

The implementation of the ES Code of Practice in the National Statistical System: the Italian experience

Marina Gandolfo, Istat
Elisabetta Parente, Istat
Susanna Terracina, Istat

Summary

This paper presents the path undertaken by Italy for the extension of the ES Code of Practice at National level. The awareness of the importance of the Principles included in the Code and its value in increasing trust in official statistics through quality standards is shared by the institutions of the system involved in producing official statistics.

In this context, Istat has carried out several actions to implement the Code at level of system as a whole, from disseminating its principles by involving other public administrations, presenting it in national and local conferences within the National statistical System, presenting it to different actors of the System and to users participating in the National Statistical Conference and by carrying out a pilot study to plan and implement tools for its extension to the National Statistical System. The paper describes the activities and main achievements.

1. Introduction

The implementation of strategies for improving the quality of the European statistics is one of the key points of the European Commission program started in the last years.

EU institutions have strongly committed themselves in strengthening the ESS Governance for increasing the credibility of the European statistics.

In June 2004 the ECOFIN invited the EU Commission to put forward a proposal to develop “minimum European standards and establish statistical authorities”. These standards have a dual purpose: on the one hand, to improve trust and confidence in the statistical authorities by proposing certain institutional and organizational arrangements and, on the other hand, to reinforce the quality of the statistics they produce and disseminate by promoting the coherent application of best international statistical principles, methods and practices by all producers of official statistics in Europe.

Within this strategy, the Code of Practice on European Statistics, presented in the Communication of the Commission as a recommendation to the European Council and Parliament in May 2005 (COM(2005) 217 of May 25, 2005), is the response to the Council invitation as regard to independence, integrity and accountability of actors in charge of producing and disseminating European statistics.

The purpose of the Code is, on one side, to increase trust in official statistics by setting minimum quality standards and finding the best control procedures of statistical processes, and, on the other side, to provide a self-regulatory instrument for enhancing the quality of statistics produced and disseminated by adopting proper principles. The Code of Practice consists of 15 principles (*1 Professional Independence, 2 Mandate for data collection, 3 Adequacy of resources, 4 Quality commitment, 5 Statistical confidentiality, 6 Impartiality and objectivity, 7 Sound methodology, 8 Appropriate statistical procedures, 9 Non-excessive burden on respondents, 10 Cost effectiveness, 11 Relevance, 12 Accuracy and reliability, 13 Timeliness and punctuality, 14 Coherence and comparability, 15 Accessibility and clarity*). They mirror to a large extent the existing international standards, such as the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission.

The strategies and measures taken to implement the Code have already achieved their objectives at European level and have led to gather information useful to prepare a final report presented to the Council and the Parliament at the end of 2008 (COM (2008) 621 final). The original purpose of the Code is to meet the requirements exclusively of European statistics and it mainly involves national statistical authorities and Eurostat. Nevertheless, for the report purposes the Member States are requested to provide further information on the implementation of the Code in the National Statistical System as a whole.

In that occasion Italy carried out the exercise to explore the application of the ES Code to some National statistical authorities, finding that principles are well recognized by them but the self assessment questionnaire was not so applicable as to the National statistical Institutes to which the implementation of the Code is focused. The European experience has provided evidence on different aspects that the application of the Code tout court to other National statistical authorities could arise.

As far as Italy is concerned during and after the process of monitoring the compliance to the ES Code, greater importance is being given to the Code, since it is recognized as a fundamental and valuable tool to increase the credibility of official statistics.

At national level Istat has carried out several actions to disseminate the principles of the ES Code, presenting it in national and local conferences within the National statistical System. Furthermore a brochure on the ES Code in Italian has been disseminated to different actors of the System and to users participating in the National Statistical Conference that Istat has to organize every two years by national statistical law.

The debate has been continuing within the Committee for Policy and Co-ordination of Statistical Information (Comstat), a corporate body composed of representatives of bodies/institutions belonging to Sistan and through which Istat is entrusted to rule Sistan, which has shared the growing awareness of the usefulness of the Code as a tool to improve quality and increase trust in official statistics reinforcing so the entire national statistical system.

2. The National Statistical System (Sistan)

The National Statistical System (Sistan) was established by the National statistical Law (legislative decree No 322 of 6th September 1989), that sets out principles and guidelines for the reorganisation of public statistics.

The Sistan is a network of National Statistical Authorities that provide official statistical information.

The Sistan assures the uniformity of direction, the homogeneity of used methods and the rationalization of the processes of official statistics through an organizational and functional coordination plan, involving the entire public administration at central, regional and local levels. Together with Istat the other bodies belonging to the National Statistical System, namely their statistical offices, are: public bodies and agencies in charge of providing statistical information; central statistical offices of government's administrations; statistical offices of public bodies and private authorities (these last designated by law); statistical offices of Government's territorial offices; Chambers of Commerce; statistical offices of Autonomous Regions and Provinces; statistical offices of Provinces; statistical offices of principal towns; statistical offices of principal municipal cities, statistical offices of municipalities; statistical offices of small municipalities associated in partnership; statistical offices associated in partnership.

Istat is entrusted to rule Sistan through the Committee for Policy and Coordination of Statistical Information (Comstat). Chaired by Istat President, Comstat is a corporate body composed by 21 members: 10 representatives of Public Administrations, one representative for the Regions, one representative of the Union of Italian Provinces (Upi), one representative of the Union of Chambers, three representatives of the National Association of Italian Municipalities (Anci), two representatives of Public Bodies, Istat General Director and two professors in statistics and economics. The Committee issues guidelines and policies for Sistan offices, decides on the National Statistical Programme (PSN), upon proposal by Istat President.

Sistan activity is supervised by the Commission for the Protection of Statistical Information (CPSI) which is an external, autonomous and independent body. In particular, the Commission supervises: the impartiality and completeness of statistical information, the quality of methodologies and the compliance of surveys with EU and international directives. The Commission, established within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, is composed of high-profile university professors, directors of statistical or research institutes and managers of public administrations and bodies, which do not belong to Sistan.

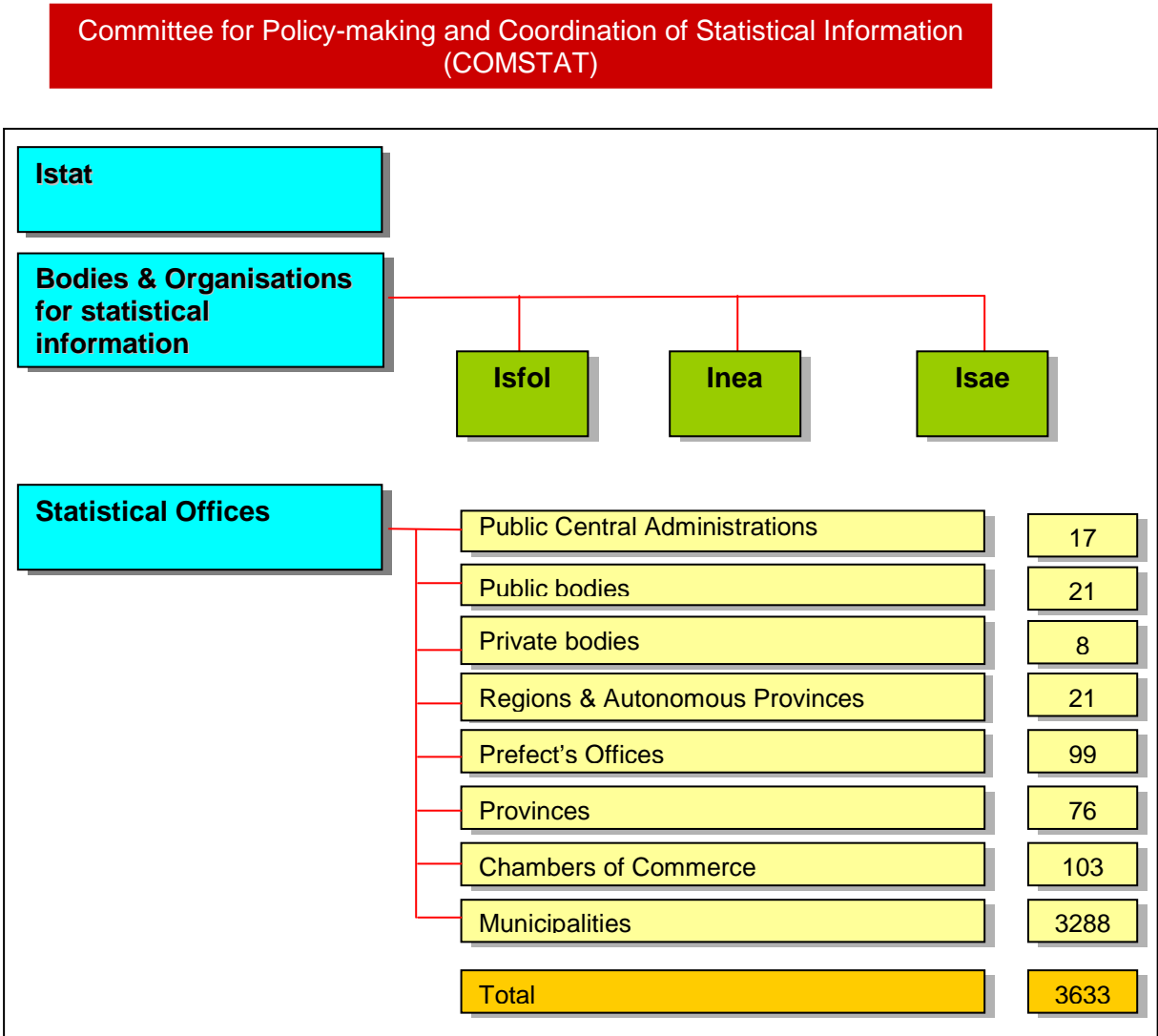
Although the mentioned offices belong to different administrations, they share the common goal of providing the country with official statistical information. Therefore the assignment of Sistan is to ensure uniform policy, homogeneous organisation and rationalised information flows at central and local levels providing Italian and International bodies with official statistical information.

The National Statistical Programme (PSN) is Sistan’s tool for planning statistical activity of public interest; it covers a three-year period and is updated each year.

Sistan characteristics are based on strong differences among its bodies in terms of dimension and functions they perform. This range starts from the complex organization of the Central Public Administration producing data, to the small Municipalities which have only the intermediary function for statistical surveys for which other bodies are in charge.

As the National Statistical Law states the guidelines for the functioning and organisation of the Sistan, the Code can be considered a valid guide to develop official statistics characterised by sound methodology and high process quality.

Image 1 The structure of Italian National Statistical System



3. The process for the extension of the Code

After the European experience on measuring the compliance with the European Statistics Code and on going monitoring process, Istat has taken the value of this process also as a challenge for the Italian National Statistical System (Sistan).

On May 2007 the Comstat decided to set up a Working Group called “Code of European Statistics” that agreed on the importance to encourage the use of the procedures, already applied at EU level, in the several territorial and sectorial institutions which contribute to the production of official statistics to different extents. The results of the work of the WG draw attention on the importance of the extension of the Code and on the necessity to continue the activities to evaluate the feasibility of the extension to the System as a whole.

For this reason in August 2008, with one year mandate, a Task Force was entrusted by the Comstat with the task of “planning and implementing a pilot survey to define methods and tools useful to adopt the Code of Practice on European Statistics within the Italian National Statistical System (Sistan)”.

This Task Force, coordinated by Istat, consists of 8 members¹ representing Istat, central institutions, regions, provinces and municipalities belonging to the Sistan. The various skills and experiences of the TF members have proved to be very useful to understand the different institutional realities and the specific needs of the Sistan administrations and bodies; therefore, this TF possessed what it took to find the proper tools and approaches for carrying out the pilot study in the close future.

A first start point was to understand that the 15 Principles of the ES Code are fully applicable to the Sistan bodies and they were hold steady.

While great efforts were made by the TF to identify appropriate indicators to measure the principle, to design an ad hoc self assessment questionnaire and to plan the Peer Review process.

At first, great consideration has been paid to the principles and to the questionnaire. As to the latter, originally conceived for the National Statistical Institutes only, indicators and their related questions have been reviewed in light of organizational and functional peculiarities of the Sistan. Then the questionnaire has been submitted to a group of statistical offices belonging to the Sistan, selected according to adequate criteria, with the scope to test its suitability to identify the different realities of the System itself. Successively, some of these offices have been peer-reviewed in order to integrate and deepen aspects on the suitability of the instruments for implementing a future survey.

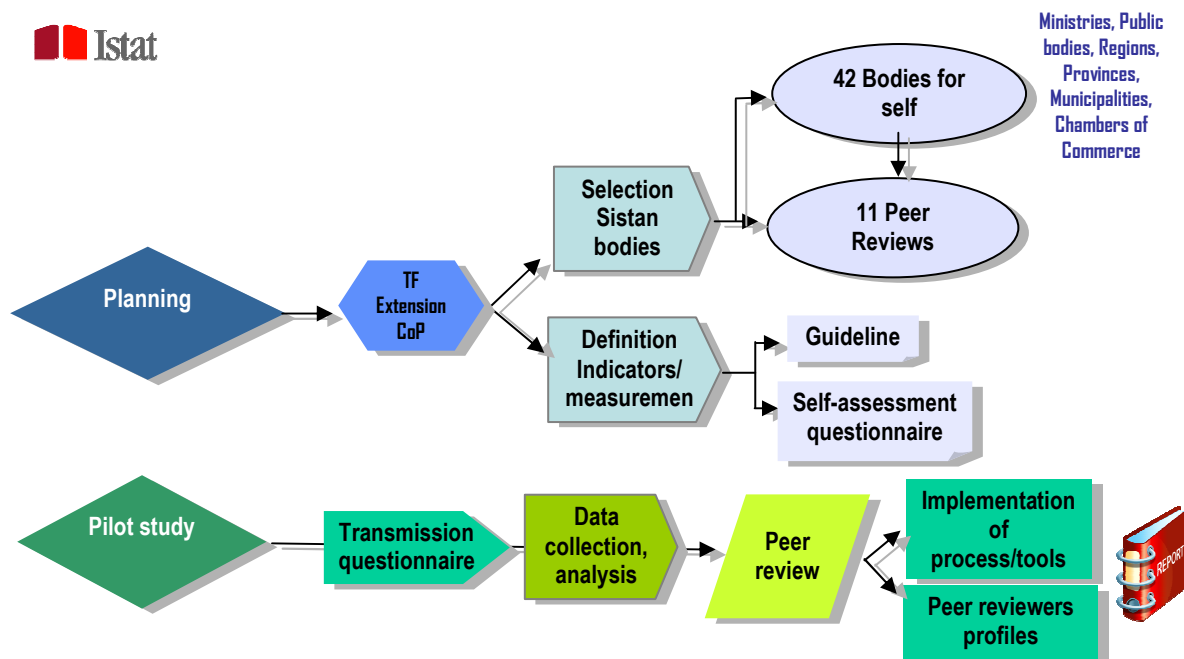
The information gathered in the Peer Reviews have been analyzed by the TF and the results have been compared highlighting critical aspects, strengths and weakness of the System; then the Group has appropriately revised the tools and processes used during the study (questionnaire, peer reviews, guidelines).

The activities of the TF have led to the creation of tools tested during this pilot phase:

- The questionnaire and the glossary, which contains technical terms, concepts and standards
- The communication: the proper way to inform the subjects involved in the pilot phase (direct contacts with the bodies involved)/help desk to support the respondents
- Peer Reviews and related guidelines

¹ 3 Istat; 1 Ministry of Interior; 1 Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry Policy; 1 Region of Emilia-Romagna; 1 Province of Rovigo; 1 Municipality of Reggio Calabria;

Image 2 Istat experience – Extension of the Code at national level



3.1 Selection of bodies

The selection of the administrations/bodies to be involved in the pilot study has been based on the need to pick in the study the different national and territorial realities in the System, and to collect elements functional to the implementation of a final questionnaire to be used in the future full speed phase.

Bodies have been selected according to the following criteria:

- Type of bodies (central administrations, public bodies, territorial bodies and private subjects)
- Territorial coverage (North, Centre, South, Islands)
- Dimension of the administrations/public bodies

The TF agreed on a list of 42 bodies to whom the questionnaire had to be administered:

- 4 Ministries
- 3 Public Institutions
- 5 Regions
- 10 Provinces
- 13 Municipalities
- 1 Associated Municipality
- 6 Chambers of Commerce

3.2 The Questionnaire

A standard questionnaire has been created for fitting all types of addressees, simplifying its filling-in by reducing the respondent burden (only 75 questions compared to 150 of the EU one) but at the same time maintaining the consistency of the questionnaire by enhancing those aspects able to detect the peculiarities of the National Statistical System. This choice has turned to be the more adequate to pursue the objectives of the pilot study and to start a debate on the compliance of activities and mandate of statistical offices with the principles of the Code.

The first important achievement has been the 100% response rate.

In the light of what we have said so far, a new questionnaire has been designed in which new indicators and questions have been adapted to the differences of our System. The self-assessment questionnaire is divided in 15 sections, one for each principle, and includes a glossary.

In the questionnaire a field “notes” has been inserted to be used by respondents to add further information, suggestions, comments and problems they have dealt with when filling in it (for example, comprehension of the questions, lack of appropriate answer, questions unsuitable to the body/institution involved, etc.).

During the Peer Review with the respondents, a great importance has been given to this field since it has been very useful to review the questionnaire.

Being aware of the complexity of the Sistan structure and different statistical functions of its bodies in the questionnaire have been included some filter questions that following the answers of the respondents address directly to some sections and exclude others according to the different statistical activities.

The questionnaire goes far beyond being a self-evaluation instrument of the compliance of the production processes of official statistics with the principles of the Code: it is intended to help the statistical offices identifying the proper improvement actions to apply to their activities and to share innovative projects.

In order to support the respondent when filling in the questionnaire and to provide explanations and general clarifications on the initiatives, an Help Desk has been created for:

- Centralizing the requests of information and observation on the questionnaire and the documents provided;
- Monitoring the study in terms of return of filled-in questionnaires
- Soliciting the respondents to fill in the questionnaire;
- Providing support for carrying out of the Peer Reviews

3.3 The Peer Reviews

Within the 42 bodies respondents to the questionnaire, 11 bodies have been selected to be peer reviewed.

The Peer Reviews have been set to allow respondents to better understand the aim of the meeting, which was to gather the information missed in the self-assessment questionnaire and to debate about the appropriateness of tools designed for the extension of the Code. The results of this activity have led to accurately review the whole questionnaire and change it where necessary. Some questions have been eliminated or integrated, some have been reformulated since their first version was liable to misinterpretation.

The Peer Reviews have been carried out by teams of 2/3 members of the TF. An Istat member was always in the team. The teams for the Peer Reviews have been formed paying attention to the needs of the system, according to the different backgrounds and experiences of the components of the TF and the organisation they belonged to.

The Peer Reviewers tasks were:

- Setting an evaluation plan (by indicating the responsible of the statistical office to be interviewed and drafting an interview);
- Collecting as much information as possible on the subject to interview before the meeting by browsing the body/institution website and studying the available documentation, in order to understand its possible peculiarities;
- Analysing the questionnaire filled in by the subject to find possible inconsistencies in the answers, to discuss about their occurrence during the meeting and modify the questionnaire where necessary;
- Testing the validity of the questionnaire to gather specific indications on questions (coherence, clarity, exhaustiveness of the answers, suggestions and modifications) and not to evaluate the

subject;

- Testing the structure of the Peer review while it is in progress for possible adjustments;
- Drafting a brief report on the main aspects arisen during the Peer Review related to the organisation, the approach and the effectiveness of the tool chosen.

Before the Peer Reviews took place, the TF developed the Peer Reviews guidelines to define a standard procedure to support the Peer Review teams. The standardisation of the approach and therefore the same way of gathering information revealed its usefulness during the TF meetings.

The Peer Reviews have proved to be a fundamental tool to fully understand the elements arising in the self-assessment questionnaire. The meetings with the responsible of the statistical office and his/her staff have helped collecting more information useful to catch individual peculiarities.

At the same time, the schedule and organisation of the meetings have resulted to be adequate and suitable for their purposes.

In addition, the brief reports on main results of individual meetings have paved the way to the implementation of future Peer Reviews as well as further debates on the improvement of the questionnaire.

4. Conclusions

The impact of this initiative on the selected bodies has been positive. There has been full collaboration among all the subjects involved in this initiative, since it has been perceived innovative and useful; therefore, they have absolutely understood the task of the study and its importance for the extension of the Code to the System as a whole.

The pilot study has represented an innovative approach which can contribute to enhance quality commitment within the System.

The self-assessment questionnaire confirmed to be an appropriate standard tool that enable different bodies of the System to analyze their situation in respect to the content of the principles and to reflect on their role in the production, development and dissemination of official statistics.

The Peer Reviews revealed to be an important aspect in the process for the extension of the Code as they have allowed to share with the Sistan bodies the relevance of concepts included in the principles, and to widen the overview on the functions and activities of the bodies.

The process put in place has been useful mainly to create a set of tools that in the future will allow to extend the Code and analyze the compliance by the System with the principles. Such tools have been honed and, once the process will be at full speed, they will serve to implement future policies to develop the System and the statistical offices.

Image 3 Istat experience – Planning of activities

Phase	Activities	2008				2009										
		September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	
Planning Pilot Study	Selection of the Sistan Bodies															
	Definition targets/indicators for measuring implementation of the Code															
	Definition self-assessment questionnaire															
	Definition of Peer Review guidelines															
Pilot study on Sistan Bodies selected	Sending the self-assessment questionnaires															
	Gathering self-assessment questionnaires															
	Peer Reviews															
	Evaluation results Planning Study															
	Definition requirements of the evaluation teams															
	Final Report															
	Definition of material for the presentation event on pilot study results															
	Presentation of results of Pilot Study and future steps															

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