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QUALITY FRAMEWORK AND GUIDELINES FOR OECD STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES

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FOREWORD

The OECD has a high reputation for both the quality of its analytical work and for the statistics that underpin that work. In some areas, OECD statistics are internationally recognised as the “best” in terms of coverage, timeliness, and comparability. The network of national and international experts created, through the Committees and Working Parties, gives to the Organisation the possibility to launch research activities (and data collections) on new topics, play a leading role in producing new statistics and develop new definitions, classifications and standards.

Nevertheless, the improvement of quality is a continuous process and one of the main objectives of the Statistics Strategy launched by the OECD in 2001 is the enhancement of the quality of OECD statistics. All OECD statisticians devote a large part of their time to improve quality, but, as the experience of other national and international organisations clearly has demonstrated, the adoption of a formalised approach to quality for statistics can bring important benefits. First, it provides a systematic mechanism for ongoing identification and resolution of quality problems, maximising the interaction between experts in different fields (statisticians, IT experts, final users, etc.); second, it gives greatly increased transparency to the processes used by the OECD to assure quality; and third, it reinforces the political role of the OECD in the context of an information society, increasing the credibility of the Organisation as one of the “first class” data providers.

It is important to note that to develop and implement a successful approach to quality, independently from its technical characteristics, the human factor is absolutely crucial. From this point of view I would like to stress how the OECD approach to quality in statistics has developed through the deep involvement of statisticians working in all Directorates, and a process that has achieved, step by step, a growing consensus on its characteristics, usefulness and importance. This process has also promoted a common view among OECD statisticians of the dimensions of quality, the core values of OECD statisticians and their role vis-à-vis stakeholders and civil society at large. A stronger sense of partnership between OECD statisticians is already an important result of the “quality initiative”.

As already said, the improvement of quality is a “never ending story”, also partly because of the continuous evolution of statistical and IT techniques. This means that the current version of the quality framework and guidelines (version 2003/1) will necessarily be reviewed in the near future, as such developments take place. The framework already contains a procedure for its periodic review and updating, in particular, significant revisions are expected in 2004, after the conclusion of the first wave of quality reviews and the full development of the new OECD statistical information system. The “dynamic” nature of the document is an important characteristic, necessary to provide OECD statisticians with a useful and up-to-date tool for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the statistical activities they manage.

Even though the development of the “Quality framework and guidelines for OECD statistical activities” has been supported by the contribution of a number of OECD statisticians, I would like to acknowledge the role played by M. Colledge, D. Ward and G. Salou, who have worked with me in designing the system and writing this document. Special thanks also goes to E. Capponi, E. Espinasse, M. Linster, P. Lübker, P. Richardson and C. Webb, who took part in the task-force established to develop the quality framework. A. Signora and E. Matthews contributed to the preparation and the finalisation of the

document. Important comments on an earlier version of the framework were provided by G. Brackstone (Statistics Canada) and other national experts. Finally, I would like to thank Donald Johnston, the Secretary General of the OECD, for his decision to give high priority to the Statistics Strategy and for his continuous support to its implementation.

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Chief Statistician of the OECD
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INTRODUCTION

1. Improvement in the quality of OECD statistics is one of the main objectives of the current OECD Statistics Strategy (OSS). OECD statisticians devote a significant part of their effort to quality improvement at an individual level, and the Organisation already applies techniques that are used in total quality management frameworks without having adopted a formalised approach to quality. Internal quality assurance processes are already in place in several Directorates. These include treatment and validation of questionnaire replies, cross-checking with national publications, compilation of additional information from OECD and other international sources, preparation of draft publication, referral of data queries and other quality issues back to source agency, interpretation, etc.

2. Several projects have been launched in the framework of the OSS and considerable improvements have been achieved in 2001-2002. These initiatives will enhance quality, though there is still need for a common framework which can be used to systematically assess, compare and further improve OECD statistics. A quality framework that is applied across the Organisation will:

- provide a systematic mechanism for the ongoing identification and resolution of quality problems;
- significantly increase the transparency of processes used by the OECD to assure quality; and
- reinforce the political role of the OECD in the context of an information society.

3. A lot of work has been done in recent years to apply the concept of quality to statistical data. For example, the IMF, Eurostat, Statistics Canada and other national statistical offices (NSOs) have identified various sets of data quality components and have adopted quality frameworks to improve their organisations and the quality of data produced. The OECD quality framework benefits from this work and we have avoided “reinventing the wheel” by adapting existing definitions and approaches to the OECD context.

4. For an international organisation, the quality of statistics disseminated depends on two aspects, the quality of national statistics received, and the quality of internal processes for collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of data and metadata. In several fields, national statistics are developed closely in accordance with international standards. On the other hand, statistical processes at international level are often derived from best practices developed at national level. Thus, there is a clear inter-dependence between the two aspects.

5. The OECD Quality Framework outlined in this document focuses on improving the quality of data collected, compiled and disseminated by the OECD through an improvement in the Organisation’s internal statistical processes and management, though there will also be a positive spillover effect on the quality of data compiled at the national level. Thus, in a sense, the OECD quality initiative is similar to those developed by Statistics Canada and other NSOs, which also encompass statistical managerial and technical processes.

6. The OECD Quality Framework has four elements:

- a definition of quality and its dimensions;
- a procedure for assuring the quality of proposed new statistical activities;
- a procedure for evaluating the quality of existing statistical activities on a regular basis;
- a set of broad principles on which OECD statistical activities are to be conducted and quality guidelines covering all phases of the statistical production process.

7. This document is organised as follows. Part 1 provides definitions of quality dimensions, together with a brief description of procedures for assuring the quality of new statistical activities and for evaluating the quality of existing statistical activities. In addition, it presents a set of broad basic principles on which OECD statistical activities have to be conducted. Part 2 outlines quality guidelines for different phases of the statistical production process. Finally, Part 3 presents a description of specific steps to be followed in planning and carrying out statistical activities, together with examples of good practice currently in use in OECD Directorates.