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**[Independence and equal treatment policy in Statistics Norway:
Principles, realities and challenges]**

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I. SUMMARY

1. Statistics Norway has a long tradition of professional independence and a strict policy of equal treatment of users. No users, neither government nor media, should, in principle, have access to statistical releases before anybody else. There are exceptions, but we have not considered them important enough to threaten our status as an independent National Statistical Institute (NSI). In most contexts the exceptions are not even mentioned, and we are quite proud of our policy, especially our policy of equal treatment of media, which has no exceptions.

2. In the report from the peer review in 2007 of our commitment to the European Code of Practice (CoP) it was commented as a positive finding that both the main principle and the exceptions were described in the Dissemination Policy document of Statistics Norway, available at www.ssb.no. However, we were asked to make the exceptions even more visible on the Internet. The communications department chose to do this by updating the metadata web document "About the statistics" on the relevant statistics' homepage. To get this in place is an important part of fulfilling our policy of accessibility and clarity concerning not only the statistics but also their documentation (metadata).

3. This has proved to be more demanding than first imagined, and we are still working on it. In the process we have discovered that there is no central overview and probably more exceptions than we knew about in 2007. Although hopefully not very many and not so important, a certain gap between principles and practice exists. At present we are preparing for the next peer review of the CoP, which is supposed to take place in 2014. To get the updating of the information about possible exceptions to the equal treatment policy done in time, the communications department as well as the quality, metadata and legal staff need to join forces more than we have done so far. Equal treatment policy of media should also be made more visible.

II. INDEPENDENCE AND EQUAL TREATMENT

4. In Statistics Norway we have a long tradition of professional independence and a strict policy of equal treatment of users. No users, neither government nor media, should have access to statistical releases before anybody else. The statistics calendar is an important instrument to secure this, with its demand for advance announcement of releases at least three months before the fixed date of release. Even publications are, since 2007, subject to most of the same regulations, although the time before the fixed publication date is not specified. In reality it is shorter than three months.

5. Three kinds of exceptions to the equal treatment policy exist, however. One has to do with the government's need for statistics as a basis for planning public finances, another with contact and collaboration with owners of administrative registers used in the statistics production. Both should be approved by our General Director. A third stems from agreements about user-financed statistics based on surveys where it is voluntary to answer. As of 2007, the exceptions are:

- *For special users:* The Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development are sent figures in connection with their work on the national budget, revised national budget and municipal reports; In addition, these ministries can order preliminary figures on income, in connection with their work on income leveling in the municipalities. The figures can not, however, be used for any other purposes before they have been released in Statistics Norway.
- *For data owners:* A number of our statistics are based on the use of administrative data. In such cases data owners may, in principle, have knowledge of figures before the release. Such figures can also be published by register owners, but Statistics Norway's statistics may deviate from these figures due to the addition of new criteria or other controls and revisions. Material is often processed in collaboration with the data owner, and the rationale is that this should ensure the quality of the data. According to the formal agreements about these statistics, however, the data owners should not forward Statistics Norway's statistics to third parties or use them in their executive work before they have been released by us.
- *For user-financed statistics based on surveys that are not mandatory.* Many of our statistics are financed by users. Most of them follow the terms of the obligation to provide information in the Statistics law. Releases of such statistics shall comply with the main rules for release, the equal treatment policy being one of them. Where user-financed statistics are based on voluntary participation, as is the case for a couple of interview surveys, customers can have access to the results before they are released. Again, according to formal agreement, the customer can use the results in the release for internal uses only.

6. It should be underlined that for one of our most important users, the media, the equal treatment stands firm, without exceptions. We have, for instance, no pre-release arrangements, neither on the Internet nor at our premises before press conferences. No material from Statistics Norway is ever given exclusively (with embargo) to any media. This is the case both for releases of new statistics and all kinds of analysis and publications, thus being

among the strictest statistical agencies in the world, as far as we know. We think that this is important for maintaining our independence and the trust of society (Borge, G and Eeg-Henriksen, F (2008))

III. MAKE THE EXCEPTIONS MORE VISIBLE

7. In 2007 Statistics Norway was subject to the peer review about the European Code of Practice (CoP), the framework for the quality of European statistics from 2005. All NSOs of the European Statistical System (ESS) went through these reviews in 2006-2008. The review team concluded that we largely or fully met the principles of the CoP, and highlighted us as an independent statistical office backed by a sound statistical law. An important part of this is described in principle 6 on Impartiality and Objectivity of the European Code of Practice for Statistics (CoP), which says:

- Statistical authorities must produce and disseminate European statistics respecting scientific independence and an objective professional and transparent manner in which all users are treated equitably.

One of the indicators (6.6) specifies this:

- All users have equal access to statistical releases at the same time and any privileged pre-release access to any outside user is limited, controlled and publicised. In the event that leaks occur, pre-release arrangements should be revised so as to ensure impartiality.

8. The demands in indicator 6.6 were found to be largely met, with the following comments in the report, after which the three types of exceptions were listed:

- “There has been a strong tradition of providing equal access to all users. This is one of the ten quality principles of section 1 of the Dissemination Policy Document 2007/10. This is further expanded in section 2.1 of the Dissemination Policy. The following exceptions are noted in the Dissemination Policy Document. [...]. These exceptions should be better noted on the Internet.”

In Statistics Norway, we were quite satisfied that the review team appreciated that both the main principle and the exceptions were described in the Statistics Norway’s dissemination policy (2007) available at www.ssb.no.

9. We had a feeling that it was going to be an easy job to make the exceptions more visible on the Internet. Our metadata webpages “About the statistics”, integrated in the homepage of every single statistic, were well suited as a place to include this information. These pages were rated positively by the review team. We were, mainly because of their existence, found to fully meet the demands of Indicator 6.4 of the CoP “Information on the methods and procedures used by the statistical authority are publicly available”.

IV. UPDATING “ABOUT THE STATISTICS”- A CHALLENGING JOB

10. As a part of the follow-up of the suggestions from the review, we decided that it was the responsibility of the Communications department to ensure that information about the exceptions to the equal treatment policy should be included in “About the statistics” of the relevant statistics. We were convinced that this concerned just a few statistics with clear exceptions decided by the General Director at some point in time, and started our work with optimism in 2008. The most important exceptions were described and put in place for the statistics relevant for public planning. So far, so good, but soon we met some challenges.

11. We got in touch with the statistical units with responsibility for other statistics with exceptions that we knew about, and asked for updating. At about the same time, however, the planning for a large project, the modernizing and renewal of our website, started in Statistics Norway, anchored in our department. We got more and more involved in the following years and used a lot of time and resources on the project. This meant that quite a few other communication tasks were not given very high priority, including the follow-up work connected to the 2007 peer review. Work connected to the communication of metadata was certainly not on top of our priority list. In fact it took many years before we could resume our follow-up work concerning the exceptions. That happened after the launch of our new website this spring.

12. We soon were in for quite a few surprises. We discovered that some updating had not yet been done by the relevant statistics production units. We discovered a few actual exceptions being practiced by some units that we didn't know about. We also realized that there was no overview in Statistics Norway of these cases.

V. PREPARING FOR A REVIEW IN 2014

13. Another challenge had come up, too. A modified CoP was adopted in 2011, with limited changes, but with a strengthening of the requirements of both the independence of the institutions and the quality of statistics. There will be a next round of peer reviews, to start late 2013 or in 2014. These reviews will be more thorough than the previous ones. Statistics Norway is a candidate for review in 2014. We are, of course, already prepared to be scrutinized concerning the follow-up of making the exceptions to our equal treatment policy visible.

14. Related to this, it should also be mentioned that recently a self-initiated internal systematic review of 18 different statistics in Statistics Norway was carried through, as a part of an auditing system following the implementation of the modified CoP. The review was prepared and carried out by a team coordinated by the quality staff of Statistics Norway, and external users were consulted about some themes. Reports with evaluation of the work and of the findings with suggestions for improvement for each statistics have been published for internal use. The setup is described in Sæbø et al. (2012).

15. Many of the findings and suggestions have to do with, or are closely related to, dissemination and communication of the statistics, including metadata. In three cases, it was found that information about actual exceptions to the principle of equal treatment of users was lacking in “About the statistics”. Two of them were not known to the Communications

department. Among them was a routine that entailed sending statistics for publication by Eurostat before the release in Statistics Norway. In addition, the team found that 16 of the 18 “About the Statistics” web pages had not been updated.

VI. WHY SO DEMANDING?

16. In Statistics Norway we produce around 400 statistics, each with its own homepage. We have for many years had about 1000 releases annually- meaning more than 4 every working day. That means there are also close to 400 “About the statistics” documents to be regularly updated. If the finding of the internal review team is representative for our whole portfolio of statistics, more than 350 documents need updating. This is the responsibility of the statistics units. But so far, it has not been clear who has the responsibility for checking whether they have done their job. In the Communications department we have our hands full ensuring that the statistics units deliver their statistical release material on time, checking texts, figures and graphs as well as correcting errors. Communication of metadata has not been highlighted as a special or an important area.

17. In times of stress and heavy workload, documentation is often the lowest priority. This has been the case not only in the Communications department but also in the responsible subject divisions. We have also experienced that staff in the subject divisions don’t necessarily regard it as so important to inform the users about the metadata.

18. The statistics producing units are more concerned about producing their statistics than of the importance of policy matters like independence. Furthermore, there are cases where they don’t know where their exception practice stems from, that is, whether it is legitimate. Some of them are anchored in agreements/contracts with users and data owners, some are not.

19. In some cases we also get the feeling that we, the communications staff, don’t have enough authority to make the producing units prioritize the work needed for the update. It has become clearer to us during the last few years that perhaps we should join forces with the metadata and the quality staff, as well as the agency lawyer, to get things moving.

VII. WHAT IS TO BE DONE NOW?

20. The “About the statistics” web pages definitely need to be up to date, this is an important part of our accessibility policy. The point on exceptions to the equal treatment policy is one out of several points, but the most immediate and important task for the Communications department today is connected to these exceptions. We are getting quite impatient about the whole matter, and we are eager to get everything ship shape in due time before the next peer review.

21. There is an immediate need for a standardized visible place in the web document, and clear instructions about where to put possible information directly and indirectly connected to the equal treatment of users policy:

- Who finances the production of the statistics/reference to formal agreement?
- Who is a partner of co-operation in the production of the statistics, referenced by formal agreement?
- Who has access to what before release/publication, according to a decision by whom?

This job should be done in co-operation with the metadata staff before we proceed with encouraging the statistics producing units to do their job.

22. The quality staff responsible for the review has followed up the plans for each of the 18 investigated statistics to ensure that the suggestions for improvement actually will be carried through. This way, there is a good chance that the responsible statistics sections will actually do this job. We are discussing the possibility of closer co-operation with the quality staff. If we also join forces with them, we think there is a better chance that we will have enough authority to get the job done concerning the exceptions mentioned in the About the statistics.

23. But to cover all possible exceptions, there is a need to undertake some kind of survey or other initiative to get an overview of the exceptions. A joint action with our agency lawyer, who has knowledge of all the agreements with data owners and customers, also will be useful when preparing this part of the job.

24. There is no doubt that the statistics production units are responsible for updated metadata related to their statistics, including the “About the statistics” webpages. However clarifications of responsibilities connected to the communication of the metadata are needed. This is also a task on our table.

VIII. MAKE EQUAL TREATMENT OF MEDIA MORE VISIBLE?

25. Our Dissemination Policy document from 2007 is under revision both because of the need related to the launch of our new website, and because our department has been reorganized recently. We are in the process of focusing more on media relations than before. In this document, we should make more visible our equal treatment policy in relation to the media, and how it is related to our reputation of being an independent and trustworthy institution. It is not a problem to combine the equal treatment policy with an active media strategy- after release or publication. This should also be highlighted.

26. A question in the wake of this, but not on the agenda now, could also be the legitimacy of the exceptions. Should the exceptions in all the contracts with stakeholders/statistics on commission/partners be discussed in the forum of directors before decision by our Director General? Is a new discussion in Statistical Norway about this needed?

Literature

A web page about the European Code of Practice and its implementation:

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/quality/code_of_practice

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