

The process and challenges of developing a Code of Practice for the European Neighbourhood South countries within the overall institutional framework

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Abstract

The development of a Code of Practice in a different institutional environment than the one of the European Statistical System is a challenging process. This process is described including the different discussion rounds and the follow-up at different levels of hierarchy in the NSIs of the countries. Some lessons learnt from the process are described as well as the result of the process and the differences with the European statistics Code of Practice.

Keywords: Institutional framework, Code of Practice, ENP South countries

1. Introduction

The overall institutional framework for the statistical offices in the countries of the European Neighbourhood South¹ (ENP South) is characterized by very decentralized statistical systems in at least half of the countries and hence a strong need for coordination of the statistical systems; by a lack of a common understanding of the definition of official statistics and of its producers and hence by a lack of a definition of the exact content of the national statistical

¹ The countries of the European Neighbourhood South are Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia

system; by a lack of understanding in society of what official statistics is and what benefits it can bring to policy-making, policy-monitoring and to the society at large; by a different understanding of professional independence of the National Statistical Institute (NSI) and official statistics as such; by a different understanding of other aspects of the European statistics Code of Practice such as impartiality and objectivity, statistical confidentiality, equal access to data; etc. The NSIs also experience a lack of understanding of the importance of official statistics for sound evidence-based decision making and hence a very limited user engagement.

It is in this context that the heads of the NSIs of the countries covered by the ENP South decided in 2013 to discuss the need to establish a Code of Practice for their NSIs with the aim to increase the image of official statistics and its producers as well as to spread the need for good quality statistics to the society. The heads of the NSIs considered the two options available: either to commit themselves to the European statistics Code of Practice (ESCoP)² or to develop their own Code of Practice. For both options it was agreed that a detailed presentation about the meaning of the principles and indicators of the ESCoP was necessary in order to understand the content and reasoning behind all of them.

These presentations and discussions were held during various workshops and meetings of the quality managers and the heads of the NSIs as well, with the result that a Code of Practice for the ENP South countries was developed on the basis of the ESCoP but adapted to the reality and institutional context of the ENP South countries. The paper will describe the main aspects of the process of developing such a code, lessons learnt and also briefly the result, the Code of Practice of the ENP South countries and its differences with the ESCoP.

The intention of describing this process in this paper and at the conference is to document the course, its difficulties and the lessons learnt so that other regions/groups of countries can benefit from this experience. The paper is also intended to demonstrate the fact that the ENP

² <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-manuals-and-guidelines/-/KS-32-11-955>

South countries decided to go for such a process and managed to achieve the objective of developing and agreeing on a common Code of Practice. This result is – given the difficult situation the NSIs are operating in and the political situation in the region – a real success.

2. Process of developing a Code of Practice for the ENP South countries

2.1. Preparation

Prior to the first workshop with the quality managers of the NSIs in March 2014, Eurostat asked – using the principles and indicators of the ESCoP - all countries to indicate for each principle and each indicator 1) what the current status of implementation of the indicators was and what kind of challenges the NSI had experienced in the implementation of the indicator (if it was relevant) and 2) whether the principles and indicators would be acceptable as such for the NSI or whether changes would be needed to reflect the reality of the country's institutional environment. Eight out of the nine³ approached countries answered and these answers served as a basis for preparing the discussions in the workshop. Furthermore, a comparison between the different quality frameworks was prepared – namely, the ESCoP, the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the African Charter of Statistics (relevant for the five countries from North Africa).

2.2. Discussion

The first workshop provided for each principle and its indicators an indication on how big the acceptance was of the specific principle and its indicator. Experts from Eurostat and Italy provided detailed explanations on the reasons why these indicators were included in the principle, on the meaning of each indicator and how it was assessed in reviews, what kind of difficulties to implement it were experienced, etc. These explanations provided very useful background to the quality managers and were considered very helpful in discussing and agreeing on which indicator should be included also in the Code of Practice for the ENP South countries.

³ Syria was not contacted because of the suspension of cooperation with this country.

All quality managers agreed that their ENP South Code of Practice should be both ambitious and realistic and this became the guiding principle for the discussions. It was the declared objective that the – to be developed - Code of Practice was not yet implemented with all its indicators in all the countries (ambitious) but should take into account the conditions and the institutional framework as described above and not contain indicators that were out of scope of application for the countries or would go against their administrative and legal set-up (realistic). While this objective was rather easy to obtain for some principles and their indicators, such as for the mandate for data collection, commitment to quality, accuracy and reliability, timeliness and punctuality, coherence and comparability, some more discussions were needed for principles and indicators that had an obvious and stronger relation to institutional aspects such as professional independence, statistical confidentiality, relevance, accessibility and clarity. In particular the principle on professional independence and the indicators related to the recruitment and appointment of the head of the NSI and other national authorities producing official statistics and their hierarchical standing raised long discussions. These were mainly on the feasibility of including such indicators that in a large part depended on the administrative and political set-up in a country. The NSIs itself are not in a strong position to influence the changes needed to implement such appointment procedures and to achieve a high hierarchical standing of the Director General of the NSI. However, an agreement was reached that these indicators were of such a crucial importance for the professional independence and the image of the NSI as an independent and professional producer of impartial and objective official statistics, that the ambitions of the NSI should be set at a high level.

Three more meetings were held to achieve a clear understanding and a first preliminary agreement of the Director Generals of the ENP South countries on the Code of Practice for the ENP South countries. After two years the final version of the “*Statistics Code of Practice for the European Neighbourhood South countries (based on the ES CoP)*” was agreed by the NSIs of the countries and their Director Generals in their most recent meeting on 19-20 April 2016.

3. Results – the Statistics Code of Practice for the ENP South countries

The result of these discussions with the top management, principal coordinators and quality managers of the NSIs from the ENP South countries is a Statistics Code of Practice for the ENP South countries that is endorsed as the basis for developing the institutional framework of the NSIs and the related quality assurance framework and quality reporting guidelines. It is a big step forward that such a Code was endorsed. The countries participating in the development of the Code underlined that the result is important but even more the process itself as this provided useful insight into the underlying framework and reasons for developing and implementing a Code.

3.1. Common aspects

Most of the principles and indicators from the ESCoP were taken over to the Code of Practice for the ENP South countries, some of them with a slight change in wording. One principle was added⁴ containing indicators from principle 8 but to be an explicit principle, one other indicator⁵ was deleted, one indicator⁶ was added and no indicator was changed to such an extent that it changed the meaning or practice. The additional indicator relates to Principle 10 on cost-effectiveness and refers to sharing of disseminated data, tools and expertise between Eurostat, the NSIs and other producer of official statistics in the ENP South countries. This addition reinforces the strong willingness of cooperation that takes place between Eurostat and the ENP South countries' NSIs.

In this sense, the Statistics Code of Practice for the ENP South countries is very similar to the ESCoP in its content.

⁴ Principle on "Coordination and cooperation"

⁵ Indicator 9.5 "Data sharing within statistical authorities is generalised in order to avoid multiplication of surveys"

⁶ Indicator 10.5 "Sharing of disseminated data, tools and expertise takes place between Eurostat, the National Statistical Institutes and other producer of official statistics in the ENP South countries."

3.2. Differences

While there are some non-substantial differences in the wording of the principles and indicators, e.g. European statistic are replaced by official statistics, European standards are replaced by European or international standards, etc., it is worthwhile highlighting the three major differences in the two codes: the scope of application of the Code of Practice, the deletion of one indicator in principle 9⁷ and the addition of a principle on coordination of the NSS and cooperation (principle 16).

The first difference is that the Code of Practice for the ENP South countries is adopted by the NSIs of the ENP South countries as a framework for only the NSI. It is not adopted at a political level and it is not (yet) valid for the Other National Authorities (ONA) producing official statistics. This Code of Practice is a very first step in promoting and designing an institutional framework for the NSIs of the ENP South countries that promotes professional independence, quality commitment, coordination in the National Statistical System, equal treatment of users of statistics, transparency and accessibility of statistical information and increased cooperation with the holder of administrative registers/data sources. Later, it needs to be seen and discussed on how this Code of Practice can also be extended to other producers of official statistics in these countries but in order to be extended, these other producers and the borderline of the NSS need to be properly defined in the first place.

The second difference relates to indicator 9.5 containing a statement about the sharing of data in the national statistical system, meaning among all the producers of official statistics in a country. This indicator has been deleted due to the fact that in the ENP South countries no exact definition of the national statistical systems exists yet and hence it still needs to be defined who are the other producers of official statistics and who should apply the Code of Practice, in particular in relation to the principle of statistical confidentiality. As the Code of

⁷ Indicator 9.5 "Data sharing within statistical authorities is generalised in order to avoid multiplication of surveys"

Practice applies to only the NSI for the time being, data sharing among producer of official statistics is not possible until these producers are clearly defined and have committed themselves to adhere to the Code of Practice.

The third difference relates to the fact that the ENP South countries decided to explicitly include a principle on coordination and cooperation. Coordination is a particular problem for many countries with a decentralised statistical system and cooperation, for example with Eurostat and international organisations, is essential for the NSIs to progress and benefit from European and other international experience and best practice. The indicators on coordination are mainly taken out of the ESCoP principle 8⁸ and developed anew⁹. They are included into this separate principle so as to make sure that coordination of the NSS is visible in such a fundamental document and receives proper attention from other stakeholders. The indicators on cooperation have been based on similar indicators in the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the African Charter of statistics¹⁰.

4. Lessons learnt

⁸ Indicator 8.1 (Becoming indicator 16.2) "When European statistics are based on administrative data, the definition and concepts used for administrative purposes are a good approximation to those required for statistical purposes." and Indicator 8.7 (Becoming Indicator 16.3) "Statistical authorities are involved in the design of administrative data which set out their shared commitment to the use of these data for statistical purposes."

⁹ Indicator 16.1 "National mechanisms exist for coordinating the development, production and dissemination of official statistics and ensuring their quality."

¹⁰ Indicator 16.4 "The National Statistical Institute has the capacity and structure in place to coordinate statistical assistance from other institutes or international organizations so as to maximize its impact.", Indicator 16.5 "The National Statistical Institutes and other producers of official statistics actively participate in the main regional and international discussion forums on statistics, according to their areas of competence and in a manner coordinated with the NSI." and Indicator 16.6 "The National Statistical Institutes advocates for the inclusion of strengthening statistical capacity and cooperation within the national strategies for cooperation and political cooperation agreements between the country and regional (organisations) and international organisations."

The lessons learnt from this process can be described as follows:

1. First of all an overall agreement is necessary that a Code of Practice is needed and beneficial for the NSI in its production and dissemination of statistics but also for its image in the society and its work with other stakeholders, users and producers of official statistics. This agreement is mainly based on the benefits from having such a Code, such as:

- a common language for statisticians, bringing them closer together
- commitment to quality communicated to the users
- clarity about statistics, about their strengths and weaknesses
- sets of standards and common tools
- promotion of a culture of quality and assessments, including self-monitoring
- a boost the professional independence of statistics
- help in implementing the coordinating role of the NSI, in the application of EU standards and in getting better access to administrative data
- tool for development
- a basis for arguments with the users
- increased trust in statistics.

2. During the process of developing a Code of Practice the quality of discussions is more important than the time it takes. Around five rounds of intensive discussions were necessary to arrive at a finally agreeable version. It is of importance to guarantee a deep understanding of the meaning and the reasons for each and every indicator in the CoP and even to simulate its implementation in reality.

3. Ownership by the countries needs to be ensured through maximum involvement into the process right from the start. This may be achieved through the filling in of a questionnaire to provide information about the starting point of the countries, the leading of discussions, the possibility to comment and introduce changes, round tables of discussion, etc.

4. The involvement of the top management is crucial for achieving acceptance of the Code of Practice. Internal explicit briefings by the quality managers but also minutes of meetings

showing the course of the discussions and outlining the reasons for certain decisions are indispensable. Transparency of the discussions is important.

5. Continuity of staff involved in the process of developing such a Code of Practice is very helpful as otherwise the same kind of discussion on controversial issues will be repeated several times. The quality managers (or other colleagues) involved in the process need to have a sufficient hierarchical standing in the NSI to be granted direct access to the top management and the possibility and capacity to brief the top management on the course of the discussions and on the decisions taken.

6. A capable moderator / facilitator for the discussions is very helpful as opinions on the inclusion / formulation of indicators tend to differ a lot and there is a need for summarising very different contributions into a commonly acceptable proposal.

7. The agreement on a Code of Practice is of course only the starting point, many discussions on the implementation and difficulties coming from promoting the Code of Practice and its application will need to be held.