

Executive summary of the second mid-term evaluation of the European statistical programme 2013-17

Background

Regulation (EU) 99/2013¹ provides for the evaluation of the European statistical programme (ESP), covering 2013-2017. It has been extended by Regulation (EU) 2017/1951² to cover the remaining period of the EU multiannual financial framework, i.e. 2018-2020. The previous evaluation³ of the current ESP was finalised in 2015, covering the years 2013 and 2014. This evaluation covered 2015, 2016 and 2017. The evaluation was based on the original Regulation of the ESP 2013-17, before the programme was extended until the end of 2020. The main purpose of the evaluation was to help prepare the impact assessment for a new ESP under the next multiannual financial framework starting in 2021. In order to be able to contribute to the impact assessment report for the Single Market Programme (SMP), in which the ESP was integrated, Eurostat prepared the second mid-term evaluation already in spring 2018. Eurostat's contribution was included in the SMP proposal, which went through all necessary administrative procedures and finally resulted in the adoption of the Commission's legislative proposal for the SMP. Eurostat conducted the evaluation internally.

The general objective of the ESP is for the European Statistical System (ESS) to continue to be the leading provider of high-quality statistics on Europe. As a spending programme, the ESP constitutes the overall framework for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics. As such, it provides the financing for developing and maintaining Eurostat's statistical infrastructure and the ESS as managed by Eurostat. The ESP also provides financial support to Member States (MSs).

Key findings

The ESP has been highly effective. The percentages of planned outputs that were achieved or on target were consistently over 90 %. 20 out of the ESP's 23 detailed objectives can be considered on track to being accomplished by the end of the extended programme.

When examining the results that were produced for the different objectives, the evaluation work has shown that in general the ESP's structure is fairly complex, with objectives and sub-objectives covered by areas and measured by indicators which sometimes are not clearly distinct one from another. It is then inherently difficult to understand and monitor the ESP. Therefore, it is recommended to simplify the structure of the programme when preparing the future post-2020 ESP.

The ESP budget has been spent in the programme's three priority areas. The first priority area 'Statistical outputs' deals with the production of European statistics. In this area all MSs have

¹ OJ L 39, 9.2.2013, p. 12.

² OJ L 284, 31.10.2017, p. 1.

³ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/64157/4375449/02-Final-evaluation-report-2008-2012-1_EN-ACT-part1-v5.pdf (available in English only).

benefited from grants, which have ultimately allowed them to produce more and better quality data. The second priority area 'Production methods of European statistics' deals with improvements to the way statistics are produced, their quality and the way they are disseminated. This has enabled some of the weaknesses identified in the first mid-term evaluation to be addressed. Examples of results include the modernisation of the IT infrastructure to exchange data with MSs, the renovation of Eurostat's website, and the implementation of a series of new visualisation tools and of new ways to reach out to users. The third priority area 'Partnership' aims to support the production and quality of the statistics by improving the cooperation inside the ESS and with other international organisations and non-EU countries. In this area the budget was mostly used to support the development and production of statistics in countries outside the EU.

The programme has been run efficiently. A trend of increased internal productivity is observed. Nonetheless, measuring the costs of producing official statistics in the ESS and the burden on statistical respondents remains difficult. However, some steps have been taken. The overall cost assessment survey on producing official statistics in the ESS showed that both the total costs of production and the number of staff working on official statistics in the ESS have remained stable after falling in the ESP's first 2 years. A significant way to reduce the costs and administrative burden for producing statistics is to establish framework regulations. Three proposals have been adopted, for agriculture statistics, business statistics and social statistics. For some areas, like statistics on international trade in goods, the administrative burden could be quantified and is being reduced. In particular it is estimated that the option preferred under the Framework regulation integrating business statistics for the statistics on international trade, when implemented, could alone potentially reduce the administrative burden (for the EU in total) by 13.5 % or EUR 93 million. Studies at MS level suggest that the total statistical burden declined by more than 10 % since the beginning of the ESP and by more than 3 % in 2015 and 2016, which is the latest year for which data are currently available.

Benefits can only be measured indirectly, by looking at the use of the statistics produced under the programme, which has increased in the last years. Statistics do not have direct effects on the economy, the businesses, the environment or the society. The effects are generated by the policies which are implemented using the statistics. An increased use of accurate statistics makes it more likely that the policies will produce the expected benefits.

The ESP remains relevant. It has helped and continues to help satisfy the users' needs and contributes to the design and monitoring of policies but more is needed. Users are generally satisfied with the quality of the data. However, they ask for improvements, especially on timeliness and comparability. Not all requests for new data for emerging policy needs could be taken into account. Eurostat and the ESS are modernising the statistical production processes to respond to such needs while taking advantage of new technologies. Focus must be given to (i) implementing the modernisation of the statistical production processes, which may require changes in the way statistical authorities gather and process data, and (ii) access to adequate resources.

The ESP is coherent internally and consistent externally with other initiatives that aim to produce statistics. The different components of the ESP interact well to contribute to the programme's general objective and Eurostat coordinates the production of statistics in the Commission and will continue to improve such coordination.

The ESP's implementation has shown that the programme has produced and continues to produce clear EU added value for its main objectives. The EU added value of the programme is demonstrated by the harmonised provision of comparable and high-quality data for EU countries. The ESP as a harmonised system with common quality standards for the production of statistics is unparalleled worldwide. A similar level of harmonisation, comparability and quality cannot be achieved at Member State level alone to make essential contributions to EU activities, in particular the 10 political priorities of the Commission.