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**How national statistical systems adhere to the core values of official statistics**

## How national statistical systems adhere to the core values of official statistics

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*Summary*

This paper aims to provide basis for a conversation around the core values of official statistics as outlined in the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the European Statistics Code of Practice, and their relevance to the ever-changing environment. National statistical offices need to take stock of their core values and if needed, adapt them to the current environment while improving communication around the role and importance of the core values to the users.

This document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' session on "How national statistical organisations adhere to the core values of official statistics' for discussion.

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## I. Introduction

1.      The core values and principles of official statistics are enshrined and articulated by the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP), the Recommendation of the OECD Council on Good Statistical Practice as well as individual NSO and statistical system's codes of practice. These core values such as independence, impartiality, objectivity, commitment to quality, relevance, ethics, confidentiality, privacy protection, timelines and punctuality are the guiding values underpinning the essential data and services NSOs provide to decision makers.

2.      The aim of this paper is to provide basis for a conversation around the core values of official statistics (as outlined in the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the European Statistics Code of Practice), and their relevance to the ever-changing environment we work in. We need to take stock of our core values and if needed, adapt them to the current environment while improving communication around the role and importance of our core values to users.

## II. How national statistical offices adhere to the core values - background

3.      The core values of an organization are those values which form the foundation on which we perform work and conduct ourselves. NSOs have always worked in a challenging environment and this is nothing new. However, the challenges we face are rapidly increasing and effective NSO response needs to be based on foundations (core values) that are relevant to the current environment and that are communicated effectively to all users.

4.      **Relevance**: Staying relevant is an ongoing challenge and many NSOs are undergoing modernisation and transformational programmes of change. Increasingly we talk about the need to gain access to and develop new data sources, develop new products and sources, focus on strategic communications etc. These programmes of work are essential if we are to stay relevant. However, in working to retain relevance and adopt new strategies and techniques we need to be careful not to forget our foundation and importance of what we already have, our core values. Staying true to the core values can anchor our relevance in today's world. That can be easy to forget when focussing on a complex and challenging programme of change.

5.      **Data stewardship**: Many NSOs are stepping more and more into a data stewardship role within their national data ecosystems. Our ability to influence across the systems is based on our reputation for professionalism, independence, objectivity, standards and quality. These are the core values and any loss of focus on these values will undoubtedly undermine our ability to influence and step into that key data stewardship role.

6.      **Competitive data environment**: The pandemic has highlighted the increased competition we face from third-party statistical providers. Many of these providers have realised the value of the data they hold and are increasingly beginning to understand how to monetise that data. These data providers can be both competitors and collaborators but either way this cohort represents a new competitive environment. How our core values can help us in this regard is worth some reflection.

7.      **Evolving user needs and values**: The scope, depth and granularity of requests continue to grow unabated amongst our user cohort, but the pandemic has accelerated the demand for high quality Official Statistics in as close to real time as possible. As we know there are many private data providers willing to "step into our shoes" if we can not deliver. Increasingly some users appear to value speed over accuracy. In a competitive environment, where time to market is becoming increasingly important, how does official statistics make itself stand out from the crowd while maintaining and communicating its core values? NSOs should also be aware of their users' *own* values and be mindful of how those values align with the NSOs' core values.

8.    **Trust**: The objective reasons for lack of trust in official statistics are outlined in five key points by the National Statistics Service of the Republic of Armenia[1] which are; i) users' different perspectives, ii) different interests of users, iii) stakeholders attitudes, iv) multi-layered methodology, and v) general lack of trust in state institutions. Communication of the core values of official statistics is a key component in tackling the reasons for a lack of trust.

9.    Broadly speaking we are trusted, independent and objective compilers of information, knowledge and insight. Policy makers are aware of the role we play in supporting the decision-making process and they understand the value we bring as a statistical community through our independence, objectivity and provision of high-quality statistical products and services based on compliance with international statistical standards. To retain the level of trust we enjoy amongst policy makers and to broaden the appreciation of the role of our core values amongst our broader cohort of users will require a concerted effort. The challenges we face include an increasingly politicised environment, very often accompanied by a heightened awareness of the power of data, and an environment where misinformation, alternative facts and easy access to all forms of statistical output from broadly "un-regulated" data providers needs to be factored into our thinking.

10.    In its 2019 annual report, the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) recommended that national statistical offices design appropriate actions of communication and outreach to citizens to highlight the trustworthiness of official statistics in view of the increasing risks of third-party dissemination of non-validated or 'fake' information. In 2020, the same board recommended that the European Statistical System develop a coordinated approach to retain and strengthen trust in official statistics, at the national and EU levels, by implementing a transparent and proactive approach to communication with all types of users, on both methodological and emerging issues. This focus on strategic communications is seen as an essential activity in our ability to retain and enhance our position with the new data ecosystem.

11.    The United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP) play an essential role in providing the key stakeholders with a roadmap to ensure confidence in Official Statistics and trust in the core values that we abide by. Codes of Practice, Principles, Polices and legislation are pre-requisites for effective and efficient Official Statistical Systems. However, on their own they may not be enough as their existence is not necessarily the defining issue but rather the extent to which they are lived and adhered to in established customs and practices, as well as communicated, understood and shared by the population we serve.

12.    NSOs have reacted swiftly to new data needs because of COVID-19. These changes have resulted in new working environments and ever-increasing data needs. The role of data stewardship and access to privately held data are to the forefront of NSOs now more than ever before. To meet the needs of users and stay ahead of competition, we need to be the ones driving change institutionally and through legislation with regards data stewardship and access to privately held data. Effective knowledge and communication of our core values is the backbone by which this change can be achieved. More than ever, in an environment in which a "fake news" alternative and a politicised news cycle exist, we need to monitor our compliance with core values. Now more than ever there is a need to open a debate in which adherence to the core values of official statistics is at the heart of the discussion.

## III.    Questions to the Conference of European Statisticians

13.    To ensure that NSOs adhere to the core values of official statistics we may need to consider:

- How do the core values outlined in the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the ES CoP apply to our current operating environments;

- Whether the existence of codes of practice and associated rules, policies and procedures (and perhaps even legislation) in and of themselves are enough to engender

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[1] https://www.armstat.am/file/doc/99476558.pdf

trust in Official Statistics amongst our data providers and users in the current environment;

• How do we effectively communicate the core values to our users to ensure we stay ahead in a competitive environment?

• How to use our values and behaviours to communicate and build an awareness and understanding that official statistics are different (in a positive way) from "unofficial statistics"?

• How do NSOs implement and monitor modern practices based on the core values in response to todays' evolving data needs?

• What challenges have NSOs faced in adhering to the core values and how were they dealt with? What additional items could have helped them if they were in place?

• Do NSOs use their core values/behaviours as a mechanism to differentiate themselves from other compilers and if so, how successful has this been?

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