

Good Practice Advisory Committee

Eighth Report

December 2021

Introduction

The Good Practice Advisory Committee (GPAC), hereinafter referred to as the Committee, was established under the provisions of Article 4 of the Hellenic Statistical Law (no. 3832 of 9 March 2010, as amended). The Law stipulated that the Committee should be comprised of five members as follows:

- a) One member nominated by the Hellenic Parliament;
- b) One member nominated by the European Statistical Office (Eurostat);
- c) One member nominated by the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB);
- d) One member nominated by the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC); and
- e) One member nominated by the Hellenic Data Protection Authority.

The President of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) is entitled to participate in the Committee on a non-voting basis.

The task of the Committee, as stipulated in the Law, is to prepare an annual report on the implementation of Principles 1 to 6 of the European Statistics Code of Practice in the Hellenic Statistical System. The report is to be submitted to the Hellenic Parliament, having informed the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board accordingly, and shall be made public following submission to Parliament.

In accordance with the Law, and having consulted with the various nominating bodies, the Minister of Finance issued a Decision (Ref. No. Δ6A1001384EΞ2013, as amended) in January 2013, convening the Committee and appointing five members for the two-year period 2013-2014 inclusive. In accordance with its mandate, the original Committee produced two annual reports in September 2013¹ and December 2014² respectively over the course of its term of office, which terminated at the end of 2014. In line with the Law as then applying, the future of the Committee was reviewed by the Greek Authorities and it was decided that the Law should be amended to establish GPAC as a permanent advisory committee, with members appointed by the Minister to serve for two-year terms. The Law was duly amended in July 2015 and the Minister of Finance issued a Decision (Ref. No. 0002491EΞ2016) in March 2016 appointing new members for the period 2016-2017 inclusive. This Committee produced two annual reports in December 2016³ and December 2017⁴ respectively over the course of its

¹ http://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1195539/report_adv_2013_EN.pdf/ade26414-2d3d-4eb8-9752-731663065fdf

² http://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1195539/report_adv_2014_EN.pdf/198f48ca-2b5b-4a53-8a5cbcff2165e810

³ http://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1195539/report_adv_3rd_EN.pdf/594fae41-5542-4bf3-bee9-6e878752586d

⁴ http://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1195539/GPAC_4th_Report_2017.pdf/63133c54-37f4-478b-baab-116ce53239e4

term of office, which terminated at the end of 2017. In March 2018, the Minister of Finance again issued a Decision (Ref. No. 2/20895/0004) appointing new members for the period 2018-2019 inclusive. This Committee produced two annual reports in December 2018⁵ and December 2019⁶ respectively over the course of its term of office, which terminated at the end of 2019. Once again, the Minister of Finance issued a Decision (Ref. No. 35165/2020) in April 2020 appointing new members for the period 2020-2021 inclusive. Details of the members appointed to the re-convened Committee are given in Appendix 1. Ms. Katerina Kalioti from ELSTAT was appointed Secretary to the Committee. Mr. Athanasios C. Thanopoulos, President of ELSTAT, participated in GPAC meetings in accordance with Article 4.5 of the Law.

Due to the Covid-19-crisis, all proceedings of the new Committee in its first year had to take place by means of videoconferencing or by written procedure. Its first meeting took place by videoconferencing on the 29th of June 2020 and Mr. Stephan Moens, Honorary Advisor General at Statistics Belgium and nominee of the ESSC, was re-elected as Chairman. Given the extraordinary circumstances, the Committee decided to reduce the size of the report and to focus on those issues related to the Covid-19 crisis. This report⁷ was produced on the basis of a written procedure. It was subsequently discussed and formally adopted in a videoconference on the 18th of December 2020.

The proceedings of the Committee in its second year were still subject to some restrictions due to Covid-19. Its first meeting took place by videoconferencing on the 11th of June 2021 and was again limited in scope. Fortunately, the second meeting could take place physically in Athens from the 13th to the 14th of September, enabling the Committee to take up again its dialogue with senior staff of ELSTAT and other Greek officials and stakeholders of the Hellenic Statistical System. In this meeting, the Committee decided to focus the 8th report on a series of particularly important issues, rather than going systematically through all the relevant principles and indicators of the ESCoP. This report was adopted in a meeting on the 16th of December 2021.

In 2022, the third round of Peer Reviews of the European Statistical System will review the progress in the implementation of the entire European Statistics Code of Practice in the Hellenic Statistical System. Apart from the principles and indicators regularly scrutinised by GPAC, the Peer Review will focus particularly on coordination and innovation.

The current report therefore concentrates on those principles and indicators of the ESCoP that were considered particularly relevant in the year 2021.

⁵ https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1196143/GPAC_5th_Report_2018.pdf/f54e6c2b-b907-4f93-a008-5c0044bd373b?t=1545221986749

⁶ https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1196143/GPAC_6th_Report_2019_en.pdf/5fdb6fd6-9f90-434c-0e86-71fb41b1c07c?t=1576571570270

⁷ https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1195539/GPAC+7th+Report_2020.pdf/b37417c6-0145-7eaf-a6a2-c20c87f38d34

Review of progress and issues in the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice in the Hellenic Statistical System

Principle 1: Professional independence

In its 7th report, GPAC expressed its satisfaction on the fact that ELSTAT continues to comply to the fullest extent with Principle 1 of the ESCoP. It remains clear that ELSTAT has now largely established itself in the public mind as an independent statistical agency that is free, in particular, from any direct political or inappropriate governmental influence on its professional work. This favourable situation is due in large part to the strength of the statistical legislation underpinning the Authority and also to the firm commitment of senior management, as demonstrated by the appropriate procedures that have been put in place to ensure compliance in line with international recommendations and standards.

In February 2021, ELSTAT managed to have the law on the General Censuses for Buildings and Population-Housing of 2021 voted by the vast majority of the members of the Hellenic Parliament, gaining broad support from both government and opposition parties, without any substantial amendments to the legal act proposal as introduced by ELSTAT. It is the first time that a Census in Greece is conducted by virtue of a legal text that enjoys democratic legitimisation to that extent. This is a good illustration of the fact that the professional independence of the ELSS is now widely recognised.

On the other hand, GPAC expressed some concern due to incidents concerning misinterpretation and even misuse by media and policy makers of employment/unemployment figures and the revision of national accounts, and recommended vigilance towards such practices. GPAC is pleased to hear that the situation seems to have eased. Specifically, after the technical explanations ELSTAT had communicated on the benchmark revision of national accounts, there have been no politically motivated public statements or complaints. As regards unemployment statistics, after the initial explanations given by ELSTAT, users seem now to have understood the differences between the administrative data of the Hellenic Manpower Organisation (OAED) and the results of the Labour Force Survey. In particular, in January 2021, ELSTAT proceeded, in conformity with indicator 1.7 of the ES CoP, to the immediate publication of an announcement, in response to comments of a Member of Parliament on the accuracy and reliability of LFS unemployment data. The announcement provided detailed information on the methodological differences between LFS and OAED unemployment data. In addition, ELSTAT has managed to announce the latest LFS monthly results one month earlier than scheduled.

In its Sixth Report, GPAC expressed its satisfaction with the fact that the long running court proceedings against the former President of ELSTAT, Andreas Georgiou, and two senior colleagues seemed to have reached a final and welcome conclusion in early 2019.

Consequently, this issue was not mentioned in its Seventh Report. However, in 2021 a new judgment in a civil lawsuit between M. Georgiou and a senior official of ELSTAT has found M. Georgiou guilty of simple slander towards this official. While GPAC has full respect of this judicial procedure, especially as it is of a civil nature, it wishes to restate its confidence on the data produced by ELSTAT, established under its former and consolidated under its current Presidency. GPAC is confident that the achieved excellent reputation of the ELSS is not compromised. Nevertheless, it will continue to follow closely further developments.

GPAC recommends that ELSTAT remain vigilant towards misinterpretation of its statistics and continue its communication efforts, as well as its strategy in fostering statistical literacy with policy makers and journalists. **GPAC wishes to remind** that, according to Indicator 1.7 of the ESCoP, ELSTAT has the right to “comment publicly on statistical issues, including criticisms and misuses of statistics as far as considered suitable”.

Commitment on Confidence in Statistics (CoC)

Greece is one of the few countries that have a stand-alone CoC. During the last two years Greece has not reported on the CoC. However, the CoC of Greece was signed in 2012 and now seems to be outdated, since most of the requirements laid down in this document are now fulfilled.

GPAC recommends that the Greek Government take an initiative to prepare a report and update the CoC. Preparatory work should be started as soon as possible, since the next Eurostat report to the Council and the European Parliament on the CoCs will be submitted in 2022.

Principle 2: Mandate for Data Collection and Access to Data

GPAC notes that ELSTAT has maintained and even enhanced access to administrative sources. The regular provision of tax data on a monthly basis facilitates cross-checking with the corresponding data from surveys and ensures the overall quality of the statistics produced in terms of accuracy and coverage, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ELSTAT has continued to produce new and experimental high-frequency statistical products based on administrative sources and publishes them on its COVID-19 webpage (<https://www.statistics.gr/en/covid-19>) as well as on a dedicated webpage on experimental statistics (<https://www.statistics.gr/en/exp-stats>).

However, GPAC notes that the benchmark revision of GDP was not completed by the end of September 2021. This was due to the late submission of data by the Ministry of Finance. In addition, if the Ministry of Finance sent tax data within 30 days, there would be no need for flash estimates of GDP. Therefore, **GPAC urges** the Ministry of Finance to ensure that tax data

is transmitted to ELSTAT on time to ensure timely and better quality data on GDP. Furthermore, the back-casting for the years before 2010 is still in progress. **GPAC recommends** that the back-casting be completed as soon as possible.

Progress has been made in the compilation and dissemination of data on quarterly business demography and, more specifically, on the registrations and bankruptcies of enterprises, in accordance with the new European Regulation on Business Statistics, which entered into force on 1 January 2021 (Regulation (EU) 2019/2152). The statistical data were compiled after processing quarterly data from the administrative registers of enterprises from the Independent Authority for Public Revenue (AADE).

In the context of the 2021 Population and Housing Census, ELSTAT has taken initiatives to better depict specific social groups:

- ELSTAT has been working closely with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum to collect detailed data on accommodation structures for immigrants and refugee centres. Data will be collected on the capacity and type of these facilities, the residence status of immigrants and refugees, etc.
- ELSTAT is cooperating with the General Secretariat for Solidarity and for Combating Poverty (of the Ministry of Labour) for the provision of data on Roma camps, information on the capacity and conditions of these facilities and relevant data on homeless people.

GPAC welcomes that ELSTAT is gradually expanding its access to administrative sources for the production of regular and experimental statistics.

GPAC is concerned that the plan for interoperability with various administrative datasets held by the Ministry of Digital Governance is not progressing well. **GPAC encourages** ELSTAT to motivate relevant institutions to find a suitable solution that would allow linking data from different registers. This would substantially simplify the work of ELSTAT for the production of population statistics.

GPAC welcomes ELSTAT's efforts in acquiring new data sources generated by digitalisation.

In this regard, ELSTAT, in collaboration with the Independent Authority for Public Revenue (AADE), has obtained aggregated data on digital platforms for the reference years 2018, 2019 and 2020. These data originate from a range of platforms such as Airbnb, Booking, HomeAway and many others and include the number of registrations, the number of daily uses and the revenues for each of these platforms. In addition, these data are broken down by region and municipality.

In January 2021, ELSTAT signed a bilateral agreement with Eurostat on the provision of data platforms related to short-term stays for compiling official statistics. The agreement concerns the transmission from EUROSTAT to the NSIs of statistical data on tourism received from 4

international digital platforms (AirBnB, Booking, Expedia Group and TripAdvisor) and the transmission from the NSIs to Eurostat of data from national digital platforms, where available. Under this agreement, ELSTAT has received 14 tables with the first data in June 2021. ELSTAT is examining whether the data received from Eurostat can be combined with the AADE data and whether and how these data can be used for the production of tourism statistics.

Principle 3: Adequacy of resources

Despite the fact that ELSTAT is able to meet its obligations to provide statistical information as required by European regulations and national needs, and even is able to produce some new experimental statistics, there is no guarantee as to the sustainability of this situation. Currently, the staff of ELSTAT amounts to 677 persons, while the posts according to the new organisation chart are 1076. The Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection (ASEP) is planning to announce 115 new posts but there are considerable delays in launching the procurement. After the Population-Housing Census of 2021 a big wave of retirements is expected. It should therefore be a priority for the next period to hire new staff in order to achieve the optimal labour force magnitude. However, the recruiting procedures in the Greek public sector remain long-lasting and slow. Furthermore, **GPAC notes** that other agencies in the Greek government sector enjoy privileged wage schemes as well as exceptions on the rules for mobility and transfer of posts. The functions ELSTAT fulfils in providing evidence for policy-making are at least as crucial as those of these agencies.

Therefore, **GPAC urges** the Greek government and the Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection (ASEP) to find flexible and swift solutions to address the pressing needs of human resources for ELSTAT in order to speed up the recruitment procedure and put an end to staff leakage. In any case, **GPAC is pleased** to acknowledge that, following the meeting with ASEP in September 2021, the agency has already accelerated the recruitment procedure for ELSTAT.

External assistance

ELSTAT is still relying on Eurostat for EDP technical assistance. ELSTAT's competent section has young and well-trained employees, who could be self-sufficient.

GPAC recommends that ELSTAT be more proactive and continue to participate actively in EDP procedures. Furthermore, the Committee **recommends** that ELSTAT look for a window of opportunity for putting an end to the external assistance. This would also put an end to the JOSGAP, since this assistance programme is now limited to EDP statistics.

Principle 4. Commitment to Quality

Quality, being always at the heart of statistical activity, is still gaining importance in these times, when evolution of needs, tools and processes is very dynamic. Specifically, when production methodologies and data sources change and new information demands require the development of fresh datasets, resources are under pressure and expertise is scarce and volatile. These are the challenges that many statistical offices are currently facing, ELSTAT amongst them.

Firstly, the 2020 lockdown, and subsequent sanitary restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic have triggered new data collection methods, in particular e-collection from respondents, as well as the use of input data from a diversity of sources, some of them new. In the case of Greece, this move has taken place in many statistical domains. It was especially striking in the two censuses, which, despite the difficult circumstances, are currently underway, and are largely relying on electronically filled-in self-enumeration questionnaires.

In business statistics, the use of tax data provided by the Independent Authority for Public Revenue (AADE), such as VAT (monthly), income tax (yearly), intra-EU deliveries, customs data, imports and exports and the relevant dictionaries, facilitates the processing of other administrative data and cross-checking with collected data from surveys.

In tourism statistics on short-stay accommodation, the shift of the production to data from digital platforms (see Principle 2 above) is an example of the quality challenges that are currently confronted, e.g., in the need of clear and consistent definitions. ELSTAT reports that it is still exploring the potential offered by these sources for the compilation of reliable tourism statistics.

It is desirable that these changes in the initial phase of the statistical production chain would be consolidated in the future, so that returning towards more classical data production scenarios will only be necessary in those cases where it is deemed unavoidable.

Secondly, the rapidly changing economic situation, in general as a consequence of the pandemic, has driven new data demands that have led to construct new indicators based on experimental data collections having as main source administrative data, such as tax data and the 2019 Business Register.

As already mentioned in the seventh report of GPAC, this is the case of:

- Evolution of the Turnover of Enterprises in Accommodation and Food Service Activities Section (monthly)
- Evolution of the Turnover of Enterprises under Suspension of Operation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (monthly)
- Evolution of Turnover of Enterprises in Retail Trade (monthly)

The unprecedented success of these new indicators requires ELSTAT to pay special attention to any quality issues that may arise and to inform users on their particular features in this context. In fact, ELSTAT has already given full access to their methodological details. In addition, it may be advisable to stabilise these as streamlined datasets covered by the same quality labelling as any other regular domain. In fact, ELSTAT has expressed the intention to gradually include the statistics produced under the label of experimental in its regular work programme and thus achieve for them the quality standards needed.

Thirdly, the diversity of available administrative and private sources constitutes a constantly growing universe of data that could replace, improve or allow cross checking more traditional inputs to statistical production processes. The potential of these new sources may be substantially enhanced once the planned Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council “Data Act”, addressing the B2G data transmission, is adopted.

Fourthly, the above-mentioned resources issues (long and cumbersome recruitment procedures, upcoming retirements, competition with other national bodies for skilled new personnel) (See principle 3), also put pressure on the sound performance of processes that assess and ensure good quality of the data produced.

ELSTAT has confronted these challenges with a panoply of responses, such as the development of well-defined quality processes; the spread of quality knowledge and expertise throughout the organisation; a capacity to respond to new statistical needs, and also to react to any challenges to the published data that may arise.

As reported by users met by the Committee and also confirmed in the discussion of GPAC with Eurostat senior management, GPAC is pleased to remark that, besides some specific timeliness issues, the datasets released by ELSTAT are not perceived to suffer major quality problems.

Therefore, **GPAC recommends** that all above-mentioned solutions be consolidated and duly documented with a view to benefit the Hellenic Statistical System as a whole and relieve possible pressures on it. More specifically, **GPAC recommends** that ELSTAT make all the institutional and technical preparations for being able to take full advantage of the new “Data Act”.

In addition, GPAC is pleased to learn from a notification by Eurostat that most of the reservations still existing in GNI statistics are now lifted.

Furthermore, the Committee would like to address more specifically the governance of the quality function.

The fourth report of GPAC stressed the importance of the design of a quality system based on a series of instruments of varied levels of complexity, resource implications and involvement across statistical domains. These range from checklists and internal self-assessment processes

to quality audits. All these actions to be steered by a High-Level Group on quality. ELSTAT has however reported that this approach has not produced cost-efficient results. Therefore, ELSTAT preferred a more decentralised framework for quality. This is already being designed and will begin to be deployed as of January 2022 and expected to be fully operational by the middle of 2022.

While GPAC could support the main lines of approach, inasmuch as it decentralises responsibility on the production domains as an effective and scalable way to face growing and diverse pressures on data quality, it remains of the opinion that senior management should play an explicit and essential role in the assessment and assurance of quality. This role should cover in particular such tasks as the identification of areas of concern, where quality should be deeply monitored; development of quality assessment programs; and, when quality is jeopardized, establishment of remedial actions to re-establish it and development of adequate narratives to explain quality gaps.

This specifically means that, similarly as quality concerns should spread across staff in statistical domains, it should also reach those at the top of the organigramme as these are the holders of the ultimate responsibility on identifying any quality issue arising, finding the adequate actions to steer the domain to acceptable standards; and being ready to explain to users and to stand controversy whenever new, still experimental domains are made public.

GPAC consequently **recommends** that governance issues related to quality be addressed at the adequate hierarchical levels and that the responsibilities at all levels, from the rank-and-file statistician to senior management, be well defined. Adequate documentation, which is currently lacking, and close and frequent monitoring of the cost-effectiveness of this setup should be carried out mainly at the initial steps. **The committee** finally **invites** ELSTAT to make swift progress on this matter, that already lags behind schedule.

Principle 6: Impartiality and Objectivity. Communication and dissemination practices of ELSTAT

In recent times, and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, ELSTAT has made substantial efforts to provide the best possible service to main users of statistical data, as well as to inform citizens, researchers, students and other users about its activities, results and plans.

This was confirmed by power users met by GPAC, who stated that ELSTAT data are of high quality and reliable. Furthermore, they bore witness of good cooperation at all levels of staff, resulting in easy data retrieval and high publication and dissemination speeds.

Within academia, ELSTAT has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB). This cooperation seems to be very positive as well. It focusses on internships of students in ELSTAT and the support of ELSTAT for preparing two existing Master programs on applied statistics for the EMOS certification.

GPAC welcomes the aforementioned activities **and recommends** that ELSTAT continue its efforts to inform the general public, stakeholders and users about its activities and statistics as well as about potential cooperation. Furthermore, the Committee **recommends** that ELSTAT implement a sustainable multi-domain communication policy and foster collaborations with academia and other institutions.

In addition to the Press Releases and the announcements through the ELSTAT website, **GPAC supports** the implementation of other tools for achieving the aforementioned objectives, such as:

- The organisation of information days for the general public, where the activities and objectives of ELSTAT will be presented
- The organisation of workshops with institutions/users of ELSTAT data, for discussing and exchanging views, collecting new requirements, recording possible cooperation problems and ways for addressing them, as well as on issues concerning data quality and confidence.
- The pursuit, through targeted actions (such as workshops, competitions, internship of students, etc.) of cooperation with more Universities, not limited to departments of statistics but also expanding to departments of mathematics, informatics, economics and others.

Appendix 1

Information on the members of the Good Practice Advisory Committee

- *Stephan Moens, former Advisor General and Head of International Strategy and Coordination at Statistics Belgium, nominee of the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC), Chairman of GPAC*
- *Eleni Bitrou, Head of the Parliament Members Support Division of the Hellenic Parliament, nominee of the Hellenic Parliament, Member of GPAC*
- *Pedro Diaz Muñoz, former Director Sectoral and Regional Statistics at Eurostat, nominee of Eurostat, Member of GPAC*
- *Konstantinos Lambrinoudakis, Professor, Department of Digital Systems, University of Piraeus, nominee of the Hellenic Data Protection Authority, Member of GPAC*
- *Genovefa Ružič, Head of Administrative Burden Reduction, Better Regulation and Quality at the Ministry of Public Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, former Director General of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, nominee of the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB), Member of GPAC*