Spreading the word – implementation of the Code of Practice in a decentralised statistical system

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Abstract

The decentralised system for the production of statistics in Sweden presents many challenges, not least in the dissemination and implementation of common standards for quality. The 27 agencies responsible for official statistics are very different in character and have very different levels of responsibility for statistics. Tasked with the role of coordinating the agencies, the Council for Official Statistics introduced in 2006 a national set of quality guidelines but has been gradually transferring focus to the European Statistics Code of Practice as European statistics have increased in importance for many agencies.

Work has been ongoing for several years in a working group; firstly to spread the Code of Practice in seminars, conferences and working groups sessions; and in more recent years to assist the agencies in the interpretation and implementation of the various principles. To this end, the working group has put together a guide for implementation of the Code, based on the European Quality Assurance Framework but adapted to Swedish circumstances.

This paper aims to present the work of the Council working group, and discuss the challenges and benefits of implementation of the common set of quality standards across different producers of statistics.

1. **Introduction**

Sweden has long been recognised as having a so-called decentralised system of statistical production, with a number of different government agencies producing statistics, both national official statistics and European statistics.

Following decentralisation it was recognised that quality was one of the key areas requiring coordination across these statistical agencies and the coordinating body, the Council for Official Statistics, has been working since then to achieve a more standardised approach to quality. As described below many steps forward have been taken and there is relatively good cooperation in the area of quality today. A recent government inquiry[[1]](#footnote-1) noted that “experience gained by the inquiry suggests that, on the whole, current official statistics are of good quality.” However there is still considerable room for improvement and the inquiry specifically mentioned the European Statistics Code of Practice as a key focus area.

The role of National Statistical Institutes as coordinators of their national systems is nowadays more explicit and therefore it is an important part of the job of an NSI to spread the word about the Code of Practice.

As described below, Statistics Sweden has been carrying out its coordination role for many years. This paper presents this coordination role from the perspective of quality and what is being done to spread compliance with the Code of Practice across Sweden’s many different statistical producers.

1. **Coordination in a decentralised system**
   1. *The road to coordination*

The current system of decentralized statistical production was created during the statistical reform in the middle of the 1990s. Responsibility for official statistics in Sweden was spread over a number of government agencies, with the main aim of giving the users more influence over the statistics.

The government determines the subject areas and statistical areas for which official statistics are to be produced, and which agencies are to be given responsibility for the statistics. Under the legislation, the statistical agencies have a large amount of autonomy regarding what statistics they produce within their areas of responsibility. In a similar way as with the subsidiarity principle in European legislation, the statistical agencies decide themselves on the content and scope of their statistics and, crucially, how the statistics are produced, to what extent and to what frequency. However official statistics are always identified by a special symbol[[2]](#footnote-2), and they are regulated by a number of laws, regulations and guidelines[[3]](#footnote-3) which do not apply in the same way to statistics which are not classified as official.

* 1. *The Council for Official Statistics*

The Council, which is an advisory body, was established following a government report in 1999 which noted that coordination and the overall view of the statistical system needed to be strengthened.

The Council has the task of dealing with matters of principle concerning the availability, quality and usefulness, as well as considering issues of facilitating the response process for data providers. The Council was regulated in an ordinance[[4]](#footnote-4) which outlined the coordination role for Statistics Sweden, the establishment of the Council, which was to be managed by a secretariat at Statistics Sweden, and the chair of the Council which was to be Statistics Sweden’s Director General. This ordinance was important in outlining the areas of activity of the Council and in explicitly giving Statistics Sweden the coordinating role in the system.

* 1. *Soft coordination*

In Sweden we have a system of so-called “soft coordination”. This means that the Council has no mandate to enforce decisions or actions on the statistical agencies. In accordance with the legislation governing official statistics[[5]](#footnote-5), Statistics Sweden may regulate further on issues of availability and (since 2013) quality but only after consulting all the other statistical agencies.

The Council shall produce an annual report on the official statistics regarding how the statistical agencies are working but there is no other in-depth monitoring or follow-up, for example, in the area of quality. The Council carries out its work via working groups, seminars, cooperation and exchange of experiences. Some guidelines and recommendations have been produced on behalf of the Council but these are not binding regulations. These include criteria and principles related to quality which I will describe in more detail below.

**3. Steps forward in the coordination of quality**

*3.1 Regulations on the release of official statistics*

It should be noted that the primary pressing task for the Council was to ensure the accessibility of the official statistics for the users. This was seen as the greatest obstacle following the decentralisation of official statistics, that users were unable to find the statistics they needed because they were not aware of who was producing the statistics. This was why the first steps of the Council focused on developing the electronic network, the publishing calendar and the list of all official statistics.

However, the need for coordination in the area of quality was also recognised at an early stage and the first regulations issued in 2002 by Statistics Sweden under the Official Statistics Ordinance (SCB-FS 2002:16) focused on ensuring that statistical agencies documented the quality of their statistics and published this information alongside the statistics[[6]](#footnote-6). These regulations even recommended the use of a template for this documentation and a basis for the descriptions of quality, MIS 2001:1[[7]](#footnote-7). The template was based on five main components: content, timeliness, accuracy, comparability and coherence, and availability and clarity.

*3.2 Guidelines for sufficient quality*

In 2005 the Council requested that its working group on methods and quality should continue the work on quality and, in particular, try to clarify how statistical agencies should identify whether their statistics achieved a level of quality that is sufficient in relation to how statistics are used. The term “sufficient quality” was seen as crucial in agencies’ work with quality. The work of the working group resulted in a set of criteria to help agencies evaluate whether their statistics held a sufficiently high level of quality. The criteria were published in 2006 and can be seen as the first step in developing a national “Code of Practice” for quality in statistics. The criteria covered the regulatory framework, users’ needs and contact with users, and planning and follow-up procedures in relation to methods, sources, costs and quality.

*3.3 Commitment to quality*

How, then, has this national set of criteria been implemented? Important to remember is that, unlike the Code of Practice, the national criteria are not legally binding. However, they were endorsed by the Council and therefore the statistical agencies implicitly agreed to follow them as far as possible. The Council carries out an annual survey on how the agencies are working with the criteria, in the form of a web survey which is reported as an annex in the annual report. In 2013, only two agencies have made a public commitment that their statistics comply with the criteria whilst a further seventeen agencies report that they are working on implementing them.

*3.4 Night and day – different circumstances require different approaches*

The variation in implementation of the criteria can be partly explained by the variation in the statistical agencies, both in terms of organisational set-up and scope of official statistics. The two agencies that have made the public commitment, the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Swedish Board of Agriculture, have the largest number of official statistics products whilst other agencies only have one or two products and, therefore, scant personnel and financial resources. Some agencies produce statistics based solely on administrative data whilst others rely on data collection from surveys. There are also many differences in type of data provider, from local government to businesses and individuals. In addition, there are some agencies who do not produce any European statistics at all but who have a large amount of national “official statistics” and vice versa. The different circumstances of the statistical agencies naturally require different approaches to quality work, and different levels of support.

**4. Towards a harmonised approach**

*4.1 Swedish official statistics vs. European statistics*

The European Statistics Code of Practice was adopted around the same time that the national guidelines came into being and the statistical agencies in Sweden with the greatest proportion of European statistics began working with the two sets of guidelines. Focus across the system in general however was primarily on spreading the national criteria. Only Statistics Sweden, the Swedish Board of Agriculture and, to some extent, the agency for transport statistics (now Transport Analysis), took account of the European Code of Practice, in advance of the 2007 round of peer reviews. There is a large amount of overlap in Swedish official statistics and European statistics but not a complete correlation (see figure 1 below)

Figure 1 Correlation between Swedish official statistics and European statistics, 2013

Official statistics

European statistics

*4.2 Consolidating two guidelines for quality*

Some efforts were made in 2008 by the Council working group for methods and quality to consolidate the two guidelines so that it would be clearer and easier for the statistical agencies to implement. A study was carried out of the various principles, leading to the conclusion that the national criteria and the Code of Practice covered roughly 89% of the same content. However it was not possible to simply combine the two, or to apply only the Code of Practice. As a set of guidelines from the Council for Official Statistics, the national criteria are not legally binding and have no legal status above a set of recommendations. The Code of Practice, however, with the adoption of Regulation (EU) 223/2009, became the legal standard according to which European statistics should be produced. The focus and terminology also differ between the two guidelines. The national criteria have, for example, no bearing on the institutional framework within which the statistical agencies work, as this is clearly defined in Sweden in the statistical law and ordinance. In a similar way, the Code of Practice is formed around the set of quality criteria outlined in Regulation (EU) 223/2009 which the Swedish criteria are not.

*4.3 Facilitating implementation*

The Swedish statistical agencies have thus continued to work with the two sets of quality guidelines. However, focus has shifted more and more onto the Code of Practice and, even some agencies which do not produce European statistics have decided to focus their quality work on the European set of guidelines instead of the national criteria. Examples of these are the National Social Insurance Agency and the Swedish Forestry Agency. This, in anticipation of the incorporation of the European quality criteria in the Swedish national law, something which was recommended in the 2012 government inquiry and which occurred during 2013. However many agencies have struggled with adapting their work with the national criteria to the Code of Practice.

The Council working group has focused much of its discussions and work during the past few years on helping the agencies to understand and implement the principles in the Code of Practice. The task of facilitating the shift has been a key priority of the Council and the working group. So what has the group done in practice to help the agencies?

*4.4 Council working group on methods and quality*

The composition of the group has been an important factor in the development of the work. The group is the largest working group under the Council, with representation from 15 different agencies. Statistics Sweden chairs the group but is in a minority with regard to representation in the group. This is important because Statistics Sweden is unlike the other statistical agencies in the “official statistics family”. Statistics Sweden’s main business is producing statistics and has an entire quality unit solely focused on quality in statistics. The majority of other statistical agencies in Sweden have small statistical units, often as part of a larger analysis department, while the agency itself is focused on other primary tasks, such as implementing, monitoring and analysing government policy. It was therefore of key importance to view the principles in the Code of Practice from their perspective and adopt an approach that fitted with their specific circumstances, rather than describing implementation from Statistics Sweden’s perspective.

The members of the group are primarily experts who work with issues of official statistics production and quality on a daily basis in their agencies. They have therefore hands-on experience of the issues in question and can raise the primary issues of concern for them, plus practical challenges and solutions. This has also been a key aspect to the success of the group.

*4.5 Guide to implementation*

In October 2011 the Council assigned the working group the task of adapting the principles of the Code of Practice to the Swedish statistical system. The group worked with this task over a long period and presented to the Council in February 2013 its “guide to implementation” of the European Statistics Code of Practice. The guide is essentially a Swedish variation of the European Quality Assurance Framework. It presents every indicator in the Code of Practice and provides examples of ways in which implementation could be achieved, from the perspective of a Swedish statistical agency. Examples are also provided from throughout the agencies (including Statistics Sweden) of how an agency has applied the indicator, with links and further information where appropriate. In this way, the statistical agencies are better able to visualise implementation. Where there is legislation in place which supports compliance with the Code, this is specified in the guide so that each agency does not have to find the references for itself. This is particularly relevant for the principles relating to the institutional framework, which are essentially the same for all government agencies in Sweden.

*4.6 Seminar series*

As described previously, the Council works with soft coordination and facilitates exchanges of experience and cooperation through, for example, seminars and conferences. This was thus a key channel for spreading information about the Code of Practice, and about the guide mentioned above. Workshops were held to gather examples for the guide, to discuss challenges with implementation, and to exchange experiences. The Code of Practice has been presented several times at specific quality seminars and at the annual Conference on Official Statistics. Where there has been discussion about specific aspects of the Code, the Council has tried to organise seminars to develop these aspects further. For example, seminars have been held on quality management (principle 4.1), and on evaluation of questionnaires (8.2).

**6. Future considerations**

*6.1 National criteria in line with European criteria*

As mentioned previously, in 2013 the basis for quality work changed and the European quality criteria (relevance, accuracy, timeliness, punctuality, accessibility and clarity, comparability and coherence) have been added to the Swedish statistical law. This is an important step in consolidating the quality work for the statistical agencies, adopting the same terminology and the same structure for both official statistics and European statistics.

*6.2 One approach, one guideline*

The difficulties mentioned above in consolidating the national criteria and the Code of Practice due to their different theoretical and legal bases should be easier to overcome now. The most pressing questions facing the working group on methods and quality today are whether all the aspects of the national criteria are covered by the Code of Practice and whether all the principles in the Code of Practice are relevant in the national perspective, for Swedish official statistics. Over the summer, the working group plan to address and discuss this question further.

*6.3 Standard description of quality*

Once the quality criteria from the statistical law have been operationalized, either by adopting the Code of Practice as the guideline even for official statistics, or by adapting the national criteria to better cover the principles in the Code of Practice, the next step is to adapt the quality declarations mentioned in section 3.1. The current template for the declarations is based on the national quality framework (MIS 2001:1) which does not have exactly the same terminology or division as the new criteria[[8]](#footnote-8). In order to make it as easy as possible for the statistical agencies to work according to the new criteria, and thus to the Code of Practice, Statistics Sweden and the working group should develop a way of describing quality that matches the criteria. Work at European level to develop standard quality declarations should naturally be an important input to this work.

*6.4 Constructive follow-up*

To complete the circle, the Council and the working group should also consider the way in which quality is followed up across the agencies. Currently follow-up consists of a web questionnaire which is filled in by the agencies themselves on the basis on self-assessment. As noted in the 2012 government inquiry, “to safeguard the quality of statistics, there is reason – within the framework of the conditions provided by the decentralised system - to raise the level of ambition somewhat with regard to coordination, follow-up, etc.” It could be an option, for example, to supplement the self-assessments of the statistical agencies with more constructive feedback to those agencies that are having difficulties in implementing the guidelines, in the form of dialogue. To this end, the Council would no longer simply monitor compliance but also help the agencies to identify obstacles to implementation, offer advice, and point them in the right direction.

**7. Conclusions**

In conclusion, much has been done in Sweden to coordinate quality across the many statistical agencies. From the obligation to publish quality declarations for official statistics, to the endorsement of national guidelines, the introduction and dissemination of the European Statistics Code of Practice, and the development of a national guide to implementation.

It is my belief that the following are crucial to the success of implementing any guideline across a decentralised statistical system:

* Developing one set of criteria and one guideline that are clear, defined and practical in their focus. Such a guideline should take into account international standards and guidelines so that, by complying with the national guideline, producers also comply with other relevant guidelines;
* “Nationalising” the principles of any guideline to ensure that they are able to be implemented on the many different types of statistical producers;
* Providing statistical agencies with the tools for implementation, such as a clear regulatory framework, templates for declarations and other key documentation, advice where required, and examples from other agencies;
* Maintaining a forum for discussion of quality issues, exchanges of experience, in particular with representation from many different statistical agencies to ensure that the variations in approach and possibilities are captured;
* Continuously working to inform statistical agencies about the guidelines, to refresh the practical examples and reflect changes in legislation and circumstances.

1. <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/108/a/205564> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Primarily the Official Statistics Act (2001:99), the Official Statistics Ordinance (2001:100), the Personal Data Act (1998:204), and Statistics Sweden's regulations and general guidelines (SCB-FS 2002:16) for the official release, publishing etc. of official statistics [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ordinance (2007:762) with instructions for Statistics Sweden [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Official Statistics Ordinance (2001:100) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Section 1 of Statistics Sweden’s regulations and general guidelines for the official release, publishing, etc. of official statistics [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quality definitions and recommendations for quality declarations of official statistics”, 2001:1 Statistics Sweden [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The national criteria mention ”content” instead of ”relevance”, for example [↑](#footnote-ref-8)