, virtual verification and methodological missions, etc.).

The Chair took note of the very impressive Eurostat developments, and invited ESAC members to look at the new section on Eurostat's website.

ESAC members congratulated Eurostat on the way it has been handling the crisis. They rose the following questions:

Mr Hand was interested to know which lessons learnt could serve to make the ESS more robust when facing future crises.

Ms Valente Rosa asked about Eurostat plans in terms of communication, in particular on reaching out to young generations and raising their interest in statistics.

The ECB representative highlighted the very good collaboration between the ESS and the ESCB, especially on agreeing on the Eurostat / ECB joint table providing information on Covid-19 related transactions and their recording in Government Finance Statistics. The ECB also needs more timely information on labour market and business demography; therefore, it is looking forward to developments with the ESS Recovery Dashboard where this data will be accessible.

Mr Herteliu pointed out the new challenges that some national statistical systems could be experiencing with respect to the current situation. He described difficulties of the Romanian NSI to compute good indicators on population health. The problem arises from the fact that many Romanian citizens live abroad but they are registered in Romania. As a result, due to high migration of the Romanian citizens, it is difficult to have good data on population at local level.

Ms Kotzeva reminded that all the Covid-19 related methodological guidelines were prepared in cooperation with NSIs but also with other partners, such as ECB, OECD, ILO, IMF etc.

Emphasising that the crisis is an opportunity for improvements, Ms Kotzeva highlighted four lessons learnt from the first months of the crisis:

1) Eurostat faced the need to find and define mechanisms and guidelines to follow during a crisis. As a result, the German Presidency and Eurostat prepared a Memorandum on an ESS coordinated response to future crises, assembling common denominators and actions. During the high-level meeting taking place on 25-26 November, the Heads of NSIs should agree on the final text of that Memorandum.

2) Eurostat realised that the response to new demands for information needs to be coordinated within the ESS. Regulation 223/2009 provides for an 'European approach to statistics' which in practice means that in special cases Eurostat could initiate ad hoc statistical surveys or use modelling techniques to produce aggregates not based on national contributions.

3) Eurostat realised that it needed to increase its efforts in terms of innovation - to invest more on experimental statistics and to be able to access new data sources.

4) In a time where the search for official data has increased, the appropriate communication of statistics is very important. The trust in official statistics has significantly increased during crises. And Eurostat has a key role to play in providing and communicating figures. A targeted approach to

different audiences, including very young people, is crucial to fight disinformation. In this respect, Ms Kotzeva informed that Eurostat has launched its Instagram account to reach out the wide public via another channel of social media. Aiming to increase the interest of the young generation in official statistics, Eurostat also launched a European Statistical Competition for universities and schools.

- European Green Deal (EGD)

Ms Kotzeva stressed that the EGD is a high priority for the European Commission. The European Green Deal touches a broad range of areas and it will put pressure on resources, obliging to reconsider the priorities. As the policy context takes shape very fast and reaction time for statisticians may be short in particular for new statistical products, the ESS has to anticipate emerging needs.

The ECB representative suggested the EGD as a topic for future ESAC discussions. The outcome of such discussions could be used by the newly established expert group within the ESCB, which has been investigating the possible impact of the transactions undertaken in the context of the EGD on financial institutions and non-financial corporations.

- The peer review process

Mr Barredo Capelot presented the process of preparation of the third round of peer reviews, which will take place between 2021 and 2023 (9 countries in 2021, 12 countries in 2022, 10 countries in 2023). He reminded that while the Code of Practice is a self-regulatory instrument to which all statistical producers are committed, the peer reviews aim to verify its implementation. Eurostat, together with the Member States, has established a Task Force to prepare the peer review methodology and necessary documentation. The third round of peer reviews also includes a communication strategy to promote the value of European statistics and raise awareness to the ESS commitment to the Code. Seven or eight peer review teams, consisting of four experts each (1 NSI senior manager, 1 external expert, 1 NSI/external expert, 1 Eurostat staff) will conduct peer review visits in countries. Eurostat has been organising trainings and workshops with national peer review coordinators. ESGAB will conduct the peer review of Eurostat.

The Chair was interested in the possible role of ESAC in the peer review process. Ms Junker, the Head of the Eurostat Task Force Peer Reviews and Quality, replied that ESAC could promote the peer review exercise among users and explain them why the peer reviews are important.

Ms Bohatá linked the peer review exercise with the issue of quality of health statistics and asked whether ONAs providing health statistics should not be included in the peer reviews.

Ms Junker explained that in many countries the health agencies are not ONAs officially designated by their countries. However, during the workshops Eurostat could invite national coordinators to consider including ONAs and agencies of that character in the exercise.

- Pilot review on climate-change related statistics

Eurostat explained that the review of statistical domains is one of the elements of the new priority-setting mechanism developed by a Partnership Group Task Force and endorsed by the ESS Committee in February 2020. As a consequence, the future multiannual planning system established by Eurostat for 2021-2027 will include a critical and systematic review of existing requirements and parameters to increase the relevance of the statistics produced and to reduce costs and burden for the ESS and for respondents wherever possible. This will be initiated via a pilot.

The pilot review, to be launched in early 2021, will focus on climate-change related statistics as one important area where the role of official statistics is not fully established and where the ESS is not the main data provider. The coverage of the review will be based mainly on statistics produced by the European Statistical System or re-disseminated by Eurostat which can have a potential use for climate action policies, with a particular focus on transport and energy statistics. So far, such statistics are collected and published mainly for reasons other than climate-change policies but could be relevant in this context. The review will also build upon the UNECE Conference of European Statisticians (CES) recommendations on climate-change related statistics. It will include as well high-level user dialogues at European and national levels. Eurostat would appreciate if ESAC could consider its participation in the stakeholder meetings planned in 2021.

The Chair thanked Eurostat for the presentation on this important topic and suggested that the work of international organisations active in this field could be taken into account for the pilot. He also stressed that it is relevant to link this work with similar projects at international level.

- Feedback from the Business Statistics Directors Group

Michael Gold's feedback from the meeting of the Business Statistics Directors Group, which took place on 8-9 June, had been circulated before the meeting. The ESAC members did not have any comments on the document.

3 - Preparation of the forthcoming ESAC / UL seminar 'From citizen science to citizen statistics - Evidence for the transformation towards Sustainable Development'

Ms Koenig informed on the ongoing preparations of the ESAC / University of Luxembourg seminar, focusing on four main topics:

- i) Democratising the co-design and production process for evidence on sustainability as a basis for official statistics, policies and practices for sustainability transformations;
- ii) Methodological issues of working with non-traditional data sources and diverse evidence landscapes;
- iii) Designing official statistics and indicators for assessing dynamics of human-environment interactions taking a systems view;
- iv) Quality criteria and management: Embracing contingency, complexity and uncertainty.

The main objective of the discussions is to develop a venue that allows to explore these four questions in a dialogue with diverse perspectives from across the usual silos of policy makers, statisticians, academics, and innovators in practice, organised civil society and citizen volunteers. Ideally, all participants in all sessions should be as diverse as possible.

The plan is to have a two days main conference, allowing for transformative learning and offering opportunities for networking across silos, as well as a workshop with around 30 selected, highly engaged experts, before and/or after the conference. The participants in the workshop would develop a paper with main insights for publication in nature sustainability, and a group of diverse teams could collaborate on a Horizon Europe proposal exploring the potential of combining earth observation data and citizen science to inform policies.

The final report of the seminar would include policy recommendations to be widely disseminated across the European Statistical System, the European Commission, as well as through academia and NGOs.

The call for sessions could be published at the beginning of 2021. The possible date for the event is Q1 2022, but if the sanitary situation allows, it might take place earlier. Working groups might be organised ahead of the seminar. Ms Koenig invited the ESAC members to volunteer to help with the organisation.

The Chair congratulated for the impressive work done with respect to this conference. He suggested that, if possible, it might be reasonable to anticipate the date of the events to Q4 of 2021, maybe near the European Statistics Day (20 October 2021), so that the seminar can also celebrate ESD 2021 as usually done by ESAC.

Ms Koenig felt that organising the event earlier would mean to count on trade-off as topics are controversial and difficult and they require some time to prepare. If the crisis is over and the conference can take place at the end of 2021, it might be a smaller event. Mr Hand suggested organising a hybrid event and distributing the key notes to participants beforehand.

In Ms Kotzeva's view, the project of the conference as presented was missing a link to the official statistics and it seemed too broad. She also stressed that Eurostat should not be committed in a public call without having received an official letter, as this is a sensitive topic. The official letter should contain a concept note and a proposal for Eurostat's involvement. The Chair suggested that he could take part in the organising committee to ensure the direct connection to ESAC. Ms Koenig reminded that Mr Wirthmann from Eurostat is a member of the organising committee as well and committed to send an official letter to Eurostat about this conference in January 2021.

The ECB representative expressed her willingness to investigate whether the ECB could contribute to the organisation. Ms Vukovich mentioned that the NSIs are experimenting with 'citizens data', using remote sensing and trying to involve non-statisticians. She believed that it would be more realistic to plan a hybrid event.

3.1 Organisation of the activities of ESAC in 2021

Considering that the current sanitary situation might not allow for physical meetings, the Chair suggested two remote meetings in 2021, for a shorter time (2-3hours):

- beginning of May,
- October, close to the European Statistics Day. In case this meeting would take place as a physical one, it might be combined with the previously mentioned conference/seminar or it could take place in Rome. The motto of the ESD will need to be defined.

The ESAC Secretariat and the Chair will agree on the dates and the Secretariat will circulate them to ESAC members.

The Chair invited ESAC members to propose a series of topics connected with new needs of the users of statistics, to be discussed in future meetings. One of the topics could be 'Disinformation and fake news effects on official statistics', a topic that is generating great interest in Europe and has a great impact on European citizens. The lack of experience of the majority of citizens regarding statistics frequently induces an inability to distinguish between official statistics and alternative figures and disinformation. Thus, the Chair believed that Eurostat should help citizens with statistical tools that can detect disinformation and quickly reduce the exposure to it.

The Chair also proposed a project on 'Innovative statistics against disinformation', the natural language processing against fake news and disinformation.

Ms Valente Rosa suggested other topics, such as ‘Data protection and security’ and statistical literacy.

The ESAC Secretariat will send to the members a call for proposals of topics to be discussed by ESAC in 2021.

3.2 Future CESS Conference

The Chair believed that the CESS is a good tool of communication among statistics stakeholders connecting producers, methodologists and heavy users. It has strongly increased the relevance of ESAC in the European Statistical System. In the future, the main organisation will be the responsibility of ESAC with a university and a NSI, with the co-organisation of Eurostat and the ECB and without the involvement of private companies.

The Chair proposed to organise the next CESS in Rome in October 2022 in cooperation with ISTAT and La Sapienza University. He also asked for proposals to organise the CESS in a country that has not done so in the past.

Ms Kotzeva underlined the importance of finding appropriate topics for the CESS. Ms Valente Rosa suggested ‘migration’ as one topic that could be discussed.

4 - National User Councils (NUCs)

Ms Bohatá and Ms Valente Rosa prepared a questionnaire to collect information from Member States on NUCs.

Ms Bohatá explained that the purpose of this questionnaire is to enhance the communication of ESAC with NUCs. The already existing document on NUCs presented the information in a very heterogeneous manner; therefore, there was a need to develop a questionnaire to collect the necessary information in a structured way.

Ms Bohatá put forward several suggestions for improvements of question 4 of the questionnaire ‘Main tasks’, to eliminate possible comparability problems when drawing the results. She believed that information on the following would help better understand the roles of NUCs in the Member States:

- consulting users on their needs;
- providing opinion on statistical programmes of NSIs;
- approving the statistical program for the whole NSS (including ONAs);
- monitoring the fulfilment of the program;
- commenting on NSI’s functions, including budget;
- commenting on the NSI’s strategy;
- commenting on governance including institutional framework;
- commenting on the implementation of the Code of Practice;
- reporting on the governance of the NSI or of the whole NSS;
- involvement in methodological discussions including quality.

Ms Bohatá will amend the questionnaire and the Secretariat will send it to ESAC for comments.

The Chair concluded that the questionnaire could be ready beginning of 2021 for distribution to the NSIs.

5 – DIGICOM end report

Mr Martin Karlberg, from Eurostat's unit 'Methodology; Innovation in official statistics', presented the DIGICOM final report.

The Chair appreciated the results of the DIGICOM project and considered it very successful. He also supported having a second DIGICOM including some activities that ESAC has recommended to develop in the document approved in 2018 (ESAC Doc. 2018/28): "The role of communication in Statistical Science and the strategies of communication for statistics users", drafted by David Hand and the Chair himself.

After this first DIGICOM project, with the identification of PERSONAS who are different typologies of the users of statistics, it is now clear that a good consultation and an efficient communication infrastructure must be commensurate to the typology of users.

In particular, for heavy users (researchers, specialists, policymakers), Eurostat should extend the features of the website section on 'Experimental Statistics' (ES). As a result of the DIGICOM project and the European Statistics User Forum, a new communication tool could be created. It could be in the form of a 'research networking site', where researchers can: share data; papers on data, new practices of data production, new methodologies for data collection and analysis; ask and answer questions; and find collaborations between researchers of NSIs and universities. Its membership could be open to researchers of national and international institutions of the statistical systems, to universities, and to private experts with recognised experience. It could function on the basis of an accreditation system. Each member should have a user profile allowing to upload data, papers and open software. Users could also be allowed to follow the activities of other users and give their opinions on the importance of new statistical products, for example, regarding: economic, financial and political crises, new forms of economic production with global value chains, global demographic trends, migrations, poverty and the sustainable development goals.

For light users, NSIs and Eurostat should support a registration system with a search tool and a virtual assistant that helps the user understand which statistics and data are relevant to his/her interest. This follows the approach of 'Statistics Explained', the innovative electronic publishing platform and gateway for statistical information. When users seek updates, they immediately receive the latest statistics and data for which they are registered. In this case, the virtual assistant could give general information on the latest statistical developments in the NSIs and could collect requests for new information.

For non-users who might become potential users, ESAC, as suggested in the document of 2018, recommends the promotion of the culture of statistics by using short online training videos on statistical literacy. These are persons not looking for data, believing it is something hard to understand, and the lack of statistical knowledge for this segment may more frequently induce an inability to distinguish between official statistics and alternative figures and disinformation.

Ms Valente Rosa congratulated Eurostat on the very good project and outcomes. She asked whether the outcomes would be shared with NSIs to enhance sharing of best practices. She was also interested in what results of the innovations have actually been implemented, whether they are monitored and whether the number of users of statistics has actually increased.

Mr Hand enquired about the plans to follow up the innovations and about the development of the discrepancy explanation tool, which seemed to have stopped.

Ms Barredo Capelot clarified that the 2018 ESAC document served as input for several actions in the project and that the DIGICOM outcomes were included in the MAP, the multiannual tool to plan the statistical activities in the next European Statistical Programme 2021-2027. Mr Karlberg acknowledged that some deliverables of the project were not achieved (e.g. discrepancy explanation tool) but developments took place in other areas.

6 – AOB

2021 meetings of Directors Groups

The Secretariat will distribute by email the document on the annual planning of meetings of Director Groups for ESAC members to attend. The Chair invited the ESAC members interested to participate in those meetings to reply directly to the Secretariat.

Collaboration with ESGAB

The Chair apologised for not being able to propose a first draft of on the joint ESAC/ESGAB paper on 'Smart statistics and big data', and invited other ESAC members to contribute to the document.