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**THE IMPORTANCE OF COORDINATION FOR THE CREDIBILITY OF THE  
STATISTICAL SYSTEMS**

Supporting paper submitted by Instituto Nacional de Estatística, Portugal<sup>1</sup>

**COORDINATION: WHAT IS IT? WHAT IS IT FOR? HOW IS IT DONE?**

1. Coordination is essentially a function whose purpose is to ensure the coherence of efforts developed by different elements, leading to a specific result. It exists because the result of one specific activity requires the participation and the contribution of several parts - individuals and their competences - and individual actions need to be sequential and synchronized in order to achieve a final result (product or service) with the necessary attributes to satisfy the needs of users or clients.
2. Coordination is perceived through the development of standard tools and procedures which determine in a **coherent** way "what to do", "who does it" and "when it is done". Therefore, coherence is the key-word for coordination: assuring that the different parts - a system, an organization, a production process – all work together in a harmonised way.
3. However, because coordination is a method of organizing teamwork according to certain rules, its effectiveness depends on the organization's culture, its values, habits, practices and line of thinking which people share with each other when working together.

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<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared by Pedro Lima.

### Coordination requirements

4. In order to achieve a well-exercised coordination practice, staff involved must fulfil some basic requirements:

- to detain a global knowledge of the organizations' activities, systems or processes;
- to be able to develop relationships (formal and informal) and to work in and outside the organization (motivation to work as a team);
- to be able to define adequate rules (theory and practice);
- to be granted authority in order to guarantee the accomplishment of rules and procedures;
- to be able to evaluate the organizational constraints resulting from coordination problems;
- to be flexible and to be able to adjust to the evolving environment.

### Coordination advantages

5. The added value of coordination results from basic economic concepts: **productivity** and **quality** of the products and the services rendered.

6. An effective and efficient coordination of the resources used in the production of a specific product or service will reduce costs, shorten delivery dates and increase the quantity and the quality of products and services: as a result, the producers' credibility and the customers' satisfaction will grow.

7. To achieve this aim, coordination should be begun during the planning and organization of activities, when it is decided "what to do", "when to do it" and "who does it".

8. Secondly, and no less important, coordination must be considered in all handbooks on procedures: only an awareness of the need to work together in a coordinated way will enable those responsible to ask the following question: "during the planning of activities and tasks, where do the main articulation and integration problems lie and how can we overcome or reduce them?"

9. At the same time, coordination practice should be based on the principles of co-responsabilization, cooperation and close communication with all those responsible: this is the only way to evaluate the overlapping of new activities with those already ongoing, to identify in due time where the problems and constraints are, and to guarantee the interaction with other activities or systems, in a permanent effort to adapt to the present situation.

10. It is common sense that, for the organizations, there are clear benefits in adopting coordinated actions amongst different activities. However, the difficulty of measuring their effect remains. The intangibility of coordination is an obstacle which discourages the effort of quantifying its effects: frequently, it is only when something "goes wrong" that we become aware of its importance. Methodologies should be studied in order to determine the added value of the time spent in coordination actions for each unit. In the absence of a methodological approach, there are indicators that can be used as "proxy" for coordination

measurement, such as the degree of rules and procedures accomplishment, and more importantly, the degree of internal and external satisfaction of suppliers and customers.

### Co-ordination difficulties

11. The introduction of coordination actions in the already existing systems/ organizations/processes frequently faces four types of difficulties:

- the "impossibility" demonstrated by sectoral managers to adjust routines in due time according to the already assumed schedules; here the "disturbance effect" is normally decisive enough to postpone coordination actions;
- the second rate importance that managers tend to give to the implementation of instruments and coordination practices, essentially because their effect is visible only in a medium or long term period (the sedimentation of "best practices" is a joint effort of the whole organization that takes years to achieve);
- coordination problems are enhanced if the limits between tasks or activities – or even units - is either too rigid or insufficiently well defined. The result is a set of inconveniences: individual responsibility is not evaluated, motivation, team spirit, integration, monitorization will fail or be reduced;
- the complexity and requirements of the coordination function will increase in proportion to the system's degree of functional decentralization and power delegation.

### **CO-ORDINATION OF STATISTICAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

12. In a context of increasing needs and requests for statistical information, within contemporary societies either on a quantitative or qualitative basis, coordination becomes essential and decisive for the management of statistical activity resources and for the methodological tools adopted in the production of statistical data.

13. From the point of view of the statistical systems, to coordinate means to organize the information produced or compiled by the National Statistical Information System (NSIS) in order to prevent duplication and gaps and to assure its coherence and comparability (internal as well as at an international level).

14. The exercise of the coordination activity of the Statistical Information System is based on three inter-related functions: coordination of objectives, coordination of procedures and management of the statistical activity, and technical coordination.

15. **The coordination of the statistical activity** consists of adjusting the practices to the plans and goals defined within the NSIS and of articulating them with the established international norms. Thus, it is necessary:

- to guarantee the absence of duplication in the process of statistical data production;
- to synchronize production and dissemination calendars;
- to integrate objectives and practices within the context of international commitments.

16. Coordination of objectives is made through the NSIS Activity Plans, which must also include the statistical obligations assumed at an international level.

17. **Coordination of practices and management procedures** also includes the activities that aim to assure the operational and technical-scientific coordination in the processes of official statistics production. It is composed by the coordination of technical validation of official statistical operations, by the harmonization and systematization of procedures as well as by the management of procedures and statistical information flows; it also comprehends the coordination of relationships between the National Statistical Institutes and other entities involved in the production of official statistical information.

18. **Technical coordination** consists of harmonizing and integrating the required normalization technical tools, necessary to the statistical activity, endowing them with coherence and making them available to all users within the official statistical organizations.

19. As technical normalization instruments we can identify:

**Statistical Metadata:** the activities concerning the management of definitions and classifications used in the scope of the National Statistical System, as well as the development and coordination of all the information systems, whose content is statistical metadata. This includes questionnaires, variables, definitions, classifications, methodological documentation, administrative sources.

**Normalization methodologies:** the activities which develop general support methodologies for the production and conception of information systems. In the first case, they include the activities concerning data collecting methods, validation, treatment, research, quality control, confidentiality and the reduction of the statistical burden on respondents.

**Statistical unit registers:** the activities of management and updating, harmonization and integration of statistical unit registers, which constitute the sampling basis for statistical surveys.

**Geoinformation infrastructures:** the activities of creating infrastructures and the development of georeference methodologies for the statistical information.

20. **A concrete case of statistical coordination of the Portuguese Statistical System is the technical certification of statistical operations**

21. Coordinating the technical validation process of statistical operations is a classic example of statistical coordination since it involves the interaction of a large number of participants contributing to its implementation.

22. It is a vital phase in the life of a statistical operation since it is here that the technical dialogue is created between those responsible for the statistical operation and the intervening units and/or users of the results of the operation.

23. This assumes compliance with a number of procedures requiring that those responsible

for the statistical operation submit the prepared technical documentation for internal review by the units in charge of planning and coordinating activities, statistical methodology, the National Accounts and other intervening units or the users of their results. The unit responsible for the operation, taking into account the suggestions and proposals received, will promote dialogue in order to find the best technical and methodological solutions and will reply in writing to the technical opinions received, stating reasons if it is unable to consider a proposal.

24. It is up to the coordinator of the technical certification to ensure that the process is carried out and to prepare a proposal for approval to submit to the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) Executive Board.

25. After obtaining the technical approval necessary for its implementation, a *registration number* and *validity term* are assigned to the collection instruments, the final act in the technical certification process. This represents, for the INE, for those surveyed and for users, a double guarantee:

- in terms of the overall quality of the survey, the guarantee that the most appropriate technical and methodological requirements have been met and that the relevant organic units have been heard in the matter;
- formally, that the collected data and their content originate from the only official body in Portugal engaged exclusively in statistical activity, governed by law and its own code of conduct, in respect of which statistical confidentiality is a key element. In this sense, those surveyed are guaranteed that the information they are requested to provide is transmitted to an official, suitable body and enables the INE to detect more easily any improper use of its name in collection instruments.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO A STRATEGY OF STATISTICAL COORDINATION

26. The new statistical requirements imposed by recent changes in the economy and society in general, namely the phenomena of globalisation and technological development, pose new challenges to the National Statistical Systems. Recognition of the existence of information gaps, the need for new data collection methodologies, for reviewing, in line with present-day criteria, the classifications, definitions and standards used in statistical output, and above all, improved access by users to statistical information, are examples of new challenges **requiring increased coordination of the processes linked to statistical activity**. Therefore, the medium-term instruments necessary to plan official statistical activity must evolve towards the definition of an overall strategy for statistical coordination.

27. In the case of INE, a set of strategic goals was defined and integrated in the INE's Strategic Development Plan for the 2004-2006 period, which, aimed at improving the way in which the needs of users are met and the efficiency of internal procedures, requires intensification of the practice of coordinating the National Statistical System. Of these goals, four stand out which are briefly described below.

### Promote the use of administrative sources

28. This is one of the key aspects of the strategic goal to optimise the rationality and value of the National Statistical System, particularly in terms of improving the reliability of the information, reducing the statistical burden on those surveyed and streamlining Central Government resources. The coordination measures deemed necessary to achieve that goal include:

- systematising internal and external channels related to the use of administrative sources;
- creating, maintaining and updating a database of administrative sources;
- improving the institutional relationship of the INE with Central Government agencies that are or can be producers of data from administrative sources. In the scope of any legislative act which may be created, the INE should be able to participate in the design and review of administrative data sources for which Public Services are responsible, thus guaranteeing that their statistical use is suitable.

### Improve interaction with the bodies involved in the production of national statistics

29. The need to improve interaction among the INE and all other bodies linked to the production of national statistics has led to defining, in conjunction with these bodies, a set of coordination goals in five areas of intervention:

**Planning:** the aim is to promote prior discussion and to prepare the statistical programme and annual activity plan, promoting the simultaneous dissemination of information among the various bodies, present mechanisms to plan and monitor the implementation of the activities and develop and provide indicators to monitor the execution of the activities;

**Production:** the aim is to harmonise procedures promoting the general use of the Handbook of Procedures for Statistical Production and standard methodological documents, promote the design and development of information sub-systems, develop partnership projects and guarantee technical certification and the quality label;

**Dissemination:** the aim is to develop and prepare a joint dissemination plan, falling within the scope of the activity plan, the preparation and dissemination of information highlights of these bodies and the joint definition of the contents of statistical dissemination;

**Training:** the aim is to develop and prepare an integrated training plan for the National Statistical System (statisticians from the INE and other bodies linked to the production of national statistics);

**International Cooperation:** the aim is to develop and prepare a joint cooperation plan which would include in particular preparing participation in international meetings, exchanging documents produced and the plan to answer international organizations' questionnaires.

### Reduction of the statistical burden on respondents

30. In this sense, priority will be given to administrative sources over survey operations, to progressively adopt electronic data collection, to integrate the surveys, to manage populations and samples and to design and implement tools to measure the statistical burden.

#### Implementation of the Integrated Metadata System

31. In developing the statistical metadata system promoted and coordinated by the INE, the conceptualisation and implementation of highly integrated sub-systems of the following metadata components are particularly relevant: Nomenclatures, Definitions, Methodological Documents, Variables and Statistical Sources. The function of the Integrated Metadata System is to provide support to the various areas for which the Portuguese Statistical System is responsible – management, statistical output, internal and external dissemination –, by ensuring up-to-date, thorough and harmonised metadata.

#### **CONCLUSION**

32. Of all the human activities, coordination is perhaps one of the most difficult to achieve. Psychiatry and social psychology tell us that each individual is the unique product of a combination of hereditary factors, socially acquired through (formal and informal) education, and above all, of the degree and type of direct experience accumulated throughout one's lifetime.

33. Coordinating activities means coordinating people and working together. Working together efficiently requires the existence of and adherence to a set of values: trust and mutual support, availability and openness, flexibility and the ability to adapt but also to accept responsibility and the authority of decision. Physical working conditions and incentives – both material and immaterial – to ensure the work is carried out properly, complete the main factors required for good individual and collective performance. In short, coordinating activities well is essentially – just like almost everything in life – a cultural question: "tell me how you work and I will tell you who you are."

34. In addition, it is important to know that the present world is increasingly fragmented and complex, which places greater demands on coordinating activities, and, of course, the activities of an organization. These new requirements include, among other things, enhancing human qualification in aspects that surpass the technical skills required for one's profession and new ways of organising work. However, the paradigm of coordination still stands: well-coordinated activities mean well-managed human resources and, as a result, greater productivity and quality of the work performed; this contributes decisively, although not exclusively, to the trust of customers in the products and services provided and therefore, to the credibility and success of the organization.

35. In terms of the national statistical systems and bodies comprising them, their credibility and reputation are based on the production of quality statistics which are perceived as such by their users: the greater the former, the greater the value users place on their statistical products. The trust in the work carried out is thus a precious asset for the national statistical institutes and this depends, increasingly, on the quality of the coordination of their most precious resource: people.

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