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SEMINAR ON BALANCING PRINCIPLES OF PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY WITH THE MANDATE TO PRODUCE POLICY RELEVANT DATA

SESSION III: ACCOUNTABILITY 'BEYOND THE BUDGET': MEASURING AND  
ADDRESSING PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS

**ACCOUNTABILITY OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS**

Note by the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria

*Summary*

The Conference of European Statisticians selected in June 2008 (ECE/CES/74) the topic "Balancing principles of professional autonomy and accountability with the mandate to produce policy relevant data" for a seminar to be held at its 2009 plenary session. The Bureau, acting on behalf of the Conference, approved the outline for the seminar at its February 2009 meeting (ECE/CES/2009/2) and requested Bulgaria to prepare a note to provide basis for the discussion.

The note provides a cross national perspective based on Bulgarian experience of the role of accountability in making official statistics credible and legitimized. Administrative accountability contributes to the increase in the trust in official statistics as a public administration. Professional accountability is closely linked with the general framework of administrative action and accountability. The evaluation of the performance of a national statistical office focused on the outcomes and satisfaction of clients needs (democratic accountability) is gaining importance recently.

## **I. INTRODUCTION: ACCOUNTABILITY - CONCEPTS, SCOPE AND DIMENSIONS**

1. The concepts of integrity, transparency and accountability have been identified by the United Nations (UN) member countries, collectively and individually, as part of the founding principles of public administration. Sound public administration involves public trust. Citizens expect public servants to serve the public interest with fairness and to manage public resources properly on a daily basis. Within the past three decades, since the world has witnessed spreading democratization, the values of transparency and accountability have enjoyed resurgence. Accountability is viewed as the obligation of a individual firm or institution to account for its activities, to accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner. It also includes the responsibility for money or other entrusted property.
2. When accountability of official statistics as public administration is considered, there are two key questions that need to be addressed. To whom should the national statistical system (decentralized or centralized) report? And for what should it be accountable? In a narrow sense, accountability refers to the obligation of official statistics to report to a superior authority for its performance in the execution of its functions. In a broader sense, the national statistical institute (NSI) should report to all stakeholders who have most interest in using statistical information in a socially advanced and democratic society – public sector decision makers, researchers, media, business, non-governmental institutions as well as the public at large.
3. Regarding the content and scope of accountability, there are three types of accountability that are relevant to the official statistics' mission and role in the society – administrative, professional and democratic accountability. Administrative accountability refers to the full subjection of a national statistical system to a wide set of constitutional, legal and administrative rules and procedures that tightly govern its performance and ensure proper use of public resources. Professional accountability refers to the subjection of statisticians to a set of rules and practices of a professional character – technical and ethical – distinctive of the profession, which are established by the profession itself. Democratic accountability refers to the existence of a direct relationship between the official statistics and the society.
4. The aim of this paper is to describe the various forms of accountability that are relevant for official statistics as a public administration. In particular, it analyses the content, mechanisms, evaluation criteria and implications of administrative, professional and democratic accountability. The paper attempts to provide a cross national perspective of the subject, but it also provides evidence of Bulgarian practice in ensuring a greater transparency and accountability, both administrative and professional, of official statistics, while maintaining professional autonomy and freedom. The paper is structured as follows. Part II describes traditional forms, mechanisms of implementation and consequences of administrative accountability based mainly on legal and constitutional provisions. Part III is devoted to the transparency of statistical priority-setting. While part IV takes into account and analyses professional accountability, part V focuses on the accountability viewed as direct relationship between the official statistics and the society. Finally, part VI concludes and summarizes lessons learned in increasing accountability of national statistics over the years that might be of interest to the other countries and their NSIs.

## II. ADMINISTRATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

5. Administrative accountability takes place in a double dimension – vertical and horizontal. In its vertical dimension, administrative accountability is a relationship that links NSI with the superior institution - usually Parliament, Prime Minister or Minister depending on the specific legal provisions in the country. And in its horizontal dimension administrative accountability links the NSI with users of statistical information as well as with other external organs of supervision and control established to this purpose such as national statistical councils, audits, “ombudsmen”, etc.

6. Administrative accountability includes duty of NSI to give account for its performance and therefore, to be subject to a judgment of a superior authority. It does not exist without a specific legal framework establishing its content and consequences. There are several models for accountability and governance framework of official statistics currently operating across the world – direct accountability to the Parliament, direct accountability to Prime Minister or operation under a Minister responsible for Statistics. A crucial element in the accountability model is the position of the President of NSI. In particular the role and authority, standing in the government hierarchy and the way of appointment and removal of the President of NSI are key elements of accountability framework that guarantee the transparency and public trust in official statistics. Among solutions adopted by different countries is that of Canada, where the chief statistician has the status of under-secretary of state, notwithstanding the fact that very strict rules guarantee the independence of Statistics Canada. In Europe, national statistical offices (NSOs) sometimes fall under a Ministry, as in Germany, or operate under the Prime Minister, as in Lithuania and Hungary. In several countries, Australia, UK, USA, the systems of official statistics are decentralized. For example in the United States there are various statistical offices and the US Census Bureau, which comes under the Department of Commerce and, in addition to the census, compiles most of the social statistics. Each other Department has its own statistical office, even if it is not uncommon for it to commission – and pay for – local surveys by the Census Bureau. The Statistical Policy Office of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which comes under the President, manages the resources allocated to official statistics. In some countries like Czech Republic, the President of the NSI reports to both the Government and the Parliament.

7. In Bulgaria, the evolution of institutional and legal arrangements<sup>1</sup> has resulted in a National Statistical System that consists of the National Statistical Institute, the Bodies of Statistics and the Bulgarian National Bank. The Bodies of Statistics are state bodies or their structural units, which develop, produce and disseminate statistical information. The list of bodies of statistics includes Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Transport, Tax Revenue Agency, Custom Agency, National Social Security Institute, Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Health. Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (BNSI) is at the centre of the system and has a responsibility to coordinate or lead it.

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<sup>1</sup> The current Law on Statistics reflects profound amendments to the previous legal arrangements. The Law is modern in the sense that it fully reflects the values embodied in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and European Code of Practice such as obligatory public nature of the output and transparent manner of dissemination, ensuring statistics are produced to high professional standards.

8. BNSI is a state agency that operates under the governance of the Prime Minister. The President and the Deputy Presidents of the National Statistical Institute are appointed by the Prime Minister for a period of 7 years, but for no more than two mandates. The President of NSI should submit annually to the Council of Ministers a report on the implementation of the National Statistical Programme and a report on the activities of the National Statistical Institute for the preceding year, as well as a draft of the National Statistical Programme for the next year, not later than 14 days after the adoption of the Law on the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria for the respective year. The President and the Deputy Presidents of the NSI can be dismissed before expiration of their mandate: at their request; for a committed serious violation of the Law; for a committed premeditated crime of general nature, provided by enacted sentence; and for inability to perform their duties in a period longer than six months. Annual Reports on the performance of NSI are publicly available at the website. These are very strong legal provisions that ensure independence and professional autonomy of official statistics in Bulgaria but also constitute a basis for a regular reporting to the Government and to the public on the development of national statistics, including details of the programme undertaken and of quality assurance.

9. A question has been arising whether it is preferable for NSI to report directly to the Parliament or to the Prime Minister. Several arguments against direct accountability to Parliament include among all: risk of party political influence, possible duplication of resources, a loss of relevance and responsiveness of statistical work to public policy issues. On the other side, an effective scrutiny role of the Parliament is an extra safeguard against political pressure. Accountability model based on operation under the Prime Minister ensures a regular and direct involvement of the President of NSI to the highest levels of government. Therefore, assuming a good public standing of the President of NSI as well as the existence of a set of powers, stipulated in the Law to resist political pressure should it be necessary to do so, accountability to the Prime Minister seems to be preferable option compared to the direct accountability to the Parliament.

10. A wide set of internal mechanisms is needed in order to assure the strict compliance of administrative performance of NSI with the established procedures and rules in public administration and the correct use of public resources – audits, inspectorates, controllers, etc. In this respect it is very common that the instruments of financial control acquire a special relevance among the different mechanisms of control.

11. In its horizontal dimension, administrative accountability includes the relationship between NSI and the citizen established on the basis of the rights and possible expectations of the latter and duties and the functions if the former, fixed by law. For example NSI can not differentiate or discriminate between users and it should provide output based on impartiality and objectivity.

12. In addition, horizontal dimension of administrative accountability implies also existence of external bodies of control and supervision to which NSI has to give account for its performance. A potential candidate for playing such a role in most of the countries is the National Statistical Council, respectively National Commission for Statistics. Many countries have some version of such a body. Their role, method of appointment, and accountability vary. They share the common purpose of providing high level policy guidance to the statistical system and of serving as additional protection against politicization. The Bulgarian National Statistical Council is a

consultative body, attached to the President of the National Statistical Institute with the explicit mandate to advise the President of NSI about broad policies and priorities in general and on the Strategy for Development of the National Statistical System for each 5-year period and on the Annual National Statistical Programmes in particular. The National Statistical Council includes eminent people from Bodies of Statistics, Bulgarian National Bank, academia, various users and respondents groups (provincial government, labour unions, the media, business). In performing its role, the National Statistical Council draws on the views of users and providers of statistics.

13. National statistical Council should not be necessarily a decision making body, but rather one that serves as focal point for meeting the interest of various stakeholders and the body to whom the NSI is accountable for the content, scope and stage of development of national statistical system. Bulgarian experience shows that until now the council members are not engaged with interest, attendance at its meetings is poor, participation is formal and the effectiveness of the council is under question. Therefore, it is essential to provide evidence that the Council's views are treated thoughtfully and respectfully in planning and setting priorities in official statistics.

### **III. TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF PRIORITY SETTING AND PLANNING**

14. An important determinant of credibility of statistical system is the existence of transparent planning process, including strategic priority setting with explicitly defined long-term objectives for public scrutiny. Seeking for satisfaction of user needs within a limited budget, statistical agencies unavoidably make daily choices involving programme priorities. It is more than crucial to demonstrate that such choices are free of political biases and that the public resources are spent on providing statistical information necessary for solving the major social and economic issues of the country. In Bulgaria the strategic planning of the national statistical activity is conducted on a five-year basis, in line with the planning cycle of the European Statistical System. Currently the Strategy 2008-2012 is in place. The National Statistical Programme is adopted annually by the Council of Ministers on a proposal made by the President of the National Statistical Institute within a month after its submission. The Programme is published in the State Gazette. The National Statistical Programme includes the NSI plan of activities and also the plans for statistical activities of the Bodies of Statistics. The budget of the National Statistical Institute is formed of the subsidy from the state budget, grants from Eurostat and other bodies of the European Commission provided for the production of national and European statistical information and from own revenues.

15. Bulgarian corporate governance ensures transparency in priority setting, decision-making, operation and accountability for the usage of public resources. National Statistical Council has a role of focal point in this respect. It is essential to show that national statistics take into account the information needs of all user groups. While a common perception exists that the national statistical program meets mainly the needs of the government, NSI should strive to convince public at large that all stakeholders deserve to be listened to and their needs to be incorporated in the program. BNSI employs a set of mechanisms through which the different needs of the different user groups can be determined. In our experience the following approaches have proven to be effective:

(a) Establishing clear rules and procedures of setting the scope and content of annual statistical program and making them publicly available. Formal instructions on the stages and roles of main actors involved in the planning process have to be accompanied by guidelines on how to decide whether an area or survey is having a lower or higher priority;

(b) Maintaining a formal and close bilateral relationship with key line ministries without neglecting the multilateral, and transparent to the public fora for discussion, of the horizontal issues, generating national information needs. One should not undermine the fact that very often the productiveness of such relationship depends on the personal standing of the President of NSI and of the level of understanding and readiness of the Ministers to participate actively in the process. At the same time personal communication with the line ministers should not be at the expense of providing an integrated picture of national (government) priorities at a focal point such as Council of Ministers;

(c) Creation of professional advisory committees in different fields of statistics, i.e. demography, health, agriculture, innovations, which by design include at least one member of National Statistical Council. Usually they meet twice per year, and members serve without remuneration. The purpose of the committees is to make the NSI regularly accountable for its activities and results achieved in a particular field of statistics, and on basis of that to make recommendations for further improvement of both the content and methodology. The set of proposals is submitted in a written form to the National Statistical Council that is supposed to discuss them and incorporate them in the draft of the National Statistical Programme using clearly defined and publicly available criteria;

(d) Publishing National Statistical Programme together with the budget used for conducting the surveys and activities that it contains.

#### **IV. PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

16. Professional accountability takes place primarily in the world of profession, although it is inseparable from the general framework of administrative action and accountability. It refers to a set of norms and practices of a technical and professional nature that govern the behaviour and performance of the members of certain profession. It is difficult to find one single criterion of evaluation of the performance of professional accountability with respect to widely accepted technical norms and standards. Furthermore such an evaluation can not be carried out by a single administrative organ of supervision or control. Professional performance can only be supervised or peer reviewed by bodies, consisting of members of the same profession with technical knowledge and expertise on the subject matter in question who carry out the evaluation using only professional criteria.

17. In fact, it is common for the organized professions to have their own codes of behaviour and codes of professional ethics, and to establish special mechanisms for their application and control. In this respect, adoption of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (1992), the Data Quality Assessment Framework (DQAF, 2001) and European Code of Practice (2005) provided the framework and basic criteria according to which the national statistical systems could be built and evaluated.

18. In response to the increasing interest in mutual benchmarking among the national statistical offices and in demonstrating the compliance of the official statistics with the professional norms and standards, since the beginning of 90s a number of peer reviews have been conducted in the statistical world. Ivan Fellegi and Jacob Ritten carried out the first peer reviews of the adaptability, effectiveness and credibility of the statistical systems in particular countries (Switzerland, Hungary, Portugal). The DQAF reports contain comprehensive assessments of data quality, institutional environments, statistical processes, and characteristics of the statistical products for more than 60 countries. At the request of the European Commission, all the candidate countries were assessed during 1999– 2002 with regard to the overall capacity of their statistical systems to meet the statistical requirements imposed by the European Union on its Member States. An extensive round of peer reviews, self assessments of NSIs and subsequently of the other national bodies of statistics against the implementation of the 15 principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice have been carried out since its adoption by the Statistical Programme Committee (SPC) in May 2005. Usage of peer reviews has been intensified in recent years since they have proven to be a driving force towards excellence in official statistics. Making NSIs accountable for their performance to a team of professionals who base their evaluation on clearly defined principles, fixed in internationally recognized codes and frameworks, ultimately, reinforces confidence and trust in official statistics. And, peer reviews are considered to be a vital element of professional accountability given their capacity to encourage the sharing of best practice and to contribute to transparency in what is, essentially, a self-regulatory approach.

19. A question arises here how to match the classic criteria that govern the operation and accountability of official public administration and the accountability of the statistics as a profession. In our view, a possible solution to the problem lies in granting full autonomy to NSI for the realization of the specific professional and technical tasks while at the same time keeping the elements concerned with the administrative dimension of accountability such as administrative status of the personnel, subject to the general management of public administration. It is unsustainable to attempt to exclude the classic forms of administrative accountability and establish professional accountability and control as the only form of accountability for NSI. Professional control and accountability of official statistics have to be included in the general framework of administrative accountability. At the end, official statistics is part of the public administration with all the advantages and drawbacks of this membership.

20. An important element of the professional accountability is to ensure the compliance of statistics with solid methodology. The President of NSI has the responsibility for the essential tasks of developing and maintaining the quality assurance framework for national statistics, spreading good practice on statistical techniques and helping manage change in processes that produce key outputs. In our experience the following approaches to professional accountability have proven to be effective:

- (a) Client oriented program evaluations and thorough reviews of key outputs, at least every five years, with the involvement of methodologists and outside expertise, as appropriate;
- (b) Systematic audits of single statistical products and working processes based on self assessments or conducted by external teams;

- (c) Comprehensive documentation for each chain of activity resulting in statistical product or service which have to be opened to scrutiny;
- (d) Quality improvement plans within each broad area of National Statistics which will feed into the planning process for National Statistics;
- (e) Transparency in the development of methodology and quality assurance and better legal arrangements for active involving external methodological and professional advice;
- (f) An enhanced code of practice for producers of national statistics, including guidance on professional standards.

## **V. DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY**

21. Democratic accountability refers to the existence of a direct relationship between official statistics and the society. In recent years a substantial change in the strategic focus and in the culture of public administration has taken place. Evaluation of public administration has increasingly concentrated on the outcomes of the performance, not on its compliance with formally established rules and procedures. In addition public administration has become more client-oriented, that is, it has started to put much more emphasis on the satisfaction of the needs and interests of social groups or public at large. Statistical agencies have not been an exception in this respect.

22. In recent years active communication with users and improving the dissemination of statistical products and rendering statistical services have been among priorities for national statistical offices. Citizens and social groups that have the most interest in using statistical information become new agents of the control on NSI's performance. Due to the wider application of modern information and communication technologies users' expectations have changed. They are now more aware of the relevance of statistics and, accordingly, more demanding of data, explanations and justifications than they used to be. A particularity of statistical product creating an additional challenge for officials working in the field of statistics is that few, if any, users can validate the quality and relevance of statistical data. In fact, they must rely on the reputation of NSI. Therefore, credibility and establishment of a supportive environment of national statistical system are important determinants of the successful development of the institutions. Realization of democratic accountability implies a democratic legitimization of national statistics.

23. The role of accountability for building up perceptions, and, hence for increasing trust in official statistics is a very broad and complex topic that needs a thorough analysis in a separate paper. Still, there are several dimensions of accountability which the present paper can touch briefly, highlighting some specific approaches and mechanisms used in Bulgaria. In our experience it is essential to have an effective data dissemination approach and in particular:

- (a) To be pro-active in identifying the information products and services that would be of the greatest benefit to various user groups. Concrete actions include user satisfaction surveys, active interactions with business associations, reporting to various user group committees, enhancing dissemination and public relations' role of local statistical offices;

- (b) To ensure justification and transparency in price determination of paid services and products;
- (c) To enrich the set of tailor-made services to meet the specific needs of various user groups;
- (d) To prove and to show to the clients that all of them have an equal access to statistical information and that no one, including government, has the privilege of pre-advanced use of statistical releases. Publishing of calendar of statistical releases on the web site of NSI and strict compliance with the rule of disseminating data exactly at 11:00 pm on the respective day of the calendar have proven to be a very effective tool in gaining credibility of official statistics in Bulgaria;
- (e) To provide a single entry point to the system. A year and a half ago, the Bulgarian NSI opened the so called “Information corridor” - a physical space within the building of NSI that provides all kinds of services to the clients at one single point. The most important elements of the initiative are the entrance service that ensures advice and support to identify the information that will most properly meet the particular user request and search on behalf of the clients in the data bank of the institute. This design guarantees that information needs and interests of all users, and especially of those who have little knowledge about the scope, structure and meaning of statistical information produced by the NSI will be satisfied. So, the evaluation of the statistical output as relevant on behalf of the clients has resulted in an increased support and trust of people in official statistics.

24. Besides the instruments of accountability, mentioned above, another one, very effective, indeed, and of growing relevance, has to be considered: the media. Intensification of communication with media has been a priority for Bulgarian NSI for the last two years. Hardly a case of statistical release can be found without an extensive media reporting. Daily mentioning of the name of the NSI in relation to the important topics such as inflation, growth, financial and economic crises, resulted in enhanced perception of the relevance and usefulness of statistical information. A growing interest in methodology and interpretation of the statistical data has been observed.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

25. There is a common agreement that legitimacy and credibility are crucial determinants of the successful development of both national and international statistics. Present paper attempts to provide a cross national perspective combined with evidence from Bulgarian experience concerned with the role of accountability for making official statistics credible and legitimized. Administrative accountability contributes to the increase in the trust in official statistics as a public administration through assuring public in the strict compliance of administrative performance of NSI with the established procedures and rules in public administration and the correct use of public resources. Professional accountability, despite the fact that it is taking place primarily in the world of profession, is inseparable from the general framework of administrative action and accountability. It is unsustainable to attempt to exclude the classic forms of administrative accountability and establish professional accountability and control as the only form of accountability for NSI. What is gaining importance recently is the evaluation of the

performance of NSI focused on the outcomes and satisfaction of clients needs, known as democratic accountability. Repeated media references result in a name recognition, and hence in high public profile. Realization of democratic accountability implies a democratic legitimization of national statistics. In sum, various forms and mechanisms of accountability prove to be a driver of both increasing excellence in statistics and achieving a high public profile. The latter, in turn, helps in reaching high response rates and better data quality.

## VII. REFERENCES

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