**Quality quest in official statistics through international cooperation: Turkish Statistical Institute Experience**

Gürdal Gedik (PhD),

Turkish Statistical Institute, Ankara, Turkey – gurdal.gedik@tuik.gov.tr

**Abstract**

Quality is one of the most important phenomena in every field of our lives in this age. Since information and knowledge are fundamental pillars for modern societies and official statistics provide an information infrastructure for the needs of various categories of users, enhancing the quality of official statistics is of utmost importance in this frame as well.

Accordingly, National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) have been intensively working to improve both the quality of their systems and products through various ways. However, high quality statistical information is neither easy nor cheap.

NSIs need to build sound infrastructures and invest in the production of high quality statistics in order to do so. Budgetary constraints in the public sector have led to shrinking resources also for statistical administrations. These issues cause considerable challenges for official statistics.

International cooperation in the field of statistics offers an important contribution to overcome these difficulties. In line with this perspective, the principle on coordination and cooperation was very recently included in the European Statistics Code of Practise.

Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) has also been an active actor in the field of statistical cooperation. Having a long history in statistics and gained significant experience through European Union harmonisation process, TurkStat shares her knowledge with other NSIs in order to contribute to their quality of human resources as well as quality standards of official statistics.

This paper presents the international cooperation frameworks and practical implementations of TurkStat in the field of statistics. It explains how TurkStat supports the capacity building efforts in human resources and accordingly how it contributes to the improvement of the quality of statistical production in certain NSIs.

**Key words:** Quality, international cooperation, human resources, international organisations

***Note:*** *The opinions and arguments expressed in the document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Turkish Statistical Institute.*

1. **Introduction**

Information and knowledge are the fundamental pillars for modern democratic societies and official statistics provide an information infrastructure for the needs of users. Therefore, enhancing the quality of official statistics is of utmost importance.

We are in the midst of a data revolution in which data is very attractive and therefore in huge demand. Methods and tools to analyze and gather data are constantly evolving making more and more information available for use in real time. We have reached a point where not only do citizens and businesses want to be informed, they also want to get good quality information in real-time and in easy formats on mobile technologies anywhere. This in turn is forcing National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) to modernise themselves and enhance their capacities.

All these challenges and increasing demands of today require high quality in both human resources and methods that can best handle and cope with these issues. One of the best solution, we believe is the international cooperation among NSIs and international organisations.

1. **General Framework for International Cooperation**

Modernisation and innovation are pushing hard the NSIs to rise their current levels up. New business models based on data, new methods and implementation techniques as well as the changing public and government attitudes are challenging NSIs to catch up the new trends. International cooperation with the view of supporting each other by sharing knowledge and experiences is a good mechanism to contribute to meet these difficulties. Certain international initiatives also support and recommend this idea for a long time in the field of statistics.

* 1. *International Context*

Global initiatives from various international organisations have underlined the importance of the logic of international cooperation, coordination and partnerships. Among certain initiatives, Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS) which were adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 1994 were the pioneering one at the global arena to set the cooperation as a principle in official statistics. Principle 10 of the FPOS states that international cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics.

European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) for the National and Community Statistical Authorities has become another initiative in this context. In the last revision in 2017, additional principle on coordination and cooperation was added into the code calling statistical authorities to actively cooperate within the partnership of the European Statistical System (ESS) and continuously maintain and develop cooperation at various levels with each other.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also adopted Recommendation of the OECD Council on Good Statistical Practice and number 11 is to commit to international co-operation. It encourages statistical producers to achieve common goals in statistics jointly with the statistical producers in other countries and with international organisations.

Finally, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require a stronger commitment to partnership and cooperation particularly in capacity building to achieve the sustainable development.

* 1. *National Context*

International cooperation policy of TurkStat has developed since the beginning of 1990s, matured in time and then extended to Balkans, Eastern Europe, Africa and farther parts of Asia.

TurkStat has also officially documented her cooperation policy in its 5-Yearly Strategic Plans. According to the current Plan covering years 2017-2021, enhancing international cooperation is defined as a goal for TurkStat. Increasing the statistical cooperation activities with other NSIs and international organisations is determined as a target by this Plan.

1. **Experience of TurkStat** 
   1. *Deep rooted statistical culture*

Statistics plays an indispensible role in modern societies which enables evidence based policy making for the governments. On the other hand, statistics, statistical registers and information have been attached utmost importance by certain countries in the history as well and Ottoman Empire was certainly among these. In order to run such a big state in a smooth and efficient way, Ottomans started to keep registers since 14. Century. In 1389, “Defterhane (Registry)” was formed in order to keep certain registers including population, agriculture, land and other elements of the country within the context of centralised state mechanism.

Culture of keeping registers, producing statistics and information have further developed in the country in the following centuries resulted in the modern Statistics Department in 1860s and left a sound legacy on statistical culture and tradition to the Republic of Turkey in the 20th century. Central Statistics Department, founded in 1926, was one of the first public institutions in the newly founded Republic.

Having such historical background, we can easily say that Turkey has a deep rooted statistical culture and TurkStat is well equipped with this background.

* 1. *Modernisation and EU harmonisation studies of TurkStat*

TurkStat has launched EU harmonisation studies following the declaration of Turkey as a candidate country to EU in December 1999. This process has given TurkStat a unique opportunity to modernize the whole Turkish Statistical System (TSS) with the strong support of Eurostat (the Statistical Office of EU).

In this respect, TurkStat has established significant collaboration with EU and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Member States and enlargement countries under EU Programmes.

* 1. *Assessments of Turkish Statistical System*

In the very beginning of the modernisation studies and as one of the first steps, “Global Assessment” exercise was conducted by the EU and United Nations experts in 2002. Detailed analysis of statistical implementations and processes of TurkStat was realised by this study. It outlined all statistical activities, administrative and technical capacity, financial situation and legal framework of TurkStat and TSS.

A general strategy was then adopted to modernize the statistical system as a whole by strengthening the capacity to cope with the new challenges and undertake the responsibilities of ESS in line with the findings of the evaluation process.

Having attached great importance to the outsider evaluation of the TSS, TurkStat has requested further assessments from Eurostat. In line with this approach, two Peer Review (PR) exercises were carried out to determine the level of compliance of the TSS with the CoP. The first PR was conducted in 2011 and the second round of PR was realised in 2015. TSS was evaluated as a whole in this exercise.

According to the PR 2015 Report, the development level achieved by TurkStat was found impressive. The Team concluded that TurkStat was highly compliant with the CoP and compared favourably with other NSIs. Furthermore, they indicated that the Statistics Law of Turkey provides a comprehensive legal basis for the whole Turkish Statistical System (TSS) in terms of coordination. In the report, they also identified a number of challenges with regard to TurkStat and TSS and for these, appropriate recommendations were put forward.

* 1. *Improvement of capacity through EU Programmes*

Taking into consideration the needs of TurkStat identified through mentioned evaluations, “Upgrading the Statistical System of Turkey-USST” Programmes were designed to accomplish the priorities in the framework of EU Accession Partnership in a multi phased manner. The objectives and priorities of the Programmes were designed to achieve harmonization with EU statistical standards in several steps.

USST Programmes were conducted in three Phases during 2003-2014 as well as Upgrading Information Technologies Infrastructure of TurkStat Programme (2014-2017). The important feature of these Programmes was that they were also covering Multi Beneficiary Programme (MBP) Grant Contracts which ensured regional cooperation with enlargement countries although they were EU national programmes designed for Turkey’s statistical requirements. Within this context, six MBP Programmes were completed so far and one Programme is still ongoing. Financial support of approximately 40 Million Euro, which is the total budget of those programmes, has been provided to TurkStat and other stakeholders.

In addition to the support of EU institutions, EFTA has been one of the key partners for TurkStat in EU accession process since 2002. The enhanced cooperation between TurkStat and EFTA for several years has made remarkable contribution in institutional strengthening and the improvement of official statistics in Turkey.

EU Programmes have provided comprehensive support to TurkStat in order to realise the methodological studies with technical know-how that is necessary for the compliance process with ESS. They have also greatly contributed to improvement of the general capability of the Institute by providing technical assistance and tailor-made expertise. While these programmes have helped to maintain proximity to ESS and to integrate quickly to statistical Acquis, TurkStat has made great national efforts to reform the TSS and establish a new structure in this process.

Legal infrastructure was established for TSS by adoption of New Turkish Statistical Law in 2005 with important features such as creation of a Statistical Council, maintaining the professional and technical autonomy of TurkStat, transition to multi-year programming which covers Strategic Plans and Official Statistics Programmes prepared for five-year periods.

These studies and mentioned programmes have significantly contributed to establish a modern statistical system. More effective coordination with the stakeholders in TSS has been ensured. A common language for both international and national statistics community has been created as well as significant progress made in harmonization with EU Acquis in statistics.

1. **International Cooperation Policy of TurkStat**

Turkish Statistical Institute has adopted a policy of implementing international cooperation programmes and modernising its statistical system simultaneously, in which these two practises feed each other. Thanks to this approach significant synergy is created for the Institute which serves considerably to meet the ultimate goals covered by its vision.

Implementing EU Programmes with various partners including many countries, organisations and experts as well as intensive technical cooperation programmes as a donor NSI, TurkStat aims to act as a statistical hub in her wider region of Eurasia. Contributing to the quality of official statistics in other countries has been long lasting mission and endeavour of the TurkStat within this context.

One of the most important features of the international cooperation policy of TurkStat is the demand-based structure. All the cooperation activities start with the official demand of the countries. Activities and programmes then discussed between the parties and road map documents, for instance protocols or memorandum of understanding are prepared. Furthermore, the content of the programmes are mainly determined by the demands of the relevant countries.

Main partner of TurkStat in these cooperation activities is Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TICA) which is the responsible Institute for the coordination of Turkey’s official development assistance aids. TICA funds and coordinates the TurkStat’s cooperation activities as well. Strong cooperation and coordination between the two Institutes facilitates the smooth operation of the mentioned programmes and activities for long years.

Cooperation activities of TurkStat are mainly focused on Middle East, Caucasia, and Asia. Recently, they are also extended to the Africa as a response to the increasing demands of the countries.

*4.1. Main Advantages of TurkStat in International Cooperation*

TurkStat has some important advantages in maintaining the international cooperation activities. First of all, as mentioned above, it has a deep-rooted statistical culture dating back to Ottoman Empire era which has been further strengthened through EU Programmes in the last decade. TurkStat has accumulated great experience in this long period and has assumed the mission of sharing this knowledge with the countries who are in demand and need support from the Institute.

Longstanding international cooperation culture of TurkStat which dates back the beginning of 1990s is also important element for the Institute in order to better organise the cooperation activities and well management. Culture of mutual learning concept has also flourished in the Institute by this method.

Cultural and historical ties with the demanding countries have an important role on the establishment and maintenance of the cooperation activities. Strong bilateral relations always facilitate the realisation and management of the programmes. Trust between the Institutes plays an important role in these activities as well.

Turkey’s unique geographical location at the intersection of Europe and Asia is another important element for TurkStat which provides not only the advantage of easy access of experts in implementing the cooperation programmes but also provides mental advantage acting as bridge between the two continents.

*4.2. Main Features of TurkStat’s Cooperation Approach*

All the cooperation programmes and activities of TurkStat are maintained in line with the Turkish foreign policy. This is one of the leading features of these activities. Since the cooperation demands from TurkStat gradually increases year by year, determination of the countries and programmes has become an important issue. Coherence with the Turkish foreign policy is also the main criterion which facilitates the determination of the programmes.

Another important feature of the cooperation programmes of TurkStat is its demand based character. All the programmes and activities have initiated according to the demands of the countries. Countries themselves request the programme as well as the content. TurkStat only advices and offers some additional activities to support the main subjects when needed. Needs of demanding NSIs have determined and programmed with the relevant country. Programmes cover the activities, time frames and other relevant elements regarding the content. These programmes are always flexible and easily adaptable to the emerging needs of the countries. And they are oriented to the concrete results.

1. **International Cooperation Programmes of TurkStat**

As referred in previous sections of the paper, TurkStat has launched cooperation studies in the beginning of 1990s with the Caucasian and Central Asian countries and intensified its efforts with the sound contributions of EU programmes.

Technical assistance programmes have then extended to the Balkans, Middle East, Islamic countries, Africa and farther parts of Asia. As mentioned earlier, TurkStat has implemented these programmes mainly with close cooperation with TICA. Thanks to this strong partnership, TurkStat has benefited from large financial and logistical resources which are essential for the well functioning of the cooperation activities.

TurkStat has also some other international and regional partners in these activities, namely United Nations (UN) Agencies (particularly United Nations Economic Commission for Europe), World Bank, Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC) and EFTA.

Major cooperation programmes and activities have been provided by TurkStat to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Moldova, Albania, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, Jordan, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Palestine, Tunisia, Niger, Vietnam, Somali since 1994.

Moreover, TurkStat has given consultancy services (46 expert missions) at other countries (Albania, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Qatar, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Egypt, Syria, Tajikistan, Uganda, Oman, Jordan, and Yemen) in cooperation with SESRIC. Additionally, training activities have been provided by TurkStat for experts from various countries in Ankara with the support of SESRIC.

TurkStat experts (during 2003-2018 period) provided consultancy services of 1721 Working Days to the statistical offices of Asian, Balkan, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, Islamic countries and 797 experts from relevant countries have participated in training programmes in Turkey. This indicates remarkable contribution of TurkStat experts in consultancy activities (as consultants) in other countries’ statistical offices and increased efficiency of TurkStat in international statistics arena.

TurkStat also attended to Kazakhstan Project (2012-2017) funded by the World Bank and implemented by Destatis as a subcontractor. Furthermore, it has taken place in MEDSTAT IV (2016-2019) which is a regional statistical cooperation programme funded by EU as a member of consortium led by Expertise France and as an expertise provider.

Through these technical assistance activities, TurkStat aims at contributing to increase the quality of statistics in these partner countries and strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations within Statistical Community. Deep rooted statistical culture and the further achievements in especially EU accession process have provided TurkStat to become a statistical office whose technical assistance is requested for international projects for the third countries.

1. **Conclusions**

In this age of information, data and knowledge are indispensible elements for modern countries and NSIs are in the position of providing the necessary statistical infrastructure for the needs of their societies. Therefore, enhancing the quality of official statistics is of utmost importance.

Methods and tools to analyze and gather data are constantly evolving together with the rapid technological developments. New concepts such as big data, data revolution, and data mining are forcing the statistical authorities to catch up these trends in a timely manner. NSIs cannot meet these challenges alone.

We believe that international cooperation is a key instrument in coping with these challenges by building strong partnerships with various actors. It contributes to the quality of official statistics through joint projects and activities, bringing synergies, creation of a common language, exchanging experiences, and establishing network in Statistical Community and among the experts of NSIs.

TurkStat has benefited from the cooperation programmes in the framework of EU accession process and these programmes have made an important contribution in the enhancement of TSS together with the national continuous efforts of TurkStat. The institutional capacity of TurkStat has been considerably developed by means of the comprehensive studies.

The enhanced capacity has further improved the efficiency of TurkStat in international cooperation studies. Thus, contribution of TurkStat experts in consultancy activities (as consultants) for other countries has been accelerated.

At the end we can say, cooperation approach in Statistics should be maintained for the development of the quality in countries’ statistical systems and international and regional organizations should also continue to play their role to design and implement the cooperation programmes jointly with voluntary NSIs.