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**New round of global assessments/ peer reviews in the
EECCA countries**

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The aim of this paper is to present to the meeting the possibility of carrying out a new round of peer reviews (PR) and/or global assessments (GA) and to present different options regarding the implementation and the type of assessments to use. The discussion on this is necessary as the methodology of peer reviews for the Member States has been changed and thoughts should be given to the way to follow / partly follow the new methodology also for the next round of peer reviews and/or global assessments in the enlargement countries.

Participants are invited to discuss the different options as outlined below.

Background

Adapted Global Assessments (AGAs) and Light Peer Reviews (LPRs) were carried out in the enlargement and ENP East and Central Asia and some ENP South countries during the period 2008-2014. In each of the Candidate Countries (except Iceland) and Armenia a LPR was conducted during the period 2010-2014. LPRs were based on the structure and procedure of the ESS peer reviews and contained recommendations aimed at helping the country reaching a higher level of compliance with the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP), especially regarding principles 1-6 and 15, and evaluating the coordinating role of the NSI within the statistical system.

In each of the potential candidates and 9 out of 11 EECCA countries and Mongolia, an Adapted Global Assessment was carried out. Recommendations in the AGAs are based on traditional global reviews of statistical systems, but are specifically adapted to potential candidates, EECCA countries and Mongolia.

For all six ENP-East countries and some Central Asia countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan) Adapted Global Assessments were carried out between 2008 (for Kazakhstan) and early 2013 (Belarus). The AGA reports are finished and available on Eurostat website. In Armenia also a light peer review was implemented in early 2014 the report of which is also available on Eurostat's website.

In the ENP-South countries (North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean) the process of assessing the national statistical systems was launched with a LPR in Palestine in 2012 and was continued with the AGA in Tunisia carried out in 2013/2014.

Regarding the Member States, EFTA countries and Eurostat the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC) set up a task force in November 2012 to elaborate a new methodology for the peer reviews based on the recommendations and successful elements in the 2006–2008 peer reviews. The task force was mandated to operationalize ESSC recommendations and develop instruments for the peer reviews. The task force, composed of delegates from 14 countries and the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB), began its work in December 2012 to develop a methodology covering all the principles of the CoP as well as coordination within the NSS and the cooperation / level of integration of the ESS and related instruments.

The results of the work were presented to the ESSC at its meeting on 15–16 May 2013. The ESSC in general endorsed the methodology and instruments to implement it. Some concerns were expressed about the heavy burden on the NSIs and the tight timeline.

The elaborated methodology represented a maximalist approach that was piloted over the summer of 2013 in the Slovak Republic and Iceland. The September 2013 DGINS conference discussed the methodology in the light of experience gained through the pilots and instruments were revised and the methodology was fine-tuned by the task force.

The new round of peer reviews were started in 2014 and the exercise will be carried out until 2015 in all the Member States, EFTA countries and Eurostat. The peer review of Eurostat was conducted in April 2014.

A change in methodology compared to the first round of peer reviews can be observed. In line with audit practices, all statements by the NSIs need to be backed up by evidence. The peer review teams as owners of the final reports will be responsible for their objectivity and impartiality. The NSIs will be asked to comment on the factual accuracy of the reports. The NSIs will have the right to present their views in a separate chapter should they disagree with the conclusions reached by the review teams. The peer review teams will present recommendations only while the NSI will be asked to develop an action plan to implement the recommendations.

Why do we need a new round of assessments?

At the time of the next round of global assessments / peer reviews, in many of the enlargement and EECCA countries about five years will have passed since the last round of reviews took place, so it might be time for a thorough look at how the situation changed during that time. The professional and legal environment is likely to have changed in five years, which means new, different challenges that might call for new, different recommendations. Improvement actions that could not be implemented in five years might be a signal to some other underlying problem in the system that needs to be examined and dealt with.

The idea of a new round of peer reviews and/or global assessments was discussed at the Alushta seminar on the "Follow-up of peer reviews and global assessments" in June 2013, with most participants from the enlargement countries as well as from the ENP and the Central Asian countries supporting the idea. The implementation of a new round of peer reviews is on-going in the Member States, according to a different methodology than what was used during the period 2006-2008.

The options

There are different ways new assessments can be organised and carried out, depending on what should be the end result. After an initial brainstorming with UNECE and EFTA, Eurostat unit A3 has developed several first ideas to discuss. At this first stage of the discussion process it is also entirely possible to mix and match elements of different options, so they should be considered as food for thought rather than definite solutions set in stone.

Option 1 – No changes from the last round

Going with the first option would mean carrying out the PRs and GAs in the same way as in the first round, regarding the methodology. For the PRs that would mean assessing the Code of Practice principles 1-6 and 15, focusing on the institutional environment without assessing the statistical processes and outputs detailed in principles 7 to 14, especially issues related to quality, methodology and cost effectiveness.

The advantage of this approach is that the reports would be directly comparable to the previous ones, so the development would be clearly visible. For those countries who would choose to have a different type of assessment than last time (e.g. if a country had an AGA in the previous round and would have a PR in the next) this would however, not be the case. The disadvantage is that, because the development can be followed quite well through the annual monitoring exercises, there is the danger that the new round of PRs carried out the same way as the last would not reveal too much additional information, so the resources put into the exercise might not have the ideal return.

Option 2 – Peer Reviews with Global Assessment-like elements

This option is similar to the first one, the difference being that principles 7-14 would be assessed as well. The statistical processes and outputs would be assessed in a way that is similar to a global assessment. In fact there can be two sub-options under this category:

- Option 2.1 – Principles 7 through 14 would be assessed through a simplified procedure like focusing on the overall implementation of sound procedures, methodology, etc., which would mean more detail than a PR, but less depth than a full GA. This approach would assess the basic requirements for methodology, appropriate statistical procedures in place, timeliness etc. of each field without going into detail for broad statistical domains like business statistics, macro-economic statistics, social statistics, agriculture statistics, etc..
- Option 2.2 – Principles 7 through 14 would be assessed like during a global assessment, meaning all the broad statistical domains as listed above, but structured according to the principles 7-14 of the CoP. This approach would be a true mix of a PR and a GA.

The advantage of option 2.1 is that it takes the view of a PR and fills up the missing bits with assessments similar to a GA. The result would be a report that deals with the institutional aspects, and with the statistical fields, although not as thoroughly as a GA. The possible downside is that for those countries that have already had a GA, the added GA-like parts would bring new information in a less detailed way.

Option 2.2 on the other hand would probably be the most thorough assessment the countries have had so far, combining the advantages of both PRs and GAs. The disadvantage is likely to be the increased requirement of resources from the side of the NSIs, meaning longer missions, more colleagues interviewed, more material translated, but also from Eurostat's side as these kinds of thorough assessments would likely require more preparation and have a higher cost than some of the other options.

Option 3 – Audit-like approach

This is the approach used in the Member States for the second round of peer reviews. The two main differences between this option and the first round of MS peer reviews was that a) each bit of information provided during the assessment process needs to be backed up by evidence, and b) the structure of the final report is different, focusing mainly on areas to improve, including recommendations, and only a relatively short listing of the strengths. It also means that there is no global view on the statistical system. Indeed, the purpose of an audit is to discover and identify shortcomings, and this approach builds on the advantages of such a type of assessment.

This option is stricter in the way the review is carried out, but this audit-like strictness and transparency might also give it more credibility. The report focuses on what needs to be improved, instead of a general assessment of the statistical system and of what works well and what does not yet work well, so direct comparison with the results of the previous round is more difficult than in some of the other options. The experience of the Member States showed that for some countries it is more difficult to accept this kind of report that details areas to improve and only briefly lists strengths.

Option 4 – Focus on outstanding actions

Going with this minimalistic approach would mean only to review the still outstanding improvement actions and try to find the reasons for the difficulties as well as discuss possible solutions to the problems.

The obvious advantage of this method is that the resources invested and the burden put on the participating NSIs is minimised. On the other hand, the returns from this option would also be less than in the previous cases, and it is a question whether this option could bring more than a regular round of annual monitoring. Moreover, newly arising issues and problems would probably not be discovered during such an assessment.

Implementation

A significant change from the first round affecting all four options above is that it is proposed that the reports will only contain the recommendations for improvement from the reviewers while the improvement actions will be defined by the NSIs themselves based on the recommendations included in the final report. This is proposed in order for the NSIs to suggest the most appropriate actions and to increase the feeling of ownership of the actions by the NSIs. However, a check by Eurostat (and UNECE) will be done to assess whether all the recommendations are appropriately addressed in the actions.

Once the meeting has discussed the different options above and elaborated in more detail their advantages and disadvantages, Eurostat together with UNECE and EFTA will have to review the outcome of the discussion. As a possibility it could be envisaged to pilot the new types of assessment in one or two volunteering countries, probably in the second half of 2015.

Based on the experience and the feedback received after the pilots, the methodology can be fine-tuned and discussed in the high level seminars 2015 / 2016 before launching the full exercise.

As a number of countries include some of the improvement actions in their own strategies and work programmes, it is proposed to shift the timing of the annual monitoring so as to bring it in line with the domestic reporting cycle of the NSIs, in most cases in or around February. This would help reduce the reporting burden on the NSIs.

Questions for discussion

- What are the main objectives of a new round of reviews?
- What are the advantages / disadvantages of each option?
- What is the optimal way to identify the improvement actions?
- What other options could be defined, if any?