



Luxembourg, 24 April 2006

## **EUROSTAT SELF-ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE PRINCIPLES AND INDICATORS OF THE EUROPEAN STATISTICS CODE OF PRACTICE**

### **1. BACKGROUND**

With the adoption of the Recommendation on the independence, integrity and accountability of the national and Community statistical authorities of 25 May 2005 (COM 2005 (217)), the Commission has committed itself to ensuring that the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice are respected by Eurostat. In its respective Communication, the Commission announced that both the Member States and Eurostat would produce an initial self-assessment report during the first year of implementation of the Code.

A Task Force of the Statistical Programme Committee had been created on 25 May 2005 among other things, to develop a common framework for the European Statistical System self-assessments. This Task Force decided to detail the principles and indicators in a common questionnaire which was considered to equally benefit a common reading of the principles of the Code of Practice, to facilitate a further processing of the results of the self-assessments and pave the way for peer reviews to monitor the implementation of the Code.

On the basis of this questionnaire the National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat during October-December 2005 carried out a self-assessment against the principles and indicators of the Code of Practice. The results of this first round will be summarised in a report by Eurostat to the Economic and Financial Committee of the Council (forthcoming). Further steps towards a European Statistical System wide implementation of the Code of Practice should include an extension of the approach to cover as well data producers other than the National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat, and a round of peer reviews.

### **2. EUROSTAT APPROACH**

To carry out its first self-assessment Eurostat created an internal Task Force, chaired by a Director, in which Eurostat horizontal units and production domains were represented. The members of the Task Force filled in the self-assessment questionnaire on the basis of information readily available, interviews with representatives of middle management and the replies to a questionnaire sent to all Eurostat production units. In a special meeting in January 2006, the self-assessment was discussed with the Eurostat Deputy Director General and Eurostat Directors prior to its final validation by the Director General.

As the self-assessment questionnaire has been mainly designed for the purpose of providing assistance to the National Statistical Institutes' self-assessments against the Code of Practice, the Eurostat self-assessment cannot be based on that questionnaire alone. Given its unique co-ordination role within the European Statistical System, some of the questions did not or not fully apply to Eurostat while at the

same time, Eurostat reflections on strengths and weaknesses in the framework of the Code **go beyond the questionnaire** in an attempt to address the principles' potential for Eurostat.

With a view to already prepare the review, update and completion – comprising as well suitable improvement actions – of its self-assessment in the course of the peer review process envisaged for the implementation of the Code of Practice in the European Statistical System, Eurostat tried to focus it on areas that can be improved, thus to some extent putting more emphasis on weaknesses compared to Eurostat strengths.

### **3. MAIN FINDINGS**

Below the main findings of the self-assessment are briefly summarised. The Eurostat strengths and weaknesses identified during the exercise are given following the order of the Code's principles.

#### **3.1. Institutional environment**

As a pre-requisite for delivering high quality output and for it to be recognized by users, the Code of Practice assigns high importance to the institutional environment covering the following 6 principles:

Professional independence, Mandate for Data Collection, Adequacy of Resources, Quality Commitment, Statistical Confidentiality and Impartiality and Objectivity.

With regard to its institutional environment, Eurostat seems to be well covered for many of the Code's indicators. In particular its confidentiality regime in place and its commitment to quality seem to be broadly in line with the benchmarking indicators suggested by the Code, with the exception of a perceived gap with regard to timeliness of data and systematic user consultation. Improvements seem to be needed in the area of adequacy of Eurostat human resources and with regard to some specific issues related to Commission provisions and Eurostat practices to enforce independence and impartiality. These comprise dissemination practices, relationship with other Commission services producing statistics and a more flexible mandate to collect data in order to produce timely and truly European statistics.

Additional information on the European Statistical System institutional environment including on Eurostat is available from the Eurostat [overview on the institutional set-up](#) of October 2005.

#### **Strengths**

- ✚ Existence of transparent and comprehensive legislative framework and programming procedure
- ✚ Monthly reporting to the senior management on allocation of staff, vacancies, budget and IT resources, availability of sophisticated information system, screening exercise to better align allocation of human resources to needs

- ✚ High quality commitment of top management (ESS quality declaration, EFQM, quality unit) and of many production domains, investing in data reliability and comparability through intensive quality controls
- ✚ Eurostat has in place strong legal provisions and dedicated organisational functions and procedures to protect statistical confidentiality, in particular with regard to regulating data access and processing
- ✚ Full transparency of Eurostat work; methods and results discussed at length in various fora (working groups, SPC, CEIES, etc.)

### **Weaknesses**

- ✚ No clearly formulated policy but rather individual considerations applied case by case with regard to commenting publicly on criticism and misuse of European Statistics
- ✚ Issue for Eurostat might be to play its role in the co-ordination of statistical work inside the Commission with a view to other Commission services producing statistics and the delimitation of official statistics and administrative data
- ✚ •Through the current legislative framework, data collection in general is carried out by National Statistical Institutes, mandating Eurostat to collect data on a case by case basis only. Thus, in order to introduce more flexibility Eurostat's mandate for data collection could be broadened.
- ✚ Although Eurostat cannot be considered a statistical office, compare to a national statistical authority, given its co-ordination role within the European Statistical System, its lack of availability of staff with statistical expertise in some areas is perceived as a weakness
- ✚ External user consultation limited largely to CEIES
- ✚ Heavy coordination procedures with a high number of suppliers (NSIs) and internal procedures (e.g. decision-making or legislative procedures) having an impact on timeliness and responsiveness
- ✚ Link between process quality and output quality seems not to be clearly established yet by all units
- ✚ Procedures in place to protect data confidentiality during the dissemination phase are not harmonised and may profit from a more centralised approach
- ✚ News release calendar exists on Website but not a general calendar for data releases
- ✚ Not in all cases when privileged users get earlier access to data, this fact is publicised.
- ✚ Procedures for following up problems in data exist and would need to be extended to cover also potential leaks

## **3.2. Statistical processes**

In line with the concept of total quality management, the Code of Practice sets out standards and good practices for the processes underpinning the production of statistics covering the following principles:

Sound Methodology, Appropriate Statistical Procedures, Non-Excessive Burden on Respondents, Cost Effectiveness

With regard to statistical processes employed in Eurostat, the self-assessment exercise did not reveal any major problems with regard to the quality of the production processes of the various domains. However, their sheer heterogeneity within Eurostat has been identified repeatedly as a potential for improvement with a view to realising efficiency gains, better coping with high proportions of non-permanent staff in some domains and applying office-wide quality standards. Given the role of Eurostat, generally not collecting data itself, several questions of the Code of Practice Questionnaire did not apply.

### **Strengths**

- ✚ Existence of Regulation enforcing the European-wide application of harmonised methods, classifications and standards in line with internationally recommended practices (e.g. SNA, NACE, statistical units, etc.)
- ✚ Validation procedures in the single domains
- ✚ Strong IT environment e.g. with regard to hardware and security provision
- ✚ Full transparency of the statistical processes for other partners in the ESS
- ✚ •EU political environment evolves to promote the measurement of burden
- ✚ •Close cooperation of Eurostat at international level (joint questionnaires); ongoing initiatives to improve coordination within Eurostat.
- ✚ Existence of staff members with innovative ideas and experience of working in different domains
- ✚ Schéma Directeur for a mid-term co-ordination of IT development

### **Weaknesses**

- ✚ Lack of control/harmonisation with regard to methodology developed in specific domains, no common policy, dispersed expertise within Eurostat
- ✚ Although Eurostat cannot be considered a statistical office, compared to a national statistical authority, given its co-ordination role within the European Statistical System, its shortcomings with regard to methodological developments are perceived as a weakness.
- ✚ Data treatment procedures are sometimes complex, to some extent insufficiently documented and lack standardisation (e.g. imputation, validation procedures and estimation of European aggregates)

- ⊞ vulnerability of some statistical domains due to non-planned mobility and high proportion of non-permanent staff
- ⊞ •Lack of a coordination mechanism balancing EU and national requirements with regard to reducing burden; lack of harmonisation with regard to burden measurement in the European Statistical System
- ⊞ •Eurostat coordination with other Commission services collecting data has to be improved
- ⊞ Sometimes bureaucratic procedures hamper cost-effectiveness improvements

### 3.3. Statistical output

Compliance with European standards on quality in statistics is covered by the third part of the Code of Practice dealing with the statistical output. The following principles are included:

Relevance, Accuracy and Reliability, Timeliness and Punctuality, Coherence and Comparability, Accessibility and Clarity

Once more the picture gained from the self-assessment exercise points to a high diversity within Eurostat. Information on output quality seems to be varying with the degree of harmonisation of a statistical area and whether or not it is subject to European legislation. Ad hoc exercises rather than a systematic approach for Eurostat prevail in selected domains with regard to the exploitation of Eurostat wealth of data through means of cross-checking and other ways to improve coherence. With regard to the questions on accessibility and clarity of its output, Eurostat features very well in the self-assessment of which the free dissemination of Eurostat data is only one aspect. While no major additional shortcomings have been flagged in the replies to the questions on output quality, this part of the questionnaire to some extent overlaps with other parts. Thus, the needs to improve timeliness as well as to consult users of statistics on a systematic basis are repeated under this heading.

#### Strengths

- ⊞ Recent improvements with regard to priority setting (Memoranda of understanding, hearings, CEIES, Task Force on priority setting, etc)
- ⊞ Extensive validation procedures are in place, involving in several domains National Statistical Institutes. Eurostat has a good knowledge of accuracy of its data.
- ⊞ Regular quality reports (including evaluation of accuracy and reliability) by Member States and Eurostat.
- ⊞ Comprehensive accuracy and reliability assessments in domains with well advanced EU harmonisation

- ⊞ Recent achievements to improve timeliness for some main indicators being subject to a strict release calendar from which divergences are extremely rare (but when they occur they are publicised and explained)
- ⊞ Comprehensive compliance assessment carried out by Eurostat for major statistical domains
- ⊞ Strong legal basis to ensure methodological integration of domains
- ⊞ Systematic examination of differences over time and of asymmetries in many domains
- ⊞ Free dissemination of Eurostat database on the web

### **Weaknesses**

- ⊞ procedures for consultation of institutional users only (hearings, co-operation with ECB); no systematic approach; no systematic consultation of users outside the sphere of institutions and CEIES.
- ⊞ Limited surveys/studies on user satisfaction exist but not on an office-wide scale
- ⊞ Varying methods and data sources make the assessment of accuracy and reliability difficult
- ⊞ Due to the huge amount of detailed data and breakdowns, accuracy and reliability can not always be assessed.
- ⊞ Provision of quality indicators is not obligatory for all domains
- ⊞ Poor timeliness of data in some areas, due to Member States' late delivery, too generous delivery deadlines in some regulation or heavy data production systems in Eurostat in domains where input is not sufficiently harmonised
- ⊞ There is no harmonized calendar for other releases than press releases
- ⊞ Comparability hampered by derogations granted to MS in the past
- ⊞ Lack of input harmonisation in several domains
- ⊞ Main selected results to be produced and presented in an user-friendly way on the Eurostat website for certain domains only
- ⊞ Cumbersome procedures to grant microdata access for researchers

## **4. NEXT STEPS**

As a next step, starting in 2006, the European Statistical System will carry out peer reviews to review and complement the self-assessments. While targeted primarily to National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat, it is foreseen to address as well the co-ordination function of the NSI where pertinent. The

peer reviews will focus on the principles 1-6 of the Code of Practice, covering the institutional environment, and principle 15 Accessibility and Clarity.

While the self-assessments will be one input to the preparation of the peer review, they are expected to go beyond this initial exercise adding value by raising issues from a peer's perspective, going more into detail where needed and assessing the situation in a country as a whole. Areas for improvement and related actions identified in the self-assessments will be confirmed with peers contributing to their prioritisation where needed.

The results of the peer reviews will yield a report at country level including a refined set of improvement actions which will be used to feed the monitoring process of the implementation of the Code.

With the self-assessments focusing basically on the National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat, compliance of the Code by other providers of European statistics will have to be addressed as well in the framework of the implementation of the Code. This remains a challenge to be tackled at national level on the basis of an exchange in the respective ESS fora.

In line with the ECOFIN conclusions of November 2005, the Commission proposes to set up a high-level advisory body. Its main tasks will relate to reporting on the implementation of the Code by Eurostat and on general rules and principles of the functioning of the European Statistical System as a whole and to advising the Commission with regard to issues relating to the implementation and communication of the Code of Practice.

Further steps envisaged in the context of the European Statistical System implementation of the Code of Practice include projects at various levels to enhance process and product quality, including progress in the collection of ESS good practices, the organisation of the European Conference on Quality in Survey Statistics in April 2006 and a co-operation project with other international organisations lead by Eurostat on the use and convergence of international quality assurance frameworks. In addition, compliance monitoring established by Eurostat in the area of statistics will allow addressing quality issues at the level of statistical domains. Some areas of the Code will be specified in more detailed protocols as a first step to better allow users to distinguish statistics produced in compliance with the Code. As a basis for further communication about the Code to users of European Statistics, Eurostat has dedicated a section on its website to the [European Statistics Code of Practice](http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/quality)<sup>1</sup> and issued a brochure in three languages.

A final report by the Commission on the implementation of the Code in the European Statistical System will be submitted to the European Parliament and to the Council in 2008.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/quality>