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**HOW TO ANTICIPATE USERS' NEEDS WHEN DEFINING PRIORITIES
WITHIN A STATISTICAL PROGRAMME: EXPERIENCE OF A CANDIDATE
COUNTRY**

Invited paper submitted by National Institute for Statistics of Romania¹

EVERYTHING STARTS WITH PROGRAMMES

1. Strategies, multi-annual and annual programmes are decisive tools for both developing new statistical methodologies within the National Statistical Systems and for implementing statistical methods of collecting, processing, analysing and disseminating statistics, aiming at satisfying data users with comprehensive, accurate and relevant statistical data.

2. Even if the general goal of defining programmes is quite obvious in its nature, we consider it appropriate to **highlight** some of the specific objectives:

- Programmes are core frameworks for ensuring the continuity of the statistical process, thus providing a constant opportunity to improve the quality of statistical services rendered to society as a whole, ensuring reliable and timely results;
- Programmes offer the basis for a prompt reaction of statistics to the needs of different categories of users, particularly to decision makers, to set up their policies in general and in specific domains;
- Programmes permit the assessment in the short and medium term of the resources needed (depending on their coverage), both financial and human;
- Programmes bring together at least the major part, if not all, of the data needs, under the

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assumption that the preparatory works and open discussions took place as a main prerequisite for reaching such goal;

- Last but not least, the programmes represent the field where priorities are set up and the means, risks, threats and, finally, the outcomes are established.

3. Unfortunately, **no programme exists to date to accomplish all the above**. The creation of such a programme is jeopardized by at least **three factors**: i) limited resources facing such requirements; ii) perturbatory factors generated by new demands from the environment – it is difficult to refuse statistics; and iii) it is very difficult to define priorities, since each sector is very important; prioritisation within such a programme thus becomes superfluous.

4. The strategy and the programmes are **simple in concept, but complex in elaboration** and even more complex in their implementation. Complex in that the pursuit of an increasingly user-intensive method of demanding data implies for the statistical office the use of a whole new range of methods to ensure the necessary additional resources. Sometimes, prioritisation becomes a subjective matter.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT ROMANIA'S PROGRAMMES AND STRATEGIES

5. The NSI of Romania has adopted since 1990 several strategies, the latest covering the period 2004-2006, broadly aimed at consolidating the achievements reached so far and implementing the remaining parts of the Statistical Acquis Communautaire not yet transposed into the Romanian statistical system.

6. The strategy mentioned above, approved by the Romanian Government, is not accompanied by a multi-annual programme. However, it represents a background for setting up annual programmes approved by the Government and published in the Official Journal of Romania.

7. While at the beginning of the last decade, annual programmes were in fact a kind of “shopping list” enumerating the most important statistical works from the National Statistical Institute’s point of view, in the last four/five years the annual programme became a relevant tool providing all the necessary elements, based on the inputs resulting from the general tasks statistics is facing, including users’ opinions and proposals as well.

8. By setting up the programmes, and especially when submitting them to the Statistical Council for endorsement and ultimately to the Government for approval, one of the **prerequisites for being accepted and assumed** by all the players (providers of the primary data producers and users) is ensured. The explanatory note that currently presents the programme describes the large range of needs and obligations covered by the programme. It is sufficient to mention that the biggest part of our statistical programme is designed to cope with the requirements of harmonizing Romanian statistics to the EU norms and standards. The other major part covers national needs for ensuring the so-called “core statistics” for national users and special statistical works for maintaining and guaranteeing the sustainability of the system as a whole. Normally, other kinds of work come from specific demands of particular users (business operators, researchers, etc).

9. These very large and complex statistical subjects, works and themes covered by the programme resulted in some users hesitating to ask for more data. This happened during the first three/four months after the adoption of the programme, followed by a period when a lot of other data requests came in from users.

LESSONS LEARNT IN THE PROCESS OF ELABORATING AND IMPLEMENTING ANNUAL PROGRAMMES

10. The first lesson is that, when setting up the programme, it is necessary to **link data needs to the available resources** within the statistical system on one side, and to policy actions currently put in place on the other side. The last is the most difficult to consider. The needs of the decision making process are the most difficult to define since these needs are often changeable and unexpected. The ability of the National Institute of Statistics to anticipate such needs has to replace the usual practice of defining demands of the users based on their opinions (proposals).

11. The second lesson is that, due to its limited resources, the only way for the National Institute to be able to meet the ever greater demand for statistics is by **increasing the performance of the INS, improving the efficiency** of the whole statistical system and making the best possible use of its organizational capabilities.

12. The third lesson is to foresee a **monitoring mechanism** during the implementation of the programme and to provide for flexibility and space of manoeuvre, allowing for adaptation when unexpected circumstances require revisions and/or adjustments in order to cope with the evolving new requirements.

13. The fourth lesson we have learned is that INS should be aware and provide **the quality of the programme** and try to improve the INS relationships with other data suppliers, producers and researchers to find out how they perceive their tasks and/or their role in participating as actors in the statistical process.

14. The fifth lesson consists of providing **assessment reports regarding the status of the dialogue with users**, including the description of the possible involvement in the statistical programming and focusing on good practices in promoting users' opinions on programmes, as well as on reliability, timeliness and relevance of statistics.

15. The sixth lesson is to **make available to the main users and to the public at large the content of the programmes and the general content of the statistical law** and other documents describing the statistical system in a broad sense, describing how users can benefit from the statistical data they need, information on the dissemination policy, etc..

16. The seventh lesson indicates that we must undertake **preventive action to avoid duplication in collecting data**, as well as to try to anticipate virtual needs and priorities to be given to certain domains.

17. The eighth lesson is that the INS needs to enforce the approach of setting programmes based on improved standards of performance, **leading to better quality of statistics and larger coverage of users' needs**. The institute will not be able to meet such needs of greater complexity unless it moves rapidly in the direction of anticipating priorities and new requirements coming from the policy makers.

18. Much could be said about the anticipation approach in defining priorities and avoiding shortages and bottlenecks, but they are wasted words if we do not **create the proper mechanisms and find means of observing and assessing virtual needs**.

19. The ninth lesson consists of the fact that, with a view to developing the anticipated approach of future statistical projects as a reaction to the policy agenda, INS has to develop its operational and organizational capability to capture the messages and information of a policy nature and to transpose them in statistical themes.

SOME VIEWS ON USERS' NEEDS

20. There are some assumptions among users that statistics is an omnipotent institution in the sense that it can instantly solve problems by offering data on any kind of issue within any deadline and with a large spectrum of characteristics and structures, on different processes and phenomena, particularly at regional profile. Of course, we do not discourage such a statement, since it favours statistical office credibility. And to be modest, there are other users as well who do not share such a view!

21. When new demands come from the Government, they have to be treated with high priority or, if permitted, extra-priority for two reasons: firstly, because this means that the statistical office is proactive in being involved in a matter of importance for policy decisions; secondly, that usually the statistical office has no choice, although there are sometimes feasible alternatives.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE NEW DEMANDS FOR STATISTICS AND HOW TO ANTICIPATE USERS' NEEDS WHEN DEFINING PRIORITIES?

22. One of the most important issues when defining an annual programme is the **establishment of priorities**. At the very beginning of the process, almost all the themes and activities are, as stated before, candidates for high priority status. Obviously, not all of them can be treated with priority. For Romania, as a candidate county, this issue raises **more problems**.

23. The so-called "core statistics" within the programme merit high priority, because ensuring comparability of data over time is a stringent matter. The more time passes, the more difficult becomes the problem of reconciling those statistics back in time.

24. All the requirements for harmonization stemming from the Statistical Acquis

Communautaire, both regarding norms and standards and data provision to Eurostat, are, by their nature, of high priority.

25. Regarding the above, such an imperative is clearly a consequence of the very provisions of Romanian Statistical Law. This stipulates: "...all the statistical works provided by the EU directives, regulations and decisions, are to be included as high priority in the annual statistical programme. The official statistical services develop and undertake data collection, processing, dissemination and storage in accordance with the provisions of the statistical programmes".

26. The priorities emerging from the medium term strategy are inserted into the annual programme and ranked according to their importance and urgency, with due consideration of allocated resources. Since the strategy provides for major statistical surveys, such as censuses, new surveys, etc., their place in the programme depends crucially on the financial and human resources. Only here is there room for setting up lower priorities. For instance, the population census and the general agricultural census were planned for implementation several times, but were postponed due to "force majeure" above.

27. The other priorities come from users' proposals. Within this bulk of themes, the most important are those generated from the political agenda of the Government and other governmental bodies and agencies. These kinds of virtual activities are twofold: on the one hand, they are policy decisions already defined as items of high priority included in the programme. Thus, statistics is in a position to concretely play its pro-active role by putting its services at the disposal of society. On the other hand, there are predictable policy actions not yet decided, but virtually on the political agenda of the Government for the period covered by the lifetime of the programme implementation.

28. The last assertion above presupposes the ability of the statistical office to evaluate opportunities, and to synthesise and decide upon insertion in the working programme of themes with the corresponding priorities.

29. Besides constructively covering priority issues of present interest for statistics derived from politics, such an approach also has the role to prevent a negative impact on the programme due to unexpected issues that may occur during its progress. In other words, statistics is thus sheltered from being confronted with the request of setting ad hoc priorities or having the ones already included in the programme affected, which in many cases is not possible.

30. Anticipating the issues and priorities in the last category is evidently not a matter of chance or empirical forecast, but something to be based on an adequate work mechanism. Romanian statistics has been trying to create such a mechanism and we continue to focus our efforts in this respect.

THE INFORMATION SOURCES AND THE MEANS TO SECURE THE OPERATION OF A MECHANISM FOR CAPTURING USERS' DATA NEEDS

31. The following have been identified so far:

- i) **Prompt informing of the INS staff** on the main current and future political events of interest to the media and other information means. As part of the INS Intranet system, a desk officer receives, selects, synthesizes and distributes the materials to the staff. Each statistical department selects or formulates, depending on each case, possible candidate themes for the annual programme and promptly sends them to the appropriate department in the coordinating division responsible for working out of the statistical programme;
 - ii) **Opinion polls among users**, including government bodies and local authorities; organising press conferences on various themes including the themes and the priorities of the statistical programme;
 - iii) **Investigating users' requests and INS' compliance with their data needs**, including perception of the new statistical works with a view of introducing them into the programme through the statistical data dissemination department;
 - iv) **Discussing the intermediate and the final versions of the annual statistical programme in the Council for Statistical Activity Coordination**, before it is submitted for approval to the Prime Minister. It should be pointed out that the Council structure, approved by the Prime Minister, includes, among others, people with direct access to the themes on the political agenda, such as counsellors to the Prime Minister, to the President of Romania, the State Secretary within the Ministry of European Integration, representatives of the Ministry of Public Finance, of the National Bank of Romania, of the academic media, of the trade unions, the employers' associations and civil society.
 - v) Concern on the part of the statistical office to have **its own representatives in the interdepartmental commissions, as well as in the political and scientific forums discussing the current and future issues related to the evolution of Romanian society, Romania's accession to the EU, globalisation, sustainable development, etc.** This type of representation and participation enables the office to anticipate some of the statistical work and political commandments resulting from the debates. Mention should be made of some of the commissions with active participation on the part of the INS: the National Economic Development Strategy Substantiation Commission, the Working Group for Elaborating and Monitoring the Action Plan for Improving the Business Environment, the National Standing Commission for the Strategy of Sustainable Development of Romania, the Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Promotion Commission, the Interdepartmental Consulting Commission for Equal Chances for Men and Women, etc.
- It goes without saying that the participation of the representatives of official statistics in these commissions aims primarily, if not exclusively, at providing the data needed to substantiate the policies set by these bodies. At the same time, they offer the INS the possibility to formulate in advance some priorities within the statistical programme.
- vi) **Involving representatives of and specialists from other related governmental**

institutions in various statistical projects, mainly to provide the economic and cost-efficiency significance conveyed by the expected results to the statistical framework of the project. An important part in anticipating priorities is the close cooperation with the National Commission for Prognosis, whose direct task is precisely to define short-term, medium-term and long-term forecasts based on the government policy.

vii) **Training the statistical office staff** to cope with the requests related to observing the economic and social phenomenon and to formulate in advance the relevant statistical themes. Once the range of themes eligible for the statistical programme has been formulated, half the road towards completing the programme has been covered. The issues left are securing the cooperation of other actors in the implementation of the programme, to share with them the responsibilities, and, most difficult and complex to define, the financial and human resources allotted globally and separately per programme domain.

HOW TO ENSURE THE RESOURCES FOR THE STATISTICAL PROJECTS AND HOW TO ANTICIPATE THE STATISTICAL SUBJECTS AND DEFINE PRIORITIES?

32. Both these issues are of a major and complex importance and, as such, difficult to solve. However, we see no alternative but to try to do our best to find the most appropriate methods. Whatever the case, we should not avoid but rather anticipate needs for statistics required by the policy issues that arise within society. Some prerequisites and actions are presented below:

- i) Providing the legal framework with the conditions of proper functioning of the fundamental principles of statistics;
- ii) Promoting, to the extent possible within the legal framework, the regulations favouring the autonomy of the national statistical office in using its own available financial and human resources;
- iii) Attracting additional resources from specific activities (dissemination of publications, undertaking paid projects for third parties, sponsoring, etc.), provided that such amounts are used internally for additional projects, particularly for those entailed by certain political decisions;
- iv) Ability, and often agility, in obtaining the required means. As well as those mentioned above, there will be further need to resort to persuasion and sensitising of decision makers on the benefits the statistical activities could offer for setting up their policies, in the interest of the whole society;
- v) Adequate formulation of international assistance projects so that they clearly focus on the statistical issues of interest;
- vi) Examining the programme achievement stage and the resources expenditure rate by drafting and discussing progress reports at least twice a year;
- vii) Adequate flexibility in allotting human and financial resources according to possible priority requests from the government or other users which could suddenly occur;
- viii) Providing adequate infrastructure to face complex technical problems and to ease new

statistics tasks;

ix) Implementing an appropriate dissemination policy.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS...

33. The National Institute of Statistics has already undertaken the most of the highlighted approaches, measures and actions. Whilst aware that there is still a lot to be done, let us exemplify just a few approaches, which we consider to be most relevant:

- Following some successive and consistent measures, we have managed to improve the statistical legal framework so as to actually lay the necessary foundations for applying the pro-active mechanism to anticipate potential requests for additional statistics arising from the political agenda. The current statistical law has been revised and completed with provisions on the use, apart from the already existing number of staff, of additional personnel, statistical operators for data collection, etc.;
- Another facility provided by a Government Decision is to permit activities generating income from i) statistical data and information dissemination through publications on paper and electronic support and in other forms; ii) issuing of publications, other than those covered in the approved programme of statistical surveys; and iii) drawing up of statistical projects other than those comprised in the approved annual programme. Based on the created resources as described, the National Institute of Statistics is authorised to employ additional staff for the carrying out of various projects.
- While carrying out certain comprehensive activities, the NSI has have taken various rules into consideration, such as:
 - an additional request for the necessary funds to carry out statistical work must obviously be based on very solid grounds. This is due to the budgetary restrictions that exist all over the world, the transition countries being, as is well known, in a particularly difficult situation;
 - we must realise that statistics cannot be granted de facto the privilege to benefit from major budget increases, as compared to other areas; it is often the contrary. In order to accede to a favourable situation, particularly regarding the allocation of funds for major statistical activities, some approaches have to be considered. Thus, it is not enough to simply prove the lack of financial and human resources for the statistical field. In all cases, the advocacy must be based on a coherent and logical presentation of a status in a certain economic domain and the corresponding decisions to be taken, followed by highlighting the role statistics can assume in meeting such a goal.

34. **Just an example!** The general agricultural census, which was carried out in Romania in 2002, had been initiated since 1986 and had repeatedly been postponed for lack of funds. Being an exhaustive statistical action on which all the statistical agricultural surveys depend in a decisive manner, the census could have been justified by the request for funds for this purpose. Such an argument, as a pro-domo justification, would have failed, since policy makers are more interested in the data and information that a statistical action provides for a political decision, than in the actual statistical actions.

35. This approach, which conveniently anticipated the meeting of both interests, was also the one that produced the expected results and the census mentioned above benefited from the necessary resources and could be carried out. Moreover, as the agricultural census, organised for the first time in more than 50 years, laid the foundations necessary for implementing the complex system of statistical surveys in the agricultural field, according to the Acquis Communautaire, the request for new resources for the projects' sustainability was easy to substantiate. Following our request, the Government approved the increase, at the beginning of 2004, of the number of statistical staff from the main headquarters and from the counties by 150 additional staff. This fact was unique in recent history when, after successive rounds of diminishing the number of personnel, statistical staff significantly increased this year.

36. This paper has tried to focus on the fact that a statistical office should not wait for external factors to support its activity, but should rather play a pro-active role in meeting the policy demands and society at large with the relevant statistics. It goes without saying that statisticians are used to living with the problem of a changing environment and needs and that the statistical system has to evolve continuously to adapt to them. What is significant is the fact that statisticians have to promote and encourage a pro-active attitude in defining priorities, and particularly of being able to anticipate them.