



ITALIAN NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS

Guidelines for improving the quality of the dissemination of official statistics by the members of the National Statistical System

(Comstat¹ session of 16 December 2011)

1. Introduction

Within the framework of the principles established by the Italian Code of Official Statistics² the subject of dissemination is among the most sensitive in various respects, the most important of which relate to the principles of impartiality and objectivity, timeliness and precision, accessibility, and clarity.

The Italian Code, on the other hand, is consistent with similar acts that at the European level have established increasingly stringent rules of conduct, such as:

- the Communication from the Commission to the European Council and Parliament on the independence, integrity and accountability of the national statistical authorities and the European Community statistical authority and the corresponding Commission Recommendation COM (2005) 217 of 25 May 2005;
- Regulation (EC) no. 223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2009 on European statistics;
- the recent Communication from the Commission to the European Council and Parliament on strengthening the quality management of European statistics of 15/4/2011 COM (2011) 211 final, which refers to the need to increase the independence of national statistical authorities and calls on Member States to take steps in this direction to strengthen confidence in official statistics.

The Steering and Coordination Committee for Statistical Information (Comstat), in acknowledging that the results of the annual survey carried out by the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat) on the functioning of the Statistical Offices highlighted specific critical issues in the final part of the production process of statistical data, specifically the dissemination, and in consideration of the key role played by dissemination for the purpose of the concrete implementation of the principles set out in the European Code and the Italian Code of official statistics, has adopted these "Guidelines for improving the quality of the dissemination of official statistics by the members of the National Statistical System (Sistan)".

The guidelines, adopted by Comstat after extensive debate and consultation of a significant group of Statistical Offices, aim not only at articulating in more detail the above mentioned principles with reference to the dissemination processes, but also to provide concrete operational instructions to the Statistical Offices to promote and facilitate their effective implementation.

¹ Steering and Coordination Committee for Statistical Information

² Comstat Directive no. 10 of 17 March 2010, published in the Official Gazette of the Italian Republic of 13 October 2010, no. 240

2. General principles for the dissemination of official statistics

The National Statistical System is responsible for "providing the country and international bodies with official statistical information"³, while the individual Offices included in the System are responsible, among other things, for promoting and implementing "the dissemination of statistical data concerning the administration to which they belong, within the national statistical programme"⁴.

As required by art. 3 of Regulation (EC) no. 223/2009 of the European Parliament and Council of 11 March 2009, the term "dissemination" means "the activities necessary to make statistics and statistical analysis accessible and comprehensible to users".

Thus the timely and precise dissemination of impartial statistical information is a fundamental element for strengthening the credibility of official statistics, this function must be carried out paying the attention to the principles formulated in this regard by the Code of European Statistics and the Italian Code of Official Statistics provided for in the Comstat Directive no. 10 of 17 March 2010.

To increase the credibility of official statistics, support their reliability and authoritativeness, as well as ensure their maximum usefulness, the Statistical Offices and Statistical Information Bodies are required to process and disseminate statistical data respecting the principles indicated in art. 2 of Regulation (EC) no. 223/2009 of the European Parliament and Council of 11 March 2009, as well as those referred to in art. 2 of the Italian Code of Official Statistics and, in particular, the principles of professional independence, impartiality and objectivity, timeliness and precision, accessibility, and clarity.

3. Guidelines for the dissemination of aggregate statistical information (macrodata)

Statistical Offices and Statistical Information Bodies disseminate official statistics to international bodies, institutions, businesses and citizens. The dissemination of official statistical data, the collection of which is determined on a legislative or regulatory mandate, must be carried out free from any pressure by political groups or other interest groups or by national or international authorities. These data may not be released in advance to third parties, unless they are expressly embargoed until the date scheduled for official dissemination. Particular care must be taken to ensure that the dissemination of data is not preceded or accompanied by statements of a political nature that make use of data not yet officially disclosed.

Consequently, the Statistical Offices and Statistical Information Bodies:

- disseminate statistical information in accordance with the criterion of professional independence, which applies to the entire process of design, production, and dissemination of statistical results;
- ensure that statistical information is disseminated as soon as possible and accurately and make readily available to the public information on the sources, classifications, methodologies, and calculation procedures adopted;

³ Art. 1, paragraph 2, of Legislative Decree no. 322 of 1989

⁴ Art. 6, paragraph 1, letter a) of Legislative Decree no. 322 of 1989

- ensure that the dissemination of statistical information is based on the principles of impartiality and objectivity, avoiding, in the analysis comment, to emphasise aspects of the investigated phenomena whose robustness is not sufficiently supported by the quantitative evidence disseminated and guaranteeing conditions of maximum scientific independence, transparency and non-discrimination towards any category of users.

To achieve the objectives described above, the Statistical Offices and Statistical Information Bodies:

- ensure simultaneous access to data and metadata by all potential users, including those belonging to the administration of which the Statistical Office is a member, by ensuring that any privileged access prior to dissemination is restricted, controlled, and made known;
- work to ensure maximum ease of access to data and metadata;
- establish the maximum time between the time of collection and processing carried out by them and the time of dissemination of data and metadata;
- establish ex-ante and make public a timetable for the dissemination of data and metadata (in particular through press releases) that takes into account the needs of users as much as possible. The release calendar:
 - must cover at least the following quarter (with monthly updates), although its definition on an annual basis is recommended;
 - must be made available on the website of the Office/responsible body and sent to Istat, so that it makes it available on the website⁵

The calendar should preferably indicate the topic, the reference period of the data and the day of release of the data; alternatively, it can indicate the week during which the release will take place. For information that may be relevant to the functioning of financial markets, it is recommended that the time of dissemination should also be indicated. If, due to unexpected events, changes to the pre-established calendar should be necessary, they must be announced promptly, according to procedures made known in advance, and explaining the reasons for the changes that have occurred;

- disseminate statistics in a clear and comprehensible form, presenting them in such a way as to offer an interpretation that is as impartial as possible and to facilitate meaningful comparisons in space and time.
To this regard, they make available to users all the concepts, definitions, classifications and, in general, metadata that allow them to orient themselves in the correct interpretation of the data;
- inform users about the methodologies adopted through the preparation of methodological notes;
- provide in a systematic manner the indicators necessary to enable the quality of the data disseminated to be assessed, so as to allow their correct use;
- in the case of specific institutional needs to which the survey promoted by the administration to which they belong must respond, they may make available to the latter the macrodata in a still provisional or partial version - conveniently accompanied by the technical specifications necessary to allow their correct use for administrative purposes - even before their release in preliminary or definitive form to the public;

⁵ www.sistan.it

- if preliminary estimates are disseminated, subsequently revised as new (or updated) information becomes available, they shall communicate in advance the revision policy adopted.
When publishing final estimates, summary statistical indicators on revisions should be published, possibly referring to more detailed documents. Occasional revisions, not provided for in the revision policy, must be announced, justified, and documented;
- if errors are detected after dissemination, they shall promptly be corrected and the corrections shall be published, explaining the reasons.

4. Measures for improving the quality of the dissemination of statistical information

In the dissemination of aggregate statistical information (macrodata) the protection of personal data and compliance with statistical confidentiality must be guaranteed by the offices and bodies of Sistan, as well as the use of personal data collected and processed for exclusively statistical purposes. To this end, the heads of the offices and bodies of Sistan provide the personnel involved in the dissemination of data with adequate instructions regarding the protection of statistical confidentiality and compliance with the rules on the protection of personal data with particular reference to the rules dictated by the *"Code of ethics and good conduct for the processing of personal data for statistical purposes and scientific research carried out within the National Statistical System"*.

The dissemination of statistical information is carried out using advanced information and communication technologies. In particular:

- a. the statistical information must be published on a website or on a web page dedicated exclusively to statistics and, if produced by the Office, with its own clearly identifiable logo;
- b. transparent and easy access methods must be guaranteed for all users, whatever their IT competence or physical ability, in line with the Digital Administration Code, the guidelines for PA websites and the best practices recommended by international organisations and Istat for the dissemination of statistical information;
- c. statistical information and metadata must be made available in formats and licences that allow its reuse;
- d. the contact details of the offices or persons to be contacted to answer user questions on the information disseminated must be indicated.

The dissemination activity carried out by the Statistical Offices and Statistical Information Bodies must be appropriately coordinated if the data disseminated come from activities provided for in the National Statistical Programme and owned by another body, even if other members of Sistan took part in its realisation. Such coordination must cover both the timing of dissemination and the methods of publication of methodologies, classifications, sources and calculation procedures, concepts, definitions, and metadata.

As far as possible, provision should be made for the free distribution by electronic means of the statistical information already available.

Statistical offices and Statistical Information Bodies adopt initiatives for the continuous improvement of dissemination services. To this end, they detect the information needs of users, monitor the actual quality of dissemination services and measure the degree of satisfaction with the services provided. In order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the dissemination of statistical information, Istat and the other Sistan bodies collaborate to disseminate best practices, also through specific training interventions.

5. Publicity of dissemination policies adopted by Statistical Offices and Statistical Information Bodies

Starting from 2012 for each Statistical Office or Statistical Information Body, a prospectus is published and updated on the dedicated page on the Sistan website with the concrete methods of application of these guidelines. To this end, the Statistical Offices and the Statistical Information Bodies provide Istat with the necessary information by compiling in electronic form a prospectus prepared by it to be shown on the Sistan website.

Each product included in the National Statistical Programme and released on its website by the Statistical Office or Body must be made accessible, through a specific link, also starting from the Sistan website. The application of this procedure is also recommended for the release of other products scheduled in the calendar.