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**MANAGING PERCEIVED RESPONSE BURDEN: WHY AND HOW –
EXPERIENCES FROM THE NETHERLANDS**

Working Paper

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I. Introduction

1. The day to day challenge in the production of statistics is finding an acceptable balance between quality and costs (e.g. Groves 1989; Eurostat 2003; Erikson, Haraldsen & Snijkers 2012). The costs that need to be considered do not only include the costs for the agency producing the statistics but also the costs for the providers of the data. As stated in the European Statistics Code of Practice: “*The reporting burden should be proportionate to the needs of the users and should not be excessive for respondents. The statistical authority monitors the response burden and sets targets for its reduction over time.*”
2. Reducing administrative burden for businesses is an important target in European Union and national policies (e.g. U.S. Paperwork Reduction Act 1980; the 2007 EU Action Programme for Reducing Administrative Burdens). The main reason for reducing administrative burden is that resources spent on complying with government reporting cannot be spent on profit making activities. In order to increase the competitiveness of businesses, administrative burden should be kept as low as possible. The burden caused by statistics is only a relative small part of the total administrative burden. The EU Project on Baseline Measurement (2009) estimated the total annual administrative burden caused by statistics at €552 million for the EU: 0.5% of the total costs measured. However, burden caused by statistics is an important concern for businesses. The EC High Level Group of Independent Stakeholders on Administrative Burdens (2009) states that perceived burden or “irritation burden” is the main cause of this concern.
3. In the last decades many national statistical institutes (NSIs) have managed to substantially reduce the actual burden (i.e. time and /or money spent by businesses on statistical reporting) put on business respondents. They have done so with various methods (Hedlin 2011), among others by using administrative data (UNECE 2011) and by collecting data directly from respondents’ systems (Roos

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2010; Goddeeris & Bruynooghe 2011). Until recently less attention was paid to respondents' perception of their experience with the survey. This is illustrated by the fact that a survey of NSIs practices of measuring and reducing response burden found that only 12 of the 41 institutes had recently measured perceived burden in business surveys, whereas 34 had measured actual burden (Giesen 2011). However, both in the general policies regarding regulations as in official statistics it has become clear that one also needs to focus on the perception of regulations/administrative burdens (OECD 2012; Haraldsen, Jones, Giesen & Zhang 2013).

4. In the remainder of this paper we will first summarize the findings regarding causes and effects of perceived response burden in official business surveys from a recent European research project in which Statistics Netherlands participated. These findings illustrate the relevance of managing perceived response burden. Next, we will discuss specific measures taken by Statistics Netherlands to reduce the perceived response burden.

II. Causes and effects of perceived response burden: findings of BLUE-ETS project

A. Background BLUE-ETS research on perceived response burden

5. The BLUE-Enterprise and Trade Statistics project was a collaborative research project on official business statistics, funded by the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme under Grant agreement n. 244767. The project ran from April 2010 until March 2013 (see www.blue-ets.eu for more information). Several work packages within BLUE-ETS focused on response burden and motivation in official business surveys. The main contributions for this research came from Statistical offices of the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Slovenia and the Universities of Ljubljana and Bergamo. Work Package 2 investigated NSIs current practices concerning burden and motivation in business surveys by a literature study (Giesen & Raymond-Blaess 2011) and a survey among all European and some non-European NSIs (Giesen 2011). Work Package 3 examined business perspectives towards NSI statistics, both in their role as data providers and (potential) data users (Bavdaž 2011a, 2011b). This research was based on a multitude of sources: information available at the participating NSIs; interviews with experts on businesses in institutions/organisations outside NSIs; academic publications and textbooks, and; a cross-country qualitative field study among businesses to examine their practices in using NSIs' statistics, explore their motivation for participating and accurate reporting in NSI surveys, and to identify links and relations between people participating in NSI business surveys and users of NSI statistics. In five participating countries, on-site visits were conducted to 41 businesses; and at each site, between one and three people (data users and/or respondents to businesses surveys) were interviewed.
6. Work Package 2 with its focus on NSI practices concerning business burden and motivation and Work Package 3 with its focus on business perspectives related to NSI statistics were complementary and ran in parallel for the first 15 months of the BLUE-ETS project. The research continued in the framework of Work Package 8 with methodological case studies based on insights in potential reduction of business burden and improvement of business motivation as acquired in Work Packages 2 and 3.
7. An important conclusion from the research focusing on NSIs practices in measurement and reduction of response burden (Giesen 2011) is that there are only some theoretical and hardly any empirical foundations for understanding how crucial concepts in the discussion on response burden are related. Even the measurement of response burden that is done by many NSIs varies largely between and also within NSIs (ibid). Nevertheless, the survey of NSIs showed that many NSIs are actively working on response burden reduction. They usually combine various types of actions to (i) reducing the volume of primary data collection (for example by using administrative data instead), (ii) simplifying for businesses to provide data (for example by improving questionnaire design or offering additional modes of data collection) and (iii) by promoting the benefits of responding (for example by providing concrete examples of how the data are used). Despite these commendable actions, there is hardly any quantitative research on how such actions aimed at response burden reduction actually affect three

crucial aspects: response burden, data quality and the cost of producing statistics. The research work in BLUE-ETS Work Package 8 attempted to fill some of the above mentioned methodological gaps by conducting quantitative research based on a common framework and with the same purpose of gaining knowledge on burden and motivation in business surveys. This resulted in two types of case studies that will be described in more detail in the next section.

B. Overview of BLUE-ETS case studies on burden and motivation in official business surveys

8. The first type of case studies focused on causes and consequences of response burden in business surveys. The following three data sets were analysed:
 - Data from Statistics Sweden register of data provision by businesses, containing longitudinal information on the business level on actual response burden and response behaviour.
 - Data from Statistics Norway on actual and perceived burden, the timeliness of the response and the response quality from the Survey of Structural Statistics.
 - Data from Statistics Netherlands on actual and perceived response burden, attitudes towards Statistics Netherlands, the perceived usefulness of statistics and the timeliness of response from respondents of the Survey of Structural Statistics.
9. The second type of case studies described concrete actions aiming to influence respondents, namely to reduce respondents' perceived burden and increase motivation for survey participation and accurate and timely reporting. The actions studied stem from findings of WP3 and various sources of motivation described in motivation psychology (see Torres van Grinsven, Bolko & Bavdaž 2012). These case studies consisted of:
 - Two Slovenian experiments on improving respondents' motivation in the Monthly Survey on Turnover in Service Activities and the Annual Industry Survey by (i) including some statistical information on the first page of the questionnaire in a striking format suggesting value for business and (ii) trying to induce positive emotions through a more personal contact with respondents.
 - A Swedish experiment and follow-up study on improving respondents' motivation in the Structural Business Statistics Survey by changing textual content of the reminder letter so as to suggest (i) value for business by promise of providing a set of statistics comparing the business's performance with that of a reference group and (ii) value for society.
 - Dutch analyses of the effects of a drastic redesign of the Structural Business Statistics Survey on response burden and timeliness of the response.
 - A Norwegian experiment to increase respondents' motivation by improving the usability survey questions on sick leave (i) using a video clip supporting the task of attaching a data file to the questionnaire, and (ii) guiding respondents through a calculation step by step instead of instructing them.

C. Summary of findings and recommendations following from BLUE-ETS case studies on burden and motivation

10. The first important finding from the case studies on causes and consequences of response burden is that the analyses show that response burden can affect the response behaviour of respondents and through that the quality of the collected data as well as the NSIs' costs of producing statistics. These findings confirm insights from qualitative studies (e.g. Hedlin, Dale, Haraldsen & Jones 2005; Giesen 2007; Bavdaž 2010). The analyses of the Swedish register (Lorenc, Kloek, and Abrahamsson & Eckman 2013) indicate that a too high level of response burden (measured over multiple surveys) can

lead to a reduced response in future surveys. They also show that some businesses are extremely burdened, which calls for attention to burden management at the individual business level. The Norwegian analyses (Berglund, Haraldsen & Kleven 2013) show that, within one survey, a high actual burden (time spent) and perceived burden (perception of difficulty) affect the likelihood that a core variable is edited. Both the Norwegian (*ibid*) and Dutch (Giesen 2013a) analyses point to a lower likelihood of timely response if response burden for a given survey is high.

11. Secondly, the Dutch and Norwegian data, which included both measurements of actual and perceived burden, indicate – as could be expected - that perceived burden is affected by actual burden. Additionally, the Dutch data also contained information about how respondents feel about the NSI and about the usefulness of the produced statistics. The analyses showed that these perceptions are also related to perceived burden. These findings indicate that perceived burden may be influenced via respondents' attitudes. This means that even if actual burden cannot be further reduced, the perceived burden may be reduced if NSIs can develop strategies to make respondents feel more positively about the NSI and see more use of NSI statistics for their own business.
12. The Slovenian and Swedish experiments (Bavdaž & Bolko 2013; Lorenc, Persson & Berg 2013; Lorenc, Persson & Wibell 2013) show that it is not straightforward to affect motivation and ensuing response behaviour with communication strategies. The treatments did produce some but not all of the expected effects. It seems there are at least three common reasons for the lack of effects in these studies. First, many respondents do not notice the action (i.e. experimental treatment). This seems to be enhanced by the fact that responding to official business surveys is a routine behaviour for many respondents. They have become used to only quickly scan the materials sent to them for obligations and deadlines. Secondly, the experimental treatment is for many respondents just one of many contacts they have with the NSIs. If NSI's actions can affect motivation, then any effects of the interventions might be reduced by other types of contact with the NSI. Respondents may also already have an established attitude towards official statistics, which requires a stronger treatment. Thirdly, the motivational tools as offered in the experiments proved not to be very appealing for many respondents. Still, the Slovenian experiment did produce an effect on response rates in a quite demanding annual survey on industrial production (Bavdaž & Bolko 2013). It also seems that enhancing personal ties and positive emotions (help offered, among others) worked better than suggesting value for the business based on some specific statistics. In general, offering help in the Slovenian study was positively evaluated by roughly half of interviewed respondents, though it was largely not needed (at least among respondents having experiences with the tested surveys). Two different kinds of statistical output offered (some specific statistics and a promise of statistics) seemed not relevant for many interviewed respondents. However, some interviewed respondents valued statistical output, either for themselves or for others in their business. It just seemed that it had to be more prominent, more tailored to their needs and accessible more easily. In communicating statistical feedback or information about the usefulness of statistics for the business, an important challenge is that the persons who complete the questionnaires (who work for example in the accounting department or even in an external accounting firm) often are not the same persons who can use the statistics for the benefit of the firm (who may be working in the marketing department).
13. The Dutch (Giesen 2013b) and Norwegian (Lund, Haraldsen, Kleven & Berglund 2013) studies on the questionnaire design showed that improving the questionnaire can indeed affect response burden and response behaviour. A complete redesign of the SBS questionnaire in the Netherlands significantly reduced both actual and perceived response burden: the actual burden was reduced from an average time spent of 4 hours to 3; the percentage of respondents who perceived the questionnaire as difficult was reduced from 25 % to 22 %, and the percentage of respondents perceiving the questionnaire as much work was reduced from 56 % to 48 %. Also, in the new design the questionnaires were returned much faster, although it cannot be determined to what extent this can be contributed to the new design of the questionnaire or to the fact that the questionnaire was sent out later in the year and respondents were given less time to respond. The Norwegian experiment with different ways of offering instructions shows that offering a calculator and using a video clip to explain how it should be used, did not add to the actual response burden and rather had a positive effect on the perceived response burden. Even more importantly, there are reasons to believe that the response quality increased.

14. To conclude, the findings from the BLUE-ETS case studies on burden and motivation provide some quantitative support for the notion that both the NSI's design decisions regarding the total number of surveys a business is in and instrument design can affect perceived response burden and through that response behaviour. The experiments on strategies to increase the motivation of businesses offer mixed results, suggesting that it is not straightforward to achieve changes in attitudes and behaviour by one-time interventions in the communication between NSIs and business respondents.

III. Statistics Netherlands approach to reducing perceived response burden in business surveys

15. About ten years ago, Statistics Netherlands started to focus explicitly also on perceived response burden in business surveys (Snijkers, Göttgens & Luppens 2003; Oomens & Timmermans 2008). An important measure in this context was the establishment of a council of business respondents (in 2008, the so called "Berichtgeversraad") that meets with Statistics Netherlands directors several times a year and advises them about actual and perceived response burden. Around the same time our data collection was centralised, resulting among others in one central help desk for respondents. Also a website was established that provided information for businesses both in their role as data providers and data users: www.cbsvooruwbedrijf.nl ("cbs for your business").
16. In 2012, following requests from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, a project was started at Statistics Netherlands to further intensify and coordinate the reduction of perceived burden. The project ran from February 2012 until August 2013. The main goal of this 'Perception of Burden' project was to improve the way businesses and business organisations perceive Statistics Netherlands and the response burden generated by our surveys.
17. The project started with a brainstorming workshop that involved representatives from various parts of our organisation. Colleagues from the departments of communication, data collection (including field officers, help desk staff, questionnaire designers), methodology (who were also involved in the BLUE-ETS research at Statistics Netherlands) and statistical departments discussed one day about questions such as 'What do we know about businesses' irritations concerning Statistics Netherlands?'; 'Which actions do we already take to avoid or reduce business irritations?'; 'What other actions are desirable?'; 'What is needed to implement the desired actions?'
18. During the project more research was done into what are the drivers of irritation amongst our business respondents. An external agency (to stress independence) was commissioned to conduct a telephone survey of small and medium sized enterprises that were recently in one or more of our surveys. Also, data of our regular Customer Satisfaction Survey from business survey respondents were re-analysed (part of the BLUE-ETS research, Giesen 2013a). Finally, an analysis was conducted of sentiments regarding Statistics Netherlands found in social media (Torres van Grinsven & Snijkers 2013). The actions carried out in the project are described in the following sections.

D. Improvement of letters

19. An important part of the Perception of Burden project focused on the improvement of the advance and reminder letters that accompany our business surveys. There were four main reasons for this. First of all, we received many complaints about the tone of voice of our letters. Respondents felt annoyed by the way the mandatory status and the possibilities of fines were mentioned in the letters. Another major irritation of businesses was that they do not see the use of the survey that they are requested to participate in. Therefore, we wanted the letters to include more appealing information about the relevance of the specific survey the letter referred to. Third, by reviewing and updating all letters at the same time we wanted to improve the consistency of our communication with business survey respondents. Now all letters are based on uniform guidelines. Fourth, we wanted to inform respondents more prominently about the above mentioned website dedicated to businesses. This website offers statistics that are relevant for businesses (among others via an interactive tool that allows benchmarking of own data with our statistics within a certain size class and type of industry) but provides also information about how to respond to our surveys. The website offers a list of FAQ

for respondents (both general and survey specific) and the option to submit questions via a web form. These facilities both help the respondent to find answers to frequently asked questions easier and reduce the burden on our helpdesk.

20. An external communication advisor rewrote all letters for business surveys. The text was rewritten as to make it more friendly and modern (less bureaucratic phrases). Each letter mentions – if applicable – the mandatory status of the survey. However, the way this is formulated varies with the type of letter. Mandatory status and fines are stressed more in consecutive reminder letters. In cooperation with subject matter specialists a couple of lines were written for each survey about the relevance of the specific survey. Also in each letter specific links were provided to relevant parts of our website (to either output related parts or the self-service functionalities).
21. The new letters were evaluated with respondents in a pilot study that included interviews with 164 respondents about the new letters (Berkenbosch 2012). The results show that, as was the case in the BLUE-ETS studies, our letters do not make a big impression on most respondents. Only 20% of the respondents in this pilot remembered the contents of the letter. When asked how they felt about the letter most respondents were neutral, 10% negative and 18% positive. From these interviews some points for further improvement for the letters were taken.
22. The reasoning behind the design of the new letters as well as all types of content and style have been documented in a manual. Also, procedures have been established for adding new letters and making changes to the existing letters in order to guarantee also for the future consistency of our communication with business survey respondents via letters.

E. The ‘show case approach’: collaboration with businesses and business organisations in redesigning surveys

23. Another major part of the Perception of Burden project was the redesign of the Survey of Road Freight Transport. This survey came up as one of the surveys that created most irritation with respondents. A redesign project was started that took a new type of approach, the so called ‘show case’ approach. A multi-disciplinary team from Statistics Netherlands cooperated with businesses and business organisations to discuss how the survey should be improved in order to reduce both actual and perceived burden. This resulted in a new design which included a reduction of the number of questions, an improvement of the wording in order to make the questions more consistent with concepts as used by respondents, a different sampling strategy (a more even spread of burden for respondents over the year and a smaller sample size) and a promotion of the use of XML delivery as an alternative for completing questionnaires. What was new for us in this approach is that much effort was put not only in listening to respondents, but also in our contacts with the business organisations regarding a specific survey and, most of all, in an active communication about this. This resulted, among others, in positive publications about the redesign project in trade journals. This way of actively collaborating with businesses and business organisations in survey redesign creates benefits for all parties: less burdensome questionnaires, improved quality of the collected data, more insights from business organisations in how the output can be used and, most importantly, an improved mutual understanding of all parties (statistical office, business organisation and business respondents) in each other’s needs.

F. Reduction of helpdesk waiting times

24. Long waiting times for our telephone help desk were also frequently mentioned as a source of irritation experienced by respondents. In order to improve the level of our service to respondents several actions were taken to reduce these waiting times. First, we improved and expanded the self-service options on the website (for example making it possible to quickly request a replacement questionnaire). Second, an automatic answer system was introduced for the incoming email that allowed a more efficient processing of emails. Third, in the new letters the telephone number is mentioned less prominently (only in the header of the letter) and respondents are directed to the website if they have any questions about the completion of the questionnaire.

G. Improvement of service for ingoing and outgoing calls

25. Both the help desk staff members and the staff responsible for reminder calls received extra training about how and where businesses can find relevant statistical output resulting from our surveys. Additionally, in collaboration with an external communication advisor, the helpdesk staff formulated standard answers for frequently asked questions concerning response burden and practiced how to communicate this information in telephone conversations.

H. Improvement of website

26. As explained above the self-service options of our website www.cbsvooruwbedrijf.nl have been improved. Also, dedicated subpages were developed for most surveys. In these pages a short explanation is given about the relevance of the survey, the users of the data and, if possible, a link is provided to recent publications based on the survey.

I. Ideas considered but not implemented (yet) for business surveys

27. It was discussed whether QR codes should be used in our letters to make the website more accessible. However, it was decided that for business surveys it may be less likely or desirable that respondents use their smartphones or tablets to visit websites. Also, as the letters refer to several parts of the website using several QR codes may make the letter look too crowded (but this may have been solved with a brochure). However, we have recently implemented a QR code in a brochure for a household survey.
28. From several sources it became evident that many respondents would like to have a survey calendar to inform them about which questionnaires they can expect from Statistics Netherlands in a year. This would help them plan their resources. However, after a feasibility study it was decided that currently our systems do not allow the production of such a calendar in an efficient and accurate way. In the future we hope to be able to provide this information.

J. Effects of the implemented actions

29. The design of the Perception of Burden project did not involve any experiments. As many aspects of data collection changed at the same time it is impossible attribute any changes in perceived burden to specific actions taken. We did see in the first quarter of 2013 that the overall the number of complaints by businesses has been reduced. However, this is likely at least partly due to the fact that a specific survey was stopped in 2013. For the Survey of Road Freight Transport the overall effect seems very successful. The number of helpdesk calls related to this survey has decreased by 75%. Also Statistics Netherlands has disappeared from the top ten of business irritations as published by the Transport Trade Organisation.

K. Future plans

30. Although the “Perception of burden” project has been concluded, perceived burden will remain a priority for Statistics Netherlands. Future plans include the following.
- The “show case approach”, i.e. including businesses and business organisation in redesign projects and actively communicate about this, will be used also for future survey (re)design projects.
 - The development of a permanent monitoring of perceived burden.
 - A redesign of our questionnaire systems that should improve the uniformity of our communication with businesses and allow the production of survey calendars. For this we are currently also investigating the possibilities to build personalised websites for businesses.

- Further professionalization of our procedures for handling complaints. Based on best practices from other organisations improvements will be made in the complaint handling process and registration.

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