

# Perspective of three different countries on peer review on European statistics Code of practice: lessons learned, future challenges and common features on coordination role

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## Abstract

In the second round of peer reviews on the implementation of the European Code of Practice (CoP), an audit-like approach was applied covering all contexts of the CoP. In addition special attention was paid to the coordination role of NSIs in their respective national statistical systems.

In this joint paper we compare the lessons learned during the process and the outcome of the Peer review, taking into account the different national statistical systems of Austria, Italy and the Netherlands. A comparative analysis of the similarities, differences and best practices allows us to highlight whether they are related to one typical system or have general applicability, and to explain the value of a strong coordination role. One conclusion might be that we should reinforce the coordination role as laid down in the Revised regulation 223/2009 even further and include a new principle on coordination in the European Statistics Code of Practice.

**Keywords:** European Statistics Code of Practice, peer review, coordination role, Other National Authorities, regulation 223/2009.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

In the period 2013-2015 the second round of peer reviews in the EU and EFTA/EEA countries was one of the main projects of the European Statistical System (ESS). New aspects of the exercise comprise the review of all principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP), the addressing of selected Other National Authorities (ONAs) beside the National

Statistical Institutes (NSIs), an audit-like approach as well as the inclusion of the issues of cooperation and coordination within the national statistical systems.

This paper intends to show how three different national statistical institutes, the institutes of Austria, Italy and the Netherlands, perceived the various stages of the peer review exercise in their countries. What kind of experience/lessons learned can be taken for the future? What lessons did we learn about the process, the organisation and communication? The questions elaborated on are whether or not any commonalities exist, and if so, which commonalities could be found keeping in mind the differences of the respective systems and the country-specific characteristics.

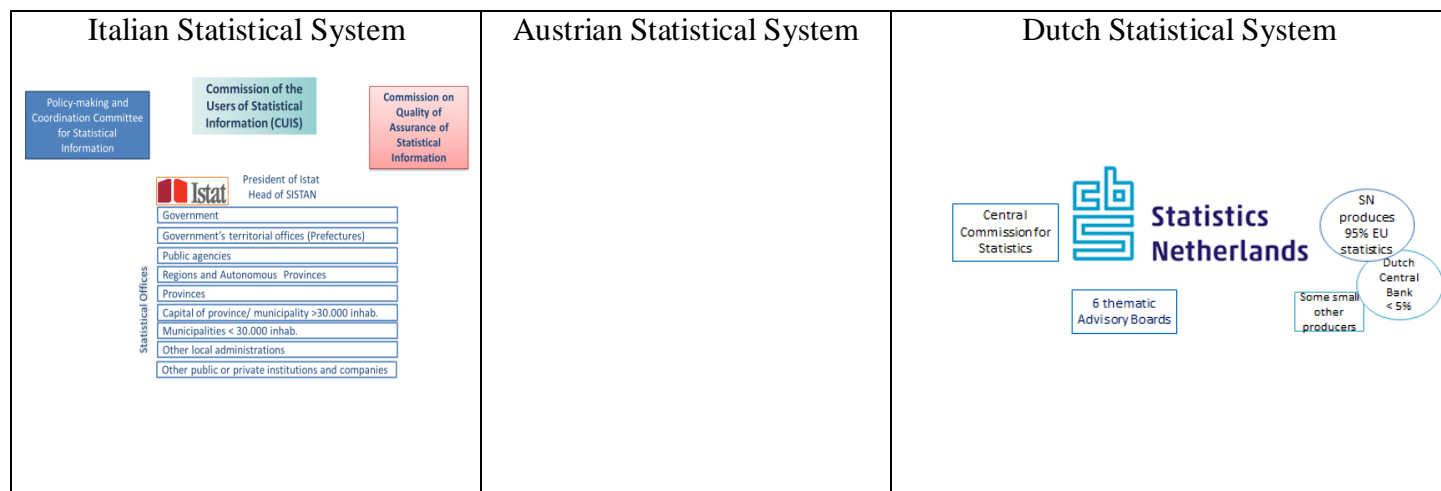
In this process, particular attention had been paid to the coordination role of the National Statistical Institute (NSI), which is a central aspect of the national statistical systems (NSS) and the ESS, in general. This also becomes apparent when reading the annual report of the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) on the challenge of anchoring well-established coordination procedures and clarified and transparent mechanism in NSIs and Eurostat. Especially for countries with regional production “...a clear and definite mandate and wide coordination powers should be enshrined in legislation.” (ESGAB Annual Report, 2015). Accordingly, ESGAB gives some thoughts on creating a new principle on coordination in the framework of the CoP (ESGAB Annual Report, 2015). Finally, the amendments to Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 on European statistics, the European Statistical Law (Regulation (EU) 2015/759 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2015 amending Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 on European statistics) emphasize the importance of enhancing the coordination role, not in the least in the context of independence and quality with regard to the credibility of evidence-based decision-making.

Looking into the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice and coordination with the European Statistical System, 2016, saying that 121 out of 707 recommendations relate to improvements of coordination (3 diverging views NSI – PR team), it is to be noted that this issue produces a widespread picture, beginning from NSIs having a strong leadership in

coordination (some with a legal basis), others having just informal arrangements. This leads us to the structure of the three NSIs in question which have been attested high level of compliance with the CoP by the last peer review round.

*1.2. Key element of the National Statistical Institutes of Austria, Italy and the Netherlands*

Source: PR report, Austria 2015, Italy 2015, NL 2015	<b>Austria</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>The Netherlands</b>
<b>NSI status/legal basis</b>	<b>Statistics Austria</b> STAT: federal institution under public law, Federal Statistics Act of 2000	<b>Italian National Institute of Statistics</b> ISTAT: legal person under public law Art 14 of Legislative Decree no 322/1989	<b>Statistics Netherlands:</b> autonomous authority with legal personality based on the Statistics Netherlands Act of 20 November 2003
<b>Committees/Bodies (governance)</b>	Statistics Council and Economic Council (2 independent bodies with Sub-Committees)	Policy-making and Co-ordinating Committee for Statistical Information, Commission Quality Assurance of Statistical Information and Commission of Users of statistical Information	Board of Directors, Central Commission for Statistics (CCS) (autonomous body), thematic Advisory Boards
<b>Other National Authorities</b>	7 institutions	19 institutions	0 (some statistical producers)
<b>Coordination Mechanism</b>	agreements/ memoranda of understanding (already adopted or being prepared)	ISTAT leading role within SISTAN	agreements with other producers



## 2. Lessons learned: Peer review an opportunity for NSIs

The new round of peer reviews was a further demonstration that the countries have made efforts with respect to quality and their commitment to follow the European Statistics Code of Practice and the standard for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics.

It was a good opportunity for the NSIs in our countries to reinforce progressive behaviours and other factors for modernizing the statistical production and to enhance efforts to make our national statistical systems more efficient. Peer reviews provide a means to carry out analyses from a variety of situations and a work flow of different activities for the development, production and dissemination of official statistics to performance evaluations. The audit-like approach applied in the new round of peer reviews, was a value in the NSIs fostering a culture of self-assessment. The, evidence-based approach is an important means to discover potential weakness, best practices and innovative tools and a catalyst for positive change.

The impact of the exercise is not only on the NSIs but also on the national statistical system (NSS) as a whole. The knowledge of the members of the peer review team about the structure and functioning of the NSS is essential to better understand the governance and the dynamics that exist in a more or less complex system. In this respect, the presence of the ONAs can drive the assessment by the peer reviewers. The efforts of NSIs to involve them in the process

are essential even if the outcome can vary a lot. Before launching the peer review, several initiatives had to be taken to involve the selected ONAs (7 in total in Austria, 19 in total in Italy), to inform them about the process and the methodology adopted. In general, many efforts have been made by NSIs to get the ONAs on board and even in the case of the Netherlands, in which Statistics Netherlands is the only statistical authority producing more than 95 percent of official statistics, participation of other producers has been ensured. This involvement showed different level of enthusiasm and persuasion. The completion of the (light) Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ) also by ONAs has helped to raise awareness by ONAs. In any case it is an valuable opportunity to share the relevance of the exercise, and its value for the quality and the credibility of official statistics, the importance to adhere to the principle of the Code of Practice, which together with the general quality management principles represents a common quality framework in the European Statistical System and finally another way to express the coordination role.

### *2.1 Lessons learned on the process*

The new round of peer reviews meant extensive work not only for the national peer review teams but also on a much larger scale for the NSI. The audit-like approach forced NSIs to provide evidence on their activities. This provided an overall picture as an essential input of information to the peer reviewers focussed on specific aspects of the institutional environment, of the statistical process and of the statistical products. The efforts made by the NSIs were focussed on the final output requested for the completion of the SAQ, the production and translation of core documents needed, such as description of our National Statistical Institute and national statistical system, legal framework and description of ONAs. However, we consider this process important also with regard to the phases following the compilation of the documentation. We could discover some common points hereinafter:

- the development of a systemic approach to collect, store, and classify a set of information which provide the required evidences in the SAQ and for the peer review team;

- the consolidated set of information collected is also useful to increase the awareness on the availability of documented activities, which comply with principles following specific indicators and on the re-use of those information at internal level sharing achievements with colleagues in different domains and sharing practices at national and international level;
- promoting a continuous dialogue within the NSI at the technical and strategic levels involving different expertise with regard to specific activities/outcomes which can be taken as “evidence”.

## *2.2 Lessons learned on organisation*

The latest experience shows that peer reviews take a bit of organisational and individual courage and commitment. One element of the deliberate practice required to raise results and evidence, engaging multidimensional expertise. During the organisation of activities in response to the peer review, NSIs must have the courage to ask for feedback and accept performance related feedback, which may be uncomfortable or difficult to manage. Possible critical feedback should be taken as an opportunity for improvement. These are points in which more efforts must be made. In this respect in the experience of our three countries, the involvement of various colleagues of the institute represented a value added and chance to enhance the sense of belonging to an institution committed to the high quality of data. It was an opportunity to carry out an internal gap analysis, identifying real and potential weakness but also the best practise to be highlighted and to be shared within the Statistical Office and if the case with other NSIs, in order to create synergies.

One of the challenges for the NSIs was the development of materials in English needed as core documents and as documentation for “evidences”. The set of information collected for this purpose was available in most cases but not always systematized. The NSIs had to draw up ad hoc papers to explain the activities and the process, describing what had been done and what is to be done about the specific indicator to which the evidence is related. The experience of peer reviews has highlighted the opportunity to prepare this documentation in advance using an

interdisciplinary approach, team work and identifying synergies among several activities. The output of this work becomes a benefit for the NSIs. It shows the importance of leaving proof of our work to be used by all colleagues. This approach can be followed even after the peer review and should be used to come to a consolidated set of documentation.

### *2.3 The value of communication*

The whole peer review round was meant to open the door to the outside world. In fact we faced external peer reviewers to whom the NSIs had to speak in a clear and understandable language, not too technical and not too simple. As communication is an essential tool, the experts involved should be prepared to use the “story telling approach”. It is seen as a good method of preventing misunderstandings and of getting an idea of what is well understood and what requires further explanation. By the peer review exercise, the NSI acquires visibility within the organisation itself and towards the other stakeholders in the national statistical system, as well as at the political level and civil society. Therefore, the exercise can be used as an excellent opportunity to provide information on the process of the peer review and the results to:

- Colleagues in the NSI, also to those who were not directly involved. Communication of the results, disseminating the final report and improvement actions identifying responsibilities for each improvement actions for the commitments to carry out actions needed to respond to the recommendation (internal communication);
- Stakeholders (like government, ministries and other main users, the media, academia, ONAs and other producers). This is to explain the purpose of the peer review and the main results (external communication).

### **3. Coordination Role**

As said before, Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council on European statistics addresses the fundamental aspects of coordination and attaches

significant importance to the coordination aspect, reinforced in the revision of 2015 in particular with regard to whereas (1) and article 5 giving more responsibility to the NSIs.

Furthermore, the second round of peer reviews comprised a new self-assessment questionnaire on the Coordination Role of NSIs including taking stock of the effectiveness and efficiency of the coordination activity by the NSIs within the National Statistical System.

In the background to this questionnaire, the “coordination role” is described as the set of activities of a single organisation, which ensures that the activities of different members of the system meet the relevant quality standards. For NSIs, the coordination role ensures that all other national authorities within their national statistical system that contribute to the development, production and dissemination of European statistics comply with the standards of the ESS, and fulfil the quality requirements for European statistics.

### *3.1. The coordination in practice*

Analysing the three statistical systems of Austria, Italy and the Netherlands in the context of the experiences with the coordination role, commonalities and differences are to be found.

At the national level, legal provisions attribute the coordination role of these three NSIs. The case of the three countries shows that the coordination role can only be effectively carried out when the legal provisions are supported by an effective organisational structure, and if needed, further agreements and contracts with ONAs and other producers of European Statistics to commit themselves to follow guidelines, quality criteria and common rules.

Although other producers do not have the same status as formally appointed ONAs, the responsibilities inherent to the coordination role are similar and adequate arrangements have to be made. Contracts and written agreements can be used as a tool in order to reinforce compliance with the EU regulations and the Code. Through coordination mechanism and appropriate instruments the NSI can better express the responsibility for the quality and timeliness of the statistical production of the other producers of European Statistics. In this respect a specific principle on coordination in the Code can drive the assessment of the role and activities carried out by the NSI according to the structure of its national system.



The way a NSI organises its coordination role in practice is also essential for its effectiveness. The first main step for the coordination role of the NSI is that it is recognized by ONAs taking into account the provision of the European statistical law. There are different options to implement this role, either with a central coordination team or to devolve a coordinating role to subject-matter specialists, or to have a mixture of the two. In Italy with a wide statistical system, effective coordination requires a lot of effort and a strong mechanism is important. SISTAN has this in practice. In the centralized statistical system of the Netherlands, the coordination role is mainly devolved to subject matter specialist, supported by the signed agreement at the top level. Austria implements its coordination role via option three, a mixture between central and subject-matter experts` team also in the framework of agreements/memoranda of understanding.

ONAs should be required to provide quality reports and further explanations where and why they deviate from the European Statistics Code of Practice.

In practice it also means that the NSI has to organise meetings on a regular base and create a platform for the exchange of views and to steer on the quality and timeliness if necessary. The more complex the system a stronger coordination mechanism seems necessary. Finally, the peer review teams concluded that the NSI must be financially enabled to fulfil its coordination role. Providing sufficient resources (human and financial) are fundamental for an effective coordination in practice.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In countries with different national statistical systems, the peer review exercise is a process which raises awareness and interest for statistics not only at the internal level but also at the national and international levels. It brings evidence for trust building, partnership into the NSS, synergies at internal level, increasing transparency activities and innovative practices in compliance with the CoP. Effective communication about this process is essential. It should be given even more attention in a next round.

The coordination role is an important aspect of the functioning of the NSI and a strategic issue in more or less decentralized or centralized statistical systems. It is crucial in showing how a

NSI functions in the NSS. At the country level, the exercise of peer review showed different practices and efforts on coordination, according also to the structure of the NSS. Part of the coordination role is the development and management of coordination tools to enhance the consultation process with ONAs on the production of European statistics, the dialogue with ONAs on main topics at European level and the monitoring compliance to quality guidelines and principles of CoP.

There are examples at the international level mentioning the coordination role as a principle, like in the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (principle 8 Coordination among statistical agencies within countries) and in the Código regional de buenas prácticas en estadísticas para América latina y el Caribe (principle 2 Coordinación del Sistema Estadístico Nacional). The development of a specific principle on “coordination” to be added into the European Statistics Code of Practice could be a possible and promising way forward for self-assessment of the level of coordination and a potential way to share practices among NSIs on coordination.

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