

**Revision of the Swiss Official Statistics Charter: opportunities and risks**

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Users must be able to trust the findings of official statistics. Official statistics are produced without political influence, using recognized scientific methods and are an essential element of any democratic society. For this reason, fundamental principles of official statistics have been drawn up at national and international level. The UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (UN FPOS) are a global benchmark and were used as a basis for the drafting of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) by the European Union. The CoP also applies to Switzerland, in particular to the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) and to the other national statistical authorities producing European statistics.

Based on the UN FPOS, the FSO and the Swiss Conference of regional statistical offices (CORSTAT) have developed and adopted the Charter of Swiss Official Statistics (Charter) in 2002, which applies to all statistical services producing and disseminating official statistics. Following the first edition of the CoP in 2005, elements of it were incorporated into the charter. A reference to these principles, laid down at both national and international level, can also be found in the Federal Statistics Act of 1992.

In the Swiss federal system, the Charter complements the legal framework that governs the statistical authorities, and it is based on a set of basic principles and indicators, similar to the ES CoP. The Charter fosters cooperation among the statistical authorities as it sets out the common objectives to be pursued and complied with and thus providing an effective coordination tool for the FSO.

The Swiss Statistical System is quite intricate and comprises actors on different levels of government. The FSO fulfils its coordination mandate with the help of the two coordination committees Fedestat and Regiostat. Based on an agreement between the FSO and CORSTAT, the general guidelines for quality in statistics are entrusted to the Ethics Council for Official Statistics which has also developed the Charter, the latest version of which was accepted in 2012.

In 2021 a decision has been taken among the Charter holders to update this document. There is a clear need to modernize this important document such that different types of organizations find it relevant and up to date, resulting in a broader acceptance of the Charter in the Swiss Statistical System. All organizations of this system should be able to orientate themselves on this common value system given by the charter. Also, as the Swiss Statistical System promotes adherence to both the Charter and the ES CoP, it would be an advantage to harmonize those principles of the Charter that are similar to the ES CoP to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

The planned presentation by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and the Swiss Ethics Council is intended to shed light on the process and the challenges and proposed solutions arising from the revision of the Swiss Official Statistics Charter.

## Revision of the Swiss Official Statistics Charter: opportunities and risks

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### *Paper*

#### **Initial situation**

Quality has always been of considerable importance in official statistics. Users must be able to trust the findings of official statistics. Official statistics are produced without political influence, using recognised scientific methods and are an essential element of any democratic society. Official statistics enable society to form opinions and provide a basis for political and economic decision-making. In this way, official statistics become an important public good.

For this reason, fundamental principles of official statistics have been drawn up at national and international level. The UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (UN FPOS) are a global benchmark and were used as a basis for the drafting of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) by the European Union. The European CoP also applies to Switzerland, in particular to the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) and to the other national statistical authorities producing European statistics.

Switzerland takes part in the European Statistical System (ESS) pursuant to the bilateral agreement in the area of statistics concluded with the EU, which came into force on 1 January 2007. The legal bases of the ESS are laid down in the regulation (EC) no. 223/2009 of 11 March 2009 on European statistics. The CoP and this regulation form an integral part of the agreement.

Based on the UN FPOS, the FSO and the Swiss Conference of regional statistical offices (CORSTAT) have developed and adopted the Charter of Swiss Official Statistics (Charter) in 2002, which applies to all statistical services producing and disseminating official statistics. Following the first edition of the CoP in 2005, elements of it were incorporated into the charter.

A reference to these principles, laid down at both national and international level, can also be found in the Federal Statistics Act of 1992 (last updated in 2024) and in the Ordinance on the Conduct of Federal Statistical Surveys (last updated in 2023).

#### **The System of official statistics in Switzerland**

Important statistical information is processed in some 40 federal offices and in other corporate entities and statistics institutions subject to the Federal Statistics Act such as the Swiss National Bank or the Swiss Farmers' Union. This information is used, in particular, for planning and management purposes in important policy areas.

In addition, the majority of the 26 cantons and several larger towns have at their disposal regional statistics offices. These services also contribute to statistics at national level and also cover the specific regional statistical needs of the cantons and cities.

The individual statistical offices differ considerably in terms of size, organizational structure and institutional embedding. Some statistical offices are integrated into larger organizational units such as federal offices. Others, especially at regional level, sometimes only have a small number of staff and have limited task portfolios.

Due to the decentralized structure of this system, coordination is of the utmost importance. As the competence center for official statistics at federal level, the FSO is responsible for this coordination. It heads and oversees the relevant committees. All levels of the political structure – the Confederation, the cantons and the communes – are represented in these committees, allowing them to coordinate their statistics activities.

The producers of federal statistics are grouped together in Fedestat, which comprises as mentioned some 40 members representing the federal offices with their own statistical production as well as most of the organizations subject to the Federal Statistics Act.

Regiostat ensures the coordination of statistical works between the Confederation and the regions (cantons and communes). The approximately 40 members of this committee include the cantonal statistical offices, the statistical services of cantons with no statistical office and the statistical services of the larger towns. These regional statistical offices also regularly exchange information in their own CORSTAT committee.

In addition, the topic-specific dialogue and consultation of statistics producers on comprehensive topics such as education and science, economy, health, etc. currently takes place in eight expert groups. They are made up of representatives from the federal government, cantons and municipalities as well as the scientific community, business, social partners and the Swiss National Bank.

Coordination and intensive exchange between the statistical offices enable a well-functioning system of official statistics, which is based on different legal requirements in accordance with Switzerland's federal structure. In addition to legislation at federal level for national matters, regional statistics are governed by their own cantonal statistics laws. Supplementing these different legal bases, the charter is intended to provide a common framework of values for all bodies and thus for the entire Swiss statistical system.

### **The Charter of Swiss official statistics and the Ethics council**

The current Charter opens with a preamble, which is followed by 23 basic principles in 6 chapters. A total of 81 indicators explain and expand on the principles. The Charter's scope of application, its organisational arrangements, the mandate of the Ethics Council and a comparison of the Charter and the CoP are presented in the annexes.

The charter is aimed at all statistical offices in Switzerland that produce and publish official statistics. There is no obligation to join the Charter. Currently, 8 members of Fedestat and 21 of Regiostat have signed the charter. By signing, they undertake to respect the basic principles and to contribute to their implementation. The lower number of Fedestat members signing up is partly due to their primary focus on the CoP. To monitor compliance with the charter, the FSO and the ONAs are subject to the peer reviews of the ESS, while the members of CORSTAT conduct an institutionalised exchange of best practice in an annual workshop.

The current charter is in line with the CoP. Following a preamble, both set out the professional ethics requirements in principles and indicators. In terms of content, the requirements of both codes of conduct are largely the same, apart from certain additions to the CoP following its revision in 2017. However, the structure of the CoP and the Charter differs considerably. The CoP sets out the requirements in just 3 chapters with 16 principles and a total of 84 indicators. Comparisons of the two codes of conduct or synchronised orientation to both are extremely difficult and time-consuming. The

CoP is of course only aimed at the National Statistical Offices and the ONAs of the ESS, and compliance with the CoP is monitored by peer reviews.

Together with the Charter, the Ethics Council was established by the FSO and CORSTAT. In order to ensure its independence from public sponsorship, it is institutionally anchored as a private association in the Official Statistics Section of the Swiss Statistical Society. The Ethics Council ensures that the Charter is disseminated and monitors compliance with the principles. The Ethics Council also answers enquiries about the Charter, fulfils its role as a mediator and makes recommendations on the Charter, but does not have power to impose sanctions.

According to the annex to the charter, the FSO, CORSTAT and the Ethics Council undertake to regularly exchange experiences on the charter and to clarify whether changes are necessary. After the Charter was last revised in 2012 and the CoP in 2017, these organizations considered it necessary to take account of the latest changes and innovations in the development, production and dissemination of official statistics. For this reason, the sponsoring organizations decided in 2021 to subject the Charter to an evaluation and subsequent revision.

### **Evaluation of the Charter**

To this end, an online survey was conducted among Fedestat and Regiostat members in 2022. The aim was to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the charter and to identify possible ideas and wishes with regard to the subsequent revision.

The response rate of 67% showed great interest. The evaluation made it clear that the charter is important as a general framework of values for maintaining professional independence and as a guarantee of high quality statistics for all stakeholders. The charter as a means of integration into a network of public statistics tends to be more important for the regional and municipal statistics offices (Regiostat) than for the topic-specific federal statistics offices (Fedestat). These tend to be orientated towards the respective federal administrative office and its specialist focus.

The structure of the charter with principles and indicators was generally approved. Although the relevance of the individual principles was assessed differently, tendencies emerged: Those principles that promote impartial, objective, transparent statistical production that respects statistical confidentiality and is based on sound methodology are considered to be particularly important. What is primarily questioned - but never by everyone - are the principles for the availability of resources and their efficient implementation in operations. These would be self-evident, generally applicable and not statistic-specific guidelines.

The suggestions for revision can be summarized as follows: As the statistical offices have developed into competence centers for data management, the charter should take into account access to a wide range of data sources and the new areas of responsibility such as data science or data management. In addition, the charter should be more in line with the CoP, somewhat more pragmatic and somewhat shorter. The aim is not to create new principles, but to adapt existing ones wherever possible.

In a subsequent workshop on the evaluation, certain points were clarified: the consideration of the new tasks should ultimately include the legitimation of the statistical offices to take on these tasks.

Incidentally, these tasks also include services for other public offices and therefore do not exclusively serve the production of statistics, but statistical production will also rely on their results and findings in the future. Furthermore, the call for a more pragmatic orientation of the Charter is intended to take

account of the following fact: Not all statistical offices fulfil all the principles of the Charter, which is primarily oriented towards the remit of larger offices. However, all should respect the principles and endeavor to implement them. This aspect should be taken into account in the revision.

### **Recommendations from the last Peer Review**

As a member of the ESS, Switzerland took part in the third European Peer Review from 20 - 24 March 2023. The FSO and other actors in federal statistics who produce statistics as well as external stakeholders from the world of media, business, administration and politics were interviewed. The four experts from other European statistical offices presented their report in December 2023. It presents a very positive assessment of the Swiss statistical system. However, the report also contains 15 recommendations.

One recommendation relates directly to the Swiss Charter for Official Statistics, which is why the peers' findings and recommendations are reproduced here:

*“The Swiss statistical system is quite intricate and comprises actors at different levels. The FSO has a clear coordination mandate with the help of two coordination committees – Fedestat and Regiostat. However, based on an agreement between the FSO and the Conference of Regional Statistical Offices (CORSTAT), the general guidelines for quality in statistics have been entrusted to the Ethics Council, which has also developed the Charter of Swiss Official Statistics. The peer review team was informed that a decision has been taken to update the Charter, which the peer review team welcomes. There is a clear need to modernize this important document for different types of organizations to find it relevant and up-to-date, resulting in a broader acceptance of the Charter within the Swiss statistical system. Moreover, as the Swiss statistical system promotes adherence to both the Charter and the ES CoP, it would be an advantage to harmonize the principles of the Charter that are similar to the content and purpose of the ES CoP, to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.”*

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends: *“The relevant authorities should revise and strengthen the Charter of Swiss Official Statistics, as a complement to the legal framework for official statistics in the Swiss statistical system, with the aim of developing a document that is applicable for all types of organizations in the Swiss statistical system and maximizes coherence with the ES CoP.”*

### **Revision of the Charter**

The supporting organizations agreed on an important common goal at the beginning of the work on the evaluation and revision of the Charter in 2022: they want the revision of the Charter to move in the direction of a code of conduct as a reference document for all producers of public statistics in Switzerland in the future, which includes both regional and federal actors and is intended to serve as a supplement to the legal basis. As many statistical offices as possible, including the members of Fedestat that have so far focused mainly on the CoP, should be able to sign the charter. This would clarify the image of a uniform statistical system in Switzerland: a system that has de facto existed for many years, but is not sufficiently recognized, partly because of its focus on two codes of conduct with the same content but different structures.

Other important objectives were also defined for the revision:

- Simplification of dialogue with all stakeholders on the basis of a single reference document
- Consideration of the federal structure of Switzerland

- Charter should be designed in such a way that it can also be signed by smaller statistical offices
- Consideration of the amendments to the 2017 CoP
- Align the structure of the Charter with the structure of the CoP
- Consideration of the expansion of tasks and mention of possible interfaces with emerging data ethics topics (data management, data science)
- Inclusion of an additional, strongly summarizing level for broad communication of the Charter
- Strengthening the solidarity of all statistical offices in the federal system and thus their general perception by the public

### **Formation of a working group and status of work**

At the beginning of 2023, a working group was formed with two representatives each from Regiostat (CORSTAT), Fedestat, FSO and the Ethics Council. The working group is chaired by the President of the Ethics Council and deputized by the FSO.

The procedure for revising the charter was subsequently approached and discussed in several meetings. The first step was to review the results of the survey of Regiostat and Fedestat members and discuss how these could best be incorporated into a revision. In a second step, all principles and indicators of the Charter were compared and contrasted with those of the CoP. In an essential third step, the members of the working group agreed that the new charter should adopt the structure/title of the CoP for the 16 principles and indicators. The description of the individual elements should then be supplemented and adapted to include Swiss specifics where necessary. This primarily concerns aspects of the federal system as well as certain adjustments in the area of terminology and general comprehensibility at national level.

The working group is currently discussing the adapted individual principles and indicators together and possibly integrating new elements or simplifying them where necessary. The next step will then be to develop the additional level for broad communication. It is envisaged that a first version of the revised charter can be developed by summer 2024 and submitted for consultation to all stakeholders in autumn 2024. The necessary revisions, including translations, should then take place by the end of 2024 so that the text is finalized in 2025 and can be communicated to the stakeholders involved and a wider public.

In parallel to all this work, the Federal Statistical Survey Ordinance is currently being revised. It is intended to mention the Charter in this ordinance in future, thereby further strengthening its importance.