

High-level seminar on Global assessments and peer reviews - follow-up and next steps

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Recommendations for the improvement of the institutional framework of National Statistical Systems

Session 3: Implementation of improvement recommendations related to the institutional
environment

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Overview on improvement recommendations related to the institutional environment (professional independence, impartiality, confidentiality, organisational structure of the NSI, management of HR and training, coordination and delineation of the national statistical system) with a focus on similar recommendations for a number of countries including very specific ones.

1. Introduction

In session 3 of the seminar I will start our joint work by giving a short overview on improvement recommendations pointed out in the Adapted Global Assessment (AGA) and Light Peer Reviews (LPR) reports and related to the institutional environment. The institutional environment of statistical systems includes professional independence, impartiality and objectivity, statistical confidentiality, organizational structure of the NSI, management of human resources and training, as well as coordination and delineation of the National Statistical System (NSS).

2. Professional independence

In regards to professional independence, as previously mentioned in session 1, the statistical laws in all assessed NSSs, except in one, support this principle, although sometimes not perfectly or incompletely defined. In such cases, peers recommended to amend the statistical law in a future revision by including the principle with a complete definition. Amendments to the statistical laws are also necessary as suggested in nearly all AGA and LPR reports: The head of the statistical office should be given a strong position by law as a protection against any interference into professional independence. He or she should be provided with a fixed-term mandate which is respected independently of political changes. He or she should be protected against an inappropriate dismissal during the term of office and the procedure of the appointment with the professional requirements for applicants should be laid down by the statistical law.

In about one third of the reports, it is recommended that guidelines for responding in case of misinterpretation and misuse of official statistics should be developed and published. The right to react in such cases is one of the ‘Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics of the United Nations’. In a small number of reports it is said that there is a need to urgently improve the public image of the statistical institutions. Independence should be demonstrated through the dissemination policy and through transparency of all processes. In one country the assessors welcomed an initiative of the statistical office to better ensure professional independence by an amendment of the legal basis.

A number of recommendations deal with programme planning and the development of mid-term strategies. In some reports, it has been advised to establish more formalized structures to involve all user groups in a more integrated way in the planning process. A few other reports include the advice to use the planning process for the development of a mid-term strategy on how to reach compliance with European requirements. For this, the programme should include all developmental activities of the statistics producers as well as estimations of the budget and of the international assistance needed for the implementation of all planned activities.

3. Impartiality and objectivity

Improvement actions concerning impartiality and objectivity can only be found sporadically in the AGA and LPR reports. The reason may be the overlap between “Impartiality and Objectivity” and “Professional Independence” on the one hand, and the substantial aspects of impartiality and objectivity, e.g. equal access to releases or publication of advance release calendar, which are very well fulfilled by most of the NSIs on the other hand. In a few cases, peers recommended to develop and publish documents describing procedures used if errors in already published data occur and if there is need to revise the advance release calendar. Procedures for the preparation of press releases and statements in press conferences and for the prevention of leaks should also be described. Some existing documentation has only to be published. A few NSIs have been advised to develop a policy

on how to deal with pre-releases including a procedure according to which embargoed pre-release access is controlled and documented. This policy should be made public.

4. Organizational structure of the NSI

A large majority of the assessed NSIs are confronted with a challenge as a legacy of the previous system of a planned economy: A large number of regional offices with a large number of staff and, together with that, an inadequate balance of resources and division of labour between central office and regional offices. We find therefore in the majority of reports the recommendation to simplify the regional structure of the National Statistical Service. It should be attempted to reduce the number of regional offices in line with the opportunities offered by modern IT development (electronic data collection, web based surveys), possibly in correspondence with a regional re-organization of the country. In this regard, it appears to be advisable to consider reallocation of staff from regional offices to head-quarters when modern means of data collection allow freeing up resources from the regional offices. Mainly in connection with plans for changes of the regional structure, the need for an alteration of the NSI's organizational structure itself, together with a re-allocation of staff resources, has been mentioned in some LPR and AGA reports.

It was already explained in session 1 that a special organizational problem for many of the assessed NSIs is the division of work between the statistical office and the Main Computing Centre (MCC). It was, moreover, said, that one NSI, the statistical office of Moldova, managed to integrate the staff of the MCC into the respective statistical divisions of the NSI. In a few other reports it has been stated that a full integration of MCC activities within the statistical office could lead to positive synergy effects with other horizontal services already existing in the central office and avoid duplication of tasks.

5. Management of human resources and training

As far as financial and human resources are concerned, assessors emphasize their insufficiency. Many explicit suggestions for concrete improvement actions are, however, not made because an improvement of the situation is not in the hands of the NSI's management. In a few reports it is advised to develop a strategy on how to achieve more financial independence in the long-term and to reduce dependency on donor financing and in two others to allow more flexibility in the allocation of financial resources.

In nearly half of the LPRs and AGAs, assessors recommended the development and implementation of a Human Resource Management System together with a regular training programme for all staff. Most, or even all NSIs, had already implemented some elements of a human resource management and conducted some training measures at the time of the assessments. However, these were limited and isolated. In a situation where there is a shortage of staff resources, assessors advised to interlink the various elements and develop a more encompassing human resource management and a well-organized training programmes. In that context the implementation of a staff satisfaction survey has been suggested. In a few reports the advice can be found to supplement training programmes by non-technical competences such as project management, quality management and communication skills.

In more than half of the reports, mainly the AGA reports, it is stated that there is a need to upgrade information and communication technologies. The modernization and standardization of the software environment, a proper equipment renewal and further automation of production processes are some of the issues explicitly mentioned in individual reports.

A recommendation, which can be found in only very few reports, is the integration of financial aspects into the activity planning. It may, however, be of interest for other NSIs if it is not already current practice.

6. Statistical confidentiality

Statistical confidentiality is rather well regulated in the statistical laws of nearly all the assessed NSSs. Assessors nevertheless recommend some further improvements of these laws. They underline that the rules pertaining to statistical confidentiality should be even more in line with the confidentiality principle. Exceptions from the confidentiality principle, on the basis of court decisions or caused by other legislation of the country, should be removed and the corresponding practice of allowing access terminated. In one report it is said that the statistical law needs to be improved by mentioning that the only reasons for court decisions are the cases of breaching the statistical confidentiality principle. According to further recommendations, the stipulations on confidentiality should be complemented by a provision that identifiers should be removed from the files if they are no longer necessary for statistical purposes, and that the completed questionnaires should be destroyed once the data have been captured electronically, validated, coded and edited. In the very few NSSs where the statistical law did not include a prescription of the penalties or disciplinary or criminal proceedings in case of breaching statistical confidentiality an amendment of the law has been proposed.

NSIs, which did not have instructions and guidelines for staff on how to deal with micro-data in all phases of the production and dissemination processes, have been advised in a few cases to develop and publish such documents. In one case it has been suggested to arrange for the adoption of a government directive on the implementation of the confidentiality rules in the statistical law. In a number of LPRs and AGAs, assessors stressed that confidentiality could be further improved by having each official or employee sign a confidentiality commitment. Such commitments should also be signed by former staff.

In the large majority of countries, the statistical laws allow in principle to grant access to statistical micro-data to researchers. However, comprehensive descriptions of the procedures of gaining access were mostly not available. In all LPR reports and in a number of AGA reports it is strongly recommended to develop such instructions and to publish these documents on the websites of the NSIs.

In one LPR report it is recommended that the principle of statistical confidentiality be highlighted on the website. Possibly some NSIs are already doing such kind of public relations work. For all others it seems advisable to apply the idea on their own website.

7. Coordination and delineation of the National Statistical System

For a large majority of the assessed NSSs, there is some uncertainty and ambiguity in the statistical system about which organizations are producers of official statistics on the one hand, and which organizations are providers of administrative data for statistical purposes on the other hand. Some statistical laws explicitly identify, besides the national statistical office, a small number of other statistics producers, e.g. the Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance, and contain a further category of “other statistics producers defined by the Statistics Programme or the Statistics Work plan”. In a number of reports it has been recommended to precisely determine in the statistical law itself or in the statistical programme a clear definition of “official statistics” and to clarify under what conditions other authorities can be considered as producers of official statistics and thus belong to the NSS. The other producers to be named in the programme or the work plan should be

obliged to produce and disseminate official statistics as a regular activity and in full respect of the principles of official statistics. Professional independence, impartiality and objectivity, quality commitment, statistical confidentiality, etc. of the whole statistical system are crucial for trust in the institutions, their statistical products and the acceptance in the public. In a few reports it has been demanded that the National Bank and the other recognized producers of official statistics should create a professionally independent organizational unit for statistics that works in full compliance with the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice and in coordination with the NSI. These units would then become part of the system of official statistics, but not the rest of the agency/department to which they legally belong to.

Memoranda or agreements of understanding with other statistics producers had already been concluded by many NSIs at the time of the assessments. In some assessment reports it is advised that comprehensive memoranda of understanding should be concluded as soon as possible with all other statistics producers. Such memoranda should not only include rules for data sharing in compliance with confidentiality rules, but should also go much further: Taken from the best practice in one of the assessed NSSs, these agreements should also include the other statistics producer's guarantee to comply with the UN Fundamental Principles and to provide the human and financial resources for the implementation of their statistics. Along with the establishment of a working group for the coordination of the activities of the parties, the NSI's should be obliged to determine standards and to provide guidelines, to exchange information on the implementation of the programme and possibly further issues. In a few reports it is recommended that the NSI should develop appropriate statistical procedures for other producers of official statistics in cooperation with other agents within the NSS.

For the NSSs of a few small countries, assessors expressed that it would be more efficient to concentrate nearly all statistical expertise in one institution. This means that the NSI should take responsibility for as many statistics as possible from other institutions, given that the necessary resources are provided by the state budget. Statistical units in other public authorities (with the exception of the National Bank) will be rather small and will therefore be lacking in highly professional expertise.

In about half of the AGA reports and one LPR report it is recommended to clearly define and partly strengthen the role of the NSI as the coordinator of the NSS in the statistics law. More formalized coordination is a recommendation that can also be found in a large number of reports, e.g. to create a coordination committee, to set up a unit in the NSI to manage coordination and develop a coordination policy or to set up working groups chaired by the NSI. Regarding the tasks that should be fulfilled by the NSIs as coordinators of the NSSs, the following are mentioned in some of the reports:

- Multi-annual programmes and annual work plans should include all official statistics and be drafted by the NSI together with the other statistics producers;
- yearly reports describing the progress made should tackle all areas of official statistics;
- the advance release calendar should be published by the NSI for all official statistics;
- all official statistical information from all statistics producers should be available on the NSI's website as a national statistics portal.

Nearly all statistical laws include the rule to establish a Statistical Council which shall fulfill an important role as adviser of the NSI or even the NSS. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the members of the Council represent all groups of stakeholders of official statistics adequately. In some countries the private sector of economy and civil society had clearly been underrepresented

and so a change of the Council's composition has been suggested. In a few other countries, where a Statistical Council had not been established at all or not been working for some time, assessors recommended to establish or re-activate the Statistical Council as soon as possible.