

Peer Review on the Implementation of the Statistics Code of Practice for the European Neighbourhood Policy South countries (based on the European Statistics Code of Practice) in Palestine

Report

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Abbreviations

CFG	Core Financing Group
DESAP	Development Self-Assessment Program
EECCA	Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ESCoP	European Statistics Code of Practice
ESMS	Euro-SDMX Metadata Structure
ESQRS	ESS Standard for Quality Reports Structure
GSBPM	Generic Statistical Business Process Model
GSL	General Statistics Law
IRD	International Relations Directorate
IT	Information Technology
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NQAF	National Quality Assurance Framework
NSDS	National Strategy for the Development of Statistics
NSI	National Statistical Institute
NSS	National Statistical System
OPOS	Other Producers of Official Statistics
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PR	Peer Review
PUF	Public Use Files
SAQ	Self-assessment questionnaire
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Foreword

The Peer Review (PR) of the National Statistical System (NSS) of Palestine was undertaken within the framework of the project *'The provision of global assessments, sector assessments and peer reviews of ENP countries'*. Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, funded and managed the project and DevStat, a company contracted by Eurostat, organised all activities and tasks related to the PR.

Eurostat initiated the PR following an official request by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). The assessment was conducted by the following experts: Mr Gerry O'Hanlon (independent consultant), Mr Peter Hackl (independent consultant), and Mr Marius Andersen (EFTA).

The principal purpose of the PR was to assess compliance by the PCBS with the Statistics Code of Practice for the European Neighbourhood South Countries¹, (based on the European Statistics Code of Practice). The review findings are based on an extensive review performed during the PR mission, which took place from 30 May to 2 June 2022 inclusive in Ramallah.

Prior to the mission, the PCBS staff completed self-assessment questionnaires (SAQs) and returned them with other relevant supporting documents, which together served as a starting point for the review. The results of the review are based on the analysis of the documents provided by the PCBS, documents available on its website, and information collected and discussed during the in-country mission.

The collaboration between the review experts and the PCBS team was constructive throughout all phases of the PR.

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4031688/7946023/KS-32-11-955-A8-N.pdf/94b12830-95fe-42f7-90ac-ad1162c8108d?t=1490171183000>

Executive Summary

1. The President of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and the Top Management have a very clear vision of what is required for a high-quality statistical service and this would appear to be well communicated and accepted throughout the organisation. The PCBS adheres fully to the Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics and it is widely accepted by national and international stakeholders as one of the best performing public authorities in Palestine. Furthermore, as a mark of the respect in which it is held, it was noted that it is one of the few national authorities that have the support of the Gaza Authorities in implementing its mandate in that region. Based on its findings, the Peer Review (PR) Team is pleased to concur with this positive opinion of the PCBS.
2. The production of official statistics in Palestine is governed by the General Statistics Law (GSL), No. 4 of 2000, which provides a solid basis for the production and dissemination of statistics. The GSL was very much fit for purpose at the stage of development of Palestine, both at the institutional and statistical levels, at the time it was adopted, and it has served the statistical system well in the intervening period. However, the PR Team considers that the Law could be improved by aligning it more closely with current international recommendations and best practice for the drafting of statistical legislation (for example, the Generic Law on Official Statistics, published by the Economic Commission for Europe in 2016). In updating the GSL, the Team would recommend that there should be a more systematic focus on ensuring full adherence to the internationally accepted principles for official statistics. In addition, for the definition of the National Statistical System, a generic definition of official statistics should be provided and clear criteria set down for the identification and designation of Other Producers of Official Statistics (OPOS).
3. The PCBS has a current complement of 255 permanent and 101 temporary staff with approximately 75% (267) located in the main office in Ramallah. The remainder are located in seven regional offices, mainly in Nablus (30 staff), Hebron (20) and Gaza (31). The Bureau can also draw on a pool of approximately 1 500 field staff for the conduct of its regular agricultural, business and household surveys. The generally poor labour market conditions in Palestine mean that employment in the PCBS is highly valued and difficulties are, therefore, not experienced currently in the recruitment and retention of skilled staff. The PR Team was very impressed with the quality and motivation of the staff, at all levels, that it encountered during its mission. PCBS management will, however, need to address imminent challenges in replacing a relatively large number of experienced and senior staff, who will retire in the next few years. Moreover, it will need to consider how it can motivate and recognise staff in the face of a continuing public service-wide moratorium on promotions and temporary salary reductions.
4. Information Technology (IT) systems and services are mainly handled in-house and the PR Team was informed that the PCBS does not have difficulty in recruiting and retaining the necessary skilled staff to deliver the service. The computing centre and network were established in 2009 and they are now in need of substantial updating. The PR Team is pleased to note that funding has been obtained to implement necessary upgrades in the medium term and that the first phase of this work has been completed. The Team would recommend that a sectoral peer review of the IT system should be commissioned so that further development might be informed by best practice in technologically developed countries.
5. The PCBS faces ongoing difficulties annually in securing the budget necessary to deliver the agreed statistical work programme. Typically, there is a persistent shortfall of around 10% in the annual budget, which can result in certain planned outputs being dropped or postponed. Such a situation is not sustainable in the longer-term and needs to be addressed in consultation with the Palestinian budgetary

authorities and the external donors. A further area of instability and potential vulnerability is the fact that one core funder on its own has been underwriting approximately 10% of the annual budget over a prolonged period. Previously, a few other core funders had committed to ongoing funding over a number of years. Efforts should therefore be made to restore this situation in order to provide more certainty and stability to the annual budget. PCBS might also use its prominent position in coordinating the provision of high priority indicators for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to attract more resources for the development of the National Statistical System.

6. The PCBS has a Standards, Methodologies and Quality Directorate that oversees its commitment to quality throughout the organisation. The Bureau has deployed and adopted a range of tools and systems in pursuit of its quality assurance objectives. These include ISO 2001 and EFQM certification; the development of a National Quality Assurance Framework (in line with the UNSC recommendations); the preparation of quality reports; and the use of the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM) and the Development Self-Assessment Program (DESAP) tools in the development and assessment of individual statistical outputs. Metadata and Methodological Reports are available for various statistical outputs. Despite these commendable efforts, the PR Team was surprised at the low visibility and transparency afforded to quality and methodology on the PCBS website. For example, the Quality Policy is not listed under Policies on the website while the PR Team could not find direct links between individual statistical outputs and the related metadata and quality reports on the English version of the website. These shortcomings should be addressed and the PCBS should also consider adopting to a greater extent international standards, such as the Euro-SDMX Metadata Structure (ESMS) and the ESS Standard for Quality Reports Structure (ESQRS), as templates in preparing its metadata and quality reports.

7. The PCBS has made considerable progress in using administrative data for statistical purposes. However, E-Government is still relatively under-developed in Palestine and hence there is considerable scope for further progress in this regard. As the PCBS is more advanced than most authorities in the use of modern technology, it should continue to position itself to actively promote and support the adoption of E-Government in a manner that would maximise the potential benefit for statistical production. The full exploitation of administrative data sources is, however, also restricted by the fact that some key administrative data sources, such as the population register and customs data, are not controlled by the Palestinian authorities. Access to these sources is indirect and limited and therefore their statistical potential is constrained. The PCBS is encouraged to explore with the Palestinian Ministry of the Interior all means by which the current situation might be improved.

8. The PR Team welcomes the PCBS's recent initiative to develop a business register in collaboration with the local municipalities. Business identifiers will be collected during this process and certain register-type information will be shared with relevant Ministries. The Team would urge PCBS to ensure that any such sharing is undertaken in a manner that is lawful and fully in line with the principle of statistical confidentiality so that there is no real or perceived threat to the principle.

9. The PCBS continues to have a heavy reliance on face-to-face interviewing in conducting its regular surveys of agricultural holdings, households, and enterprises. Response rates are generally quite high (over 80%) and the response burden is regularly monitored. The Team would encourage the PCBS to modernise its data collection methodology, continue its efforts to reduce the response burden, and keep response rates under review, having regard to the downward trend in response levels internationally.

10. The PCBS website is the main means of disseminating its statistical outputs. While it is comprehensive in presenting a wide range of statistical data and supporting information, the PR Team would agree with the view of some users that it is not particularly user-friendly or focussed at present. A major upgrade, involving the introduction of a database system for generating statistical tables, is

imminent and will improve the functionality. Nevertheless, the PR Team considers that there is considerable scope to improve the website and to make it more amenable to meeting user needs. Responsibility for dissemination and the content of the website currently rests with the Information Systems and Computer Directorate. While this may be a good solution from the point of view of ensuring a technically robust website, it may be at the expense of providing a more user-focused outcome. Consequently, it is recommended that the PCBS should establish a more user-focused dissemination and communication function at senior level in the organisation with a mandate to deliver a more user-friendly website and dissemination service.

11. The dissemination of the main statistics is accompanied by press releases. The PR Team would encourage the PCBS to include more insights, explanations, and analytical content in these releases. The Team was informed by some users, notably in the media, that they frequently contact the relevant experts in the PCBS to obtain additional information and explanations. While it is commendable that such access is possible, it may be more efficient to anticipate common and recurring questions and provide the relevant information in the press releases.

12. The PCBS produces several anonymised Public Use Files (PUFs), which are widely disseminated, and also facilitates controlled access by researchers to more confidential files at its Ramallah office. The use of the latter service is quite limited, perhaps reflecting the need for the researchers to physically go to the Research Centre in Ramallah. Accordingly, the PR Team would encourage the PCBS to develop a safe remote access solution for researchers. Pending the introduction of such a system, it might consider offering controlled access at satellite research centres in some of its offices, for example at the Nablus and Gaza offices.

13. The PR Team was informed that in some Ministries, which produce official statistics, statistical releases must be communicated to and cleared by Ministers or senior officials outside the statistical function prior to general dissemination. Since such practices are contrary to the requirement for equality of access (Principle 6, Indicator 6.6), it is recommended that the PCBS review the situation and introduce appropriate rules and standards for application across the National Statistical System (NSS).

14. Users also mentioned that the availability and quality of data and related metadata was quite variable amongst OPOS. The PCBS is therefore encouraged to develop common standards for application across the NSS.

1. Recommendations

1.1 Institutional Environment and Coordination and Cooperation (Pr. 1-3, 5, 6 and 16)

15. The PCBS should bring proposals to the Palestinian National Authority to update the General Statistics Law (GSL) in order to achieve greater alignment with current international recommendations and best practices for the drafting of statistical legislation. The Generic Law on Official Statistics for Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia, published by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in 2016², is recommended as a template to be followed in drafting the updated law.

16. In updating the GSL, the PR Team recommends that appropriate explicit provisions should be included in relation to the following:

- the professional independence of the PCBS and its President and of the OPOS, as necessary;

² <https://unece.org/statistics/publications/generic-law-official-statistics>

- the procedure for the appointment of the President of the PCBS and the conditions of employment, including tenure;
- the granting of full access (including to identifiers) to administrative data, held by public and private authorities, that are necessary for statistical production;
- the definition of Official Statistics; and
- criteria for the designation of OPOS.

17. The PCBS should address, in consultation with the Palestinian Budgetary Authorities, the sustainability of the current funding of the agreed statistical programme – with a particular focus on the current persistent annual funding shortfall of around 10% – and the potential vulnerability of relying on a very small number of external donors.

18. The PCBS should actively explore with the international partners the necessity of getting more donors to commit to the Core Funding Group in order to mitigate the risk of an over-reliance on one major funder.

19. In meeting the high priority SDG demands for statistical indicators, the PCBS should endeavour to take the opportunity to gain support for the development of the National Statistical System (NSS).

20. In view of the current government policy of freezing promotions and imposing salary reductions in response to the severe national budgetary situation, the PCBS is encouraged to continue developing other means of motivating and recognising staff for good performance.

21. The PCBS is encouraged to continue to place a high priority on planning for the imminent retirement of a relatively large number of senior experienced staff over the next few years.

22. The PCBS, in consultation with the relevant international statistical agencies, should seek to commission a sectoral peer review of its Information Technology (IT) systems and practices.

1.2 Commitment to Quality and Statistical Processes (Pr. 4 and 7-10)

23. In order to provide greater transparency, the PCBS should give more prominence to its Quality Policy on its website.

24. Quality Guidelines should be available that ensure the consistently high quality of statistical products, support experts in applying sound methodology, and ensure the use of appropriate statistical procedures by setting quality standards in the statistical production process.

25. The PCBS should re-organise its website so that, for individual statistical outputs, there is a more accessible and visible direct linkage between the published statistics and the related available metadata and quality reports.

26. In order to improve international comparability and understanding, the PCBS is encouraged to develop to a greater extent uniform templates for its metadata and quality reports in line with international standards, e.g., the Euro-SDMX Metadata Structure (ESMS) and the ESS Standard for Quality Reports Structure (ESQRS), which are recommended for European Statistics.

27. In the context of future E-Government development in Palestine, the PCBS should continue to position itself to maximise its access to administrative data for statistical purposes. The PCBS should take the initiative in pushing for a stronger and faster development of E-Government in Palestine.

28. In the context of establishing a business register in collaboration with the local municipalities, the PCBS should ensure that all data sharing with the municipalities and relevant ministries is lawful and fully in line with the principle of statistical confidentiality.

29. Despite the current relatively high response rates to statistical surveys, the PCBS is encouraged to continue its efforts to minimise the burden on respondents and to develop strategies to minimise non-response. The development of the response rates should be carefully monitored.

1.3 Statistical Output (Pr. 11-15)

30. The PCBS is encouraged to establish a more user-focused dissemination and communications function at senior level in the organisation, with overall responsibility for web-design and functionality.

31. The PCBS is encouraged to develop its website further in order to make it more user-friendly and responsive to user needs.

32. The PCBS is encouraged to provide more explanations and analytical content in press statements and statistical releases.

33. In anticipation of an increased demand for access to microdata for research, the PCBS is encouraged to consider how it might facilitate such access remotely rather than requiring researchers to go physically to the research centre in the Ramallah office. In the meantime, satellite research centres should be offered in other places such as Nablus and Gaza.

34. The PCBS is encouraged to review the practice by some OPOS of Ministers and top officials, outside the statistical function, being involved in the clearance of statistical releases prior to public dissemination. Consideration might be given to introducing appropriate rules and standards, for application across the NSS, in order to ensure closer adherence to the statistical principles of impartiality and equality of access.

35. The PCBS, in conjunction with the OPOS, should develop common basic standards and principles for the preparation of metadata and methodology reports for application across the NSS.

2. Compliance with the Code of Practice

36. The assessment by the PR Team of compliance with the Code of Practice is based on the self-assessment and other documentation provided by the PCBS, supplemented by information obtained during the mission to Ramallah from 30 May to 2 June inclusive. The Agenda of the Peer Review Mission is reproduced in Annex A.

37. In view of the close relationship between the implementation of Principle 4 (Commitment to Quality) and the Statistical Processes section (Principles 7-10) of the Code, the PR Team decided from the outset to review and report on these issues in conjunction with one another. For similar reasons, the remainder of the Institutional Environment section (Principles 1-3 and 5-6) of the Code was examined in conjunction with Principle 16 (Coordination and Cooperation). Accordingly, the description and assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice are presented below under the following three broad headings:

- Institutional Environment and Coordination and Cooperation (Principles 1-3, 5-6, and 16);
- Commitment to Quality and Statistical Processes (Principles 4 and 7-10); and
- Statistical Output (Principles 11-15).

2.1 Institutional Environment and Coordination and Cooperation (Pr. 1-3, 5-6, and 16)

Overview

38. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) was established in 1993 and has primary responsibility for the production, dissemination, and coordination of official statistics in Palestine. It is a public authority, directly accountable to the Council of Ministers, and its President has the rank of a Deputy Minister. Since its foundation, it has pursued its mandate with vigour and innovation and is regarded as one of the most effective public organisations in Palestine. The Bureau has a current complement of 255 permanent and 101 temporary staff, three quarters of which (267 staff) are located in the modern head office in Ramallah. The remainder is located in seven regional offices, mainly in Nablus (30 staff), Hebron (20) and Gaza (31). The Bureau can also draw on a pool of approximately 1 500 field staff for the conduct of its regular agricultural, business and household surveys.

39. Ministries and Other Public Authorities may engage as necessary in the production of official statistics within their areas of responsibilities. These Other Producers of Official Statistics (OPOS) together with the PCBS constitute the National Statistical System (NSS). The overall system is coordinated by the PCBS.

Legal Basis for Official Statistics

40. The production and dissemination of official statistics in Palestine is governed by the General Statistics Law (GSL), No. 4 of 2000, which sets down, *inter alia*, the tasks to be accomplished by the PCBS and its President, the mandate for data collection, the funding of the Bureau and the need for adherence to the principle of statistical confidentiality. The GSL also enables the establishment, where necessary, of statistical units in Ministries and Other Public Authorities and requires that these units coordinate their statistical activities with the PCBS. Finally, the GSL provides for the establishment by the Council of Ministers of an Advisory Council on Statistics, with the primary task of reviewing the annual plans of the Bureau and defining the areas of priority in the strategic development of official statistics in Palestine.

41. While the GSL provides a solid legislative basis for the production and dissemination of official statistics in Palestine, the PR Team considers that the Law could be improved by aligning it more closely

with current international recommendations and best practice for the drafting of statistical legislation (for example, the Generic Law on Official Statistics, published by the Economic Commission for Europe in 2016). In particular, the PR Team would recommend that there should be a more systematic focus on ensuring full adherence to the internationally accepted principles for official statistics. In addition, for the delineation of the National Statistical System, a generic definition of official statistics should be provided and clear criteria set down for the identification and designation of Other Producers of Official Statistics (OPOS). These and other issues are addressed in more detail below in the assessment of compliance with the individual principles of the Code of Practice.

Strategic Development of the National Statistical System

42. Since 2009 the development of the NSS has been driven by three successive national strategies, namely: the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) 2009-2013, 2014-2018 and 2018-2022. The strategies were adopted by the Council of Ministers based on proposals formulated by the PCBS, in agreement with the Advisory Council on Statistics, following widespread consultation of users and other stakeholders. These costed strategies have provided a consistent and ambitious basis for the development of official statistics in Palestine and have also been important in attracting financial support from international donors. Primary responsibility for the implementation of the strategies rests with the PCBS and its performance in this regard has been impressive, notwithstanding the major environmental obstacles that must be overcome. In a mid-term review of the implementation of the current strategy, NSDS 2018-2022, external consultants commented very favourably on the role and performance of the PCBS as follows:

“PCBS is viewed as a strong organisation proving high quality data. The organisation gets a seat at the table at many of the key policy discussions and is a strong advocate for the SDGs. Many stakeholders commented on just how well PCBS responded to the COVID-19 crisis: by understanding new user needs, collecting new data, and becoming part of key decision-making committees, this gave us a flavour of how effective they are becoming in this space. This alongside work on the SDGs has given PCBS even more visibility in recent years. The organisation has also managed to continue to deliver on their pre-existing commitments and priorities and has achieved rate of more than 80% of targets in all of the years under review. Overall, the PCBS is making excellent progress towards the goals stated in the NSDS.”

43. As a follow on, the Palestine Data Strategy 2022-2026 was published in December 2021 and has, as a central focus, the transformation of the National Statistical System to give more value to data through a greater focus on quality and coverage. The targeted transformation of the data ecosystem (Tier 1 of the strategy) will be supported through interventions: to ignite and/or consolidate steering factors such as quality, trust and awareness, and alignment to international standards (Tier 2 of the strategy); and to activate supporting factors such as human and technology resources, data governance and stewardship, and data analytics (Tier 3 of the strategy). Once again, this draft strategy is very ambitious and forward-looking and sets out a very exciting roadmap for the effective development of the NSS over the next decade and beyond. The additional cost of implementing the strategy is estimated at 1 678 million USD, which equates to approximately 3-4% of the estimated expenditure on the core statistical programme over the lifetime of the project.

Resources

44. The funding of the PCBS and the National Statistical System continues to be challenging and somewhat problematic. In recent years, approximately 80% of expenditure on the statistical programme has been funded by the Palestinian National Authority, with the remainder covered by international donors. This is a substantial improvement on the situation a decade ago when the share of expenditure

covered by international donors was close to 50 per cent. In considering the reduced dependence on international donors, two factors need to be considered. First, the number of international funders who are prepared to commit to ongoing funding has fallen from around 5/6 over a decade ago to just one in recent years, with the remaining core funder covering around 10% of the annual expenditure. Secondly, there is a persistent shortfall of around 10% in the annual budget, which results in planned outputs being dropped or postponed. On the assumption that such a shortfall might previously have been covered by international donors, the “true” dependence on international contributions might therefore be around 30 per cent. Since a persistent shortfall of around 10% is not sustainable in the longer term, remedial action will therefore be required from the Palestinian budgetary authorities and/or the international donors to address the situation.

Compliance with the principles of the Code of Practice

2.1.1 Principle 1: Professional Independence.

Professional independence of the National Statistical Institute and other producers of official statistics from other policy, regulatory or administrative departments and bodies, as well as from private sector operators, ensures the credibility of official statistics.

45. In practice, the PCBS is a professionally independent statistical organisation that implements its mandate without any interference from external bodies (Indicator 1.1). The President of the Bureau is at the rank of Deputy Minister and the Prime Minister chairs the Advisory Council on Statistics. Accordingly, the PCBS has very good access to policy and administrative public bodies at the highest levels (Indicator 1.2). Since 2009, a series of four-year strategic plans have been published and reported on, while annual work programmes are also prepared (Indicator 1.5). Statistical releases are clearly distinguished and published separately from political/policy statements (Indicator 1.6). The PCBS is also free, and has developed policies, to comment publicly on statistical issues, including criticisms and misuses of statistics (Indicator 1.7).

46. There is, however, no explicit reference to professional independence in the GSL. The only indirect reference of relevance is the requirement in Article 3 of the Law for the PCBS “*to provide truthful and impartial official statistics....to serve the Palestinian citizenry*”. This is somewhat vague, and the PR Team is of the view that Palestine does not, therefore, comply in full with Indicator 1.1 which requires that the independence of the National Statistical Institute from political and other external interference is specified in law. The duties and responsibilities assigned to the President of the PCBS, in Article 6 of the GSL, are also very much focussed on the managerial tasks with no explicit reference to the professional responsibilities, not least those related to ensuring professional independence (as required in Indicator 1.3). The PR Team would recommend that the very specific requirement in Indicator 1.4 that the head of the National Statistical Institute should have “*sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods, standards and procedures and on the content and timing of statistical releases*” should be enshrined in any revision of the GSL.

47. The appointment of the President of the PCBS is made by the President of the Palestinian National Authority, on the basis of a nomination by the Council of Ministers, from among persons “*with the required qualifications and experience*” to undertake the role. While this is broadly in line with the requirements of Indicator 1.8, the PR Team believes that there should be greater transparency around the appointment process. Furthermore, there is no mention in the GSL of the tenure of the President and the basis on which the incumbency can be terminated (as required under Indicator 1.8).

2.1.2 Principle 2: Mandate for Data Collection.

The National Statistical Institute and other producers of official statistics have a clear legal mandate to collect information for official statistical purposes. Administrations, enterprises and households, and the public at large may be compelled by law to allow access to or deliver data for official statistical purposes at the request of National Statistical Institute and other producers of official statistics.

48. The PCBS is mandated under the GSL (Article 14.1) to “request data for official statistics from government departments, non-governmental agencies, public organisations and private economic actors”, thus complying with Indicator 2.1.

49. Furthermore, it is stated in Article 14.2 that the Bureau “has the right to obtain administrative records data from government departments to be used for statistical purposes”. The latter provision is silent, however, on the type of access – for example, whether it includes personal or other identifiers – and on access to administrative-type records held by other public authorities and private companies (for example, mobile phone companies). The PR Team would recommend that in any revision of the GSL these issues should be addressed to ensure full access and to avoid the difficulties that have been encountered in some other countries in this respect.

50. Response to the Census of Population and Housing is mandatory (Article 15.2 of the GSL). However, response to all other surveys of households and enterprises is not mandatory. Indeed, Article 16.1 goes on to state that the Bureau shall “respect the right to privacy of individuals and households, including their right to refuse participation in a statistical survey”. Thus, the GSL does not comply with the requirements of Indicator 2.3 i.e., by enabling the PCBS to adopt legal measures to make response mandatory when deemed necessary. Notwithstanding the voluntary nature of the surveys, the PR Team was informed that response levels are quite high (typically in excess of 80%) and that it would be difficult in practice to implement mandatory response.

2.1.3 Principle 3: Adequacy of Resources

The resources available to the National Statistical Institute and other producers of official statistics are sufficient to meet Official Statistics requirements.

51. As indicated already, the funding of the PCBS continues to be challenging with funding available from the Palestinian National Authority and international donors typically meeting just 90% of annual requirements. The PCBS ensures that essential statistical outputs (List A) are maintained while those seemed non-essential (List B) are either postponed or undertaken to the extent that available resources permit. While this is a sensible and pragmatic solution in the short-term, its sustainability in the longer-term must be open to question as many of those outputs on List B should not be considered as optional or low priority. Accordingly, in order to achieve better compliance with Indicator 3.1., the PR Team would recommend that the PCBS should explore with the Palestinian Budgetary Authority how a more sustainable funding regime might be achieved.

52. It is also recommended that the PCBS should actively seek, in consultation with the international partners, to attract more donors to join the Core Funding Group so that there is more funding certainty and less vulnerability to the current over-reliance on one major funder.

53. The PR Team would also encourage the PCBS to use its central position in coordinating the provision of indicators for monitoring the achievement of the SDGs to generate more financial support for the development of the National Statistical System (NSS).

54. The high performance of the PCBS can in large measure be attributed to the motivation of its staff in general and to the professionalism and experience of its senior managers. The Team was informed of

the de-motivating impact of a freeze on promotions that has been in place for a few years due to the adverse overall budgetary situation in Palestine. It is expected that this situation may persist, in whole or in substantial part, for some time to come. In this situation, it is recommended that the PCBS should continue to put an emphasis on other methods to explicitly recognise good performance and to raise the morale of staff. Due to impending retirements, the PCBS will also lose a relatively large proportion of its senior managers over the next few years. It is, therefore, vital that the PCBS should also continue to take decisive steps in good time to prepare for this potential loss of institutional knowledge and capacity.

55. The Information Systems and Computer Directorate has a staff complement of over 30 staff, most of whom are highly skilled and experienced. The Directorate has responsibility for maintaining and developing, mainly in-house, the information technology infrastructure and systems. It has made good progress over the years in maintaining and developing the network and systems to meet the needs of a dynamic and increasingly complex statistical system. Plans are currently being implemented for a major upgrading of the network that will meet future needs over the next decade and beyond. In order to benefit from international experience and best practice in this vital area for National Statistical Institutes (NSIs), the PR Team would recommend that the PCBS should commission a sectoral peer review of its current IT infrastructure and development strategy.

2.1.4 Principle 5: Statistical Confidentiality

The privacy of data providers (households, enterprises, administrations and other respondents), the confidentiality of the information they provide and its use only for statistical purposes are absolutely guaranteed.

56. Articles 17, 18 and 19 of the GSL provide a very solid and comprehensive legal basis for ensuring full compliance with the principle of statistical confidentiality. Information obtained for statistical purposes cannot be used for any other purpose unless written permission has been obtained in advance from the data subject concerned (or the person in charge in the case of an enterprise or organisation). In addition, Article 17.3 requires that “each employee or designated employee shall sign an affidavit according to which, he shall not divulge, disseminate, or transmit any information or data that is protected as confidential”. In Article 19 penalties are set down to punish any breaches of the statistical confidentiality.

57. Internal procedures that are in line with the Law and the Code of Practice have been documented and promulgated within the PCBS for the protection of statistical confidentiality. Furthermore, physical, technological, and organisational provisions are in place to protect the security and integrity of statistical databases.

58. Access to confidential data for research purposes is only allowed for duly authorised researchers who must physically attend at the PCBS’s Research Centre in the main office in Ramallah where their access is controlled and monitored.

2.1.5 Principle 6: Impartiality and Objectivity

The National Statistical Institute and other producers of official statistics develop, produce and disseminate Official Statistics respecting scientific independence and in an objective, professional and transparent manner in which all users are treated equitably.

59. The PR Team is satisfied that the PCBS complies in full with the principle of impartiality and objectivity. The Bureau applies international standards and recommendations to the maximum extent in producing and disseminating its statistical outputs. Furthermore, policies relating to dissemination and the correction of errors have been prepared and published on the website. A comprehensive release

calendar is published in advance and deviations from the release schedule must be approved, in justified cases, by the President of PCBS and noted on the website. There is absolutely no pre-release of statistics disseminated by the Bureau. This is not always the situation in the OPOS as the PR Team was informed that in some cases Ministers and Senior Officials must approve the statistics before they are released.

2.1.6 Principle 16: Coordination and Cooperation

Coordination and cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of the quality of official statistics in the national statistical systems of the ENP-South countries.

Coordination of the National Statistical System

60. Articles 13 and 14 of the GSL set down: the limits on the statistical activities of Ministries and other public bodies; the coordination role of the PCBS; the right of access to administrative and other information for statistical purposes; and the right of PCBS to be consulted in relation to any changes to administrative records or procedures that might affect their statistical utility. Accordingly, these articles might be considered as constituting the legal basis for the National Statistical System (NSS) and its coordination. While welcome, the PR Team considers that they fall short in defining official statistics and in setting down standards and criteria for designating and certifying other producers of official statistics (OPOS). These are issues which should be addressed in any future revision of the GSL.

61. The coordination and improvement of the NSS was a central focus of the NSDS 2018-2022, with priority assigned to delivering the indicators required for implementing and monitoring the SDGs. The PCBS signed 10 Memorandums of Understanding with a number of government institutions and private institutions in order to strengthen cooperation, develop the administrative records, exchange experiences and strengthen technical capacities. While progress was achieved, it is accepted that more is required and that lack of technical and financial resources for statistics in the OPOS are significant limiting factors. The improvement and development of the NSS will again be a major objective of the Palestine Data Strategy 2022-2026 and it is to be hoped that the resources identified for this purpose will be forthcoming.

Co-operation with international bodies

62. The International Relations Directorate (IRD) of PCBS is responsible for cooperation and coordination with international organisations and donors. Its main tasks include PCBS project management of international assistance, participation in regional programmes as well as the provision of translation and editing services. The PR Team considers the IRD is well organised and effective in coordinating and implementing capacity building projects in cooperation with international partners. Regular donor coordination meetings are held which include both active and potential donors, and PCBS uses this forum to promote its needs for technical assistance and funding for achieving objectives specified in the statistical work programmes.

63. The PCBS considers that access to technical assistance from international partners is usually satisfactory; however, an ongoing main challenge for the PCBS is to ensure sufficient and sustainable funding to implement the objectives of the statistical work programmes. To this end, the PCBS prioritises statistical activities and outputs according to essential (List A) and non-essential (List B) activities with the latter only implemented if funding is available. Unfortunately, in the absence of sufficient funding, this approach has resulted in the postponement and cancellation of a number of important projects in recent years.

64. Previously, the PCBS could rely on a number of donors contributing as part of a Core Financing Group (CFG). Currently, the CFG consists of only one donor, which contributes approximately 10 per cent of the PCBS budget. This over-reliance on one external donor, together with a persistent financing

shortfall in its annual budget, represents a fragile resource situation. The PR team therefore considers that the PCBS should continue its efforts to persuade more international donors to commit to longer-term funding as part of the CFG. One strategic approach to be considered in this regard would be to stress the urgent need for financial support to develop the statistical indicators required for monitoring the high-priority SDGs.

2.1.7 Recommendations

65. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) is urged to update the General Statistics Law (GSL) in order to achieve greater alignment with current international recommendations and best practices for the drafting of statistical legislation. The Generic Law on Official Statistics for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA), published by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in 2016³, is recommended as a template to be followed in drafting the updated law.

66. In updating the GSL, the PR Team recommends, in particular, that appropriate explicit provisions should be included in relation to the following:

- the professional independence of the PCBS and its President (and OPOS, as necessary);
- the procedure for the appointment of the President of the PCBS and the conditions of employment, including tenure;
- the granting of full access (including to identifiers) to administrative data, held by public and private authorities, that are necessary for statistical production;
- the definition of Official Statistics; and
- criteria for the designation of OPOS.

67. The PCBS should address, in consultation with the Palestinian Budgetary Authorities, the sustainability of the current funding of the agreed statistical programme – with a particular focus on the current persistent annual funding shortfall of around 10% – and the potential vulnerability of relying on a very small number of external donors.

68. The PCBS should actively explore with the international partners the necessity of getting more donors to commit to the Core Funding Group in order to mitigate the risk of an over-reliance on one major funder.

69. In meeting the high priority SDG demands for statistical indicators, the PCBS should endeavour to take the opportunity to gain support for the development of the National Statistical System (NSS).

70. In view of the current government policy of freezing promotions and imposing salary reductions in response to the severe national budgetary situation, the PCBS is encouraged to continue developing other means of motivating and recognising staff for good performance.

71. The PCBS is encouraged to continue to place a high priority on planning for the imminent retirement of a relatively large number of senior experienced staff over the next few years.

72. The PCBS, in consultation with the relevant international statistical agencies, should seek to commission a sectoral peer review of its Information Technology (IT) systems and practices.

³ <https://unece.org/statistics/publications/generic-law-official-statistics>

2.2 Commitment to Quality and Statistical Processes (Pr. 4 and 7-10)

Overview

73. The PCBS has a strong commitment to achieving and maintaining high-quality standards in the development and deployment of its statistical methodologies and processes. The driving forces in the environment for the production of official statistics are the growing demands by users for more statistics and more complex statistical products on the one side and the growing availability of data and the progress in information technology on the other side. In common with most other National Statistical Institutes, these are also challenges with which the PCBS is confronted.

74. Coping with these challenges causes the PCBS to adapt its technical resources, notably the information technology systems, to the current international standards and to empower the staff to develop and improve statistical processes in accordance with current best practice methodologies and standards. The corresponding resource requirements are addressed already in the section on Institutional Environment and Coordination and Cooperation. This section deals with the methodological aspects of the statistical production process, including: data collection, the use of data from administrative sources, and the underlying statistical processes and methods. In addition, the approach towards quality assurance and monitoring is reviewed.

Data collection

75. Like for all producers of statistics, the collection of raw data is a central activity of the PCBS. The PCBS collects data in agricultural, business and household surveys, conducts various censuses, and has access to data from administrative sources.

76. In the PCBS, the predominant means of data collection is face-to-face interviewing. Data collection is carried out by the regional offices; a pool of approximately 1 500 interviewers is available for conducting the field work. The PCBS increasingly uses current technologies in data collection such as call centres and tablets. The Bureau has also started to align the questionnaires of the business surveys to the accounting systems of the responding companies.

77. Serious obstacles to efficient and effective data collection are encountered due to the prevailing adverse political situation. It is to the credit of the PCBS that they have found many innovative solutions to overcome these obstacles and restrictions.

78. Although participation in the surveys of the PCBS is voluntary, the response rates are quite high, e.g., more than 80% and 85% in business surveys and the Labour Force Survey, respectively. The monitoring of non-response in surveys, however, shows a slightly increasing trend.

79. The PCBS is monitoring the response burden and works on reducing the response burden for establishments and households; the use of data from administrative sources is seen as an important means for that purpose. The response burden is measured as the time spent providing the response.

Data from administrative sources

80. The PCBS has made considerable progress in using data from administrative sources for statistical purposes. Various preparatory steps have been carried out. Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were signed with more than 40 national data providers. The PCBS supports potential data providers in developing the statistical capacity of their staff. For example, a handbook was developed on the collection, processing, and dissemination of administrative data for statistical purposes. Data are mainly provided by the Ministry of Interior for vital statistics, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Agriculture.

81. Unfortunately, E-Government is still relatively under-developed in Palestine, a fact that limits the possibilities for the use of administrative data sources by the PCBS. Accordingly, there is still considerable room for further progress in this regard. As the PCBS is more advanced than most authorities in the use of related technology, it should position itself to actively promote and support the adoption of E-Government in a manner that would maximize the potential benefit for statistical production.

82. The PR Team was informed about an interesting initiative that shows a constructive way to deal with this difficult situation. The aim of the initiative is to develop a business register in cooperation with the municipalities of Palestine. The initiative arose from the common interest of the municipalities and the PCBS to have an inventory of the local economy. In establishing the business register, the municipality is collecting the business identifiers that are relevant for the municipality itself, the PCBS and several ministries who will be partners in the project. This ambitious and complex endeavour requires solutions to various problems, e.g., a sound legal treatment of the data, that is in line with the principle of statistical confidentiality.

83. Another limitation in using data from administrative sources is the fact that some important administrative data, notably the population register and customs data, are not controlled by the Palestinian authorities. Access to these data is indirect and limited, and therefore their statistical potential for the PCBS is constrained. The PCBS is encouraged to explore with the Palestinian Ministry of the Interior all means by which the current situation might be improved.

Statistical processes

84. The statistical production of the PCBS is based on sound methodology, appropriate statistical procedures, non-excessive burden on respondents and cost effectiveness. The current trend internationally in statistical process design is towards adopting common frameworks and harmonised terminologies that help statistical organisations to modernise their statistical production processes on a common basis and to share methods and components in the production of the various statistical products. The most widespread concept is the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM). The PCBS uses GSBPM as a framework for assessing the production process of each statistical product, resulting in indicators for the various quality dimensions. A future step will be the development of a harmonised and integrated system to produce statistics along the GSBPM. It is planned that the version 5.1 of GSBPM will be applied in 2022.

85. The PR Team was informed that the statistical methods used, such as survey designs, sample selections, data collections and estimation methods are regularly reviewed. The Field Work Directorate is responsible for monitoring productivity for each survey, and for increasing productivity and reducing the costs. The reviews often serve as the basis for improvements or revisions of the statistical processes.

86. The PCBS is working on a comprehensive modernisation of the network and data centre built in 2009. Both the conversion of hardware and software to the latest technology and the adaptation to current security regulations will be implemented in the coming months and years. These modernisation steps will respond to emerging needs using new technologies in data collection, processing and dissemination and will substantially improve the cost-effectiveness of statistical production within the PCBS.

The Quality Dimension

87. Both quality of statistical processes and products and quality management play a major role within the PCBS. A special unit within the Standards, Methodologies and Quality Directorate, the Quality Department, is responsible for all related activities.

88. The document Quality Policy and Objectives sets down the quality policy of the PCBS; it was published in 2011. It contains eight objectives and includes a commitment to monitor the achievement of the quality objectives based on suitable indicators. Among the objectives are the principles of continuous improvement, the reduction of the response burden and user orientation. While the Quality Policy and Objectives document is aimed at the general public, it is not, however, listed under Policies or anywhere else on the PCBS website.

89. According to the Quality Assurance Framework of the European Statistical System, guidelines that complement the Quality Policy should be available on how to practically implement quality management within the statistical production process. Such guidelines are an important tool for: assuring the provision of consistently high-quality statistical products; supporting statistical experts in the use of sound methodology; and assuring the application of appropriate statistical procedures by providing quality standards in the statistical production process. Such guidelines facilitate the work of the line departments, including the training of new staff, and having such guidelines would improve the efficiency of statistical processes. The PR Team therefore recommends that such guidelines be prepared and made available for use throughout the PCBS.

90. Examples of systems and tools that the PCBS has deployed and implemented for ensuring and enhancing the quality of its statistical processes and products include:

- Certification according to the Quality Management System ISO 9001; and
- Achievement of the first excellence certificate of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM).

91. The Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM) and the Development Self-Assessment Programme (DESAP) are also used in the development and assessment of individual statistical outputs.

92. Over the years, various reviews of the PCBS and strategies have emphasised the importance of improving the quality dimension. For example, in 2012, a Light Peer Review of the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice was undertaken in the framework of the EUROSTAT funded project “Global assessments of statistical systems of candidate and potential candidate countries as well as ENP countries”; the report indicated strengths of the PCBS and recommended several quality related actions and improvements.

93. The National Strategy for the Development of Official Statistics for the years 2018-2022 sets down a number of objectives related to the quality of the statistical production and products, including: to improve the work environment for human resources and IT, and to approve and implement a National Quality Assurance Framework (NQAF). Similarly, the Palestine Data Strategy for the years 2022-2026 focuses on improvements such as the establishment of a business register and the comprehensive assessment, following the GSBPM model, of statistical outputs.

94. The PR Team was informed that the assessment of the production process of each statistical product using the GSBPM model has already been implemented. The documentation of these evaluations is the basis for identifying potentials for improvement.

95. International practice requires that users have access to all metadata information that is needed to use the statistical product. An advanced search of the English version of the PCBS website for “quality reports” results in just a few reports (Labour Force Survey, Expenditure and Consumption Survey, Industry Survey, Olive Presses Survey, etc.), all of them published between 2011 and 2014. Furthermore, the methodological part of reports on statistical products is usually very short and variable in content. The PR Team was also informed that the PCBS publishes quality reports on the website but considers the metadata reports to be for internal use only.

96. The PR Team would stress that a direct link between individual statistical outputs and the related metadata report is highly desirable for users. The Euro-SDMX Metadata Structure (ESMS) and the ESS Standard for Quality Reports Structure (ESQRS) are standards that could be used as templates in preparing metadata and quality reports. Using such templates would assure that the metadata and quality reports follow a consistent format.

97. The PR Team also believes that it would be beneficial for the user in general to increase the visibility and transparency afforded to quality and methodology on the PCBS website.

Compliance with the principles of the Code of Practice

2.2.1 Principle 4: Commitment to Quality

The National Statistical Institute and other producers of official statistics are committed to quality. They systematically and regularly identify strengths and weaknesses to continuously improve process and product quality.

98. While there is good compliance with this principle, there is room for further improvement. The PR Team noted PCBS' commitment to high standards for statistical methodology and quality throughout its work. The PCBS has deployed and implemented systems and tools for ensuring and enhancing the quality of the statistical processes and products. The GSBPM and DESAP are used in the development and assessment of individual statistical outputs. The Quality Policy should be made visible on the PCBS website, and Quality Guidelines should be available as support for staff. The PR Team recommends that metadata reports should be offered for all statistical products, prepared using a standard format as template; a direct link on the website between individual statistical outputs and the related metadata would be desirable for users.

2.2.2 Principle 7: Sound Methodology

Sound Methodology underpins quality statistics. This requires adequate tools, procedures and expertise.

99. The PCBS complies with this principle. The PR Team noted in particular the PCBS' efforts to follow current trends to standardise the statistical process design towards a common framework and to modernise statistical production processes. The PCBS uses the GSBPM as a framework for assessing the production processes and derives indicators for relevant quality dimensions. Major steps towards modernising hardware and software to the latest state of the art and adapting to current security regulations will be implemented in the coming months and years. The PCBS also places a high priority on training, both for its own staff and also for staff working on statistics in Ministries and other public authorities.

2.2.3 Principle 8: Appropriate Statistical Procedures

Appropriate statistical procedures implemented from data collection to data validation underpin quality statistics.

100. There is good compliance with this principle through the implementation of appropriate statistical procedures from data collection to data validation. Furthermore, the PR Team confirmed that the PCBS has adequate routines for reviewing data collection and statistical processing, and that procedures are revised as necessary. The use of data from administrative sources is increasing, but is constrained by the relatively under-developed state of E-Government in Palestine.

2.2.4 Principle 9: Non-excessive Burden on Respondents

The reporting burden is proportionate to the needs of the users and is not excessive for respondents. The National Statistical Institute and other producers of official statistics monitor the response burden and set targets for its reduction over time.

101. A range of measures are in place to ensure a good level of compliance with this principle. The PR Team is pleased to note that the response burden on respondents is regularly monitored. The PCBS is encouraged to continue its efforts to reduce the response burden and to develop strategies to minimise non-response. The scope in Palestine for the greater use of administrative records for statistical purposes will be very important in making significant progress in this regard.

2.2.5 Principle 10: Cost Effectiveness

Resources are used effectively.

102. The PCBS complies with this principle by making effective use of the available resources. The Field Work Directorate is responsible for monitoring productivity for each survey, and for increasing the productivity and reducing the costs. The multi-annual strategies contain improvement measures such as the establishment of a business register. The PR Team also notes with approval that the PCBS has robust time-recording and other systems in place to measure the cost of individual statistical outputs.

2.2.6 Recommendations

103. In order to provide greater transparency, the PCBS should give more prominence to its Quality Policy on its website.

104. Quality Guidelines should be available that assure the consistently high quality of statistical products, support experts in applying sound methodology, and ensure the use of appropriate statistical procedures by setting quality standards in the statistical production process.

105. The PCBS should re-organise its website so that, for individual statistical outputs, there is a more accessible and visible direct linkage between the published statistics and the related available metadata and quality reports.

106. In order to improve international comparability and understanding, the PCBS is encouraged to develop to a greater extent uniform templates for its metadata and quality reports in line with international standards, e.g., the Euro-SDMX Metadata Structure (ESMS) and the ESS Standard for Quality Reports Structure (ESQRS), which are recommended for European Statistics.

107. In the context of future E-Government development in Palestine, the PCBS should continue to position itself to maximize its access to administrative data for statistical purposes. The PCBS should take the initiative in pushing for a stronger and faster development of E-Government in Palestine.

108. In the context of establishing a business register in collaboration with the local municipalities, the PCBS should ensure that all data sharing with the municipalities and relevant ministries is lawful and fully in line with the principle of statistical confidentiality.

109. Despite the current relatively high response rates to statistical surveys, the PCBS is encouraged to continue its efforts to minimise the burden on respondents and to develop strategies to minimise non-response. The development of the response rates should be carefully monitored.

2.3 Statistical Output (Pr. 11-15)

Overview

110. Overall, the PR Team formed a good impression of how the PCBS complies with Principles 11-15 relating to statistical output – an impression which was confirmed in the meetings with the main users from the media, the scientific community, and international organisations. Most recommendations regarding statistical output and dissemination refer to improvements related to Principle 15 on accessibility and clarity, including the organisation of the website, press releases, access to microdata and implementing common standards in the NSS as regards dissemination standards and metadata.

111. PCBS has defined a dissemination policy for Palestinian Official Statistics, which describes the general principles for dissemination of Official Statistics. The policy is focused on traditional principles such as relevance, independence, impartiality and more, and includes a user/output-oriented section describing the main users and the official dissemination channels. In addition to the dissemination policy, the PCBS has defined the following policies, which together provide the frame for PCBS activities related to dissemination:

- Public Awareness
- PCBS Experience in Activating Role of Media Representatives and Channels and its impact on the Dissemination of Statistical Figures
- Policy on Release Dates of Statistics
- Policy for Proactive Dissemination
- Policy for dealing with errors in disseminated press releases or statistical reports.

Compliance with the principles of the Code of Practice

2.3.1 Principle 11: Relevance

Official Statistics meet the needs of users.

112. Related to the principle of *relevance*, the PR Team considers that the PCBS pays a great deal of attention to its relations with users and users indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the service provided by the PCBS. A user satisfaction survey is conducted every three years. PCBS gave examples on how the results from the last survey conducted in 2019 was used to develop the functionality of the webpage and access to microdata. Main users are also represented in the Advisory Council on Statistics. The Advisory Council, which meets twice per year, consists of 23 representatives, with many representing both users and producers of Official Statistics. Part of the responsibilities of the Advisory Council is to evaluate and give advice on the annual work programmes of PCBS thereby providing a forum to ensure the relevance of the statistical outputs.

2.3.2 Principle 12: Accuracy and Reliability

Official Statistics accurately and reliably portray reality.

113. The PR Team was informed that the PCBS implements the principle of *accuracy and reliability* via its regular assessments of individual statistical outputs. Through these assessments, different statistical outputs are evaluated and documented with the provision of indicators such as variation coefficients, response rates, coverage rates, sampling and non-sampling errors and more. Revisions are also assessed and improvements are introduced when necessary.

2.3.3 Principle 13 Timeliness and Punctuality.

Official Statistics are released in a timely and punctual manner.

114. As regards *timeliness and punctuality*, the PCBS has a clearly defined procedure for updating the statistical release calendar and informing users in case of deviations from the pre-announced publication dates. The annual release calendar is published at the beginning of each year and includes the exact date and time of all individual statistical releases scheduled for dissemination over the following twelve months. Some statistical releases by OPOS are included in the release calendar. Most statistical releases are disseminated at 10 AM on the release date, but a small number are disseminated at 12 PM. In the meeting with main users, this difference in release time did not seem to be of major concern.

2.3.4 Principle 14: Coherence and Comparability.

Official Statistics are consistent internally, over time and comparable between regions and countries; it is possible to combine and make joint use of related data from different sources.

115. In order to ensure that statistics are *coherent and comparable*, the PCBS performs consistency checks on the data as part of the validation process. The PCBS also documents changes in methodology, which might impact the consistency and comparability of time series, and informs users accordingly. Comparisons between different sources (e.g., other surveys, administrative data) and with other statistics are also undertaken, when available and relevant.

2.3.5 Principle 15: Accessibility and clarity.

Official Statistics are presented in a clear and understandable form, released in a suitable and convenient manner, available and accessible on an impartial basis with supporting metadata and guidance.

116. Related to the principle of *accessibility and clarity*, the PCBS has clearly made many efforts to develop coverage and functionality of its website, which is the main dissemination source for Official Statistics. Together with its presence in social media and its strong focus on serving user requests, the PCBS is able to deliver a high standard dissemination service to its users. In this regard, the PR Team welcomes the recent development of an interactive dissemination database where users will be able to access, extract and visualise statistics. The PR Team understands that some Official Statistics are already integrated into this dissemination database, and encourages PCBS to ensure that all statistics published by PCBS are included in the near future, as this would represent a major improvement in the accessibility of statistics.

117. Further to these developments, the PR Team noted that there is a rich amount of information and tools made available on the PCBS website. The PCBS has devoted a lot of attention, not only to disseminating the standard statistical releases in accordance with the dissemination policy, but also to making supporting information available. However, further attention should be given to developing the PCBS website with a greater user focus (Indicator 15.1). This was confirmed in the meetings with main users (media, international organisations, etc.) and by the PR Team itself. As an example, the website contains a rich range of statistics and supporting information, including visualisation tools, metadata and press releases. Unfortunately, it is often not easy for the user to find the full range of information that is being sought on a particular statistical output. This is due to the fact that the information is often organised separately according to the type of information (i.e., data, metadata, methodology etc.), without the necessary linkages in place to facilitate an overall integrated view of the statistical product. The development of direct linkages between the data and the corresponding metadata and methodological reports should therefore be pursued as a priority.

118. Responsibility for dissemination and website design is currently assigned to the Information Systems and Computer Directorate. On the one hand, placing the dissemination service and website development under the IT directorate facilitates the development of the website of the PCBS in accordance with technical and IT standards. On the other hand, however, the dissemination and website development service may place insufficient emphasis on the user perspective and user-focused dissemination and communication. The PR Team therefore considers that the PCBS should establish a more user-focused dissemination and communication function at senior level in the organisation with a mandate to deliver a more user-friendly website and dissemination service (Indicator 15.1).

119. The PCBS issues press releases when disseminating its main statistics, which include descriptions of the latest developments, tables and graphics as relevant. The PR Team noted that users frequently contact the PCBS with requests for additional information about their statistical releases, and the ready availability of PCBS staff to serve such user requests is commendable. However, such frequent requests could reflect both limitations in how information is organised on the website and/or that the information available in statistical releases is not sufficiently meeting users' requirements for additional information or explanations. The PR Team therefore considers that the PCBS could provide more insights, explanations and analytical content in press statements and statistical releases (Indicator 15.1). One solution might be to log the typical requests and questions from users and, based on the results obtained, to tailor the information in the statistical and press releases to meet the requirements of users in a more effective manner.

120. The PCBS facilitates access to microdata for research purposes through Public Use Files (PUFs), and through physical visits by accredited researchers to the PCBS premises in Ramallah. As regards the PUFs, PCBS seems to make available a wide range of anonymised datasets, which is appreciated by scientific and educational users. Access to more confidential datasets, however, is only possible for researchers who physically go to the PCBS premises in Ramallah, and access is furthermore subject to an application procedure and the conclusion of a "terms of use" agreement. The use of the latter service is quite limited, perhaps reflecting to some extent the need to physically go to the Research Centre in Ramallah. In order to further improve accessibility of microdata for research purposes, the PR Team recommends the development of a solution for safe remote access to microdata (Indicator 15.4). Developing this remote access service is likely to help the PCBS to meet future demands for access to microdata, which are likely to grow significantly in line with international experience.

121. The PCBS has defined the standards for dissemination and communication in its Dissemination Policy, which are intended to cover all Palestinian Official Statistics. The standards and principles in the Dissemination Policy should therefore apply to the entire NSS. However, the PR team was informed of some practices that would justify the PCBS introducing greater monitoring and coordination of the practices of OPOS in relation to dissemination.

122. Ideally, statistical production and dissemination functions in OPOS should be clearly separated from policy functions in order to safeguard statistical principles such as professional independence, impartiality and, specifically related to dissemination, the principle of equal access. In general, the statistical functions in OPOS would appear to be implemented in separate organisational units with responsibility for the production and dissemination of Official Statistics. However, the PR team was informed that in some Ministries, statistical releases require the prior approval of Ministers, or other senior officials outside the statistical unit, which is contrary to the principles of professional independence and equal access. The PR team therefore recommends that the PCBS reviews such situations with the aim of establishing common rules and principles for dissemination by OPOS throughout the whole NSS (Indicator 16.1). These common rules and principles should aim to bring the

dissemination principles and practice in OPOS in line with the principles of the Code of Practice and the Dissemination Policy as formulated by PCBS.

123. Another issue related to the coordination of the standards applied in the NSS is the coverage and quality of the metadata and quality reports provided by OPOS. In the meetings with users, the PR team was informed about varying availability and quality of data and related metadata amongst OPOS. This indicates that there seems to be potential for developing common standards and principles for metadata and quality reports across the NSS, and for the PCBS to coordinate the implementation of these (Indicator 16.1).

2.3.6 Recommendations

124. The PCBS is encouraged to establish a more user-focused dissemination and communications function at senior level in the organisation, with overall responsibility for web-design and functionality.

125. The PCBS is encouraged to develop its website further in order to make it more user-friendly and responsive to user needs.

126. The PCBS is encouraged to provide more explanations and analytical content in press statements and statistical releases.

127. In anticipation of an increased demand for access to microdata for research, the PCBS is encouraged to consider how it might facilitate such access remotely rather than requiring researchers to go physically to the research centre in the Ramallah office. In the meantime, satellite research centres should be offered in other places such as Nablus and Gaza.

128. The PCBS is encouraged to review the practice by some OPOS of ministers and top officials, outside the statistical function, being involved in the clearance of statistical releases prior to public dissemination. Consideration might be given to introducing appropriate rules and standards, for application across the NSS, in order to ensure closer adherence to the statistical principles of impartiality and equality of access.

129. The PCBS, in conjunction with the OPOS, should develop common basic standards and principles for the preparation of metadata and methodology reports for application across the NSS.

Annex A: Agenda of the Peer Review Mission

Date and place of the Peer Review (PR)

Date 30/05 – 02/06/2022

Place PCBS premises

Assessment Team

Experts Mr Gerry O’Hanlon

Mr Peter Hackl

EFTA Mr Marius Andersen

Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

President of PCBS: Dr. Ola Awad

Assistant Under-Secretary for Administrative, Financial Affairs & IT: Mr. Sufian Abu Harb

Assistant Under-Secretary Planning, Development & International Relations Affairs: Mr. Loay Shehadeh

Assistant Under-Secretary for Statistical Affairs: Ms. Inaya Zidan

Assistant Under-Secretary for the Development of Statistical Work: Mr. Jawad Al-Saleh

PCBS Coordination Team:

Nayef Abed

Mohammad Omari

Marwan Barakat

Amneh Al-Natsheh

Nedal Omar

Dyala Ibrahim

Mohammad Marie

Session (time)	Topic	Content	Participants
Monday			
(8:30 – 9:00)	Preparatory meeting with the PCBS Coordination Team	Adoption of agenda, logistics and working arrangements	PR Team PCBS Coordination Team
(9:00 – 10:00)	Meeting with PCBS Top Management	Oral presentation (c. 15 minutes) followed by discussion on Palestinian Statistical System, focussing on recent developments and challenges.	PR Team President of PCBS Assistants Under-secretaries PCBS Coordination Team
10:00 – 10:15	Coffee break		
(10:15 -11:30)	Presentation of the National Statistical System, coordination role of PCBS and cooperation with international statistical organisations and donors. (Principle 16)	Short presentation (c. 20 minutes) followed by discussion	PR Team PCBS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistants Under-secretaries • IRD⁴
(11:30 – 12:30)	The Law on State Statistics and related legislation with a focus on professional independence, data collection and access to (administrative) data, statistical confidentiality, data protection and impartiality and objectivity. (CoP Principles 1, 2, 5 and 6)	Short presentation (c. 15 minutes) followed by discussion on main statistical provisions and their implementation in practice.	PR Team PCBS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistants Under-secretaries • RSMD⁵
12:30 – 13:30	Lunch break		
(13:30 – 14:30)	Programming (statistical work programmes), planning and human resources (CoP principles 1, 3, 7 and 10)	Short presentation (c. 15 minutes) followed by discussion on statistical programmes, priorities, organisational structure and recruitment, retention and development of human resources.	PR Team PCBS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AFD⁶ • PDD⁷
14:30 – 15:00	Review team meeting		

⁴ IRD: International Relations Directorate

⁵ RSMD: Registers and Statistical Monitoring Directorate

⁶ AFD: Administrative and Financial Affairs Directorate

⁷ PDD: Planning and Development Directorate

Session (time)	Topic	Content	Participants
Tuesday			
(8:30– 9:30)	Information Technology – review of IT infrastructure and effective deployment of modern hardware and software systems. (CoP Principles 3, 8, 9,10 and 15)	Short presentation (c. 15 minutes) followed by discussion on adequacy of IT resources (hardware and software), availability of skilled and competent staff, and effective deployment of modern IT systems across the statistical process chain.	PR Team PCBS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISD⁸
(9:30 – 10:30)	Quality Management and Methodology Development (CoP Principles 4, 7 and 8)	Short presentation (c. 15 minutes) followed by discussion on policies, structures and tools for quality monitoring and reporting together with approaches adopted for methodology assessment, development and improvement	PR Team PCBS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMQD⁹
10:30 – 10:45	Coffee break		
(10:45 – 12:00)	Data collection, data processing and use of administrative data (CoP principles 2, 7, 8 and 9)	Short presentation (c. 15minutes) followed by discussion on methodologies used for data collection and processing, including the effective use of administrative data and modern technology. Approaches towards monitoring and minimising the burden on respondents will also be covered.	PR Team PCBS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FWD¹⁰ • RSMD • ISD
12:00 – 13:00	Lunch break		
(13:00 – 14:00)	Relationship with users, communication and dissemination of relevant statistics in accordance with statistical principles and access to statistical microdata for research. (CoP principles 5, 6 and 11 - 15)	Short presentation (c. 15 minutes) followed by discussion with a focus on: the consultation of users; dissemination channels; provision of metadata; promotion of the use of statistics (statistical literacy); and facilitation of access by researchers to statistical microdata.	PR Team PCBS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMQD • ISD

⁸ ISD: Information, systems, and Computer Directorate

⁹ SMQD: Standards, Methodologies and Quality Directorate

¹⁰ FWD: Fieldwork Directorate

Session (time)	Topic	Content	Participants
(14:00 – 15:00)	Meeting with Junior Staff	Discussion with a small number of Junior Staff to identify their training needs and development and also their assessment of PCBS in the context of meeting their career expectations	PR Team PCBS (selected Junior Staff (c. 5) with between 3 and 6 years work experience in PCBS)
15:00 – 15:30	Review team meeting		
Wednesday			
(09:00 – 10:00)	Meeting with Other Producers of Official Statistics (OPOS) and major data providers	Discussion with OPOS producing statistics and major providers of data to PCBS for statistical purposes (e.g., administrative data holders). The focus should be on statistical standards and principles, the coordination role of PCBS, and on maximising the use of administrative data for statistical purposes. The challenge of meeting the data requirements for the SDGs should be specifically addressed.	PR Team Coordinators of PCBS with the ministries OPOS/data providers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Finance • Ministry of Agriculture • Ministry of Health
(10:00 -11:00)	Meeting with main users – Ministries and other public/private institutions (including National Bank as a user):	Discussion on the statistical priorities for the development and implementation of policy. Quality of statistics provided by PCBS and extent to which needs are taken into account	PR Team Coordinators of PCBS with the ministries Policy users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Bank (Palestine Monetary Authority) • Ministry of Finance • Ministry of Education • Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee break		
(11:15 – 12:15)	Meeting with main users – Scientific Community	Discussion to cover: needs of users; consultation mechanisms; quality of statistics provided by PCBS; and access to statistical data for research purposes.	PR Team Scientific Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS • Arab American University • Birzeit University

Session (time)	Topic	Content	Participants
12:15 – 13:15	Lunch break		
(13:15 – 14:00)	Meeting with main data providers/respondents	Discussion with representatives of other data providers/respondents (i.e., households, farmers and private enterprises) on interactions with PCBS. Issues to be considered should include: ease of responding to data requests and efforts to reduce the burden on respondents.	PR Team PCBS: Data providers/respondents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the project managers • Sampling department
(14:00 – 15:00)	Meeting with main users – Media	Discussion with experienced users of statistics within the media (print, tv, radio, news agency etc.) on quality of service and extent to which needs are met. Views on the public perception of the independence of PCBS and the reliability and trustworthiness of official statistics will be sought.	PR Team Media
15:00 – 15:00	Review team meeting		
Thursday			
(09:00 – 10:00)	Meeting with main users – International organisations	Broad discussion with the international organisations as users of official statistics and funders of statistical development.	PR Team International organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN agencies: UNOCHA • Donors:GIZ
(10:00 – 11:00)	Meeting with Statistical Council	Meeting to discuss the functioning of the Council and main challenges in advancing the development of the NSS	PR Team Advisory Council (2 members)
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee break		
(11:15 – 12:00)	Meeting of the PR and PCBS teams, clarifications, remaining or additional issues and focus areas		PR Team PCBS Coordination Team
12:00 – 13:00	Lunch break		
13:00 – 14:00	Review team meeting		

Session (time)	Topic	Content	Participants
(14:00 – 15:00)	Meeting with senior management: conclusions and recommendations	Oral presentation of main findings and recommendations, followed by discussion	PR Team PCBS Coordination Team PCBS Top Management