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**Peer review on the implementation
of the European Statistics Code of Practice**

Country visited: Belgium

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Main findings

The peer review found Statistics Belgium in a period of profound transition. A large-scale programme that includes substantial changes in the statistical production chain with related changes in the organisational structure was initiated by the management in charge at the beginning of 2006. These changes had only been partially implemented at the moment of the peer review. The statistical domain oriented structure (stovepipe) is replaced by a process-oriented organisation that integrates the entire data collection and basic validation process. Only the second part of the statistical production chain will remain domain specific albeit with a larger scope in each domain. Furthermore, administrative data should be used where available to partly replace more resource intensive surveys and information technology should be used on a much larger scale. The main objectives of the organisational change are process optimisation and increased efficiency. Despite the partial implementation at the moment of the peer review, the review has encountered generally positive opinions on the change.

Statistics Belgium is not responsible for the entire range of economic statistics. National accounts, international trade statistics and government finance statistics are not within the responsibility of Statistics Belgium nor does it have substantial methodological competence or any coordination responsibility for these statistics. The peer review was limited to Statistics Belgium and therefore does not cover these statistics.

Statistics Belgium is organised as a General Directorate 'Statistics and Economic Information' of the Ministry of Economy (officially 'Federal Public Service (FPS) Economy, SMEs, Independent Professions and Energy'). In 2006, it lost its own logo and specific name. Nevertheless, practically all groups interviewed still refer to Statistics Belgium under the old name of NIS/INS (National Institute of Statistics) and deplore this change for practical as well as image projection reasons.

The appearance of a higher degree of integration of Statistics Belgium into the Ministry of Economy raises the issue of professional independence as advocated by the Code of Practice. The Belgian Statistical Law specifies this independence. This independence has not been challenged in practice and most interviewees see no danger of this happening under the current conditions. However, the current priority setting of the political players and the strong personality of the Director General of Statistics Belgium were seen as main guaranteeing factors for the independence in this organisational setting rather than the formally guaranteed independence.

The subject of independence was also frequently touched in the context of ICT resources which have been centralised in the ministerial organisation although, currently, the Statistics Belgium management does not perceive a lack of attention to statistics by the central ICT service. However, the existence of severe limitations of available resources in terms of the numbers of ICT staff and competence was felt in practically all interviews.

In general Statistics Belgium enjoys a good reputation for its serious and competent approach, good statistical results as well as the approachability and helpfulness of its statisticians. Progress in quality (including timeliness) has been perceived by the users in the recent years. A very generally recognised characteristic is the tight human resource situation with respect to academically trained statisticians and other professional personnel. To a lesser degree, the budget situation has also been mentioned as very tight for the tasks to be fulfilled. All interviews point to the resource shortage for a number of well recognised points that need to be improved by Statistics Belgium, in particular the mixed situation with respect to metadata coverage and the low degree of statistical analysis that is carried out. The management of Statistics Belgium has started a programme to remedy this situation by replacing retiring lower grade personnel by trained statisticians in the medium term. This programme has started to show returns.

Other points identified in the review that will need improvement, include in particular the lack of explicit quality monitoring and a certain absence of formalised procedures, i.e. the statistical programme, error handling procedures, publication of microdata handling, creation and publishing of a release calendar, publication of pre-release procedures. These issues have resulted in a range of improvement actions proposed by the review team. Some of these actions were already recognised in the self-assessment of Statistics Belgium.

A major concern of the peer review related to the difficult political structure in which Statistics Belgium operates. There are a large number of players that impact the statistical work. A main aspect is the growing role of the regions in Belgium which has resulted in sizable statistics offices operated by the regions and not subject to direct coordination by Statistics Belgium as well as the above named allocation of responsibility for important statistics to the National Bank and the Federal Planning office. As a result, there is a very important coordination task to be filled that will need to be given highest possible attention. Practically all interviewees recognise weaknesses in the coordination and a lack of clear division of responsibilities. A Coordination Committee has been conceived for this essential task but is not yet operational.

2. INTRODUCTION

With the adoption of the European Statistics Code of Practice, the Statistical Programme (SPC) committed itself to adhering to its principles. At its meeting on 25 May 2005, the SPC endorsed a stepwise monitoring procedure for the implementation of the Code over three years during which countries' self-assessments should be combined with elements of peer review, benchmarking and monitoring on the basis of the explanatory indicators added to each principle of the Code.

During December 2005 / January 2006 the National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat have completed their self-assessments, the results have been summarised by Eurostat in a report submitted to the Economic and Financial Committee in May 2006 which has been published on the Eurostat website.

As a next step towards implementation of the Code, the European Statistical System is organising peer reviews to complement the self-assessments starting with 2006. They are considered a vital element for the implementation of the Code of Practice given their capacity to encourage the sharing of best practice and to contribute to transparency in what is, essentially, a self-regulatory approach. This approach is designed to enhance accountability and to help building trust in the integrity of the European Statistical System, its processes and outputs.

The Code of Practice peer reviews follow a common methodology focusing on the institutional environment and dissemination part of the Code comprising the following principles: (1) Professional independence, (2) Mandate for data collection, (3) Adequacy of resources, (4) Quality commitment, (5) Statistical confidentiality, (6) Impartiality and Objectivity and (15) Accessibility and Clarity. In principle, the peer review is limited to the National Statistical Institute and its co-ordination role within a dispersed national statistical system. A short document provided by the National Statistical Institute which summarises key aspects of the functioning of the national statistical system is published together with this report.

During a three days visit on-site and on the basis of information material provided by the National Statistical Institute and Eurostat prior to the review, peer reviews yield a report assessing compliance with the Code of Practice at indicator level and by principle following a four point assessment scale. The report includes a refined set of improvement actions covering all principles of the Code which are being used to feed the monitoring process of the implementation of the Code in the European Statistical System.

While the peer reviewers will undertake to base their assessment to the extent possible on factual information, it is worth noting some of the limitations of the peer review process. For example, peer reviewers are dependent upon the resources made available to them (though experienced reviewers can be expected to identify where appropriate information is not forthcoming). In addition these reviews are conducted on a strategic, organisation-wide and system wide basis. Accordingly it is not straightforward to ascertain that certain practices or behaviours or systems operate in all statistical domains.

3. FINDINGS PER PRINCIPLE

Principle 1: Professional Independence

The professional independence of statistical authorities from other policy, regulatory or administrative departments and bodies, as well as from private sector operators, ensures the credibility of European Statistics.

Overall assessment:

The independence of Statistics Belgium¹ is now specified by the law (2006 Statistical Law). Professional independence was never questioned by the different kinds of users during the visit of the peer review. Yet, due to its institutional location in the Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed, Energy where it operates also as an analysis service, its independence would be enhanced by a specific logo and a clearer name. In addition, Statistics Belgium does not publish any work programme or progress report. The reports of the High Council of Statistics are not made public; the decision to disseminate them has to be taken by the Minister. Statistics Belgium should promote dissemination of these reports by creating a website for the High Council.

Indicator 1.1: The independence of the statistical authority from political and other external interference in producing and disseminating official statistics is specified in law.

Fully met

Comments:

The 2006 Statistical Law Art 1 bis gives the principles according to which statistics should be governed, among which:

« 4° Principles of impartiality, objectivity and professional independence:

- a) *statistics must be produced and disseminated respecting the principle of scientific independence and in an objective, professional and transparent manner in which all users are treated equally;*
- b) *the institution charged with the production and dissemination of statistics must be professionally independent from other departments and political bodies, regulatory and administrative institutions as well from private sector operators» .*

The Statistical Law, which entered into force recently, is on the website http://statbel.fgov.be/info/history_fr.asp#7. A reference to the independence in the description of the mission of Statistics Belgium and in the comment about the law could be added.

¹ Whose official name is Directorate general Statistics and Economic Information but which is still commonly referred in Belgium as NIS/INS, from its previous denomination

Indicator 1.2: The head of the statistical authority has sufficiently high hierarchical standing to ensure senior level access to policy authorities and administrative public bodies. He/She should be of the highest professional calibre.

Fully met

Comments:

The Directorate General Statistics and Economic Information is one of the nine DGs of the FPS Economy. The chairman of the DG board is the highest non-political civil servant with direct access to the Minister. The Director General has a sufficiently high hierarchical standing to accompany the Minister to the Parliament or to take part in decisions involving statistics. He has a statistical background, as well as a managerial profile.

Indicator 1.3: The head of the statistical authority and, where appropriate, the heads of its statistical bodies have responsibility for ensuring that European Statistics are produced and disseminated in an independent manner.

Largely met

Comments:

The Art 1 bis of the 2006 law states that statistics are governed by the principles of impartiality, objectivity and professional independence (covering the production and dissemination of statistics). However, this general wording does not give precisely the responsibility to the head of the statistical authority.

National accounts, international trade statistics and government finance statistics are no longer in the field of responsibility of Statistics Belgium. The creation of the National Accounts Institute and its rules are described in the Law of December 21st 1994. The validation of the National Accounts is the responsibility of the board of INA, where Statistics Belgium is represented. However its role is more or less reduced to the provision of data. The choice of sources of data is the one of INA (in casu National Bank).

Indicator 1.4: The head of the statistical authority and, where appropriate, the heads of its statistical bodies have the sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods, standards and procedures, and on the content and timing of statistical releases.

Largely met

Comments:

The Art 1 bis of the 2006 law states that «*statistics must be produced and disseminated respecting the principle of scientific independence and in an objective, professional and transparent manner*». As mentioned under indicator 1.3, the law does not give precisely the responsibility to the head of Statistics Belgium or any other statistical authority. The High Council of Statistics may recommend methods but it is only an advisory group. In practice, methods and procedure are decided by Statistics Belgium and the content of the web site is its sole responsibility.

However, just before publishing results, there are some consultations of groups of users to discuss the results and in some case the methodology. This practice is used as a mean of explaining the results to prevent criticism due to a lack of knowledge. Yet this process should not take place before dissemination. Otherwise there is a risk there may be some attempt to influence the results. In the case of the price index, the Index commission examines the "Health index", which is used for a general indexation of salaries (see 6.3).

Indicator 1.5: The statistical work programmes are published and periodic reports describe progress made.

Not met

Comments:

There is no work programme published or progress reports. The process exists internally, up to now most of the work programme is determined by the European statistical obligations.

A High Council of Statistics is currently governed by the royal decree of 1998. It acts as an advisory body with representatives of the scientific community, socio-economic circles and federal, regional and community administrations. It must imperatively be consulted on legal modifications but also has a right of initiative in this field. The High Council of Statistics is organized with an executive body and runs different working groups. Its reports are transmitted to the Minister only, with no public dissemination. The High Council has no website.

Indicator 1.6: Statistical releases are clearly distinguished and issued separately from political/policy statements.

Largely met

Comments:

Statbel and Ecodata are the two websites of Statistics Belgium, although appearing with the same design and with the same logo as the SPF Economy website. However Statistics Belgium has the sole responsibility of the content of them. The lack of a specific logo is confusing to the user, who does not immediately know the status of the information he can find on the website. Besides this aspect there seems to be a clear separation between the policy statements and statistics.

Indicator 1.7: The statistical authority, when appropriate, comments publicly on statistical issues, including criticisms and misuses of official statistics.

Fully met

Comments:

The peer review team could see an example of a press release about employment statistics, commenting on possible misuses.

There is a follow-up of the press done to check the press comments. The spokesman uses telephone calls for minor problems such as the lack of mention of the data source. In some cases written reactions to misuses have been sent to newspapers.

Principle 2: Mandate for Data Collection

Statistical authorities must have a clear legal mandate to collect information for European statistical purposes. Administrations, enterprises and households, and the public at large may be compelled by law to allow access to or deliver data for European statistical purposes at the request of statistical authorities.

Overall assessment:

Statistics Belgium has the legal mandate to collect data and to access to administrative data. Several important administrative data sources are already used. Nevertheless in practice there are difficulties to access other administrative data either because of conflicts between laws or unwillingness of some administrations.

Indicator 2.1: The mandate to collect information for the production and dissemination of official statistics is specified in law.

Fully met

Comments:

The law says that « *the King may have statistical investigations carried out* » (Art 1 quinquies) and that «*The National Statistical Institute may use the individual information gathered from these investigations*».

Indicator 2.2: The statistical authority is allowed by national legislation to use administrative records for statistical purposes.

Largely met

Comments:

«*The National Institute has... access to data held by any administration and public authority*» (Art 9 and Art 24bis). According to the Statistical Law, it is possible for Statistics Belgium to use administrative data but in practice some data are difficult or almost impossible to obtain. Indeed there are some contradictions with other laws applying to specific registers or administrative data, amounting to conditions that in some cases make it de facto impossible for Statistics Belgium to obtain the data. This does not concern the main administrative data, which Statistics Belgium already uses (register of physical persons, register of companies, fiscal data, for household and companies...) but is becoming more important. In other cases administrations asked for payment prior to granting access to their data.

Indicator 2.3: On the basis of a legal act, the statistical authority may compel response to statistical surveys.

Fully met

Comments:

Art 2. «*The King may decide or not all natural or legal persons are obliged to respond* », Art 3 «*The persons liable to respond are designated by the Minister or by his/her delegate...* », « *The selection method shall be first submitted to the High Council of Statistics*»

Sanctions are explicitly specified in the Statistical Law (Statistical Law 2006, Art. 22, 1 and 2, Art. 23). So there is a possibility to pursue justice. In practice though, for reasons of expediency and effectiveness, sanctions are rarely if ever imposed.

Principle 3: Adequacy of Resources

The resources available to statistical authorities must be sufficient to meet European Statistics requirements.

Overall assessment:

Statistics Belgium faces an important lack of resources, mainly on qualified staff and on ICT resources. This situation was perceived by all the external stakeholders as well. Statistics Belgium has started to implement maintaining the same personnel budget while taking the opportunity of the retirement process to appoint qualified people. However, it is not clear whether this strategy to improve the quality of the staff will deliver in terms of leading to appointing a sufficiently high number of statisticians and other qualified persons.

Indicator 3.1: Staff, financial, and computing resources, adequate both in magnitude and in quality, are available to meet current European Statistics needs.

Partly met

Comments:

Statistics Belgium is far from producing the main part of public statistics. National accounts and foreign trade statistics are for example produced by and under the responsibility of INA. ICT facilities as well as ICT staff are provided by the FPS, but outside Statistics Belgium. So it is somewhat difficult to compare the situation with other European offices.

The main figures are the following (Belgium has 10,5 millions of inhabitants) :
staff: 680 persons, with only 14% of A level (university degree), 33,8 millions euros for budget.

The main problem is the lack of qualification of the staff, a heritage of the past. But the retirement process gives opportunities of reconversion and allows recruiting some A level staff within the same budget. In 2006, 18 statisticians were appointed. The process will continue to reach 40 persons but more progressively now to be able to integrate them without damaging the current production. Working in Statistics Belgium is for the moment sufficiently attractive as there were 650 candidates for a pre-selection of 30, for general statistical qualifications but there are some difficulties to find more specialized skills such as ICT and economics.

As a consequence of the lack of qualification in ICT among the staff there is low capacity to work on data (SAS, SPSS, for example), and any statistical analysis requires to have the work done by the ICT service of the FPS Economy, which often takes long time and the statistical work may not be a priority. In the field of computing tools development, there is in some fields a lack of competence in the ICT service and the technology does not always correspond to latest standards. So far, Statistics Belgium does not benefit either of good resources in terms of ICT facilities.

Because of a strong transformation period, the management of a level staff shows gaps with no training programme, for example. Indeed presently priorities are given to project management and organisational changes with the purpose of increased efficiency.

Indicator 3.2: The scope, detail and cost of European Statistics are commensurate with needs.

For European level reply

Indicator 3.3: Procedures exist to assess and justify demands for new European Statistics against their cost.

For European level reply

Indicator 3.4: Procedures exist to assess the continuing need for all European Statistics, to see if any can be discontinued or curtailed to free up resources.

For European level reply

Principle 4: Quality commitment

All ESS members commit themselves to work and co-operate according to the principles fixed in the Quality Declaration of the European Statistical System.

Overall assessment:

The Statistics Act, the strategic plan of Statistics Belgium "Meten is weten" and the interviews with the statistical staff of Statistics Belgium show a clear commitment to ensure and improve the quality of the

statistics it produces. One of the projects in “Meten is weten” centres on the introduction of a system quality management in Statistics Belgium. At this moment there is no operational follow-up yet.

In the Statistics Act the conditions are laid out under which Statistics Belgium is allowed to certify the methods used by bodies, having legal personality or not, to produce statistics referred to in the Statistics Act, providing that statistics comply at least with certain conditions (e.g. impartiality and independence). It would be an important step for Statistics Belgium to ensure that all statistics produced by Statistics Belgium comply with these conditions.

However, there is as yet no overall quality management framework. Only in individual cases, mostly for surveys carried out under EU regulations, there have been quality reports. There is no structured set of documented guidelines yet.

Statistical staff indicated that there is often no time or availability of qualified staff to guarantee minimum quality levels in first deliveries to Eurostat.

Interviews with users of statistics of Statistics Belgium showed that there has been an increase in quality over the recent years, but quality problems remain, amongst others, with structural business statistics.

Indicator 4.1 Product quality is regularly monitored according to the ESS quality components.

Partly met

Comments:

Although most individual statisticians may be aware of quality issues, there is no framework for addressing quality on a systematic and consistent basis throughout the organisation. Quality reports are available for statistics where quality reports are part of the EU legislation.

Indicator 4.2 Processes are in place to monitor the quality of the collection, processing and dissemination of statistics.

Partly met

Comments:

Internal working documents on quality checking procedures exist for short term indicators, SILC, Prodcom; and in other fields. Of course many checks are integrated into the input or calculation programmes themselves (e.g. Labour Force Survey programmes SPSS, mainframe PL1 short-term indicators calculation programmes, CAPI systems for consumer prices). But there is no systematic monitoring yet of the quality of the statistical processes and of the dissemination of statistics. Statistical staff of Statistics Belgium indicate that there is often not enough time to meet quality demands, especially for the first data delivery to Eurostat. Most quality problems are rectified in second delivery.

Indicator 4.3 Processes are in place to deal with quality considerations, including trade-offs within quality, and to guide planning for existing and emerging surveys.

Largely met

Comments:

At present there are no procedures or processes to deal with quality considerations and to guide planning for existing surveys. The only guiding principle is often the deadline for delivery to Eurostat monitored by the planning process. For all emerging surveys there is a procedure: all new surveys have to be put before the High Council of Statistics for advice, they are extensively discussed in an ad-hoc working group of the High Council composed of Statistics Belgium statisticians as well as external

domain and/or methodology specialists. In practice and very logically in view of the working groups' composition, this advice is always followed. At a later stage these working groups sometimes convert themselves into permanent 'quality committees' (the groups surrounding the upcoming Generation and Gender Panel Survey -not originated by Eurostat- are an example of this practice). Unfortunately the reports and advice of the High Council are not made public.

Indicator 4.4 Quality guidelines are documented and staff are well trained. These guidelines are spelled out in writing and made known to the public.

Partly met

Comments:

There are no documented quality guidelines. Statistical staff are not all familiar with guidelines regarding quality issues and have not recently received training on these issues. No information on quality issues is made available to the public. If there is quality management in the case of individual statistics it is not very visible within the organisation and for external users. An outstanding exception is the SILC statistics.

Indicator 4.5 There is a regular and thorough review of the key statistical outputs using external experts where appropriate.

Not met

Comments:

There is no regular and systematic review of key statistical outputs. No internal or external quality audits have been carried out in recent years. There is though a common practice to discuss statistical output of statistics prior to dissemination with so-called user groups. This can hardly count as a thorough review.

Principle 5: Statistical confidentiality

The privacy of data providers (households, enterprises, administrations and other respondents), the confidentiality of the information they provide and its use only for statistical purposes must be absolutely guaranteed.

Overall assessment:

Confidentiality and data protection are regulated in the Statistics Act in Article 1ter. In Article 17 quinquies of the Statistics Act the appointment of a delegate to data protection is regulated. This delegate reports to the Minister and to the Statistical Supervision Committee. The missions of the delegate are: - to apply independently the rules and procedures of data protection, - to ensure independently the physical and logical protection of individual data, - to watch independently on the application of technical and organisational measures taken, - to control the use of any logical key allowing data re-identification and matching in order to prevent any risk of non-statistical use and - to advise statisticians and IT-specialists on techniques of data anonymisation, encryption and perturbation.

This delegate has not been appointed yet. However, Statistics Belgium has taken measures in several fields to ensure statistical confidentiality. The appointment of the delegate to data protection is recommended, as it will bring data protection on a higher plane.

Indicator 5.1 Statistical confidentiality is guaranteed in law.

Fully met

Comments:

In the Statistics Act article 2 is devoted to the protection of the secrecy. Article 2 states that the individual information gathered for the investigations carried out under the provisions of the Statistical Act may only be used to produce overall anonymous statistics.

Indicator 5.2 Statistical authority staff sign legal confidentiality commitments on appointment.

Fully met

Comments:

All staff of Statistics Belgium are required to sign a declaration on confidentiality. It is recommended to make the signing of the declaration on confidentiality a special occasion, for example during an introduction meeting for new personnel, where the importance of confidentiality is stressed by a high ranking official. It is also recommended that staff members receive a printed version of all relevant legal texts and that they are made aware of the legal consequences of violating the rules regarding confidentiality. This policy should be made known to the general public.

Indicator 5.3 Substantial penalties are prescribed for any wilful breaches of statistical confidentiality.

Fully met

Comments:

In article 18 of the Statistics Act it is stated that any infringement with the prohibitive rules regarding statistical confidentiality is punished by the sentences of article 458 of the Criminal Code, without prejudice to possible disciplinary actions. There have apparently been no breaches of statistical confidentiality by staff members.

Indicator 5.4 Instructions and guidelines are provided on the protection of statistical confidentiality in the production and dissemination processes. These guidelines are spelled out in writing and made known to the public.

Partly met

Comments:

Instructions and guidelines on protecting statistical confidentiality are transmitted to staff and the rules are well-known, but they are not written down in a comprehensive and systematic way and thus are not made known to public.

Indicator 5.5 Physical and technological provisions are in place to protect the security and integrity of statistical databases

Largely met

Comments:

In Article 17 quarter of the Statistics Act it is stated that Statistics Belgium shall take all necessary measures to ensure the physical and logical protection of individual data and to ensure that no unlawful disclosure or non-statistical use shall occur. Furthermore the documentation made available to the

peers indicated a high awareness of the need to take precautions to protect the security and the integrity of the statistical databases. It is recommended that Statistics Belgium should look into the existing possibilities to export microdata via memory sticks, CD-Roms and other information carriers.

Indicator 5.6 Strict protocols apply to external users accessing statistical microdata for research purposes.

Fully met

Comments:

Non-identified individual data is provided for scientific and research purposes to qualified users (categories of qualified users are stated in Statistics Act). Users can only receive data after a proper application and signing of a contract to guarantee statistical confidentiality. It is recommended that Statistics Belgium develops a procedure to guarantee the destruction of the micro data file, provided to external users, after the completion of the research to avoid unauthorised multiple use or export to other non qualified third parties. Furthermore, Statistics Belgium should take care that the procedures to provide micro-data to qualified users should not take an unduly long time.

Principle 6: Impartiality and objectivity.

Statistical authorities must produce and disseminate European Statistics respecting scientific independence and in an objective, professional and transparent manner in which all users are treated equitably.

Overall assessment:

Statistics Belgium prepares the statistics based purely on an objective basis and also determines sources for statistical data and methodologies purely on statistical grounds. The peer review team did not find any evidence that would put this assessment into question. Equally, publications, statistical releases and statements made as statistical commentary are fully objective and non-partisan. As far as resources allow, Statistics Belgium also makes methodological background information available via the Internet and in more detail on the basis of individual requests for additional information. However, the scope of the methodological information could be broader and go into more detail. There is a plan for structuring the approach but decisions and plans of Statistics Belgium towards a consistent documentation in line with SDDS still need to materialise.

A less favourable assessment must also be made for operational aspects that accompany the dissemination. In particular, there is no concrete policy for error handling or a revision policy to cope with corrections of errors outside regular and pre-planned revisions in the statistical process.

Some statistical release dates are pre-announced but the range of statistics covered is not complete and a systematic approach is missing.

Statistics Belgium has a deliberate policy of pre-release access but fails to make this policy publicly available.

Despite of the existence of consultation groups of users as mentioned at 1.4, the peer review did not find any evidence of a violation of impartiality but, as not all statistics are fully available on the Internet, detailed knowledge of the Belgian statistical system, in particular, the full range of indicators covered may give certain users advantages over others. A more comprehensive description of the available statistics, including those statistics which are not provided on Internet, as well as a corresponding user support structure are missing.

Indicator 6.1: Statistics are compiled on an objective basis determined by statistical considerations.

Fully met

Comments:

Statistics Belgium gives full priority to statistical methodology and statistical competence within the existing serious resource limitations. All conducted interviews indicate that Statistics Belgium produces good quality statistics. The statistical institute is recognised for its professional approach. The peer review did not find any evidence that would put this assessment into question. There is a strong reliance on European based methodology wherever possible.

Indicator 6.2: Choices of sources and statistical techniques are informed by statistical considerations.

Fully met

Comments:

Motivated by performance and efficiency reasons, Statistics Belgium tries to reduce paper based surveys by electronic processes and to rely as far as possible and as statistically sound on administrative data. The peer review found no evidence that the changes induced by this policy would have compromised statistical quality. Agreements are made with the administrations for the procedural details concerning access to administrative data. In practice, this access proves to be cumbersome to set up and sometimes to operate. It would be advisable to formalise such agreements. The peer review team recommends the use of service level agreements (SLA) at least for the access to key administrative data sources.

Indicator 6.3: Errors discovered in published statistics are corrected at the earliest possible date and publicised.

Partly met

Comments:

The CPI and the so-called 'Health Index' which covers the largest parts of the CPI and is used for wage indexation is in a particular situation. Retrospective error correction would cause enormous political and social problems. Thus, no revisions are done as a matter of principle.

Revisions are done in other types of statistics and, if considered significant, statements on revisions are mentioned in the subsequent press releases. For statistics not subject to press releases, figures are just corrected without special statements or other types of follow-up measures. Statistics Belgium does not have any policy in place for the systematic treatment of statistical errors. The absence of an error-related revision policy is likely to find Statistics Belgium unprepared in case of the occurrence of a serious error in the future. An error handling revision procedure that is based on openness towards the users and the public at large is recommended. This need has already been recognised in the self-assessment of Statistics Belgium.

Indicator 6.4: Information on the methods and procedures used by the statistical authority are publicly available.

Largely met

Comments:

Statistics Belgium is fully aware of the importance of metadata. It is provided as far as available resources allow. As a result, metadata is generally available, however, to varying degrees of completeness and coverage. Capacity to write or edit high quality metadata seems to be particularly

scarce in Statistics Belgium and in case of a necessary trade-off between the production of statistics and the improvement of metadata, priority seems to be given to the statistical data production. Nevertheless, statistical domains that are allocated a good level of human resources have created high quality metadata. The EU-SILC domain was repeatedly quoted as a particularly positive example.

A particular weakness related to metadata is the absence of a consistent description and structuring methodology on the Internet Site(s) of Statistics Belgium. It has subscribed to the IMF initiated SDDS system and consequently, provided various metadata descriptions in SDDS format. It has internally opted to apply SDDS as a generalised concept for all statistics but has not yet advanced with its implementation.

Indicator 6.5: Statistical release dates and times are pre -announced.

Partly met

Comments:

For certain indicators, particularly those belonging to Short Term Statistics, a release calendar exists and is published by Statistics Belgium. For other, economic and financial statistics (though mainly covered by the Belgian National Bank) a release calendar exists in the context of the IMF.

Despite this limited number of release dates, Statistics Belgium does not have a culture of well planned release dates for the large majority of statistical domains. Statistical releases are made when the work has been completed. Only to a certain extent can this situation be attributed to resource limitations. It is equally due to priority setting in the statistical production chain.

Indicator 6.6: All users have equal access to statistical releases at the same time and any privileged pre-release access to any outside user is limited, controlled and publicised. In the event that leaks occur, pre-release arrangements should be revised so as to ensure impartiality.

Largely met

Comments:

Statistics Belgium operates an explicit pre-release policy based on a maximum of 12 hours pre-release access to the minister of economics and his spokesperson for economic data. A further pre-release access concerns CPI data that is presented a day in advance to a user group that consists among others of representatives of trade unions and employers associations. The reason for this particular treatment is its importance for the indexing of a wide range of economically important data, such as salaries.

This policy is in its substance fully acceptable and covered by the Code of Practice; however, an essential prerequisite is the formal treatment and publishing of these practices to users.

As mentioned under indicator 1.4, this should also include a reference to the presentation of data (under embargo) to some user groups before dissemination.

Indicator 6.7: Statistical releases and statements made in Press Conferences are objective and non-partisan.

Largely met

Comments:

Statistics Belgium organises its own press contacts. Its press releases are generally concise and limited to statistical commentary that describes direct data characteristics. No evidence for economic or political commentary has been found in recent press releases. On the contrary, the commentary is very limited. Publications are even largely restricted to pure data publications and even statistical analyses are rare.

Principle 15: Accessibility and clarity

European Statistics should be presented in a clear and understandable form, disseminated in a suitable and convenient manner, available and accessible on an impartial basis with supporting metadata and guidance.

Overall assessment:

Statistics Belgium operates as its main site an easy to use Internet Site with a large range of statistics. The data is presented mainly via Excel tables that can be downloaded by the user. The users agree that the most relevant statistics are available from the Internet. In addition, a so-called Ecodata site exists with supplementary statistical data. Nevertheless, not all statistics available for public access are placed on the Internet. The co-existence of these sites causes some confusion with some users.

It is important to note that the current situation is planned to be replaced by a fully redesigned Internet Site.

Statistics Belgium encourages users to approach its staff for inquiries by e-mail or telephone on statistics beyond those available on the Internet. A single access point in the coordinates of the official spokesperson is provided. However, frequent users know the statisticians in charge and contact them directly. All user groups are serviced in this way. A recent user satisfaction survey shows a high user rating for Statistics Belgium.

The review team recommends a more systematic approach to user inquiries through a user support service.

All statistics including statistics disseminated on the basis of specific user inquiries are free of charge. However, specific analyses are carried out on a charged basis.

Indicator 15.1: Statistics are presented in a form that facilitates proper interpretation and meaningful comparisons.

Largely met

Comments:

The Internet Site has a logical and fully adequate structure. The navigation is adequate and table based access is easy to operate and metadata is generally available although links between statistics and metadata could be more obvious and the metadata be provided more comprehensively. Statistics Belgium intends to invest into tools for graphical representations that help the interpretation of the statistics by users. These tools are not yet well developed on the site. The management of Statistics Belgium expects a considerable improvement through a fully redesigned Internet Site by the end of 2007. The work on this site has been started by the ICT department of the Ministry of Economics. Statistics Belgium has expressed an interest to reinforce its capacity for statistical analysis but has not yet acquired the necessary resources. Statistics Belgium aims particularly at improving its capacity to combine statistics from different domains. A comprehensive presentation of the statistics available on single people living has been quoted as one of the first success stories of this new strategy.

Indicator 15.2: Dissemination services use modern information and communication technology and, if appropriate, traditional hard copy.

Fully met

Comments:

Statistics Belgium makes intensive usage of information technology for statistics dissemination and communication. The access to statistics is predominantly via the Internet. Paper publications are prepared where considered still useful but have been reduced in scope. The Internet Site of Statistics Belgium is largely provided in four languages (Dutch, French, English and German) with priority to French and Dutch. As a consequence, not everything is available in all four languages. The fact that ICT resources are located for some years centrally in the Ministry of Economics has been mentioned by the

majority of interviewees as a weakness for Statistics Belgium. For example even simple to implement ICT procedures would need to be externally planned and executed with the result of additional delays. However, the management has emphasised the high importance given to Statistics Belgium by the ICT department (roughly about 50% of the available budget and personnel). Nevertheless, competence and capacity limitations have been expressed in many interviews.

Indicator 15.3: Custom-designed analyses are provided when feasible and are made public.

Partly met

Comments:

Custom-designed analyses are carried out on charged basis. The charges aim at covering the costs incurred by Statistics Belgium. However, not very many custom-designed analyses are carried out. They are mainly restricted to issues of interest to public administrations. Very little is prepared for private users. Resource issues are the main reason for this limitation. Neither the availability nor the results of custom-designed analyses are systematically published or described on the Internet. This practice is covered by the Statistical Law (Art 12, §4) which gives exclusivity for custom-designed analysis to the paying client or another client who pays the same price. The peer review recommends to change this legal clause and the related practice.

Indicator 15.4: Access to microdata can be allowed for research purposes. This access is subject to strict protocols.

Fully met

Comments:

Research with microdata is generally encouraged by Statistics Belgium since the revision of the Statistical Law in 2006 but not as widely implemented as would be desirable (see comments on principle 5.6).

Indicator 15.5: Metadata are documented according to standardised metadata systems.

Largely met

Comments:

Metadata is generally available, however not according to a standardised metadata system (see remarks on indicator 6.4).

Indicator 15.6: Users are kept informed on the methodology of statistical processes and the quality of statistical outputs with respect to the ESS quality criteria.

Partly met

Comments:

Statistics considered by Statistics Belgium to be of interest to the public are placed on the Internet and generally documented (see indicator 15.5 and 6.4). Emphasis in terms of quality is directed to provide input to European quality reports but Statistics Belgium puts very little own quality information on the Internet.

4. CO-ORDINATION ROLE OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE

The landscape of the system of official statistics in Belgium is rather complex. Official statistics are produced not only by Statistics Belgium, but also by the Institute for National Accounts, and by regional institutes (Région wallonne, Vlaams Gewest, Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft, Brussels Region). In this landscape we also find a multitude of scientific committees, user groups and the High Council of Statistics. Some of these groups have the status of an advisory board only, others have a stronger mandate. In such a landscape co-ordination is highly necessary to ensure comparability, to ensure efficiency and quality of the official statistics and to keep the response burden to a minimum as well to meet European and other international obligations.

In the Statistics Act of 2006 a coordination body is created at Statistics Belgium. Within this consultative body, an integrated multi-annual statistical programme, including an inventory of the current statistical production and needs, is to be prepared, followed up and periodically updated according to the evolution of the information needs of the various authorities and of the international obligations of data provisions. The coordination committee gives advice on the positions that Belgium takes at international meetings about statistics on fields within the scope of competence of the regions and communities. The Minister competent for Statistics Belgium may, on the proposal of the coordination committee and in consultation with the public service concerned, make recommendations on the data collection methodology, statistical processing and dissemination of results or ask the public service concerned to make statistics from data it already collects.

The challenge for the coordination body is to create the basis for a homogenous, timely, coherent and easily accessible statistical system to the users, although a multitude of authorities participate in the production of official statistics. The coordination body should also facilitate an optimal exchange of microdata between registers, administrations and producers of official statistics. Also the exchange of microdata between producers of official statistics should be facilitated.

Taking into account the rather restricted mandate of the Coordination Committee, the question arises whether the Committee will be able to enforce the use of standards and proven methodology throughout all producers.

The distributions of roles, tasks and responsibilities in official statistics between federal and regional institutions may not have been settled definitely yet. Conflicting mandates, differences (in interpretations) between federal laws and regional acts may lead to lack of coordination, completeness and comparability of the system of official statistics in Belgium.

For the short term the Coordination Committee may suffice, for the longer term the creation of an independent national statistical authority (a board for example with the status of a High College of State) with a mandate to enforce standardisation, coordination and cooperation on all levels of official statistics may be considered. At that time an evaluation of the roles of the institutions involved in the production of all statistics is advised.

5. GOOD PRACTICES TO BE HIGHLIGHTED

Thematic portals on the Internet Site

A set of nine thematic portals have been set up on the Internet of Statistics Belgium, such as the business cycle and the environment. Four other portals are in preparation. A thematic portal combines information and data from a wide range sources. Only a part of the information and data originates directly from Statistics Belgium. Any other source of information and data that is available has been added. Some of the portals contain more than 100 useful links. The portal content is basically a large collection of links structured under a few headings within the respective topic.

With the thematic portals, Statistics Belgium offers to users an easy to use and very direct facility to get very broadly informed on a specific subject with very little effort for searching and collecting of information on the Internet. The fact that no effort is made to harmonise information that originates from other sources than Statistics Belgium itself does not affect the usefulness of the thematic portal in any way negatively. It well represents the individual and specific characteristics of the various information and data sources that are included in the links.

6. RECOMMENDATION OF THE PEER REVIEW TEAM

The peer review thought that Statistics Belgium should progressively strengthen its statistical authority so as to be able to play a leading and decisional role in the statistical coordination and ensure the complete responsibility on figures it produces. Several types of actions could help to progress in this direction.

Statistics Belgium could enhance its visibility and image of independence by a specific logo different from the one of FPS Economy and by a name with statistics as core element. The FPS Economy logo on the website not only questions the independence but is also confusing to users who think they will only find economics figures and no social statistics, for example. Moreover the new denomination is too long and unpronounceable, so that users still refer to the old name. Statbel, present name of the website, could be a suggestion of a new name not to come back to the old one.

The High Council of Statistics should have a website and put its reports on it.

The lack of resources is a major issue. Taking account of the present and urgent transformation situation hiring specialized temporary staff in the field of project management, change management and ICT could be a good solution, so that the staff of Statistics Belgium can concentrate on the statistical work. Of course extra budget is necessary for that.

Statistics Belgium could increase cooperation actions towards the Regional statistical services by facilitating the access to microdata, in return for an agreement on a coordinated dissemination policy.

The peer review team recommends the use of formalised service level agreements (SLA) with the administrations for the procedural details concerning the access to administrative data. In practice, this access proves to be cumbersome to set up and sometimes to operate.

Belgium is the only country in Europe² where the National Statistical Institute is not responsible for National Accounts (including public finance statistics). Statistics Belgium is involved in National Accounts via its delivery of basic statistical data and its representation in the board as well as the scientific committee of the INA. The INA was not in the scope of the peer review. In the long term, the cooperation structure of INA may perhaps be reconsidered. A larger and more active involvement of Statistics Belgium in the compilation of National Accounts seems to the peer review team a better solution to assure quality, transparency and independence.

² As far as the peer team knows.

7. LIST OF IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS BY PRINCIPLE OF THE CODE

Principle 1: Professional Independence	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw up and publish statistical programme, following the setting up of the Statistical Coordination Committee. • Provide information on the High Council of Statistics on web site. 	<p>2008</p> <p>2007</p>
Principle 3: Adequacy of Resources	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Execute upgrading plan for staff: replacing the natural outflow of less qualified staff with a smaller number of more highly qualified persons. 	2007-2011
Principle 4: Quality commitment	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw up and systematically execute a quality policy aimed at staff (including communication on quality guidelines). • Report on quality commitments and practices on web site. • Organise a system of quality audits using internal and external experts, tied in with the certification system. • Organise training for staff on quality issues. 	<p>2008</p> <p>2009</p> <p>2008-2009</p> <p>2007-2008</p>
Principle 5: Statistical Confidentiality	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement 2006 Statistical Law on Statistical Supervision Committee (including appointment of data protection officer). • Make signing of the confidentiality document a special occasion. • Provide staff with printed copies of all legal documents on data protection. • Publish data protection policy on web site. • Extend technical protection measures (in order to deal with transmission via data sticks etc.). • For all users of microdata files, include a clause in the contracts stating that the files have to be destroyed and get the users to sign a formal written statement that they have done so. 	<p>2007-2008</p> <p>2008</p> <p>2007</p> <p>2008</p> <p>2007-2008</p> <p>2008</p>
Principle 6: Impartiality and objectivity	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generalize dissemination on the basis of public dissemination calendar. • Systematize procedures for releasing and commenting figures, revising, correcting mistakes. • Implement systematic approach to presenting metadata (methodological information). • Publicize pre-release practices (on web site). 	<p>2008</p> <p>2008</p> <p>2007-2008</p> <p>2007</p>

Principle 7: Sound Methodology	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define in 2009 a specific domain to improve through an international cooperation on best practices. This domain will be further investigated in 2010 	2009-2010

Principle 9: Non-Excessive burden on respondents	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gradually extend web-based inquiries to all statistical surveys 	2008-2011

Principle 10: Cost Effectiveness	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue Business Process Reengineering (centralized data collection, liberating resources for analysis). Raise statistical productivity by: 1. standardizing surveys; 2. switching from paper to electronic interrogation; 3. switching to administrative data; 4. building data warehouse allowing more flexible data editing. 	2007-2008 2008-2011

Principle 12: Accuracy and Reliability	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document, systematize and harmonize checks and correction procedures. 	2008-2010

Principle 13: Timeliness and Punctuality	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish and communicate a more comprehensive dissemination calendar in line with production planning. 	2007-2008

Principle 15: Accessibility and clarity	Timetable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reorganize (Business Process Reengineering implementation: Thematic Directions) in order to generate and disseminate more analyses on the data produced. Building a data warehouse allowing easier exploitation and combination of data for dissemination. Provide a clearer access to data via the web site, also by listing statistics not available on web site (equal access to all potential users). Draw up clear protocols for accessing microdata. 	2007-2008 2007-2010 2007-2008 2008-2009

8. ANNEX A: PROGRAMME OF THE VISIT

Monday 02 07 2007		
	9:00 - 9:15	Welcome and introduction of programme
	9:15 - 12:45	Meeting on Principles 1-3, 5-6 & 15
	LUNCH BREAK	
	13:45 - 14:30	Interview with DG and QM on Principle 4
	14:30 - 15:30	Meeting with junior staff on all principles
	15:30 - 17:00	Presentation of strategic Master Plan - Discussion on certification
Tuesday 03 07 2007		
	9:30 - 10:45	Meeting with other statistics producers (Institute for National Accounts)
	10:45 - 12:00	Meeting with statistics users (Federal and Regional/Community levels)
	12:00 - 13:00	Meeting with High Council of Statistics representatives
	LUNCH BREAK	
	14:00 - 15:00	Meeting with the research community
	15:00 - 16:00	Meeting with press representatives
	16:00 - 17:00	Meeting with representatives of data providers
Wednesday 04 07 2007		
	9:30 - 11:30	Summing up with management
	11:30 - 13:00	Summing up with top management

9. ANNEX B: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Monday 02 07 2007	9:00 - 12:45	Niko Demeester (General Director), Annie Versonnen (Head Statistics Division), Nadine Weverbergh (legal expert), Marc Debusschere
	LUNCH BREAK	
	13:45 - 14:30	Niko Demeester (General Director), Annie Versonnen (Head Statistics Division), Marc Debusschere
	14:30 - 15:30	Denis Grofils, Astrid Depickere, Els Bauwens, Kris Reynders, Hadewych De Sadeleer, Vicky Truwant, Coraline Croquet, Anja Termote (Junior Statisticians)
	15:30 - 17:00	Niko Demeester (General Director), Annie Versonnen (Head Statistics Division), Marc Debusschere
Tuesday 03 07 2007		
	9:30 - 10:45	Producers: Bart Hertveldt (Federal Planning Office) + Rudi Acx (National Bank - Statistics)
	10:45 - 12:00	Users: Bart Hertveldt (Federal Planning Office) + Josée Lemaître (Vlaams Gewest) + Rudi Acx (National Bank - Statistics) + Benoît Robert (National Bank - Studies) + Sabine Rousseau (Brussels Region) + Bogdan Van Doninck (Federal Science Policy) + Pierre Dmitrevsky (Federal Social Security)
	12:00 - 13:00	High Council of Statistics: Martine Van Wouwe (President)
	LUNCH BREAK	
	14:00 - 15:00	Researchers: Patrick Deboosere (VUB Brussel) + Godelieve Masuy-Stroobant (UCL Louvain-la-Neuve) + Sergio Perelman (ULG Liège) + Karel Van den Bosch (UA Antwerpen)
	15:00 - 16:00	Journalists: Gerry Meeuwssen (Knack - general weekly), Désirée De Poot (Gazet van Antwerpen - popular newspaper), Kris Janssens (VRT - public television), Walter Bogemans (VRT - public television)
	16:00 - 17:00	Philippe Donnay (VBO/FEB, umbrella org.) (other scheduled participants cancelled because of an other meeting)
Wednesday 04 07 2007		
	9:30 - 11:30	Annie Versonnen (Head Statistics Division), Freddy Verkruyssen (Head Information & Communication Division), Marc Debusschere
	11:30 - 13:00	Niko Demeester (General Director)