

The Ethics Board of Swiss Public Statistics

Ph. Eichenberger, Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Friday, 11 February 2005

The Ethics Board of Public Swiss Statistics has been active for a little more than one year. This first-year milestone is a good opportunity to briefly go over its history, role and functioning. Although a full assessment of its activities would be premature, we shall nevertheless describe its first year of activity and the priorities set for 2005.

The Swiss Public Statistics Charter

With the Swiss Public Statistics Charter (<http://www.stat.ch/documents/charter-f.pdf>), adopted on 24 Mai 2002, statistics offices now have a professional code of ethics stating the vital nature of their public service activities and stressing the importance of relevance, quality and independence of the information that they produce and publish. By adopting the Swiss Public Statistics Charter, statistics offices recognise that certain intangible ethical principles must be adhered to in order to maintain a professional standard of public service.

The Charter contains twenty basic principles relating to public information, scientific independence, distribution, quality of statistical information and protection of personal data. It is modelled after the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in the Region of the Economic Commission for Europe (<http://www.unece.org/stats/archive/docs.fp.e.htm>, April 1992) and the Declaration on Professional Ethics of the International Statistical Institute (<http://www.cbs.nl/isi/ethics.htm>, August 1985).

So far, roughly forty statistical organisations have signed the Charter. Signatories include almost all of the Swiss cantons, six cities, four federal offices and two other statistics producers.

The Ethics Board

By adopting the Charter, the statistics offices agreed to create an independent body – the Ethics Board of Public Swiss Statistics – which would help promote and enforce the Charter's basic principles, within the framework of existing legislation. (<http://www.stat.ch/documents/ethicscom-f.pdf>) Without such an ethics board, the Charter would be meaningless.

The Ethics Board was created by the Official Statistics Section (SSS-O) of the Swiss Statistical Society (SSS) at its general assembly held in November 2003. Mr Peter Tschopp, honorary professor of the University of Geneva and former Member of Parliament, chairs the Ethics Board, which is composed of four members: two from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO) (Ms Valérie Dubosson and Mr Philippe Eichenberger) and two from cantonal statistics offices (Mr Felix Bosshard from Canton Zurich and Mr Hervé Montfort from Canton Geneva). Mr Mohammad-Reza Mohagheghi from the SFSO is in charge of the secretariat.

The Ethics Board of Public Swiss Statistics is an independent body whose mission includes:

- Providing assistance with the implementation of the Charter;
- Helping to promote the Charter's basic principles;
- Ensuring compliance with the Charter's basic principles, within the framework of existing legislation, and taking note of non-compliance.

The Ethics Board is (purely) a moral authority, serving in a consultative and supervisory capacity. Although it is a non-governmental body, it may nevertheless be asked to examine complaints regarding government activities.

Any natural person or legal entity may submit complaints to the Ethics Board for arbitration. Requests should be made in writing to the Ethics Board Chairman, Mr Peter Tschopp, 13, chemin de la Troupe, 1253 Vandoeuvres, Switzerland, peter@tschopp.biz.

Complaints must include a presentation of facts, a description of the problems encountered and damage caused as well as the name and address of the parties submitting the complaint. The Ethics Board considers all written complaints relating to implementation of the Charter's basic principles. It does not follow up on complaints that are obviously unfounded or malicious. No punitive action may be taken against anyone submitting a complaint to the Ethics Board and anonymity is guaranteed.

First year's activities and priorities for 2005

In 2004, the Ethics Board focused on organisational aspects and promotion (of itself and the Charter). This was done by publishing information on the Internet <http://www.stat.ch/en/ethics/> and mailing a letter to the various statistical offices within the Confederation to remind them that there is a Charter and to encourage them to sign it. The Ethics Board also examined its activities from a legal standpoint and handled the "Muslimisation of Switzerland" case, a misleading advertisement published in leading Swiss newspapers. Commissioned by a Member of the Swiss Parliament, Mr Ulrich Schlüer, this advertisement was a blatant violation of the Charter's basic principles.

For 2005, the Ethics Board intends to handle any complaints submitted to it. It will also intensify its efforts to promote the Charter, in particular by contacting the signatories to remind them of their commitments, to offer assistance in activities that can be used within each organisation to raise employee awareness of the Charter. Finally, in an effort to increase its independence from government statistical offices, the Ethics Board will submit a motion to the SSS-O General Assembly to increase the number of board members by two and draw these members from sources outside of government statistics offices.