

Peer reviews – impact of their recommendations and first results

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Abstract

A peer review can be a powerful driving force for developing the national statistical system. In addition to increasing awareness of the quality framework for European statistics, the process itself is instrumental in bringing forward improvement ideas from various levels in the National Statistical Institute (NSI) and the other national authorities responsible for European statistics (ONAs).

The second round of ESS peer reviews 2013-2015 had a significant impact on the Norwegian Statistical System, contributing to processes resulting in a new statistics act adopted in 2019, the establishment of an advisory council for Statistics Norway, a multi-year national programme for official statistics and a national coordinating committee for official statistics. Against that background, Statistics Norway entered the third round of peer reviews 2021-2023 with a clear understanding of the potential for change embedded in the process.

The new peer review would be the first evaluation of whether the recent changes in the legal and institutional framework were in line with European standards. In addition, there was an expectation that this round would focus on future-oriented innovations in the statistical system. In consequence, it was decided to follow a decentralised approach involving all relevant parts of the organisation in Statistics Norway and the ONAs, inviting subject matter experts to describe the current situation in their area in the self-assessment phase. The central coordination team in Statistics Norway functioned as advisers and editors for the input provided by the contributors across the organisations.

The main goal was set out by the coordination team at the start of the process: To describe the current situation as accurately as possible, without exaggerating positively or negatively, to facilitate receiving recommendations that are useful for the further improvement of the Norwegian statistical system. The observations made by the peer review team and the recommendations received at the end of their visit were in line with these expectations and thus perceived as fair, relevant, and helpful for the continued development in the areas concerned.

The same decentralised approach was used when defining the improvement actions to be implemented in the coming years based on the recommendations. In the view of Statistics Norway, the close involvement of experts at various levels in the NSI and ONAs was a key success factor for the recent peer review of the Norwegian statistical system, ensuring a mutual understanding of the challenges in each area and the most appropriate way to meet them.

Keywords: peer review, quality framework, quality improvement

1. Introduction

In an era when an abundance of information of uncertain reliability is presented as facts, it is perhaps more important than ever that European official statistics is of verified high quality and trusted by users. To this end, external peer reviews of the national statistical authorities in all member states of the European Statistical System (ESS) are conducted regularly.

The overall objective of the ESS peer reviews is to monitor the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP) by the national statistical authorities. The ES CoP has 16 principles and 84 indicators covering the institutional environment, statistical processes, and statistical output (Eurostat, 2018). All statistical authorities in the ESS, comprised of Eurostat, the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) and other national authorities responsible for European Statistics (ONAS) in the EU and EFTA states, commit themselves to adhere to the code.

The first round of ESS peer reviews took place in 2006-2008, after the adoption of the first version of the ES CoP in 2005. Following the revision of the ES CoP in 2011, a second round of ESS peer reviews was conducted in 2013-2015. In addition to monitoring the implementation of the ES CoP and the progress made since the previous peer review, the second round assessed the coordination role of the NSIs within the National Statistical System (NSS).

After the ES CoP was revised again in 2017, reflecting the outcomes of the second round of peer reviews, changes in the legal framework for European statistics and the latest innovations in technology and methodology, it was decided to launch a third round of peer reviews in 2021-2023. This peer review exercise aimed to go beyond the current ES CoP by identifying future-oriented elements that could help revise the code and highlight new developments in the national statistical systems. Special consideration was put on the principles of professional independence, national coordination and cooperation, modernisation, and innovation.

Based on the experiences from the previous rounds, Statistics Norway volunteered to be among the first participants in the third round of peer reviews. This paper describes the significant impact on the Norwegian Statistical System from the second round of peer reviews and the preparations, recommendations and first results of the third round.

2. The impact of the second round of ESS peer review

The second round of ESS peer review in 2014 had a significant impact on the Norwegian Statistical System. Although the external peer review team considered that Statistics Norway had a high level of compliance with the ES CoP, they recommended changes in the statistical legislation, the coordination with other national authorities and the quality management to bring

the framework of the Norwegian Statistical System up to date with the latest updates of the European statistical legislation and the ES CoP.

In the national statistical legislation, it was recommended to better define the term “official statistics”, clarify the role of the Board of Statistics Norway, strengthen Statistics Norway’s national coordination role, and provide a mandate for the Statistics Council. These recommendations were a key factor in the Norwegian government’s decision to appoint a committee to review the Norwegian Statistics Act of 1989, considering the comprehensive changes in the framework for official statistics since it was adopted (Von der Fehr, N et al., 2018). The subsequent proposals from the committee resulted in a new Statistics Act adopted in 2019 (Statistics Norway, 2019).

The new Statistics Act clarified the definition of official statistics and the coordination role of Statistics Norway in the national statistical system, and provided the legal basis for establishing an advisory council for Statistics Norway (replacing the previous board for Statistics Norway), a multi-year national programme for official statistics and a national coordinating committee for official statistics:

- **The Council for Statistics Norway** is an independent council with a broad-ranging composition, which shall advise the Director General and help ensure that Statistics Norway’s work is performed to the best possible standard.
- **The National Programme for Official Statistics** defines the areas covered by official statistics and the national authorities responsible for developing, producing, and disseminating official statistics in Norway.
- **The Committee for Official Statistics** is an advisory body led by Statistics Norway, whose members represent authorities responsible for official statistics and main administrative data registers. The Committee shall assist Statistics Norway in preparing the programme for official statistics, contribute to coordination and development, and focus on user needs and cost-effective statistics production.

Against that background, Statistics Norway entered the third round of ESS peer reviews 2021-2023 with a clear understanding of the potential for change embedded in the process.

3. Planning and preparing for the third round

The peer review meetings in Norway were scheduled for the week of 22-26 November 2021, making Norway the fifth country to be reviewed in the third round of ESS peer reviews. This would be the first evaluation of whether the recent changes in the legal and institutional framework of the Norwegian Statistical System were in line with European standards.

3.1.1 Preparations in Statistics Norway and the ONAs

Preparations for the peer review started 14 months ahead of the planned visit. Statistics Norway established a coordination group with expertise from international and national coordination, quality management, legal affairs, communication, and the previous peer review. The coordination group met every two weeks from the start of 2021, studying the guidelines from Eurostat and starting the planning and preparatory work.

In addition to Statistics Norway, this round of peer review of the Norwegian statistical system covered four ONAs: the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, the Directorate of Fisheries, the Directorate of Immigration, and the Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research.

One of the first preparatory steps of the coordination group was to organise meetings and workshops with the management and key stakeholders in Statistics Norway and the ONAs to provide information about the peer review process and the required Self-Assessment Questionnaires (SAQ). Information about the peer review was also posted on the internal web pages and information boards of Statistics Norway at regular intervals during the whole peer review process to raise awareness among the staff.

Governing and advisory bodies such as the Ministry of Finance, the Council for Statistics Norway and the Committee for Official Statistics were informed about the upcoming peer review in the relevant coordination meetings. Ahead of the planned peer review visit, formal invitation letters were sent to external stakeholders in the main data providers (owners of administrative registers), the main users in public institutions and private organisations, and representatives from the research community and the Norwegian media, informing about the process and asking for their participation in dedicated meetings with the expert team.

3.1.2 A decentralised approach

In line with previous experiences, an inclusive approach was chosen for completing the SAQ in Statistics Norway. Responsibility for individual indicators was assigned to the relevant departments and divisions in Statistics Norway and the ONAs by the coordination team, inviting the subject matter experts to describe the current situation in their area. A sub-group of the central coordination team in Statistics Norway functioned as advisers and editors of the input provided by the contributors. The main task of the editing team was to ensure a comprehensive and coherent text in the final versions of the SAQs, approved by the relevant management level in Statistics Norway and the ONAs.

The rationale for using a decentralised approach was that it is the part of the organisation responsible for performing a task that is best suited to describe the status in their area, as well as the challenges and opportunities for improvements. The main goal of the self-assessments

was set out by the coordination team at the start of the process: To describe the current situation as accurately as possible, without exaggerating positively or negatively, to facilitate receiving recommendations that are useful for the further development of the NSS.

3.1.3 Engaging with the peer review experts

In the weeks leading up to the planned peer review visit, regular online meetings with the chair of the expert team, and occasionally the whole team, were set up to discuss the status of the preparations and to address any questions the peer review team or national coordination team might have. The clarifications on the detailed topics to be discussed in each meeting were especially helpful for planning the agenda and making sure that participants with the right competence were invited to the meetings with the expert team.

Overall, 27 physical meetings were planned with the peer review team, with a total of 91 participants including the four peer review experts, 50 participants from Statistics Norway, nine from the ONAs and 32 external stakeholders. However, due to an unexpected increase in Covid-19 infections in November 2021, travel restrictions were imposed on European Commission staff. In consequence, the peer review meetings in Norway were moved to an online format on one week's notice.

Nevertheless, due to the cooperative spirit of the peer review experts and meeting participants, the move to virtual meetings went surprisingly well. Likely, the decision to keep the original agenda for the meetings and encourage all participants to log on individually (to avoid hybrid solutions with several people in one room) minimised the challenges with conducting the peer review meetings for Norway online, as one of the very few countries.

4. Findings and recommendations from the peer review experts

In their report, the peer review team noted the progress made in the Norwegian Statistical System since the previous peer review visit in 2014. The expert team particularly emphasised the new governing structure and coordination framework for official statistics established by the Statistics Act of 2019 as significant advances (Bruun, M. et al.,2021).

The expert team further noted the solid institutional framework, the comprehensive quality framework for official statistics and the high level of trust in Norwegian official statistics, as well as the competent, enthusiastic staff and open working and management culture.

The expert team highlighted the following innovative practices:

- The system for quality management.
- Cooperation and quality agreements with owners of administrative registers.

- Legal basis for access to administrative and privately held data.
- Research and development into possible uses of new data sources.

The expert team did not find any issues that were non-compliant with the ES CoP. The report did, however, contain 15 recommendations in areas where the team believed that Statistics Norway and the four ONAs could improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP. Most of the recommendations were related to better planning of ongoing developments and initiatives, better visibility of the quality work being done and closer cooperation between the authorities responsible for official statistics in Norway.

Among the recommendations to Statistics Norway were creating a roadmap for development activities, further developing the national programme for official statistics, and creating an action plan for monitoring the quality of the entire Norwegian Statistical System. The expert team also recommended that Statistics Norway consider the possibilities for publishing more detailed statistics, strengthening staff competence, strengthening relationships with users, and further enhancing the services for access to microdata.

For their part, the ONAs were recommended to be proactive in their relations with national and international partners and improve the transparency and visibility of their role as producers of official statistics, both internally in their organisations and externally on their websites.

The general view of Statistics Norway and the ONAs after receiving the recommendations was that the observations made by the peer review team were in line with the expectations and the topics discussed in the meetings, and thus perceived as fair, relevant, and helpful for the continued development in the areas concerned.

5. Defining and implementing improvement actions

In response to the recommendations from the expert team, Statistics Norway and the four ONAs prepared a plan for improvement actions containing a total of 54 actions and sub-actions (Statistics Norway, 2023). Statistics Norway is responsible for implementing 38 of these measures, while the other authorities are responsible for 16 (four actions each on average).

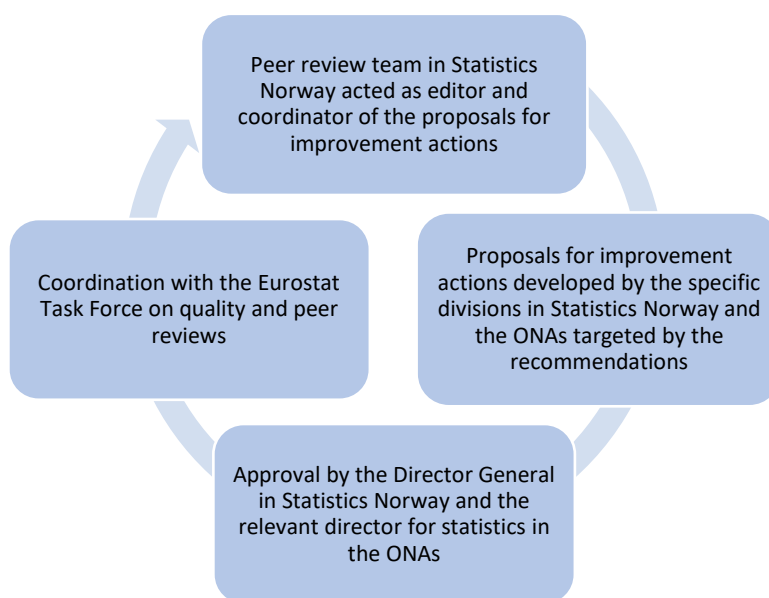
The same decentralised approach used for describing the current situation in the SAQs was used for defining the improvement actions to be implemented in the coming years based on the recommendations (Figure 1):

- The proposals for improvement actions were developed by the parts of the organisation in Statistics Norway and the ONAs that were targeted by the recommendations and the closest to determine the best way of making improvements.

- The coordination team in Statistics Norway functioned as editor and coordinator of the proposals for improvement actions, ensuring that the proposed actions aligned with the established methodology and were approved by the relevant management.

When preparing the improvement actions, emphasis was placed on them being specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound, in line with the framework for peer reviews. However, it was also emphasised that the actions should be useful for the further development of working methods in Statistics Norway and the ONAs and integrated with existing plans and strategies. The criteria of usefulness and integration were added to underline that the peer review is an opportunity for long-term improvement, not a box-ticking exercise.

Figure 1: Cycle of decentralised development of improvement actions



The main lesson learnt from developing the improvement actions in the third round of peer review was that the process is an effective catalyst for implementing existing improvement ideas. In practice, the improvement process starts when the responsible parts of the organisation are asked to describe the current situation in their areas for the SAQ. The exercise of having to summarise your work considering the ES CoP while knowing that an external expert team will evaluate the current situation, is a strong motivator for improving the weak points identified in the self-assessment.

In many cases, the relevant improvements have already been discussed internally and the peer review provides the opportunity to move from idea to implementation. In addition, the discussions with the expert team provide an outside perspective, which may help focus the content and scope of the required improvement. Finally, alignment with the methodology for peer reviews ensures that the actions are clearly described and easy to monitor.

These are some examples of the improvement actions put forward by the responsible entities in Statistics Norway and the ONAs in response to the recommendations in the third round:

- A roadmap for development activities containing an overview of prioritised activities in all departments, including details about responsibilities, deadlines, deliveries, and risks has been compiled under the supervision of the directors from the IT, methods, and statistical departments in Statistics Norway.
- Quality evaluations of all national producers of official statistics have been established as an annual process by the Quality Team in Statistics Norway, covering self-assessments of compliance with the ES CoP, follow-up interviews, and development and monitoring of improvement actions for each statistical authority.
- Networks for methodology and dissemination open for all national producers of official statistics have been established through the Committee for Official Statistics.
- An advisory committee for disclosure control and statistical confidentiality has been established with members from the statistical departments, the legal service, and the Division for Methods.
- Several departments in Statistics Norway have established teams or networks for training and support for software such as Python and R and related competencies in response to the increased need for IT and coding skills when migrating the statistical production processes in Statistics Norway to a new data platform. The teams organise workshops, share knowledge and provide technical assistance.
- The Division for Microdata in Statistics Norway has increased the training and information resources available for the microdata services, by setting up more courses, providing regular newsletters and increasing the number of staff guiding users. The division is also developing a user-tested application form with decision support.
- The ONAs, on their side, have improved the information and documentation of official statistics on their internal and external websites, and in some cases clarified the responsibilities for official statistics within the organisation.

The improvement action plan for the Norwegian Statistical System was approved by Eurostat in the spring of 2023, and the status of each action will be reported to Eurostat annually from 2024 to 2027. Preliminary updates from the responsible entities in Statistics Norway and the four ONAs participating in the peer review indicate that the implementation of the actions is generally ongoing as planned.

6. Conclusions

The main insight from the last rounds of ESS peer reviews in Norway is that they are a powerful driving force for developing the national statistical system. In addition to increasing the awareness of the quality framework for European statistics, the peer review process is instrumental in bringing forward improvement ideas from various organisational levels.

In the view of the national coordinator in Statistics Norway for the third round, these are the key success factors for a positive outcome of the peer review process:

- **Early planning and preparation:** Statistics Norway initiated preparations for the peer review 14 months before the planned visit, establishing a coordination group with expertise from various domains and previous peer reviews. One of the first preparatory steps was to organise meetings and workshops with the management and key stakeholders in Statistics Norway and the ONAs to provide information about the peer review process and the requirements.
- **Inclusive approach:** A decentralised approach was adopted for describing the current situation in the SAQs. Responsibility for self-assessment of the individual principles and indicators was assigned to the relevant parts of Statistics Norway and the ONAs.
- **Engaging with the peer review experts:** The national coordination team established early contact with the peer review team to clarify issues related to the review process, format, and methodology, ensuring alignment and a mutual understanding of the issues to be discussed in the meetings.
- **Engaging with stakeholders:** There was active engagement with stakeholders, including management, key staff, governing and advisory bodies, external data providers, users, and the research community. Information about the peer review process was given through meetings, workshops, internal web pages, and invitations to dedicated meetings with the expert team.
- **Decentralised development of improvement actions:** The close involvement of experts at various levels in the NSI and ONAs in developing the improvement actions is fundamental for identifying the most appropriate way to improve the challenges highlighted in the peer review recommendations.

In conclusion: Although not as transformative as the second round of ESS peer reviews, with its significant impact on the legal basis and institutional framework of the Norwegian Statistical System, the third round of peer reviews turned out to be an effective catalyst for implementing improvement ideas that were already being discussed at various levels in the NSI and ONAs.

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