

Brussels, 20 March 2002

OPINION
of the
Economic and Social Committee
on the
**Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the
Community statistical programme 2003 to 2007**
(COM(2001) 683 final - 2001/0281 COD)

On 18 February 2002 the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Community statistical programme 2003 to 2007
(COM (2001) 683 final – 2001/0281 COD).

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 25 February 2002. The rapporteur was **Ms Florio**.

At its 389th plenary session (meeting of 20 March 2002), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion with no dissenting votes and three abstentions.

1. **Foreword**

1.1 Regulation (EC) No 322/97, which the Council adopted on 17 February 1997, provides for the establishment of a Community statistical programme setting strategies, priorities and work plans for the period 2003 to 2007.

1.2 The strategic importance of the programme has increased over the years, partly owing to the gathering pace of economic, monetary and institutional processes, and of social change within the EU, and partly owing to the practical progress made by the central and eastern European candidate countries which will conclude their EU accession negotiations in 2002.

1.3 The five-year programme for 2003-2007 is the sixth successive medium term programme prepared by Eurostat. Like its predecessors, the programme contains provision for a mid-term evaluation and a more detailed annual plan, and a final evaluation.

1.4 On the basis of the indications provided by the Commission and the Council, Eurostat should increasingly take on a key role in setting ever more standardised criteria for data collection and analysis and ensuring their timely provision in statistical programmes.

1.5 Eurostat, and the European Statistical System (ESS) in general, have the delicate task of speedily obtaining comparable data both in sectors which the EU institutions have analysed and monitored for many years, and concerning socio-economic trends and the changes which the enlargement process is causing in the candidate countries and will cause in the Member States.

1.6 In this context, while a statistical evaluation of the eurozone should clearly focus on monetary-related aspects, care must be taken to use a method which brings out differences in the three areas: eurozone Member States, non-eurozone Member States, and candidate countries.

2. **Statistics as a source of guidance in the EU**

2.1 Eurostat data are regularly used in the many reports, periodic monitoring and analyses of economic and social cohesion in the EU, and in national governments' planning papers.

2.1.1 The Committee would draw attention to the usefulness of statistical surveys for boosting the strategies decided at the Lisbon and Gothenburg Councils.

2.2 The introduction of the single currency will undoubtedly increase the need for monitoring tools to provide a scientific and realistic basis for economic, financial and social decisions that will strengthen the Union and boost its competitiveness on the world market while also upholding the principles of equity and social justice.

2.3 It is clear that the efficacy and practical value of the ESS depend on the collection of data that are as standardised, integrated and harmonised as possible.

2.4 Member States will have to make significant investments, both financially and in terms of training, if they are to iron out the continuing differences in statistical survey criteria and speed up the adjustment of their national statistical institutes to EU standards.

2.5 The position of the network which Eurostat has set up to handle monetary statistics is somewhat different, as it directly meets the monitoring requirements of the European Central Bank. The inconsistencies between the various data collection systems must be swiftly eliminated if the task of shaping the EU's future is not to be left solely up to monetary policies.

2.6 By the same token, as the Commission pointed out in its last report on economic and social cohesion, statistical instruments also need to be brought into line for the economically lagging regions and areas.

2.7 In the ESS, data collection is mainly undertaken according to the subsidiarity method. National statistical bodies often work with private agencies which directly or indirectly influence the reading of statistics and in any event become "shadow" partners. A serious assessment is needed of the role which such agencies play in data collection, with a view to ensuring that statistical instruments are as neutral, scientific and accurate as possible.

2.8 Lastly, alongside national governments, businesses etc.¹, there is another major category of Eurostat user to be considered, namely the national and European socio-economic organisations. In both the *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluations, there should be consultation of all the parties who use and provide input for statistics services.

3. **Statistics and enlargement**

¹ COM(2001) 683 final – 2001/0281 COD, page 61, point 5.2.1

3.1 Statistics have a dual role in the enlargement process and in negotiations with the candidate countries. Firstly, they are an integral part of the Community *acquis*, and secondly they are basic indicators of the "health" of the candidate countries' economies.

3.2 With the exception of Turkey, all the candidate countries submit data to Eurostat four times per year using the same criteria as the Member States. The national data collected in the candidate countries are not yet comparable with ESS data and are therefore still analysed with some caution. Nonetheless, major progress has been achieved over the last few years.

3.3 The EU has undertaken many schemes to promote closer harmonisation of data collection criteria, but not all the problems have been solved definitively. Turkey and Malta remain outside this system (the Turkish statistical office is outside the European system).

4. **Recommendations**

4.1 As in earlier opinions, the Committee calls for cooperation between Eurostat and the national statistical institutes to be made as effective as possible, so that the ESS can play a more effective role.

4.2 The coordinating role of Eurostat must be improved so as to secure greater harmonisation and effective comparability of data.

4.3 As enlargement draws nearer, the statistical institutes of the candidate countries should be more effectively brought into the system by stepping up cooperation with the provision of economic aid for training and adjustment of statistical instruments.

4.4 In order to ensure that statistics are more neutral, the Committee also thinks that the activity of private agencies working directly or indirectly within the ESS should be monitored.

4.5 In the light of the above, the Committee thinks that Eurostat's funding should be increased, with greater involvement of Member States' governments and a coherent role for the Commission.

4.6 As already noted, statistical surveys should focus on already identified, clearly targeted strategies (Lisbon and Gothenburg Councils). In particular, as noted in an earlier Committee opinion², specific data should be provided on all aspects of sustainable development.

Brussels, 20 March 2002.

The President
of the
Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General
of the
Economic and Social Committee

Göke Frerichs

Patrick Venturini

² OJ C 221 of 7.8.2001, page 169 and CES 1494/2001.