**Quality guidelines as a tool for ensuring the coordination of quality in the French statistical system**

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**Abstract**

*The revised code of practice includes a new principle relating to coordination and cooperation (principle 1bis); more particularly, according to the indicator 1bis.2, NSI have to produce national quality guidelines to ensure the coordination of quality in their national statistical system. In compliance with the amended European regulation 223/2009 the French Quality Unit established in early 2017 quality guidelines in collaboration with the ministerial statistical services. These guidelines ensure that the head of the French NSI has access to information enabling to monitor the quality of the most important statistics produced in the public statistical system.*

*These guidelines formalize the framework for the coordination of the statistical system in terms of quality. They must be applied to European statistics, in accordance with the code of practice. But they also concern the national statistics that have been described as « structuring ». These « structuring » statistics are defined as both highly expected by the users and extremely prejudicial to the services if they were to be of poor quality. Their production and dissemination need to be insured against risks.*

*These guidelines are based on five orientations concerning governance, development of quality skills within the statistical services, the planning and realization of quality approaches to statistical processes; the fulfilment of European commitments and the systematic integration of users’ needs and satisfaction in the designing of statistical products and services.*

*This article firstly describes the French quality guidelines and how they are initiating the management and the integration of quality in statistical processes. Then, it presents the procedure that has been followed in order to support each ministerial statistical services in the implementation of the guidelines. The article lastly shows how this implementation is monitored by the French NSI and how it will help to fulfil our commitments resulting from the 2014 peer review and to co-ordinate quality issues among the French statistical system.*

**Keywords:** Co-ordination, National statistical system, guidelines, institutional environment, ONA, governance, revision of the European statistics code of practice

**1. Introduction**

Quality in statistics in the European Statistical System (ESS) is the compliance with the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP). Our statistics must be relevant, accurate, consistent, comparable and timely. Our results must be punctual, easily accessible and clear. Our well-documented work must follow appropriate procedures and be conducted independently, transparently, objectively and efficiently. It is based on international standards and respects statistical confidentiality. Our users must be treated impartially. Our institutions must be reliable.

This ultimate goal is shared in France by the National Statistical Institute (NSI) and the Ministerial Statistical Services (MSS) that differ from each other in size, status, positioning within a ministry, structure, level of training of their statistical managers or degree of integration of the quality approach into their processes.

Coordination of these organizations is needed in order to ensure the quality of development, production and dissemination of European and National statistics. This coordination relies on the implementation of a common national quality framework. It relies also on the clear identification of the specificities of these organizations and of their adoption of this framework, according to their own rate of progress based on their situation and their capacity to lead changes.

In France, this quality framework has taken the form of five guidelines. This organization in terms of quality coordination will be very useful for the French Statistical System (FSS) to ensure compliance with the new principle 1bis. It should be extended to the Centre for the Epidemiology of Medical Causes of Death (CépiDC) and the Centre for Secure Access to Data (CASD) which are the only Other National Authorities (ONAs) that are not MSSs.

**2. Overview of the current situation in terms of quality coordination**

*2.1. A well coordinated French Statistical System*

The French Statistical System (FSS) is defined by French law n°51-711 of 7 June 1951 on statistical obligation, coordination and confidentiality. It is composed of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) and the Ministerial Statistical Services (MSS) which carry out statistical operations in their field of competence.

In addition, INSEE, whose tasks were defined in the decree of 14 June 1946, coordinates the methods, resources and statistical work of public administrations and private bodies subsidized or controlled by the state. Within the FSS, the Director General of INSEE chairs the Statistical Program Committee (SPC), which brings together all the heads of MSS to determine the future statistical work program. The coordination work covers various subjects of common interest to the FSS as a whole, of a strategic or technical nature.

The management staff of the MSS often consists of INSEE managers. By appointing statisticians as close as possible to the users of statistics, this organization ensures both the general coordination of the system, which benefits from the movement of INSEE staff between its various bodies, and its technical and intellectual unity, which results from the joint training and unified career management of a large proportion of management and technical staff. INSEE managers represent about 30% of MSS staff.

*2.2. Governance to identify statistical needs and guarantee the professional independence of the FSS*

In addition to the FSS, the governance of French official statistics involves two other institutions, the National Council for Statistical Information (CNIS), the French Statistical Advisory Committee (FSAC), and the Public Statistic Authority (ASP), the French Statistical Governance Advisory Board (FSGAB).

The CNIS, whose organization is set by Decree No. 2009-318 of 20 March 2009, ensures consultation between producers and users of official statistics to identify the needs of stakeholders to understand society in the social and economic fields. On this basis, and taking into account requests from the European Union or the French institutions, the FSS shall draw up its work program, inform the CNIS and implement it.

The ASP, created by the law on the modernization of the economy of 4 August 2008, ensures respect for the principle of professional independence in the design, production and dissemination of public statistics as well as for the principles of objectivity, impartiality, relevance and quality of statistics produced. It ensures that the French official statistics comply with the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP).

Three more technical committees complete this institutional system: the French Label Committee, the Committee on Statistical Confidentiality and the Litigation Committee for Compulsory Statistical Surveys.

• The French Label Committee checks the technical quality of the surveys that will be included in the official statistic survey program, which is drawn up every quarter by the Minister of the Economy. It can also be mobilized by the ASP or the CNIS to audit the quality of certain statistics in order to grant them a quality label.

• The Committee on Statistical Confidentiality brings together statistical producers, users and representatives of individual information providers to advise administrations requesting access to individual data for research or economic evaluation purposes.

• The Litigation Committee for Compulsory Statistical Surveys is consulted before allocating fines to non-respondents to compulsory statistical surveys.

The staff high level training by a small number of schools which ensures de facto coordination of the statistical system, as well as governance bodies adapted to the main expectations of the European Code of Good Practices are two strong points of the coordination of the FSS. Nevertheless, quality management still have to be harmonized, generalized and integrated within the processes themselves.

*2.3. A varied degree of maturity in quality management in statistical production*

* *Within the NSI*

According to the 2014 peer review, the production of French official statistics largely complies with the principles of the CoP. Nevertheless, commitments have been taken to further formalize quality approaches and quality assurance frameworks.

The NSI has decided to set up a governance system to support the development of continuous quality improvement initiatives. It now relies on a strategic quality committee (COSAQ), which steers and monitors the implementation of the FSS’s quality strategy.

The NSI has also formalized its quality policy. Thus, actions have been decided to develop a Quality Assurance Framework, implement quality approaches with shared tools and professionalize the use of metadata. In addition, the NSI is gradually acquiring management tools to identify the processes on which to implement and monitor its quality approaches.

* *The state of play of the MSSs*

The maturity of the MSSs in terms of quality was evaluated according to six criteria:
- the level of commitment of the hierarchy;
- the degree of implementation of quality strategies within the department;
- the management of agents' skills in terms of quality approach;
- the existence of process mapping;
- the implementation of quality approaches and their completeness;
- the measurement of user satisfaction.

The Quality Unit of the NSI submitted a questionnaire to them in 2016 during bilateral meetings. These meetings revealed a varied degree of maturity in terms of quality and quality management.

**3. The five quality guidelines**

These bilateral meetings have also shown the need to formalize a dedicated coordination framework to guarantee the quality of the statistics produced within these services and to lead them to integrate quality at the very heart of their statistical processes. This framework has taken the form of quality guidelines guiding services in the implementation of their quality policy and in quality management.

The NSI and the MSSs are associated to the general governance of quality within the FSS. These guidelines deal with quality governance, quality skills, the implementation of quality approaches, the respect of European and National commitments and the taking into account of users' needs and satisfaction.

*3.1. Direction 1: Setting up quality governance in MSSs*

This direction involves defining the MSS’s quality framework[[1]](#footnote-1), implementing a strategy, and determining a dedicated organization.

The MSSs should define and adopt a quality strategy[[2]](#footnote-2) for the next three years. The document formalizing the objectives of the strategy, the organization for monitoring its implementation and the action plan will have to be sent to the NSI’s Quality Unit as soon as it is validated. The strategy should be reviewed after three years, particularly in terms of objectives.

MSSs should also set up the framework and governance within which these strategies will be developed and monitored:
- they should choose an existing committee or set up an ad hoc committee to manage the quality strategy; this committee has to determine its operating methods: frequency and number of annual meetings; it has to set up the strategy's objectives, review them every three years and determine the associated action plan, with its timetable, monitoring, success indicators, etc.;
- the head of the department should chair this quality committee.

*3.2. Direction 2: Developing quality approach skills in MSSs*

MSSs should name a quality referent for the service, responsible for monitoring quality actions and correspondent of the NSI on these issues. With his appointment, MSSs should ensure that the referent has the appropriate skills to carry out his task and, if this is not the case, undertake to allow him to follow an appropriate training course. This course should enable him to implement in a relevant way the principles of the quality approach, to use the tools specially adapted to the field of statistics developed by the NSI for the description of processes and to share them with the other agents of the service.

MSSs should pass the quality strategy on to their staff and offer them the opportunity of training, in particular within the NSI. They must pay particular attention to ensuring that agents involved in quality procedures receive adequate training.

*3.3. Direction 3: Implementing quality approaches in MSSs*

MSSs should identify their structuring processes which can be defined as statistics whose dissemination is highly expected by users, whose poor quality would be prejudicial to the producer service and which require a quality approach including a risk analysis to be conducted on its production process to guarantee quality. European statistics are one of them.

quality approaches[[3]](#footnote-3) should be initiated on the structuring processes of the MSSs. These approaches may cover the processes in whole or in part. For example, they can focus on a specific phase of a process which is identified as its weakest part. The planning of the quality approaches and the phases of the processes involved must form part of the MSS's quality strategy.

MSSs should ensure that resources (time, external services, financial resources, etc.) are available to implement the quality approaches and integrate them into the statistical processes.

*3.4. Direction 4: Respecting the European commitments of the MSSs and the responses to the recommendations of the ASP concerning structuring statistics*

MSSs should make their staff aware of the importance of metadata quality. They should promote collaboration with the NSI to harmonize common concepts and classifications and ensure their use within the services.

Quality reports compliant with the current European standard (Single Integrated Metadata Structure - SIMS), have to be implemented for each of the structuring statistics of the MSSs and disseminated on the Internet.

MSSs should draw up, update and disseminate timetables for the publication of their structuring statistics on their websites. They should send each year in January, at the request of the NSI and relating to the previous year, the follow-up of the gaps between the announced publication dates and the achieved ones and, if relevant, the reason for these gaps (delayed to avoid media competition, redesign of production processes, lack of resources, technical problem, influence of the ministerial hierarchy, etc.).

The NSI should soon relay MSSs timetables and publications on its own website.

MSSs should draft and make public their pre-release rules in accordance with the FSS global rules which have been recently defined. They must send them to the NSI and update them each time the pre-release rules change or each time the list of statistical indicators concerned by these rules is updated.

For each of their European statistics, MSSs should provide on their websites a link to the data disseminated by Eurostat. If the field of data disseminated at national level differs from that of data disseminated at international level, the link must be supplemented by a warning underlining that field differences exist.

Staff must sign a confidentiality agreement when they arrive in the MSS or on their first assignment to the FSS.

*3.5. Direction 5: Ensuring that the needs of decision-makers and other users are regularly taken into account*

In quality approaches, the process evaluation is based on user feedback obtained through satisfaction surveys or consultation of user or program committees.

Satisfaction surveys may be carried out by MSSs to assess either their overall image among their users, the trust they inspire, their usefulness, their effectiveness, or on their production or part of their statistical output, the relevance, accessibility or clarity of the data they disseminate, etc.

When program or user committees exist, MSSs should rely on feedback from these committees to assess processes as part of their quality approaches.

These feedback can be formalized by meeting minutes. MSSs can thus identify the needs to be covered and meet them with implementing quality improvement plans.

**4. Implementation of the guidelines: individualized roadmaps until 2019**

The roadmaps are the MSSs individual commitments to implement by 2019 the action plan of the FSS following the 2014 peer review and the recommendations of the ASP. They are contractual documents drawn up, validated and co-signed by the MSSs and the NSI during another round of bilateral meetings in 2017.

These roadmaps are prepared on the basis of individual diagnoses carried out in 2016 on the degree of maturity of the organization in terms of quality and in accordance with quality guidelines. They define actions for each of the five directions of the quality guidelines. They specify the expected results and deliverables to be transmitted to the NSI's Quality Unit for follow-up. They can be used to define their quality strategy up to 2019.

Currently, MSSs are establishing or have established their quality policy and strategy. They have defined governance within their departments to arbitrate and monitor their quality strategy. They have named quality referents who are or have been trained in quality approaches. They develop or have developed the mapping of their structuring processes. Some have carried out or are carrying out quality procedures on their structuring processes in order to cover all their statistical production by 2019 and thus meet to the recommendations of the 2014 peer review. They sometimes call on the NSI's Quality Unit for full or ad hoc support.

The MSSs continuously meet their European commitments. More specifically, they have published on their Internet site the timetable of their structuring statistics and annually refer back to the NSI the follow-up of their punctuality. They have aligned their pre-release rules with the FSS rules and are gradually posting them on their websites. France has adopted the SIMS standard for its quality reports and their dissemination will be effective as soon as the statistical metadata repository is fully operational and open to MSSs.

1. The quality framework of an organization consists of the three elements :

the setting of quality governance;

the service quality strategy;

the person responsible for implementing the service quality strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A set of coordinated actions, maneuvers and tactics to achieve specific quality objectives. It is supplemented with orientations and targets. Note: This term is used in GAMSO. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carrying out self-assessments according to the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) and based on a Quality Assurance Framework of the FSS. They are based on the principle of continuous quality improvement with the implementation of an action plan. They are divided into three phases: the formal description of the process phases concerned by the approach, the risk analysis and the improvement plan put in place to achieve the quality objectives identified during the approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)