

23 January 2019

Inappropriate use of statistics weakens trust: the European Statistical System should take a more proactive stance

In its 2018 Report, the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) urges the statistical authorities in the European Statistical System to give responses to complex and new challenges: the evolution of economic, environmental and social phenomena (from digitalisation to globalisation, from climate change to migration); the impact of the so-called 'data revolution' on most dimensions of data collection, processing and dissemination; the fast-changing landscape of traditional and social media; the growing number of data producers and the risks resulting from inappropriate use of statistics in the public debate. This is why ESGAB urges the statistical authorities to take a more proactive attitude in clarifying misleading or erroneous interpretation of data and to publicly report any misuse of official statistics.

"The European Statistical System (ESS) is a complex system and its governance requires continuous improvements to take into account the central role that statistics play in the functioning of the European Union" says Enrico Giovannini, Chair of ESGAB. "The way we deal with information has radically changed over the last decade. 'Fake news' and misinterpretations of evidence and statistics are more widespread in the public discourse than ever and often enter the political arena, placing new and demanding responsibilities on statistical authorities".

The 2018 ESGAB Annual Report examines this and other challenges that the European Statistical System is facing. ESGAB welcomes the progress made over the last twelve months in many matters, thanks to the efforts made by Eurostat and the National Statistical Institutes to improve compliance with the European Statistics Code of Practice. Furthermore, ESGAB is pleased with the Code's update, which was agreed at the end of 2017.

Notwithstanding these positive steps, the Board makes 14 recommendations regarding: a) the improvement of the comparability of key economic and social indicators challenged by globalisation and digitalisation, and the measurement of their consequences; b) the establishment of a closer dialogue between Eurostat and the National Statistical Institutes with stakeholders and of an overarching strategy on relations with users; c) a greater effort to develop users' statistical literacy; d) the creation of partnerships with the private sector guaranteeing the robustness, continuity and conditions for access of new data sources; e) the need to speed up the implementation of improvement actions arising from previous rounds of peer reviews (especially the ones which depend on authorities outside the National Statistical Institutes); f) the preference for the establishment of stand-alone Commitments on Confidence in Statistics by national governments and the need to increase their visibility; and g) the creation of ESGAB-like bodies in national statistical systems to reinforce the monitoring of compliance with the Code of Practice in individual countries.

For the first time, in its 2018 Report ESGAB gives an opinion on the implementation of the European Commission's Commitment on Confidence in Statistics, acknowledging that Eurostat has a strong and well-recognised professional position in the European Statistical System and within the Commission. However, ESGAB sees room for improvement in domains such as: reaction in case of inappropriate comments on European statistics; proactive expert advice; relevance and timeliness of some statistics necessary to underpin public policies; and adequate and skilled resources to deliver quality statistics.

Attachment: Annual Report 2018 executive summary and recommendations

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Further information

The 2018 report is available on ESGAB's homepage (<http://ec.europa.eu/esgab/>).

Contact for media assistance

To arrange an interview with the ESGAB Chair, Mr Enrico Giovannini, please contact the ESGAB Secretariat at estat-esgab@ec.europa.eu.

About ESGAB

ESGAB¹ provides an independent overview of the implementation of the Code of Practice. It seeks to enhance the professional independence, integrity and accountability of the European Statistical System, key elements of the Code, and the quality of European statistics. Its tasks include the preparation of an annual report to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Code by Eurostat and the European Statistical System as a whole. ESGAB also advises the Commission (Eurostat) on appropriate measures to facilitate implementation.

The **European Statistical System**² (ESS) is a partnership between the European Union's statistical authority, i.e. the Commission (Eurostat), and the national statistical institutes (NSIs) and other national authorities (ONAs) responsible in each Member State for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics.

European Statistics Code of Practice (the Code)

The European Statistics Code of Practice³ sets the standards for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics. It builds on a common definition of quality in statistics used in the European Statistical System. The Code is a self-regulatory instrument containing 16 principles which address the institutional environment in which national and EU statistical authorities operate, and the production and dissemination of European statistics. Its implementation is supported by a set of indicators of good practice for each principle.

Peer reviews

Peer reviews⁴ are part of the European Statistical System strategy to implement the Code of Practice. The objective is to enhance the integrity, independence and accountability of ESS statistical authorities. The first round of peer reviews was carried out in 2006-2008, followed by a second round in 2013-2015. Both rounds cover all EU Member States and EFTA countries. The European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) carried out a peer review of Eurostat using the methodology developed for National Statistical Institute peer reviews with some adaptations reflecting Eurostat's specific characteristics. The European Statistical System is preparing third round of peer reviews.

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/esgab/>.

² <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-statistical-system/overview>.

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/european-statistics-code-of-practice>.

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/peer-reviews>.