

Description of the Belgian Statistical System

Summary

Belgium has a decentralized statistical system in which the role of the national statistical institute is limited by a number of factors. Firstly, important policy areas are not exercised at the federal but at the Region or Community level, often coupled with data collection and statistical processing. Furthermore, macroeconomic statistics such as national accounts and external trade statistics are a responsibility of the Institute for National Accounts. Finally, several Federal Public Services (ministries) and agencies at the federal as well as the regional level produce and publish statistics using their administrative data.

While Statistics Belgium remains the single most important statistics producer in Belgium, it is far from being the only one. A second important and central role is the transmission of data to the European level and of standards and nomenclatures to the other national statistics producers.

The 2006 Statistical Law has created several structures and instruments enabling Statistics Belgium to co-ordinate statistical production and transmission to the European Statistical System in a flexible and pragmatic way.

1. Statistics Belgium

Statistics Belgium, officially 'Directorate-General Statistics and Economic Information' is one of the nine Directorates-General of the Federal Public Service ('ministry') Economy, SME's, Self-employed and Energy. Statistics Belgium, operationally consisting of a Center for Data Collection, three 'Thematic Directions' (Territory, Society and Economy) and an Information & Communication Direction, has a central office in Brussels and 4 local branches in the main cities (Antwerp, Ghent, Charleroi and Liege). Statistics Belgium covers most statistical domains, but some important statistics are produced elsewhere (e.g. statistics on external trade, justice, education, national and regional accounts). Statistics Belgium very actively disseminates all statistical data, including those from other producers, towards the European Statistical System as well as to many other categories of users.

2. Other federal statistics producers

In 1994 the Institute for National Accounts was created as a coordinating structure for some important macroeconomic statistics: national and regional accounts, input-output table and external trade statistics. The Institute for National Accounts, jointly managed by Statistics Belgium, the National Bank of Belgium and the Federal Planning Bureau, has no executive personnel of its own. The statistical work is carried out by its three member institutions. Statistics Belgium collects structural, business trend and other statistical data, the National Bank draws up national and regional accounts and collects and processes external trade data, the Federal Planning Bureau creates input-output tables.

Several Federal Public Services (ministries) and agencies at the federal level produce and publish statistics on the areas they are responsible for and for which they collect administrative data: health, justice ... In many cases results down to a very detailed level are disseminated through Statistics Belgium's specialized channels (statbel web site, ecodata on line data base, rss-feeds, alerters and e-zines). In some cases methodological or logistical support is provided.

2. Regional and Community level

Belgium's three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels) and three Communities (French-, Dutch- and German-speaking), each with its own parliament, government and administration, exercise very important policy areas: Regions hold territorial competencies such as economy, environment, public works, agriculture, Communities are responsible for personal matters such as education, culture, family policy, employment. Because Regions and Communities have a very close association with potential data providers and, on the other hand, need statistical data to conduct their policies, they also deployed statistical activity.

The main statistical institutions at the regional level are 'Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering' (Flemish Region & Community), IWEPS -Institut wallon de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la statistique (Walloon Region) and BISA - Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse / IBSA - Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse (Brussels Region).

Except for some general articles in the Statistical Law the collaboration and division of tasks between the federal and regional statistical institutions is not spelled out in detail. A pragmatic modus operandi has evolved, in which the need to transmit data and metadata to the European level and the obligation to follow Regulations has played a significant role.

3. Coordination role and instruments

In order to coordinate the many actors of the Belgian Statistical System, the recent 2006 Statistical Law created additional structures and instruments.

3.1 Coordination Committee

The 2006 Statistical Law created a 'coordination committee' within Statistics Belgium whose 'mission is to coordinate and ensure the follow up of the statistical programmes in the various public administrations, departments and institutions in order to improve the efficiency and quality of those statistics, to reduce the total response burden as well as to meet the European and international obligations within the prescribed deadlines'. The Coordination Committee, consisting of representatives of the main official statistical instances in Belgium (Statistics Belgium, the National Bank of Belgium, the Federal Planning Bureau and the regions and communities), is a consultative body which will prepare an integrated pluriannual statistical programme, including an inventory of the current statistical production and needs, updated according to the evolution of the information needs of the various authorities and of the international obligations of data provision. The coordination committee also gives advice on the positions that Belgium takes at international meetings about statistics on fields within the scope of competences of the regions and communities. The Royal Decree implementing the Coordination Committee is to be published in June 2007.

3.3 High Council of Statistics

The High Council of Statistics is an advisory body with representatives of the scientific community, socio-economic circles and federal, regional and community administrations. It pronounces on the scientific quality, the socio-economic need and impact and on the coordinated way in which statistical needs can be identified and filled.

3.2 Certification

The possibility of statistical methods being certified by Statistics Belgium, newly created by the 2006 Statistical Law, aims at improving the quality of Belgian statistics, in a broad sense: all methods for producing statistics on Belgium are eligible for certification, including non-official ones. Quality criteria are quite specific and fully compatible with the European Statistics Code of Practice; they include conformity with recognized nomenclatures and 'relevance'.

The certification system is not yet activated by a Royal Decree and still in a preparatory stage.

3.4 Gentleman's agreements

Apart from the more formal and legal arrangements, numerous semi-formal agreements exist between Statistics Belgium and data producers or users, for all statistical domains, at the federal or regional levels, with official and private partners. The purpose is the same in all these cases: better satisfy users' needs by producing and disseminating timely and high-quality statistics according to international standards and criteria.

For more information: <http://statbel.fgov.be/>.