

## **Assistance for respondents during data collection – the Statistics Poland experience**

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### ***Abstract and Paper***

Participation in statistical surveys is usually perceived by respondents as a burden. In recent decades, statistical authorities have been taking some measures aiming at reduction of this burden, focused, for example, on using administrative and non-administrative data for statistical purposes. Appropriate communication with respondents, designed with the purpose of providing them with detailed and practical guidelines concerning the data required in the surveys, can also be considered a method of making statistical obligations less burdensome.

In an effort to have as good relations as possible with respondents, Statistics Poland offers some kinds of organized help for them. Help for our data providers is oriented to typical problems related to their participation in a survey and, in particular, to submitting the data. It covers different methods of communication, depending on character of the survey, type of respondent, length of the questionnaire or scope of required data. We try not to be limited only to dissemination of official announcements or instructions, but to make our communication with respondents more interactive, giving them potential for reporting problems to statisticians and receiving appropriate answer as quickly as possible. Transformation from paper questionnaires to “web questionnaire” and building the infrastructure connected with on-line reporting (the Reporting Portal of Statistics Poland) turned out to be an opportunity to intensify our contacts with respondents and to offer them new forms of assistance. Complete change of organization of surveys introduced in 2009 (which especially affected regional statistical offices) resulted in more qualified staff of these offices, specialized in particular problems connected with particular groups of surveys.

The presentation will outline the various methods used by Statistics Poland to help respondents in problems connected with participation in surveys, with a focus on those offered directly during the data collection phase.

### ***Keywords***

Communication with respondents and data providers

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## **“Assistance for respondents during data collection – the Statistics Poland experience”.**

### **Introduction.**

Different forms of help for respondents offered by Statistics Poland can be categorized into 3 general groups, depending on the channel of communication between official statistics and respondent:

- different information (and other materials) published on the website of Statistics Poland – available for every visitor to the website,
- functions provided by the Reporting Portal of Statistics Poland, along with additional materials and information about survey/questionnaire – accessible only for respondent, after logging-in to the Portal,
- help provided by the statistical personnel, which requires direct contact between respondent and employee of the office.

Some of the most popular methods are presented in brief in the text below. Scope of guidance received by respondent, depends on the character of the survey and, in particular, on the character of the questionnaire.

This organization of the help system is closely linked to the organization of data collection in statistical surveys in Poland, and especially to the system of on-line statistical reporting based on the Reporting Portal of Statistics Poland.

### **The Reporting Portal of Statistics Poland.**

Set up in 2007, the Reporting Portal (*Portal Sprawozdawczy GUS*) is an Internet platform which primary task is to provide access to appropriate statistical questionnaires for appropriate respondents and to gather completed questionnaires according to schedules (timetables) for particular surveys. System of on-line reporting is based on individual user's accounts connected with particular respondents – units of national economy participating in surveys. Direct access to the account can be possible for the user from the Portal's webpage (within the Statistics Poland's website), after logging-in with the unique login and password. Statistical Computing Centre (IT centre subordinated to the President of Statistics Poland) is responsible for developing IT applications for web questionnaires (on the basis of guidelines from survey authors) as well as for administration and maintenance of the Portal.

The Reporting Portal, built only for statistical purposes, is one of the basic elements (or even the most important element) of the contemporary Polish statistical infrastructure. Its importance increased especially in 2009, due to legal regulations introduced at that time: since then, only the smallest respondents (with the number of employees up to 5) are allowed to submit data on paper questionnaires. This rule has been stated in the subsequent regulations of the Council of Ministers concerning the subsequent annual programmes of statistical surveys of official statistics. As a result, the Portal collects around 3,000,000 questionnaires a year, from the vast

majority of respondents participating in business surveys (at the beginning of July 2019 number of user's accounts on the Portal reached 925,000).

Percentage of questionnaires collected by the Portal (in proportion to the total number of questionnaires used in surveys carried out by Statistics Poland, regardless of type of a survey and type of respondent) is as follows:

Year of the survey programme	Total number of Statistics Poland questionnaires	Questionnaires collected by means of the Reporting Portal	
		Number of questionnaires	Percentage
2015	222	153	68,9%
2018	233	169	72,5%
2019	216	156	72,2%

In addition to its principal function, the Portal serves also as a massive channel of communication between statisticians and respondents. Its significant role in this regard is guaranteed by a relevant fragment of the Article 28a of the Polish Law on Official Statistics<sup>1</sup>:

*The electronic platform for collecting statistical data allows, in particular (...) communication of public statistics services with the respondents.*

Since the statistical surveys are conducted on the basis of legal acts<sup>2</sup>, communication with participants in these surveys is first of all performed by informing them about their obligations, deadlines etc. connected with surveys. To this end, 3 types of announcements (notifications) are sent automatically by the Reporting Portal and delivered directly to the users:

- letter informing about statistical obligation – sent before the start of data collection,
- notification about the forthcoming deadline of data provision – reminder, sent (as a rule) a few days before the deadline specified in the survey programme and placed on the questionnaire,
- admonition letter – only for those who missed the deadline for data provision, sent usually one working day after this deadline.

All those above-mentioned notifications are dispatched on fixed dates, set in the data collection schedules, prepared in advance for every questionnaire. If necessary, some of them (especially admonition letters) can be sent more than once.

It should be emphasized that we are trying not to be confined only to dissemination of official announcements or instructions. Effective cooperation with our data providers requires two-way communication and willingness to be supportive in case of any question or problem reported by respondents. This in turn requires appropriate organization of statistical services and statistical personnel.

### **Organization of data collection.**

In case of Statistics Poland, introduction of the system of on-line reporting caused a radical change of organization of most surveys. In the past, paper questionnaires used to be distributed by regional statistical offices (and its branches) throughout respondents located in their respective voivodeships (regions). After filling-in, respondents sent these questionnaires back to their nearest offices. As a result, statistical office collected all the questionnaires (regardless of the survey in which they were used) but only from its own region.

With the web questionnaire as a predominant carrier of information, data are collected by the Reporting Portal from all over the country, irrespective of the respondent's location. New tasks of regional statistical offices are

<sup>1</sup> Law of 29 June 1995 on Official Statistics (full text available in English on the Statistics Poland website: <https://bip.stat.gov.pl/en/law/law-on-public-statistics/>).

<sup>2</sup> Aforementioned regulations of the Council of Ministers concerning the annual programmes of statistical surveys of official statistics.

connected with “statistical production” in specific areas of statistics, i.e. specific groups of surveys and questionnaires (specialization of statistical offices).

Statistical areas assigned to statistical offices are as follows:

<b>Statistical Office</b>	<b>Main statistical areas</b>
Statistical Office in Białystok	forestry and environmental protection
Statistical Office in Bydgoszcz	labour market
Statistical Office in Gdańsk	education, human capital, working condition, LFS
Statistical Office in Katowice	regional accounts, financial market, capital expenditures and fixed assets, environmental protection and water management
Statistical Office in Kielce	trade and services statistics
Statistical Office in Cracow	social economy, health and health protection, culture, social assistance
Statistical Office in Lublin	construction, housing
Statistical Office in Łódź	small enterprises, living condition of population
Statistical Office in Olsztyn	demographics, agriculture, rural areas
Statistical Office in Opole	prices
Statistical Office in Poznań	short-term statistics, urban statistics, small areas
Statistical Office in Rzeszów	sport and tourism, fuel and energy market
Statistical Office in Szczecin	science, technology, information society, maritime statistics, transport
Statistical Office in Warsaw	non-financial enterprises
Statistical Office in Wrocław	territorial and self-government statistics, industrial products
Statistical Office in Zielona Góra	economic situation in agriculture, industry, trade, and construction

As opposed to the statistical reporting, organization of sample surveys (in which data are collected by interviewers) remains unchanged. Statistical interviewers are employed by statistical offices and collect data directly from respondents in the field, only within the territory of their respective voivodeships.

#### **Help desk for respondents.**

Organization of the process of data collection, described in the previous section, has an impact on organization of the system of help offered to respondents. One of the elements of this system is the help desk for those who encountered any problems with statistical reporting.

Help desk consists of staff members of statistical offices (according to the subject-matter specialization of these offices) and, in some cases, relevant departments of the headquarters of Statistics Poland. Respondents experiencing difficulties during completion of the questionnaires can contact these people and ask for additional explanations, clarifications etc. For that reason, the system is based on narrow specialization of experts designated to answer questions from respondents (they are responsible only for particular questionnaires or groups of questionnaires from the same statistical domain). To facilitate searching for appropriate contact person(s), list of questionnaires/groups of questionnaires (shown in alphabetical order) with assigned statisticians (along with their phone numbers and e-mail addresses) is published on the website of Statistics Poland. Visitors to our website can find this list in a number of ways:

- on the webpage containing graphic designs (templates) of statistical questionnaires,
- on the webpage of the Reporting Portal,
- on the contact page,
- on the Public Information Bulletin (BIP – *Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej*<sup>3</sup>) of Statistics Poland, in the section “Kontakt z urzędem” (“Contact with the office”),

<sup>3</sup> Webpages presenting detailed information about operation of offices, other public institutions etc., created in accordance with the Act of 6 September 2001 on Access to Public Information. In practice, BIP pages are fully integrated with websites of particular offices.

- in addition, webpages of statistical offices also present lists of experts, responsible for questionnaires from specialization of the office.

Number of people assigned to particular questionnaire is different, depending on the questionnaire and survey in which this questionnaire is used as a source of data. For less complicated questionnaires with relatively small number of respondents, experts are able to answer questions from all over the country. In case of more complex questionnaire and bigger population size, one nationwide list of experts is usually insufficient and must be divided e.g. by voivodeships (regions of Poland). As a result, respondent can contact only statistician(s) assigned to the voivodeship where his/her company is located. This method is the most commonly used and there are different types of division of work within the list of experts, for instance:

- one person can be assigned to one voivodeship,
- one person can be assigned to a group of voivodeships,
- a group of people can be assigned to one voivodeship,
- one person is assigned to one voivodeship, but for some voivodeships (e.g. more populated, more industrialized) more than 1 person is assigned, etc.

Another model of distribution of tasks connected with the help with questionnaire is based on subdivision of population into groups according to their REGON<sup>4</sup> identification numbers. This method is applied first of all for questionnaires with especially large population size, where “regional” lists of experts aren’t enough. For some questionnaires, range of REGON numbers served by particular statistician is shown on the list; for other questionnaires, respondents enter the REGON number in the search engine on the webpage and then the name, phone number and e-mail address of appropriate contact person appears on the screen.

Use of different methods of organization of the help desk in 2019 is as follows:

	One nationwide list of experts	Lists of experts by voivodeships	List of experts by REGON numbers of companies	Mixed
Questionnaires/groups of questionnaires for which particular method is used	54	77	21	21

Mixed method means the situation where, for example, list of experts by voivodeships with additional nationwide list or, on the contrary, further division of the list (e.g. by REGON numbers) for some voivodeships.

Apart from the help desk organized to deal with problems connected with statistical reporting, similar solutions (but on a smaller scale) are also offered to respondents (households and farms) participating in social and agricultural sample surveys. In order to get some information about these surveys, and for example to check identity of the statistical interviewer visiting the household, respondent can consult authorized employees of statistical offices, from the list published on our website (in the section concerning this kind of surveys). For some surveys conducted with the use of CAWI method, respondent can also contact designated statistician(s) from appropriate office to get some help during filling-in the questionnaire.

Another help desk was organized for users of the Reporting Portal having “technical” problems (lost password, difficulties connected with setting up an account or logging-in etc.). List of e-mail addresses for respondents from particular voivodeships is available on the webpage of the Portal.

### **The Statistical Helpline.**

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<sup>4</sup> National official register of national economy entities (official business register), run by the President of Statistics Poland on the basis of the Law on Official Statistics. Companies and other entities registered are identified by unique identification numbers.

Created a few years ago, the Statistical Helpline (*Infolinia Statystyczna*) is in fact a multipurpose solution, intended not only for respondents/users of the Reporting Portal, but also for the people interested in statistical data and other services from Statistics Poland.

Helpline has the same phone number for entire country (+48 22 279 99 99), with following extensions:

- 1 – the Reporting Portal of Statistics Poland (help in “technical” problems, information about the webpage of help desk for respondents having problems with questionnaires etc.),
- 2 – statistical data,
- 3 – REGON (official business register),
- 4 – TERYT (official register of territorial division of the country),
- 5 – statistical classifications,
- 6 – e-services of official statistics,
- 7 – agricultural surveys.

Assistance is also provided by employees of statistical offices, from Monday to Friday between 8am and 3pm. Number of the helpline is placed on most pages within the Statistics Poland website (at the bottom of the page); information about helpline is especially visible also on the contact page and on the webpage of the Reporting Portal.

#### **Templates of questionnaires on the website of Statistics Poland.**

Graphic designs (templates) of printed versions of statistical questionnaires used in Statistics Poland surveys are published on our website. Templates in the form of .PDF files are prepared every year; preparatory works are coordinated by the Programming and Coordination of Statistical Surveys Department of our office.

There are 2 pages presenting templates of the questionnaires along with some additional information for respondents, including:

- for questionnaires in use for statistical reporting: symbol of the survey in the survey programme, year of the programme, periodicity, deadline for data provision and, in case of the questionnaire collected by the Reporting Portal, dates when the web questionnaire is available for respondents on the Portal and link to the Portal’s webpage,
- for questionnaires in use in social and agricultural sample surveys: symbol of the survey in the survey programme, year of the programme, periodicity and dates of data collection by particular methods (CAPI, CATI, CAWI, PAPI).

Files with printed versions of the questionnaires for statistical reporting in most cases contain also guidelines (instructions) informing respondents how to fill in these questionnaires: one position after another. Depending on the questionnaire, length of guidelines can be different. For questionnaires in use in 2019 (for surveys conducted on the basis of the 2018 survey programme and the 2019 survey programme), guidelines added to templates of questionnaires are as follows:

Templates of questionnaires without guidelines	Templates of questionnaires equipped with guidelines:			
	less than 2 pages	between 2 a 3 pages	exactly 4 pages	5 pages and more
26	76	41	15	25

Depending on the character of the survey for which particular questionnaire is used, some other materials can be added to the text of guidelines, for instance:

- statistical classification or nomenclature (or fragment of classification) relevant to the survey,
- definitions of selected terms,

- units of measure to be used on the questionnaire,
- examples how to fill in the questionnaire (or parts of the questionnaire), etc.

Some extra materials for respondents (classifications, lists of products, additional information about survey and so on) are placed on the webpage, next to templates of some questionnaires.

#### **Other information from the Statistics Poland website.**

Other elements of content of our website that can be particularly useful for respondents include among others:

- instructions, guidelines and other information for users of the Reporting Portal (e.g., user's manual, procedure to be applied in case of lost authentication data, link to the templates of questionnaires and so on) published on the Portal's informational webpage,
- detailed format of the data transferred (available on the webpage of the Public Information Bulletin of our office); this webpage contains detailed information about variables (e.g., name of the variable, unit of measure, character of the variable, reference period etc.) from particular statistical questionnaires and other datasets used in the surveys.

#### **Web questionnaire and its functions.**

Questionnaires on the Reporting Portal are designed in such a way that they can prevent respondents from making too many reporting errors. To this end, web questionnaires are equipped with a wide range of functions and various information useful for respondents. These functions include, among other things, validation of input data and preliminary, simple logical and calculation control of errors made in the process of filling-in the questionnaire.

Since every web questionnaire should be accepted by respondent after completion (it's impossible to send the questionnaire unaccepted), error check is necessary to provide the respondent with information about incorrectly completed or omitted positions on the questionnaire. As a result of this control, the system displays a list of errors. There are 2 types of possible errors on the Reporting Portal:

- so-called "acceptable" error that don't obstruct acceptance of the questionnaire,
- so-called "hard" error that should be obligatorily corrected by respondent (otherwise the questionnaire can't be accepted).

Error message appears also next to the position omitted or wrongly completed.

To minimize the number of possible reporting errors, some positions on the questionnaire are equipped with "active" definitions of terms or suggestions how to complete these positions. In order to display them on the screen, respondent should click on the symbol placed next to the particular position (for example, definitions are often marked with a question mark: ? or with a letter "i").

Respondents using web questionnaires have also a lot of other helpful materials at their disposal, for example:

- template of the questionnaire (in its printed version),
- guidelines for the questionnaire, instruction for e-version of the questionnaire,
- FAQ relating to the questionnaire,
- classifications (or fragments of classifications),
- glossary of terms,
- methodological guidelines concerning the particular domain of statistics,
- list of people responsible for the questionnaire, etc.

Those additional materials can be available for example in the form of files or links to relevant webpages attached to the questionnaire. They are prepared for particular questionnaires, taking into account specific of the survey for which this questionnaire is used as a source of data. Number and character of available materials can be different, depending on the questionnaire.

Other functions of the Reporting Portal include e.g. printing completed questionnaires and special e-mail for users (respondent can send a message containing description of the problem with the questionnaire and get an answer from the statistician responsible for the survey).

In some cases, different questionnaires belonging to different surveys but intended for one respondent, can be combined into one web questionnaire available on the Portal (so-called "integrated" questionnaires).

Last but not least, it should be noted that some of the above-mentioned functions (i.e., "active" definitions of difficult terms, indication of errors etc.), especially helpful for respondents, are included also in questionnaires used in the CAWI method, with data collection mode similar (to some extent) to that of Reporting Portal.

### **Conclusion.**

Help for respondents is one of essential areas of activity for official statistics. Tools for on-line data collection are especially useful for the purpose of assistance with problems related to participation in surveys. Statistics Poland tries to make use of these tools to provide respondents with necessary information and materials as well as other functions that can support them during fulfilling their statistical obligations. General aims of these solutions are to eliminate as many errors as possible already during the data collection phase and to maintain good relations with respondents.

However, providing data for statistical purposes still remains a serious problem for numerous respondents. Number of complaints about difficult and time-consuming surveys/questionnaires indicates that the goal mentioned above still hasn't been fully achieved.