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QUALITY FRAMEWORK AND GUIDELINES FOR OECD STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES

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FOREWORD

OECD statistics have a high reputation for quality and integrity throughout the world. They serve both as a key input for analytical work that informs policy recommendations and policy-making and also as an output in their own right in the form of publications and other products. OECD statistics cover a wide range of domains, from economics to health and education, from tax and agriculture to the environment, from migration and innovation to quality of life, just to name a few. Importantly, OECD statistics contribute to the OECD mission of promoting better policies for better lives.

Maintaining the high level of quality of OECD statistics is vital for the Organisation. Indeed, this level of ‘data excellence’ needs to be constantly monitored and improved along its main dimensions of relevance, accuracy, credibility, timeliness, accessibility, interpretability and coherence. This does not just apply to existing statistical activities but also to any of the new areas of research and analysis that are regularly added to the work programmes of OECD committees and working parties and that result in new statistical data collections. These must also adhere to the strict OECD quality standards.

To manage these quality standards in a systematic manner, the first version of the OECD Quality Framework (and the associated Quality Review process) was produced in 2003 as part of a wider reform of OECD statistical activities. Much of the drive for the review process in the initial period was geared towards the adoption of an OECD-wide corporate IT data management and dissemination system (the OECD Statistical Information System). These goals have now been achieved. And it was thus considered necessary to adapt the OECD Quality Review process to meet more recent and future developments.

To that end, the OECD has undertaken a review of its existing Quality Framework and Review process. The main recommendations from the review were that the main quality dimensions remained valid but that the Framework required improvement to: (i) better take into account the users’ perspective; (ii) make review procedures more effective and less burdensome for statistical programme managers; and (iii) better reflect statistical, technological and institutional changes that have taken place since the Framework was first issued.

The OECD is now in the process of implementing these recommendations. I am confident that the newly adopted Quality Framework will ensure that the OECD continues to maintain its strong reputation as an international producer of statistics of the highest quality in years to come.

Martine Durand
OECD Chief Statistician and Director of the Statistics Directorate
August 2011

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INTRODUCTION

1. Improvement in the quality of OECD statistics is one of the main objectives of the 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 were launched in the framework of the OSS and considerable improvements achieved. 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. Much 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 knock-on 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 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.