



European Statistical Advisory Committee

OPINION

on

the draft European Statistical Programme 2013-2017

23 May 2011

Decision No 234/2008/EC establishing the European Statistical Advisory Committee (ESAC) states that the consultation of users, producers and respondents of statistical information is essential for the preparation and development of the Community's statistical information policy.

Article 2 of Decision No 234/2008/EC specifies that the Commission shall consult the Committee at an early stage in the preparation of the Community statistical programme. For the preparation of the European Statistical Programme 2013-2017, ESAC has been invited to give its opinion on the general objectives of the programme.

Background

Eurostat launched the preparation of the European Statistical Programme 2013-2017 (ESP) in April 2010. Purpose of the ESP is to set the statistical agenda for 2013-2017 and to serve as a general and flexible programming instrument. Whereas the ESP fully recognises the need to satisfy demands for ongoing and new statistical activities, it has to be taken into account that the European Statistical System (ESS) will continue facing severe resource constraints. Furthermore, also the reduction of response burden for providers and producers of statistical information has to be ensured. This will have to be addressed by more flexibility and streamlined, integrated statistical actions.

Currently, the ESP identifies 9 priority areas for statistical activities next to the regular production:

1. Europe 2020 and GDP and beyond
2. Economic governance
3. Business cycle
4. Climate change / environment
5. Globalisation
6. Single market monitoring
7. People's Europe
8. Increased use of the spatial dimension in statistics
9. Statistics for own resources, allocation of EU funds and other administrative purposes
10. Regular data production – social and information society statistics / business and trade statistics / macroeconomic statistics / agricultural statistics

ESAC is invited by the European Commission to provide an opinion on the draft objectives of the ESP 2013-2017 by Mid May 2011. The comments of the Committee will then be integrated in the discussion at the meeting of the European Statistical System Committee on 18-19 May 2011.

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1. Main issues

ESAC members are conscious of the resource constraints currently facing both national and European statistical agencies. Thus the need to prioritise statistical activities at this time is fully appreciated. It is also important to be vigilant concerning the response burden for suppliers of data since the need for financial stringency impacts on them (both public and private) too.

The task of identifying statistical series or activities which can be curtailed is proving difficult since there are inevitably users of all data who will argue against reductions. Nevertheless ESAC members seek to continue to work with official statisticians to assist in the process of categorising statistics according to their importance for the user communities. ESAC welcomes the proposal to incorporate sunset clauses into activities so that the need for continuation is regularly reviewed. This will be necessary so that funding can be released for new developments – which ESAC members feel is essential to ensure that the statistical systems remain vibrant and relevant. To this end ESAC supports, in principle, the proposal to address the need for more ‘experimental statistics’.

In addition to prioritising, and thus reducing the portfolio of statistical work, there are several other implications of the constrained resource environment:

- *increasing efficiency* through greater use of technology and the exploitation of data collected for other purposes. ESAC supports such proposals but recognises that the ability to make efficiency savings differs across the various Member States in part because of the maturity of their statistical systems which are at different stages in reaping such benefits. The increased use of technology can both improve the quality and timeliness of the data but also can reduce response burden.
- *sharing developments* one of the advantages of the European Statistical System is that Member States can share information to enable them to learn from one another – this should be encouraged and might be extended to the sharing of development activities to reduce the costs of new research. In addition the potential for partnership with other agencies should be explored (for example with environment agencies)
- *maximising data use* at a time of reduced resources it is even more vital to maximise the informed use of data which have been collected and processed at public cost. Thus ESAC members argue that progress is needed to support improved access to (anonymised, confidential) micro data and more timely access to macro data. Developments to increase the integration of data are also to be encouraged in order to maximise their value, as are improved electronic search tools to enable users to find and exploit existing data.

Addressing the specific list of objectives for the European Statistical Programme 2013-2017, ESAC would like to make the following comments:

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STATISTICAL CONTENT

1. **Europe 2020 and GDP and beyond:** High quality statistical information will be needed for the development and monitoring of the implementation of the Europe 2020 policy. Statistical information should be compiled in order to measure different dimensions of the quality of life and well-being.
 - more detailed information is necessary on the content of and rationale for *additional indicators* in the light of the resource environment - are these to involve new data collection or will they be reformulations of existing data?
 - will the existing surveys (e.g. LFS, EWCS) be used to collect all the additional data on quality of life and well-being or will new surveys need to be established?
 - how will the EU2020 dimension of life-long learning (and particularly the quality of life-long learning) be addressed if the vocational training survey is abolished?
 - the methodology of these new measures for quality of life should be discussed with expert groups who will be able to contribute their knowledge and understanding and thus may help to shortcut the development stages
 - some of the more resource-intensive streams, such as work on the quality of life indicators, may require considerable research. Independent research institutes could contribute to these tasks and may be entrusted to produce and disseminate relevant indicators (with clear methodological notes), thereby removing some of the burden from already strained NSIs. Relevant research themes, such as comparative analyses of various indicators, should be proposed for inclusion in the FP8.
2. **Economic governance:** statistical information relevant for EU-decision makers and the public related to the strengthened and integrated economic governance of the EU and the surveillance cycle integrating the Stability and Growth Pact and the economic policy needs to be provided.
 - more detailed information is needed on *indicators to measure competitiveness* (will these draw on statistics which already exist or new ones?), in this regard it would be useful to have more detail on the methodology
 - the consistent and timely application of the new transmission programmes under the new European System of National Accounts (ESA) is a high priority for the period 2013-2017
 - ESAC members note, in particular, the need to improve the quality and timeliness of government finance statistics

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3. **Business cycle:** Key short-term macroeconomic indicators and PEEIs will be provided.
- the timeliness of key macroeconomic short-term indicators as well as harmonised methodology and enhanced international comparability are of utmost importance
 - quarterly national accounts at 30, 60 and 90 days after the reference period are of great importance for effective policy making, as demonstrated during the recent crisis
 - also, timely dissemination of the PEEIs is essential. The implementation of the PEEI programme should be completed in 2013-2017 and efforts should be made to advance related initiatives at international level
 - is this objective in line with putting on hold the project to make GDP flash estimates at T+30 available? (as noted in the negative priorities 2012)
4. **Climate change / environment:** The availability of high quality key environmental indicators, environmental accounts, satellite accounts and other climate change related statistics shall be ensured.
- coherent, comparable and up to date information in these areas – especially on energy and environment – are increasingly important. However the costs (in terms of response burden) vs the benefits (in terms of future policy instruments) must be assessed
 - the potential for partnership with environment agencies both in respect to the collection of data but also its analysis and interpretation
5. **Globalisation:** Statistics are needed to describe Europe's position in the world and the EU relationships with the rest of the world. This information will also serve as a basis to assess the world wide dimensions of economic and social phenomena and sustainable development initiatives.
- all the implementation measures are worthy of support, however they seem to be very ambitious given the wide variability in quality of statistical information in different parts of the world and especially given the fact that there are no legal frameworks for collecting data in some countries
 - research is needed on the appropriateness and fitness of existing statistical information, such as that relating to trade, for the purpose of assessing global environmental burden and more generally for analysing trends in sustainability. This could be proposed for the FP8

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6. **Single market monitoring:** Multipurpose statistics shall be produced for tapping the potential of the single market and further statistics developed for monitoring the single market implementation.
- a food price monitoring tool is not an adequate instrument for monitoring the single market implementation: factors such as diverse consumption habits, tax systems etc in the various Member States influence price structures in different ways
7. **People's Europe:** There is a need to address changing user requirements for statistical information on key topics of social policy.
- all statistical data collected within the EU statistical system should be made available without delay; anonymised sets of micro data should be prepared as a priority task; and the active participation of the scientific community should be incorporated into ESP 2013-2017
 - user-friendly on-line support to encourage and assist with the informed use of such data sets should be developed
 - the development of a streamlined approach to migration statistics mentioned in the document “Objectives of the European Statistical Programme 2012-2017” sounds useful but this could be costly as good data on labour mobility flows is difficult to collect. More details should be provided on how this will be achieved. Cooperation with the OECD would be valuable as this Organisation is already collecting data and providing regular analysis of cross-border labour mobility (ref. the OECD publication: “Migration at a Glance”) .
8. **Increased use of the spatial dimension in statistics:** Evidence-based policy making will be supported by a more flexible and increased use of spatial information combined with social and economic statistical information.
- spatial data is of increasing importance – but providing spatial data could impact on response burden; cost-benefit-analyses are therefore essential
 - the academic community in particular has some expertise in the spatial referencing and the use of spatial data so partnerships might be sought in the development of this aspect of work
 - access to anonymised spatially referenced micro-data is needed recognising that retaining geographic tags on data makes the process of anonymisation more complex – but there is good experience in several Member States which can be brought to bear on this issue

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9. **Statistics for own resources, allocation of EU funds and other administrative purposes:** European decision-makers shall receive reliable statistics and indicators for administrative and regulatory purposes and for monitoring specific EU policy commitments.
- it is critical that EU data should meet the needs of EU policymakers since evidence-based policy making is our aim. However it is difficult for ESAC members to comment on this without more details, what, where, why, for whom?
10. **Regular data production – social and information society statistics / business and trade statistics / macroeconomic statistics / agricultural statistics:** high quality statistics through regular activities related to the development, production and dissemination of statistics.
- more detailed information on *increased policy-relevant statistical information and statistics on services* is necessary
 - simplification of Intrastat (Single Flow System) should be one of the main objectives
 - timeliness and comparability of disseminated statistics are of the utmost importance; mention should be made as to how better timeliness and comparability will be achieved
 - new legislation on access to micro data should be taken into account
 - the background document “Objectives of the European Statistical Programme 2012-2017” states that “all social and information society surveys... [will] progressively [be] implemented as a rationalised system” – It would be useful to specify more details and to clarify whether this is in line with the objectives stated under “People’s Europe”
 - the background document also states that macro-data collection based on administrative sources will be compiled. ESAC would welcome more details since it is of the utmost importance to ensure that users (including researchers) have access to these data and the use of administrative data sometimes precludes this
 - the CAP reform should be designed with the aim in mind of decreasing the need for very detailed agricultural statistics

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STATISTICAL METHOD

1. **ESS quality Management:** The aim is to implement a quality management system in the ESS based on the revised European Statistics Code of Practice.
 - the acceleration of the full implementation of the Code of Practice in all Member States is one of the most important pre-conditions for strengthening confidence in the ESS
 - ESAC members are extremely concerned at the relatively low level of trust in official statistics in many Member States and offer their support in initiatives to increase trust
 - ESAC supports measures aimed at further improving governance of European statistics, reinforcing the independence of the ESS whilst ensuring its relevance, and strengthening the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB). ESAC will seek ways in which its work can complement and re-inforce that of ESGAB.
2. **Priority Setting and simplification:** The implementation of a priority-setting mechanism for the ESS will simplify statistical requirements and increase the flexibility of the ESS to adjust to new needs for statistics while taking into account the constraints of the producers and the response burden.
 - whilst recognising that the reduction of response burden is one of the most important objectives, ESAC wishes to ensure that simplification does not result in a loss of quality in key areas of statistics
 - it is important to place emphasis on the value of data to appropriately balance concerns about response burden
 - statistical data which can be made available for further detailed analyses, including microdata, should be collected as a matter of priority
 - European-level priority setting should take into account the need for the individual Member States' statistical systems to continue to meet their own (sometimes differing) national priorities with sufficient resources.
3. **Multipurpose statistics and efficiency gains in production:** Enhance the horizontal and vertical integration in the ESS; use multiple data sources; produce multi-purpose statistics; focus on the complete statistical process; harmonise and standardise statistical production methods and metadata.
 - ESAC members support the increased use of administrative sources not only for social statistics, since they serve the purpose of reducing response burden and in some circumstances can be a more economic way of collecting data. However there can be drawbacks to using administrative data especially in regard to the lack of control of statisticians with regard to changes in the system and the

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difficulty of ensuring harmonisation across Member States which may have very different administrative systems. Thus administrative data may not capture well characteristics which are of lesser importance to the administrative purpose of the data. It is also important to ensure that timely and full access to these data will be provided for users who could be disenfranchised by a move to employ data for statistical purposes which are confidential to the administrative agency which manages them.

- a common ESS reference IT infrastructure is without doubt a useful instrument for increasing efficiency. However, adequate technical standards are required in all Member States and data protection must also be assured.
- considerable benefits for the efficiency of statistics (as well as other tasks) could result from the development of a truly European statistical register with a view to enhancing quality and reducing reporting . ESAC members are not naïve about the complexity of such a development however.
- ESAC notes the importance of the proper identification and classification of entities and instruments, based on modern data standardisation and matching principles to facilitate more automated processing of large amounts of data. The establishment of a common Legal Entity Identifier to accurately identify all legal entities engaged in financial transactions is a key infrastructural requirement for a wide range of statistical (and non statistical) uses
- all efforts to further develop and implement standards and common tools for the efficient and secure exchange of data and metadata among statisticians are highly beneficial for the statistical function

4. **Dissemination and communication:** Eurostat will be established as first data source on EU statistics for all users and, in particular, for public and private decision makers.

- ESAC members support the ambition of Eurostat to be the primary sources of European data fit for the purpose of a large range of users
- the objective of dissemination is to meet the needs not only of expert users but also of other groups (e.g. policy, media, the research and teaching community)
- strong user producer relationships should be fostered in order to promote the widest possible informed use of data which have been collected at public expense. One way of promoting data use is to hold data workshops focussing on particular data collections, on statistical themes, or on systems of dissemination
- the principle of free access for data must not be put into question; it is one of the pre-conditions for rebuilding confidence in the ESS. Where charges are made this for data services they should be fair and proportionate to the services provided

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5. **Training, innovation and research:** Satisfy learning and development needs in the ESS based on a combination of training courses and learning and development opportunities. Facilitate participation in and contribution to the statistical activities by the research community.
- ESAC welcomes this priority and seeks ways in which it can support the ESS to engage more effectively with the research community. In particular more active discussion with academia on access to data should be considered – it would be useful to develop a strategy in this regard. Sharing of good practice across Member States should be encouraged
 - it should be recognised that the communication is not a one way process. Official statisticians at national and European level can gain greater understanding of the data they collect through developing partnerships with researchers who analyse the data
 - similarly some researchers outside of the ESS can play a key role in developing the statistical and IT methodologies which underpin efficient statistical systems
 - Eurostat and the NSIs should seek to be ‘learning organisations’ in which staff are encouraged to develop systems of continuous improvement.

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