



Opening address

Konrad Pesendorfer

Director General Statistics Austria

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If you ask for a definition of „Quality in official statistics“ the statement most people would agree about, would be: „Quality in official statistics is multidimensional.“

The European Statistics Code of Practice, very much in line with the UN Fundamental Principles, quotes quality dimensions like:

- Relevance
- Accuracy and reliability
- Timeliness and punctuality
- Coherence and comparability
- Accessibility and clarity

While those quality dimensions are the corner stones of our quality framework, they do not, however, give a clear indication for producers of statistics about their weighting. The difficulty for the producer arises from the fact that those dimensions represent, to some extent, conflicting goals, or – at least – trade-offs. Hence, choices have to be made.

The weight attached to each individual quality dimension might differ quite a bit, depending on who you ask:

- Policy makers usually attach high importance on timeliness: the sooner data is available on a certain subject, the better it is. Policy makers also do not like revisions a lot – especially if past decisions were based on statistical information at the time.
- Researchers might care about coherence and comparability more than about timeliness. Accessibility and clarity about definitions and the availability of meta data is also important for the research community.
- A statistical producer, in contrast, has a tendency to care more about accuracy and reliability than about timeliness – if you check your figures twice or wait for outstanding information to come in you know that you might avoid having to correct your numbers after publication.

The key and overarching quality dimension, however, is relevance. It combines all the other dimensions and even goes beyond in terms of substance. If you go for corner solutions, focussing only on one or two of the other quality dimensions, you will surely miss out on relevance.

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the 7th European Conference on Quality in Official Statistics, which Statistics Austria organized together with Eurostat. This conference has become a corner stone in the European Statistical System to discuss important issues on measurement, assurance and development of quality in official statistics on a regular basis.

There are three very different reasons, why quality in official statistics is a hot topic these days – especially in the European Union.

1. The new economic governance after the crisis created a need for much higher quality assurance for statistical indicators.

The EU has already been a rules-based system before the crisis in 2008/09. The new economic governance set up as a consequence of the crisis, however, tightened existing rules like the Stability and Growth Pact and introduced new rules to re-enforce fiscal surveillance and to contain macro-economic imbalances through a monitoring set of indicators – the MIP. Economic and fiscal policy in the EU has been put pretty much on auto-pilot and heavily relies on statistical indicators, fixed thresholds of tolerance and automatic procedures, once those thresholds are crossed by a member state. It is not up to producers of statistics to decide whether this is good or bad, but we need to recognize that the environment for producing indicators on government finance and internal and external balances has changed drastically. Statistics has shifted very much to the centre stage of political interest in the EU.

Everybody knows Goodheart's law, saying that "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure." The increased demand for quality assurance for the relevant indicators under the new economic governance regime emerges, because policy makers want to avoid taking wrong decisions, based on incorrect statistical data. The real proof of success for our quality assurance system for EDP or MIP data is whether the ESS is able to falsify Goodheart's law, i.e. whether we succeed in producing indicators of high political relevance without losing or compromising on quality.

We know what the ingredients of this success are:

- sound methodology, but in particular:
- strong institutional, financial and personal independence of statistical producers.

2. Official Statistics needs to maintain and extend its relevance.

The quality dimensions of "Relevance" addresses two distinct issues:

The first is the question, how we produce statistics. Official statistics will only continue to be used as an irreplaceable reference by users (be they decision makers, researchers, or the general public) if they are reliable, accurate, comparable, but also more timely; i.e., if the other quality dimensions are well respected, and the need to produce statistics in a more timely manner is also recognized by statistics producers.

Secondly, official statistics will only remain relevant if we manage to measure the things that matter to a rapidly changing society.

Two examples:

- Measuring the globalized economy: In an increasingly globalized economy national borders matter less and less. What matters to the economy, and as a consequence to the society, is where value is added in the production chain, and hence, where income and employment is generated. It matters much less to count, how many times a good or a service crosses a national border. We need to reflect this in our statistics and adjust them accordingly.

- Measuring the quality of life: Both professional and private life has become much more complex in our society and life satisfaction cannot simply be explained as a linear function of a person's income. To statistically go "Beyond GDP" is only a first attempt to better understand what is really important to people. The question of social inclusion or exclusion is far more complex than defining a certain percentage level of a society's median income and thereby creating an artificial dividing line between poverty and non-poverty.

3. Official Statistics needs to explore new territories in a digital society

National Statistical Institutes are increasingly confronted with two phenomena, making their task to produce high quality statistics more difficult:

- Limited, or even shrinking resources; and
- an increasing response fatigue or scepticism to reply to or complete statistical surveys.

Hence, we need to look for new data sources and explore new ways to produce meaningful and reliable statistics. The wide spread use of information and communication technology in our society provides a great opportunity in this respect.

The question is: How can we turn big data into meaningful and high quality statistics? Besides legal issues, issues of confidentiality, data ownership etc. there are many methodological challenges related to the use of big data for official statistics: selection bias, noise, dealing with masses of data, just to name a few.

The opportunities of new technologies for official statistics go, however, far beyond exploiting big data: new ways of communicating statistics to users on mobile devices, new forms of visualisation or storing and linking statistical data.

There are two common features of the three reasons I gave, why quality in official statistics is such a topical issue today:

The first is, that I think the challenges I mentioned can much better be addressed internationally and in cooperation across countries.

The second is, that in one way or the other, all those issues will be covered more in depth throughout this conference.

Before handing over to Marie Bohata from Eurostat, I would like to express my thanks to Eurostat for an excellent cooperation in the preparation of this conference, the speakers and chairpersons for their active contribution to this conference, the members of the programme and the scientific committee for putting together what I consider an extremely interesting and well balanced conference programme. My special thanks, however, go to the organising team, who made this conference possible.

I wish you an interesting and successful Quality Conference 2014!