

TRUSTWORTHY NUMBERS FOR A STRONG DEMOCRACY

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A strategy for Flemish official statistics



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INTRODUCTION

The unanimous parliamentary approval of the Decree on Flemish Official Statistics in February 2016 and the establishment of a Flemish Statistics Authority have created a new and ambitious framework for official statistics policy in Flanders. The Decree sets out the main components of a new chapter in the development of a high-quality, independent Flemish official statistics system¹.

An independent Flemish Statistics Authority headed by the Flemish Chief Statistician plays a key role in this new setup. The authority's main tasks are:

- the publication and dissemination of official statistics;
- the coordination of statistics for most Flemish public bodies;
- the harmonisation with the other regional and federal statistical authorities;
- the co-determination of Belgian positions at international statistics forums.

The Decree on Flemish Official Statistics is inspired by and based on a number of internationally accepted principles about official statistics, as expressed in the European Statistics Code of Practice (Eurostat)², the Recommendation of the OECD Council on Good Statistical Practice³ and the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics of the United Nations⁴. These principles set out certain requirements for the institutional context of official statistics, as well as a number of quality expectations. Since Flemish official statistics policy has so far not or only partially complied with these international principles, the new model implies a substantial change to the development, production and dissemination of Flemish official statistics.

This Strategy for Flemish official statistics outlines the framework for the future official statistics landscape in Flanders. The strategy is based on international principles on official statistics, as specified in the legislation, and on a large number of discussions with a broad group of stakeholders on the current state of official statistics in Flanders.

The ultimate goal of the coordinated network of official statistics producers is to provide sufficient, high-quality, independent and reliable official statistics. This guarantees the trustworthiness and reliability of the figures for citizens, families, associations, private companies and official bodies, and therefore allows our statistics to underpin key decisions in a democratic society.

This paper describes a broad strategy for the realisation of this goal, with four guiding principles that are complementary to the Decree:

- official statistics are for everyone;
- we provide more high-quality statistics through better planning;
- we are transparent and work independently;
- we work in an innovative spirit and focus on the future.

Of course, a strategy still needs to be put into practice. A great deal of work needs to be done in order to realise the strategy outlined below. In a second, separate paper, this strategy is further specified by establishing a concrete framework of operational objectives. However, these objectives cannot be realised without having a clear strategy in place that will serve as a guide in the years to come.

None of this would be possible without the outstanding work of a substantial number of colleagues within the Flemish Government who are engaged in the development, production and dissemination of statistics on a daily basis. Without being able to build on their commitment, dedication and high-quality work, we would not be able to start this new chapter.



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1. WHAT ARE OFFICIAL STATISTICS?

In our current digital society, a flood of data and figures is generated on a daily basis. This also happens within government: a good, efficient government should indeed have plenty of good quality information at its disposal in order to know in which direction the ship is sailing, and whether it is on course.

However, not every figure generated within the government is an official statistic. The concept of an 'official statistic', as explained below, implies that statistics are of public utility and use. This utility applies primarily to the key figures about Flanders: the statistics that are important for the essential democratic debate. When checked against the high standards of quality, independence, relevance and respect for privacy, they should pass these benchmarks with flying colours. That is why they are explicitly produced and disseminated within the scope of the European Statistics Code of Practice, which sets out these standards. From a central position within a decentralised system of statistical development, production and dissemination, the Flemish Statistics Authority has the task of coordinating, producing and disseminating these key figures, in consultation with the departments and agencies, for the broadest possible target audience, and to ensure that the official statistics respect the code of practice. The concrete delineation of the statistics that are considered to be key figures and therefore fall under the code of practice is a complex task which will be further specified in consultation with the network of official statistics producers and with statistics users.

Statisticians and analysts within the government also play a supporting role in the processing and opening up of other valuable information that does not come under the code of practice, but that is all too often locked up within the government. They may help to make this information available, interoperable and reusable for the broadest possible audience. They should do so in consultation with other coordinating bodies and initiatives within the Flemish government, in accordance with the regulations regarding the reuse of official information⁵ and the basic principles of open data, but with the necessary data protection in order to guarantee individual privacy⁶. The ultimate ambition is to provide all publicly available information in open formats.

Finally, at the same time, the concept of 'statistics' is defined relatively broadly. It is not just the task of official statistics producers to produce the bare figures. We also have a duty to carry out broader analyses by pooling statistics thematically, distinguishing trends, placing figures in a geographical framework, and thus providing a broader context. Providing this context is equally a core task of the network of official statistics producers. Statistical basic data can be improved through insights from analysis, and the analytical process can be improved by better basic data. In this strategy paper 'statistics' should therefore be read in that broad sense: collecting, describing and analysing relevant data.

2. OFFICIAL STATISTICS IN FLANDERS

As mentioned earlier, the new intention of the decree regarding official statistics in Flanders can build on a long-standing and wide experience of statistical development, production and dissemination within the Flemish Government. The Flemish Government has a decentralised system of official statistics: the various entities (departments and agencies) in each policy area are responsible for producing statistics that relate to their policy area⁷. This means the capacity for official statistics development, production and dissemination is deployed independently, according to the specific needs for analysis and statistics within each policy area⁸.

The Flemish Government has always had a central entity with the explicit and specific remit to carry out research and analyses on behalf of the Flemish Government. Over the past years, the Flemish Government Research Centre ('Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering' - SVR) fulfilled this role and delivered a number of surveys (such as the survey on Socio-Cultural Shifts), several publications, including the Flemish Regional Indicators ('VRIND') and some shorter analyses (SVR explorations and SVR-st@ts). The Flemish Government Research Centre also acted as the central contact point providing information and expertise to both internal and external statistics users.

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Following the approval of the Decree on Flemish Official statistics and the establishment of a Flemish Statistics Authority, the role of a central coordinating entity has become more explicit, and the Flemish Government Research Centre was therefore recently transformed into the Flemish Statistics Authority.

This new central entity has the remit, laid down by decree, to organise the broad network of decentralised statistical production with a more coherent approach, and to introduce a number of new principles on official statistics, in consultation with the Flemish Government entities covered by the Decree. This does not mean that the development, production and publication of statistics and analyses are centralised within the Flemish Statistics Authority. The decentralised character of the system is respected so that the individual policy areas remain responsible for developing, producing and disseminating their statistics. However, a number of new arrangements will be put in place for the network in order to streamline Flemish official statistics development, production and dissemination and to align it with Flemish and international legislation and the principles presented in this paper.

The strategy presented in this paper therefore applies to the entire coordinated network of statistics producers within the Flemish Government. Within this network the Flemish Statistics Authority plays a central, supporting role with a view to realise this strategy, in close cooperation with the other entities within the network.

3. THE ROLE OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Sufficient high-quality and reliable official statistics are an essential part of every democratic society. They underpin many decisions in the public and private sectors, which often have major consequences for the daily lives of citizens. They are important for obtaining a better understanding of our society, our position in the world and our economy, and for planning and evaluating government policy. In a sense, high-quality official statistics are equally important as clean water, or a credible currency: without them, a democratic society would not be able to function properly⁹.

In our digital information age, which produces a never-ending flow of data and information, and which continuously puts figures into the public debate, it is very important to provide clarity about which data can be regarded as trustworthy by everyone. Recent debates about the emergence of a strong post-truth culture, in which fake news and alternative facts are presented as equal to objective figures, clearly show a looming danger. If everyone produces, disseminates and uses invented figures in order to score points, without there being any firm benchmark of neutrality and reliability, we're heading for a slippery slope.

Although the public debate in Flanders couldn't be characterised as 'post-truth', it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that less extreme examples of the sloppy use of figures have negative consequences. In spite of the increasing awareness of the importance of good statistics to support decisions, there are too many examples of how important decisions are not evidence-based, or of how policy actors hide figures or show partiality when explaining them in a way that suits them best. In extreme cases, evidence-based policymaking is thus reversed into policy-based evidence-making. This is obviously harmful to a well-functioning democracy in the longer term. When policy choices are no longer based on what is actually going on as represented in credible official statistics, democracy is put at risk. Just like an audit function, official statistics play an essential role in reinforcing our democracy by paying special attention to transparency, trust, legitimacy and credibility¹⁰.



4. THE FOUR STRANDS OF AN OFFICIAL STATISTICS POLICY IN FLANDERS

How can a new official statistics policy in Flanders ensure that our statistics are accepted as trustworthy by our democratic society, and are regarded as a steady and reliable benchmark? Why are official statistics better than certain other figures?

In order for the public to trust our statistics, they should first and foremost be trustworthy. It is difficult to build this trustworthiness. It is precious and fragile, and can therefore easily perish. As official statistics producers within government, our aim should be to earn the public's trust by ensuring the trustworthiness of our numbers. It is the government's role to create an environment to foster this trustworthiness.

As statisticians we should also guarantee the reliability of our statistics: trustworthiness in this context implies reliability. We therefore should aspire to produce trustworthy official statistics which are at the same time reliable.

The strategy this paper sets out explicitly aims to reinforce and maintain the trustworthiness and reliability of our official statistics. The principles presented here are essential to develop, produce and disseminate trustworthy and reliable official statistics for Flanders and will be used as benchmarks in the further planning and development of the network of official statistics producers. The strategy is set out along four strands:

- official statistics are for everyone;
- we provide more relevant, high-quality statistics using a methodical approach;
- we are transparent and work independently;
- we work in an innovative manner and focus on the future.

Those four strands are discussed in detail in the following sections.

4.1 Official statistics are for everyone

Official statistics serve society as a whole. That is why we not only take into account the government's needs for statistical information, but also the needs of Flemish society at large. Although we are part of the Flemish Government, official statistics should be relevant and accessible to the broadest possible range of users: official statistics are a public good. Government policy should certainly indicate priorities, but it is not exclusively up to the government to determine which statistics should be developed, produced and published.

4.1.1 Official statistics as a public good

Etymologically, the word 'statistics' refers to the state¹¹. In the past, statistics were used by autocrats as 'the state's science' in order to exert, consolidate and expand their political and military power. The concept of a population count (census) has existed for more than two thousand years: it was the only way to find out how much manpower was available for an army, or how much tax could be collected.

With the arrival of the Enlightenment, a new strategy on power took hold, which crushed the autocratic view of the state. Along came a shift in ideas about the goal of 'the state's science'. Statistics were no longer regarded as a measure of a state's strength and power, but rather as a measure of 'society's happiness'.

"an inquiry into the state of a country for the purposes of ascertaining the quantum of happiness enjoyed by its inhabitants and the means of its future improvement".¹²

With the rise of democratic state systems and, more recently, a stronger consumer perspective on the relationship between state and citizen, statistics themselves have also become more democratic. Figures are not only important for those holding a position of power, but for every element of a democratic system. Throughout time, statistics have evolved from a tool of government to a public good for society as a whole.¹³

Today, the principle of official statistics being a public good is strongly endorsed by the international community at large. The United Nations state¹⁴:

"Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information."

In the United Kingdom, the UK Statistics Authority has been legally tasked to promote and safeguard official statistics as a 'public good'¹⁵:

"...the Board is to have the objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good."

In the Netherlands, the 'Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek' (Statistics Netherlands) has the following mission¹⁶:

"The mission of CBS is to publish reliable and coherent statistical information which responds to the needs of Dutch society."

Finally, the 'Algemene Directie Statistiek' (Statistics Belgium) of the federal authorities in Belgium describes its mission as follows¹⁷:

"To meet the information needs of the government, enterprises and citizens, Statistics Belgium offers figures on the current state of the country.

Relevant statistics are a prerequisite to plan efficiently and to initialise goal-oriented actions. Students, researchers and all those in search of knowledge need figures and statistics. The information covers many topics: climate, population, society, economy, finance, agriculture, industry, mobility and transport, services, information society,..."

4.1.2 Official statistics as a helpful and relevant service

A new official statistics policy for Flanders should embrace this need for public participation, and should regard official statistics as relevant not only to government policy. Although official statistics are produced within government, the production should also take into account the needs and aspirations of society at large. Society at large should be able to participate at different levels: in decisions about priorities for development (which statistics are necessary?) and production (what is the best way to produce statistics?), as well as in dissemination decisions (statistics should be disseminated as widely as possible, and should be oriented towards different types of users). This does not mean, of course, that government policy should not play any role at all. Statistical priorities should take into account the needs of government policy, but priorities should not be established solely by government.



The pursuit of the broadest possible participation in all official statistics components ensures that our statistics are relevant for all users, both experts and citizens, in their daily lives. The relevance of official statistics' obviously differs according to the target group for which they are produced: experts usually need more detailed information compared to the man or woman in the street. Citizens generally show little interest in abstract figures. When a public debate is substantiated by means of statistics, an official statistics producer should ensure that the statistics which are used are relevant for all users, both for the policy and for the citizens' daily lives. Figures should reflect what goes on in society. As official statistics producers, we should be able to explain to all citizens, in straightforward terms, how their direct environment, Flanders and the world are doing. Without sufficient attention to the relevance of our figures, the trust of citizens in experts and their figures will slowly but surely ebb away¹⁸.

The strategy for official statistics that is presented here, sets out a vision of helpfulness and relevance for society at large. In our capacity of official statistics producers, we want to provide helpful, user-friendly products and services that enable a wide range of users to make decisions in a well-founded manner, both inside and outside government. The final evaluation of the usefulness of a coordinated network of official statistics producers will be based on which benefits users derive from our service provision.

This means we will work for a wide range of users. The secondary legislation supporting the Decree on Flemish official statistics provides for the establishment of a Council for Flemish Official Statistics, which represents statistics users from a number of sectors: the academic world, civil society, socio-economic organisations, cities and municipalities, and the government. This user council will play an important future role in the practical implementation of user engagement, and will develop detailed processes and mechanisms which will ensure broad participation.

4.1.3. Equal access for all

One other principle is derived from the principle of statistics as a public good in a democratic society (see 4.1.1): the principle of equal access. This principle relates to the dissemination and publication of official statistics: they should be equally accessible to all. This means attention should be paid to different forms of access: statistical information should be suitable to all types of users, regardless of their level of expertise. But it also means that it should be possible to publish statistics at the same time for everyone: users inside and outside the government should simultaneously receive access to the information. However, although this principle is generally accepted, in practice most countries allow a limited form of privileged access for government ministers and other officials (also called 'pre-release access'), on the condition this access is granted in a transparent manner.

This principle of equal access to official statistics is also adhered to at international level, for instance in the European Statistics Code of Practice¹⁹:

“All users have equal access to statistical releases at the same time. Any privileged pre-release access to any outside user is limited, controlled and publicised. In the event that leaks occur, pre-release arrangements are revised so as to ensure impartiality.”

4.2 We provide more high-quality statistics through better planning

We ensure that the statistics we produce are of the highest possible quality and cover information needs as much as possible. We proactively examine the themes for which we need to produce more statistics in order to improve our knowledge of Flanders. We will follow international quality standards for the production and dissemination of official statistics; currently they are generally followed albeit not explicitly and not always. Our ambition is to put quality at the heart of everything we do. That is why we will take a more planned approach to the way we produce and disseminate our statistics, which will be communicated transparently and punctually to the outside world.

4.2.1 We provide more statistics with greater relevance

Given the decentralised organisation of statistical production within the Flemish government, we currently lack an approach which takes an overall view of Flemish official statistics. As a consequence, it is unclear which gaps exist in the provided information, which statistics overlap, and whether the statistics produced are sufficiently relevant for a broad user base. One of the main tasks of the Flemish Statistics Authority consists in setting up a coordinated system of statistical development, production and publication. Within Flemish government, where statistics are developed, produced and disseminated in a decentralised setup, it is acknowledged that the different policy areas are best placed to manage their own statistics. After all, the expertise on thematic issues is situated within the departments and agencies, and statistical production should be able to build on that expertise. However without any overview or coordination, it is not possible to develop a coherent approach to a Flemish official statistics system.



This coordinating task is undoubtedly ambitious given the large number of separate entities within Flemish government. Nevertheless we want to move beyond the mere coordination of what already exists. The ultimate ambition for Flanders should be to develop a fully-fledged Flemish infrastructure for official statistics that can offer a flexible and rapid response to new and changing information needs. That is why we should also be able to identify the gaps in statistical production, so that we can fill them. More relevant statistics about the real and important problems and opportunities in Flanders will substantially help improve future decision-making, and eventually promote both economic and social progress.

Detecting these gaps requires a more proactive approach and a stronger commitment from the official statistics community in current and future social debates. Through wide-ranging and continuous consultation, we want to encourage users to formulate the information needs regarding future trends and evolutions in Flanders, in order to allow us, official statistics producers, to make this information available. We want to offer proactive and flexible services that respond to new developments and topical debates. Moreover, we want to play a stronger role in clarifying unclear and incoherent figures in the public debate.

4.2.2 We pursue international quality standards

The Decree on Flemish Official statistics sets out clear quality requirements that are based on the European Statistics Code of Practice. We also want to increase the quality of our statistics by verifying them against internationally recognised standards. Of course, this does not imply that the statistics we currently produce are not of high quality. However, by making our statistical products tie in with the systematic international standards, we have the opportunity to systematically build on our strengths, and to improve our weaknesses.

The following five broad quality standards are included in the code of practice:

- **Relevance:** Our official statistics should meet the needs of a wide range of users. They have to measure what is important in our economy and society.
- **Accuracy and reliability:** It is self-evident that official statistics should be produced in accordance with appropriate methodological standards. Scientific standards are strictly observed, so that statistics measure what they want to measure, in the best possible way.
- **Timeliness and punctuality:** Statistics provide a snapshot in time. Sufficient time should be provided for their production, so that they meet the quality requirements. But the gap between measurement and publication should be kept to a minimum. It can only comprise the time the production process requires; no other considerations should play a role in their publication.
- **Coherence and comparability:** Official statistics should tell a story about the context: they are always a snapshot, but also fit within a temporal and geographical context, which should be provided if and when possible.
- **Accessibility and clarity:** Official statistics should be presented and published in a clear form. An unambiguous explanation of what they measure and the limitations of that measurement, should be included. They should be accessible to all types of users: from experts to ordinary citizens.

Finally, when pursuing these quality standards, one should keep in mind that official statistics are produced on the basis of data relating to citizens, companies, organisations or other social actors. Data generation has increased exponentially in our information society, and the

transformation of these data into useful information by means of statistical processes, offers huge added value. Data is said to be the new currency of our digital society, or in other words: data is the new oil. However, precisely because of this increased availability, data also become more vulnerable and it becomes easier to breach the privacy of citizens, companies and other social actors who trust the government with their data. Official statistics producers should guarantee maximum privacy to those providing data. If we fail to do so, we will immediately lose trust in what we do, and it will become nearly impossible to obtain good quality data from those we rely on to provide us with information.

4.2.3 We use a methodical and efficient approach, with sufficient resources

Improved coordination of official statistics in Flanders requires a better planning for the development, production and publication of statistics. Our ambition consists in encouraging a more programmatic and strategic approach for the official statistics system. This type of approach provides a framework for creating a sustainable system of official statistics in the long term, instead of merely responding to current information needs in an ad hoc way, or working exclusively with annual programmes. This sustainable approach offers a solid framework to determine which statistics will be necessary - or not - in the long term. In order to support this methodical approach, a Flemish Coordination Committee for Official Statistics has been created, which should develop and implement a more methodical approach for the official statistics system within Flemish government.

The system of official statistics in Flanders, like in other governments worldwide, is confronted with a difficult financial context. We should therefore efficiently use our limited resources and adopt a methodical approach. We should set clear priorities for what is needed, but we should also stop producing statistics that are not or hardly needed, in order to release funds for the production of new statistics with higher priority.

Finally, within that context, it is also important that we - statistics producers - should not refrain from pointing out the value of our work. This means that we have to be able to prove the relevance of our statistics to policymakers within government who ultimately decide on the resources we work with. We have to be clear about the value and usefulness of official statistics for government and for society at large. We should present positive arguments for receiving sufficient resources in order to be able to develop and maintain a strong official statistics infrastructure.

4.3 We work independently and in a transparent way

Some of the main distinctive characteristics of official statistics are their trustworthiness and reliability, and their recognition as such by society. They should not only be of high quality, but also be developed, produced and disseminated without any form of political interference. We strive for maximum transparency in the development, production and dissemination of statistics, with clear arrangements in place between the political parts of government and the civil service.

4.3.1 A wide support base for professional independence

A key condition for earning credibility in our official statistics is the fact that they are produced in a professionally independent manner. Citizens should be able to have confidence in impartial figures that do not result from a political ideology, or from too close a connection with the policy that needs to be justified to the public. Moreover, even if there is no actual political interference with the production or dissemination of statistics, the perception of independence of the official statistics system should be strongly guaranteed. The trustworthiness of our official statistics is of a fragile nature and it can be easily jeopardised as a result of negative perceptions.

The principle of professional independence of official statistics is explicitly recognised by the international political community. Within the context of official statistics production by government, professional independence implies political independence. The mere suspicion of any political influence on the development, production or dissemination of official statistics is detrimental to the trust in and trustworthiness of the figures.



The principle of professional independence is included in the Decree on Flemish Official statistics, and appears as first principle in the European Statistics Code of Practice²⁰:

“Professional independence of statistical authorities from other policy, regulatory or administrative departments and bodies, as well as from private sector operators, ensures the credibility of European Statistics.”

In practice, this means that decisions on the development, production and dissemination of official statistics should be taken by the coordinated network of official statistics producers and not by political or other administrative bodies. This professional independence reveals itself in purely professional choices regarding statistical methods, standards and procedures that are applied, and regarding the content and the moment of publication of statistical information.

For the content of statistical information, this means that the figures themselves should be produced by statistical experts in an independent manner. The task of statistical experts consists in describing the figures in an impartial way. Providing statistical commentary is an integral part of the job, as not everyone has sufficient knowledge of statistics to be able to read and interpret the figures. Moreover, the commentary should be descriptive, neutral and impartial. A clear distinction should be made between statistical comments formulated by statistical experts and political comments on the figures, made by politicians or policy experts. Statistical comments are produced independently of political interpretations and policy comments, and are clearly separated from them at the time of publication.

Decisions about when and how the figures and their statistical commentary are published belong to the exclusive competence of the network of official statistics producers: political motives or newsworthiness cannot play any role in determining the moment of publication. The only determining principle can be that statistics have to be published as soon as possible after their collection, allowing for the necessary quality control.

Guaranteeing the professional independence of official statistics is therefore not just the responsibility of statistical experts or analysts. The importance of this independence should be recognised and pursued by anyone working within the government’s political and administrative realms. Only by building and maintaining a wide support base for professional independence can the trustworthiness of official statistics be realised and maintained.

4.3.2 Transparency in development, production and publication

Through better strategic planning and coordination, we want to create a more coherent and sustainable system for Flemish official statistics. Together with this more methodical approach, we also want to increase transparency at both strategic and operational levels. We want to validate our strategic planning with the outside world on a regular basis. At the operational level, we have to enhance transparency regarding our development, production and dissemination, with the statistics user taking centre stage again.

Our *planning* should clearly indicate how our statistical programme is developed. Users should be given a clear voice in the development process. Priorities have to be verified with the outside world, both for the production of new statistics and for the discontinuation of existing ones.

The *production* of our official statistics should also be transparent: our data sources and our analysing and processing methods and techniques should be transparent and open to verification with the outside world within the scope of the data privacy requirements.

Finally, we have to examine how we can better publicise to the outside world when we will publish statistics. There is quite some ambiguity at present as to when new statistics will be published, which is confusing to users. In the future we want to be clearer about when our statistics will be published. We also want to reflect on how we can better communicate our publication planning.

4.4 We work in an innovative manner and focus on the future

In a society where an increasing amount of data are generated by living our daily lives, it is important to stay informed about new technologies and developments in the field of new data sources and statistical methodologies. This means we will need to develop an innovative mindset and work with external experts, organisations and partnerships in order to be a continuously learning network that can be flexible in responding to complex user needs.

4.4.1 Innovation

The data sources that can be used for the production of official statistics have been changing in the past decades. Traditionally, official statistics have always strongly relied on censuses or surveys among persons or companies to generate data. This classic model of censuses and sample surveys is increasingly replaced by strategies in which two other data types play an increasingly important role in addition to censuses and surveys: administrative data held within government and - more recently - big data. This evolution is sometimes described as an evolution from 'designed data', in which the statistical expert can autonomously determine the data collection, towards 'organic data', in which statistical expertise contributes very little, and already existing data²¹ are relied upon.



This shift is partly driven by efficiency motives (surveys are expensive), and partly by the reduction of the burden for citizens and companies (the participation in surveys demands time and effort from respondents). A gradual decrease in response rates to surveys has recently also become a driver for change. This decrease poses a potential threat to the quality of survey data. The new data types offer several advantages: the data are generated as a by-product of other than statistical purposes (e.g. registration databases for service delivery by the government), and are therefore cheap. They require less or no effort from citizens, and are available sooner. However, the new data also have a number of quality issues: administrative data are not always collected for statistical purposes, so do not always match with what is needed, and the field of big data is relatively new and raises many questions as to the ways in which these data contribute to official statistics.

We have the ambition to increasingly work with other data types and to examine how we can best combine them with our surveys in order to maintain the quality and to work more efficiently. Currently, various data sources within the Flemish Government hold a lot of untapped potential for the production of official statistics. This potential is not always used because of a lack of coordination, knowledge and statistical thinking about government data.

Finally, we want to become more ambitious in terms of new techniques and methodologies. Over the last few decades there has been an proliferation of new techniques and IT processes which are often developed under the heading 'data science'. We want to get better at learning from these new developments as well. We want to work with experts, both inside and outside the government, in order to valorise the potential of these new techniques, for instance with regard to innovative techniques regarding data visualisation, data fusion and small area estimation.

In order to realise all this, we need a clear and well-thought-out strategy to support statistical experts and analysts within the Flemish government. In consultation with the other entities of the Flemish government, we want to develop a clear strategy for formal and informal training which offers statistical experts and analysts within government the opportunity to optimally explore and use the new developments.

4.4.2 Partnerships

An innovative strategy for Flemish official statistics should recognise that the Flemish Government will not be able to develop all the knowledge and expertise regarding new developments in official statistics in-house. Innovative capacity can also be found with other actors who work with data outside the Flemish government, and who will be able to initiate or implement new developments. We want to become an increasingly outward-looking organisation, which actively builds partnerships with other actors who are interested in the production of high-quality data.

These include, for instance, other official statistics institutions in other countries that carry out innovative work in the field of administrative data and big data to be used in official statistics. Scandinavia and the Netherlands build up extensive experience in the field of administrative data over the past few decades. Innovation in the field of big data and data science is also being pushed by the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, as well as in a number of initiatives by Eurostat. And within the Interfederal Institute for Statistics, which brings together the four statistical authorities within Belgium, there is a lot of expertise we can share.

Non-governmental organisations in Flanders also have wide experience and expertise in data

science. The academic world as well as a number of commercial businesses make efforts to better unlock the data potential and to generate figures that may be useful for the production of official statistics. Through high-quality partnerships, we want to promote a culture of co-creation, within the limits of what is possible in official statistics (for instance with regard to privacy legislation).

4.4.3 External review and audit

A stronger external focus implies we should develop an attitude of openness to improvement, and embrace innovation. Continuing to do business as usual because it's what we know best is not a good steer in developing high-quality official statistics, and for building trust in them. An innovative organisation should never hesitate to ask for feedback, and should be open to external review and audit.

Once again, the contribution from statistics users is very important. Users tend to be the most critical voices with regard to the availability and quality of official statistics. We should have the courage to include these voices in our planning and production process for official statistics. Pertinent questions and remarks from users may lead to improvements in our statistics that are important for everyone.

A more formal example of an external perspective is the five-year cycle of Eurostat Peer Reviews, which is carried out by a panel of experts, appointed by Eurostat. These reviews are a periodical control of the European member states in order to verify the extent to which the European Statistics Code of Practice is being observed by statistical authorities. The last peer review for Belgium²² noticed the new interfederalised structure for official statistics in Belgium, and indicated that the following round of the peer review (2020) should cover the setup of the new statistical authorities within Belgium.

5. THE STRATEGY IN A NUTSHELL

This strategy is a description of how we want to coordinate, produce and disseminate official statistics Flanders. In a nutshell, the strategy describes four main principles:

1. Official statistics serve society as a whole. We take into account the government's needs regarding statistical information, but also the needs of Flemish society at large. Although we are part of the Government of Flanders, official statistics should be useful and accessible to the broadest possible range of users, as they are a public good. The government may certainly indicate priorities, but it is not exclusively up to the government to determine which statistics we will plan, produce and publish.
2. We ensure that the statistics we produce are of the highest possible quality and cover the information needs to a maximum extent. We proactively examine the domains in which we need to produce more statistics in order to improve our knowledge of Flanders. International quality standards for the production and dissemination of official statistics are available. Currently, they are generally met in an implicit manner, but not always. Our ambition is to put quality at the heart of everything we do. That is why our approach to production and dissemination will be planned more clearly, and will be communicated plainly and punctually to the outside world.
3. Some of the main distinctive characteristics of official statistics are their credibility and reliability, and their recognition as such by the entire society. They should not only be of high quality, but also be produced and disseminated without any form of political interference. We strive for maximum transparency in the development, production and dissemination of statistics, with clear arrangements between the political and civil service levels.
4. In a society where an increasing amount of data is generated by our daily doings, it is important to stay abreast of new technologies and developments in the field of new data sources and statistical methodologies. We will set to work in an innovative manner with external experts, organisations and partnerships in order to be a continuously learning network that can respond flexibly to the complex user needs.

These principles form the main scope within which we will operate. These main lines are obviously insufficient to indicate how we can realise our remit under the decree. The strategy should be put into practice. How we will do this is laid down in a second paper, which establishes a number of concrete objectives that will be specified within the described strategy. Just like this strategy paper, the concrete objectives will be verified and discussed with all relevant partners inside and outside the government.

Flemish society is entitled to high-quality, relevant and independent official statistics in order to support good decisions. This strategy paper explains what needs to be done in order to realise this entitlement. We count on a wide support base for the principles in this strategy paper to be able to make better decisions in the future for a strong democratic society.

END NOTES

- 1 Decree on Flemish Official statistics
<http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2015-2016/g547-3.pdf>.
- 2 European Statistics Code of Practice for the national and Community statistical authorities <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/european-statistics-code-of-practice>
- 3 Recommendation of the OECD Council on Good Statistical Practice <http://www.oecd.org/statistics/good-practice-toolkit/Brochure-Good-Stat-Practices.pdf>
- 4 United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx>.
- 5 Decree of 27 April 2007 on the reuse of public sector information <https://overheid.vlaanderen.be/regelgeving-hergebruik-van-overheidsinformatie>.
- 6 UK Statistics Authority (2016) National Statistician's Guidance: Management Information and Official Statistics. London, UK Statistics Authority.
- 7 A decentralised official statistics production is not uncommon. Other countries, such as France, the United Kingdom and the US, also operate within this model. Countries such as the Netherlands, Australia and Canada, on the other hand, use a more centralised model. See <https://www.paris21.org/sites/default/files/2101.pdf> for an overview of different organisational models.
- 8 The Decree on Flemish official statistics provides a complete list of the entities that come under the decree - <http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2015-2016/g547-3.pdf>.
- 9 Bumpstead, R, and Alldritt, R. (2011) Statistics for the People? The role of official statistics in the democratic debate. Paper for the 58th World Congress of the International Statistical Institute, Dublin, 21-26th August 2011.
- 10 Bouckaert, G. (2017) Overheidsaudit met een toekomst: zeven voorwaarden. Vlaams Tijdschrift voor Overheidsmanagement, 03/2017, pp. 5-8.
- 11 Pullinger, J. (2013) Statistics making an impact. Presidential address to the Royal Statistical Society, J.R. Statist. Soc. A, part 4, pp. 819-839.
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- 13 For an elaborate description of this evolution in Belgium, see Bracke, N. (2008) Een monument voor het land. Overheidsstatistiek in België, 1795-1870. Gent, Academia Press, 2008, XI + 467 pp.
- 14 United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx>.
- 15 UK Parliament (2007) Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007. London, House of Commons.

- 16 CBS Nederland (Statistics Netherlands)
<https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/about-us/organisation>
- 17 Algemene Directie Statistiek (Statistics Belgium)
http://statbel.fgov.be/en/statistics/organisation/statistics_belgium/.
- 18 Davies, W. (2017) How statistics lost their power, and how we should fear what comes next. Guardian, 19 January 2017.
- 19 European Statistics Code of Practice for the national and Community statistical authorities <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/european-statistics-code-of-practice>
- 20 European Statistics Code of Practice for the national and Community statistical authorities <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/european-statistics-code-of-practice>
- 21 Groves, R. (2011) Three Eras Of Survey Research, Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 75, No. 5, 2011, pp. 861–871.
- 22 Eurostat (2015) Peer Review Report on Compliance with the Code of Practice and the Coordination role of the National Statistical Institute: Belgium
<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/64157/4372828/2015-BE-report/c583d440-f29d-4333-8d87-ae04ca18dfc4>.