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Results of the ESSPROS user questionnaire

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ESSPROS User questionnaire: Results

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to better understand the needs of users of ESSPROS data, Eurostat issued a user questionnaire which was made available online between June and September 2014. The total of 61 responses included reasonable coverage of key ESSPROS users – i.e. European Commission, national governments, national statistical authorities and intergovernmental institutions. Some of the key results are summarised below.

A. Awareness, use and quality of existing ESSPROS products

Awareness of ESSPROS data:

- Respondents were more aware of the quantitative datasets (100%) than the qualitative products (77%). Data on social protection expenditure is most well-known (98%) while less than two thirds of users are aware of quality reports (64%).

Use of ESSPROS data:

- Respondents were mostly heavy users with more than half (53%) reporting using ESSPROS data more than once a month.

- ESSPROS data are most often accessed via Eurobase (over 90% of users). However, only a third of users (36%) have used the accompanying metadata (ESMS) which provides important information about the data disseminated.

- Most users reported using quantitative datasets (98%) while fewer use the qualitative products (64%). Data on social protection expenditure are the most widely used (91%). The use of different datasets generally reflected levels of awareness among users.

Importance and purpose of use:

- More than three quarters of respondents (78%) indicated that ESSPROS data are very important or important for their work.

- ESSPROS data are most often used for quantitative analysis (93%) and in particular for time-series analysis (66%), cross-sectional analysis (59%) and comparison with other sources of data (59%). This highlights the importance of ensuring a consistent application of the ESSPROS concepts between countries and over time.

- The ESSPROS data are also widely used for qualitative analysis (80% of users), often for background information or policy analysis (66% and 63% respectively).

Quality:

- 90% of users consider the fulfilment of each of the ESS criteria as adequate, good or very good. However, timeliness/punctuality and to a lesser extent comparability received lower than average ratings suggesting that these are areas where users feel there is the most room for improvement.

B.   Potential improvements of ESSPROS

Data needs

- A third of respondents (33%) indicated that there are social protection statistics that they need but which are not currently available from ESSPROS, underlining the potential of further extending the data currently disseminated.

Predefined developments

- Users were informed of three developments already under discussion. There was a similar level of interest in each:

  o 56% of respondents indicated an interest in the "enlarged approach" to measuring net social protection benefit expenditure. Given that only two thirds of respondents were aware of the existing data following the "restricted approach" this is a high response.

  o 59% were interested in data on social protection expenditure and receipts broken down by scheme.

  o 59% would like to see an earlier release of provisional estimates (at aggregated level) for the latest reference period.

Other additional data needs

- Other data that respondents thought would be useful include:

  o Additional breakdowns of existing data:
    - Expenditure and receipts data broken down by sector;
    - Data for survivors' benefits broken down according to the retirement age.

  o New data:
    - More detailed qualitative information;
    - Data on expenditure on long term care;
    - Information on links with other sources of data (i.e. National accounts, COFOG, SHA, LMP);
    - Data on social services;
    - Data on beneficiaries of non-pension benefits, in particular unemployment benefits (both full and partial) and social assistance/minimum income benefits.

Use of other sources of data

- Nearly four fifths of respondents (77%) reported using other sources to complement, or as an alternative to, ESSPROS data. National data are most often used.

- The international data sources most commonly used are those with the most overlap in scope with ESSPROS – DG Employment's Mutual Information System on Social Protection (MISSOC), OECD's Social expenditure database (SOCX) and National accounts. 41%, 38% and 34% of respondents used these sources.

- The main reasons for using alternative/complementary sources concern the breakdowns available, the level of detail (qualitative information) and the scope of the data. This underlines the potential gains of clarifying the links with other sources of data on social protection.

2   INTRODUCTION

ESSPROS aims to provide a comprehensive and comparable dataset on the social protection benefits provided to households and their financing among European countries (the 28 EU Member States plus Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Serbia). Social benefits are transfers to households, in cash or in kind, intended to relieve them from the financial burden of a number of risks or needs, which are categorised in eight ESSPROS "functions": disability, sickness/health care, old-age, survivors, family/children, unemployment, housing and social exclusion.

ESSPROS is composed of a core system, which collects data on gross expenditure and receipts, and two modules dealing with the number of pension beneficiaries (seven categories of pension are covered) and net social protection benefits (i.e. the value of social benefits after deducting taxes and social contributions that may be payable on them). In addition to this quantitative data, ESSPROS collects qualitative information describing the social protection schemes in each country. Quality reports describing the data collected through the core system and each of the two modules are also produced and disseminated.

The ongoing process of development of ESSPROS has two main objectives: to improve the statistical data in relation to the quality criteria set out by the European Statistical System (ESS) - relevance, accessibility and clarity, timeliness and punctuality, coherence, comparability and accuracy – and to better meet the needs of users. To ensure that the necessary work is organised effectively it is vital to consult users on their data needs and how these are being met.

In this regards, Eurostat issued a user questionnaire during 2014 in order to better understand why and how users exploit the ESSPROS data, how this data meets their needs, their assessment of the quality of the data and associated products (publications, database and website) and which aspects of the system they would like to see improved.

The **first part** of this document describes the survey content and methodology and gives important information on the interpretation of results, particularly in light of the composition of respondents.
The **second part** analyses the results in terms of how users are exploiting the data.
The **third part** focuses on the future developments users would like to see.

3   PART 1: BASIS OF THE SURVEY, RESPONSES AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

3.1   Survey design

The survey was designed to be quick (15-20 minutes) and easy to complete in order to avoid putting too much burden on respondents and, therefore, to encourage a higher response rate. It included a total of 24 questions organised into six sections. Only the first question concerning the respondent's organisation was compulsory. Where possible, questions, or indeed entire sections, were automatically skipped/hidden when a previous answer meant that the question(s) were not relevant. The sections and sub-sections were:

1. Employer characteristics
2. Role of ESSPROS data in your work
3. Use of the different elements of ESSPROS data
   3.1. Social protection expenditure data

A full copy of the ESSPROS user questionnaire is provided in **Annex** to this document as reference.

3.2   Dissemination of the survey

The survey was made available online in June 2014 using the European Commission's official survey management tool – EUSurvey[1]. Users were directed to the questionnaire through various channels:

-   A link to the survey was placed on Eurostat's main homepage[2], Eurostat's dedicated webpage for ESSPROS[3] and next to the ESSPROS data tree in Eurobase[4].

-   Eurostat contacted key institutional users by e-mail:

    o   European Commission (DG, EMPL, DG ECFIN, DG SANCO, …)

    o   Other European level bodies (SPC-ISG, …)

    o   International organisations (OECD, ILO, UNICEF)

-   Members of the Working Group were requested to re-distribute the link to the questionnaire to any other interested organisations.

3.3   Responses to the survey

The survey was closed on 22nd September 2014, one week after the original deadline. A total of 61 responses were received. Some cleaning of the data was necessary to remove inconsistencies:

-   Cross-check of responses: in a few cases there were obvious inconsistencies between responses to different questions. Where the reason was clear a correction was made.

-   Use of additional comments: in a few cases, additional free-text comments were inconsistent with a coded response. As the additional comments were generally more specific the original answer was sometimes adjusted accordingly.

As illustrated in Figure 1, a large proportion of the responses came from government institutions (28 or 46%) and national statistical authorities (17 or 28%). Indeed, there was a response from at least one government institution or national statistical authority from most Member States (the 8 exceptions are BE,

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[1] EUSurvey: http://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/home/about

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/Eurostat

[3] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/social_protection/introduction

[4] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/social_protection/data/database

DK, DE, EL, MT, NL, AT and SE) and from Switzerland. The vast majority of government institutions that responded were ministries involved in labour market and social policy in general or specifically in social protection.

There were 5 responses from European Commission: two from DG-EMPL, one each from DG-ECFIN and DG-SANCO and one not specified. Responses were also received from OECD and ILO.

There were relatively few responses from academic institutions, private companies and other institutions (3 in each case).

Figure 1 - Number of responses by type of organisation/institution
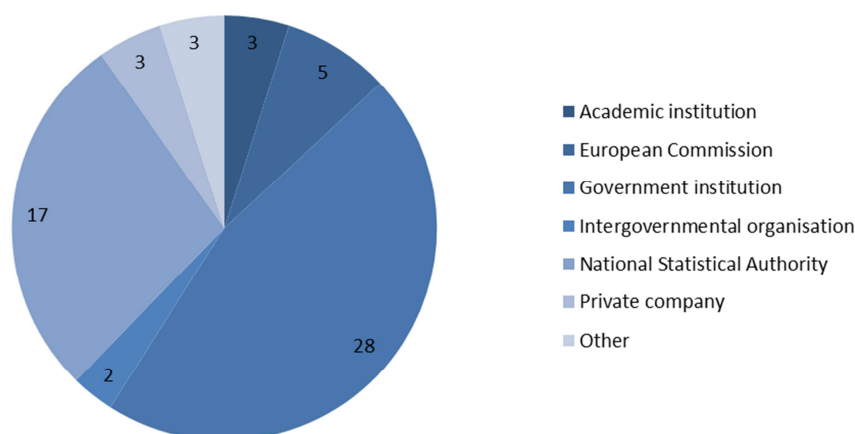
Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

3.4   Interpretation of results

A number of issues need to be taken into account when interpreting the results:

- Sample composition: The sample of respondents includes a reasonable, although not complete, coverage of the main users of ESSPROS data identified as targets for the questionnaire prior to launch – i.e. European Commission, national governments, National statistical authorities and intergovernmental institutions. However, it is clear that there is little coverage of academic institutions, private companies and other institutions. This is likely to reflect the dissemination method - while the main users were directly informed by e-mail others had to find the survey on their own initiative when visiting the Eurostat website. The results therefore reflect the opinions of the main users but not necessarily those of the user base as a whole.

- Non-response: In most cases respondents completed all relevant questions. Nevertheless, there were a few cases where the questions missed resulted in other potentially relevant questions being skipped. For example, if a respondent did not answer question 3 about frequency of use then they were not asked about which parts of the data they use.

4   PART 2: USAGE OF ESSPROS DATA

A first aim of the user questionnaire was to identify what parts of the ESSPROS data users are accessing and for what purposes and how they perceive the quality of the data.

4.1   Awareness of ESSPROS datasets

Eurostat produces and disseminates the following ESSPROS datasets:

- ESSPROS Quantitative data are made available primarily through Eurostat's online statistical database (Eurobase) but also through publications and the Statistics Explained system. There are four main quantitative datasets published annually:

    o   Social protection expenditure: expenditure on social benefits, administration costs associated with social benefits, transfers between social protection schemes and other expenditure.

    o   Social protection receipts: social contributions, general government contributions, transfers from other schemes and other receipts

    o   Pension beneficiaries: numbers of beneficiaries (at year-end) of one or more of seven categories of pension.

    o   Net social protection expenditure: expenditure on social benefits adjusted to take into account the effects of the fiscal system – i.e. taxes and social contributions applied to income from social benefits.

- ESSPROS Qualitative data is made available through Eurostat's dedicated section for ESSPROS. There are two main qualitative datasets associated with ESSPROS:

    o   Qualitative information: detailed description of each social protection scheme and the different benefits it provides.

    o   Quality reports: reports for each country and a consolidated report for all countries provide information on the quality of the data according to the criteria set out by the European Statistical System[5].

Awareness of the different ESSPROS products varied among respondents (Figure 2). **All respondents were aware of at least one of the quantitative datasets.** Awareness of data on social protection expenditure was highest (98%) followed by pension beneficiaries (85%), social protection receipts (84%) and then net social protection expenditure (66%). Lower awareness of the latter is likely linked to the fact that data on net social protection expenditure only became available via Eurobase from 2014 Q2 onwards while other datasets have been available for much longer.

Meanwhile, **just over three quarters were aware of the qualitative products.** Awareness of the qualitative information (77%) exceeded that of the quality reports (64%). **Low awareness of the quality reports is somewhat troubling given that it provides important explanations and information on the quality of the quantitative data.** However, this may in part be explained by the fact that national quality reports were not disseminated prior to May 2013 and these are the reports which provide detailed information on quality. Previously only consolidated quality reports covering all countries were disseminated.

More than half of respondents (56%) were aware of all of the different ESSPROS products.

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[5] See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/social_protection/quality

**Figure 2 – Awareness of ESSPROS datasets (% respondents)**
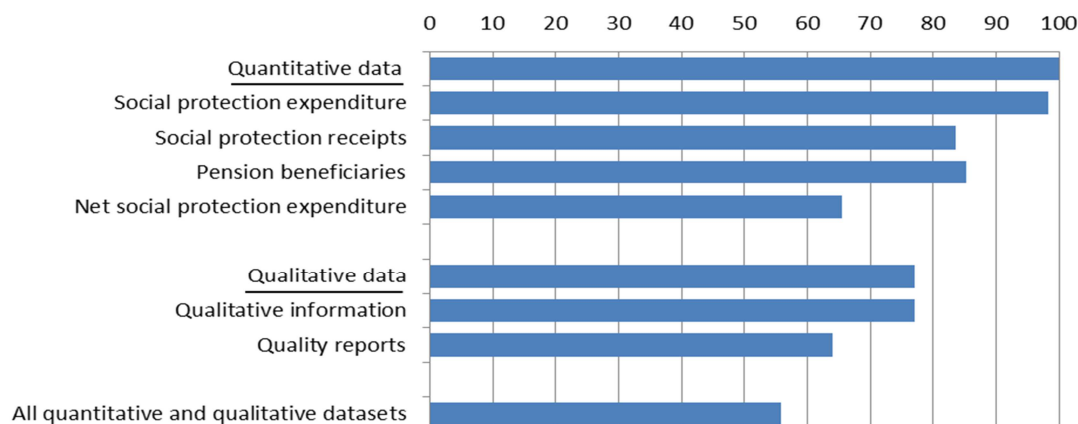
Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

4.2 Use of the ESSPROS data

All but two respondents reported using ESSPROS data though the frequency of use varied (Figure 3). A third report using the data at least once a week, more than half at least once a month and almost four fifths quarterly. The relatively high proportion of frequent users (at least once a week) probably reflects the targeting of the questionnaire and the greater incentive for such users to show their interest in the future development of ESSPROS.

Figure 3 - Frequency of use (% users)
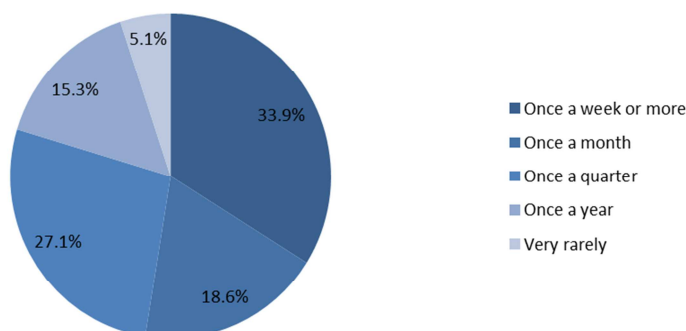
Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

ESSPROS data and associated information can be accessed through:

- Eurostat's statistical database – Eurobase (available here): disseminates ESSPROS quantitative data via a range of predefined and dynamic statistical tables.

- Eurostat's metadata system – ESMS (available here): disseminates metadata associated with the quantitative data disseminated via Eurobase.

- Eurostat publications (available here): a range of statistical publications based on ESSPROS data are disseminated including statistics in focus, statistical publications and the ESSPROS manual.
- Eurostat's statistics explained website (available here): disseminates statistical articles based on ESSPROS data.

The most widely used among these is Eurostat's statistical database – over 90% of users have used Eurobase to access ESSPROS data (see Figure 4). This is not unexpected given that this is the most user friendly way to retrieve ESSPROS data for analysis. However, only a third of users (36%) have used the accompanying ESMS metadata system which can be accessed directly from any data table and provides important information to support the correct interpretation of the data disseminated.

Two thirds (64%) of users have used Eurostat publications and half (48%) have used Statistics Explained. Overall, around a fifth of users (20%) have used all the Eurostat products mentioned.

Eurostat also releases some ESSPROS data via CIRCABC but this tends to have much less visibility as the primary intention of this system is not public dissemination. ESSPROS data is also used by other organisations which disseminate the data through their own statistical databases (e.g. OECD) and users are free to use this data in their own publications, subject to mentioning Eurostat as the source. Approximately one fifth of users (21%) had used other (non-Eurostat) products to access ESSPROS data and associated information.

Figure 4 - Products used to access ESSPROS data and associated information (% users)
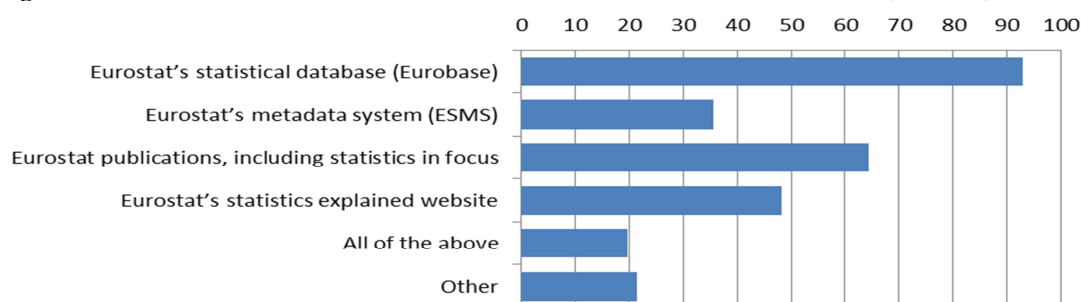
Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

Use of the different ESSPROS datasets varied among users (See Figure 5). The vast majority of users used at least one of the quantitative datasets (98%). Data on social protection expenditure was most used (91%) followed by pension beneficiaries (73%), social protection receipts (71%) and then net social protection expenditure (39%). The ranking of different datasets in terms of use is the same as their ranking in terms of awareness. However, the gap between awareness and use is particularly large for the data on net social protection expenditure, which is potentially of more interest for users as a basis for comparative analyses between countries. As noted earlier, this data has only recently been made available through Eurobase and there is as yet a relatively short time-series. Both awareness and use should increase with time.

Figure 5 – Use and awareness of ESSPROS datasets (% users, % respondents)
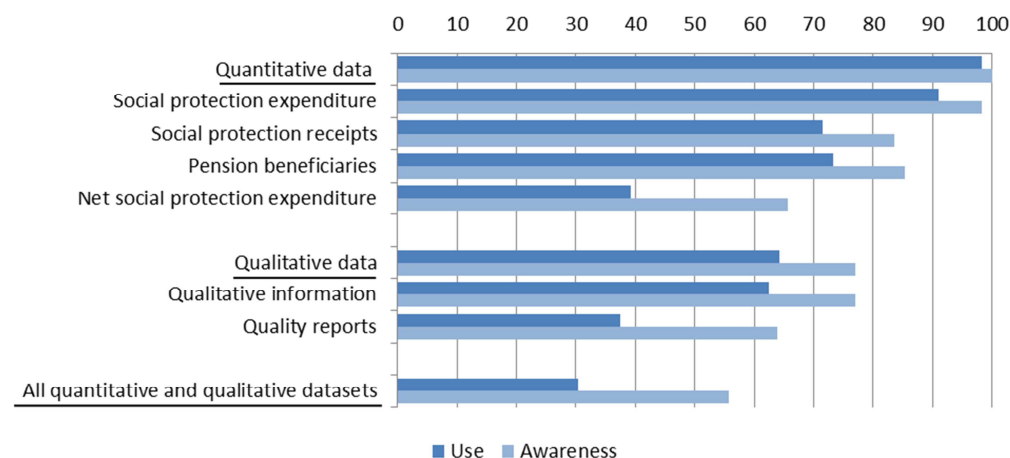
Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

Meanwhile, just under two thirds of users use qualitative products (64%). As in the case of awareness, use of the qualitative information (63%) exceeded that of the quality reports (38%). However, the gap between awareness and use is particularly large for the quality reports. The reason for this is unclear.

Overall just under a third of respondents (30%) use all the different sets of qualitative and quantitative data associated with ESSPROS.

4.3   Use of breakdowns of ESSPROS data

The various ESSPROS datasets that are available provide a range of detailed breakdowns and respondents were requested to indicate their use of the different breakdowns available:

- Social protection expenditure (see Figure 6): The vast majority of users of this data exploit one or more of the breakdowns available (98%). Notably, most use data on expenditure on social benefits (98%) while the data on administration costs, transfers to other schemes and other expenditure are used less (35-45%). Further, the breakdown of social benefits by function (e.g. sickness/health care, disability, old-age, etc.) is exploited by almost all users of the data (98%) while those by type (in cash/in kind) and by characteristic (means-tested/non means-tested) are used less (75-85%).
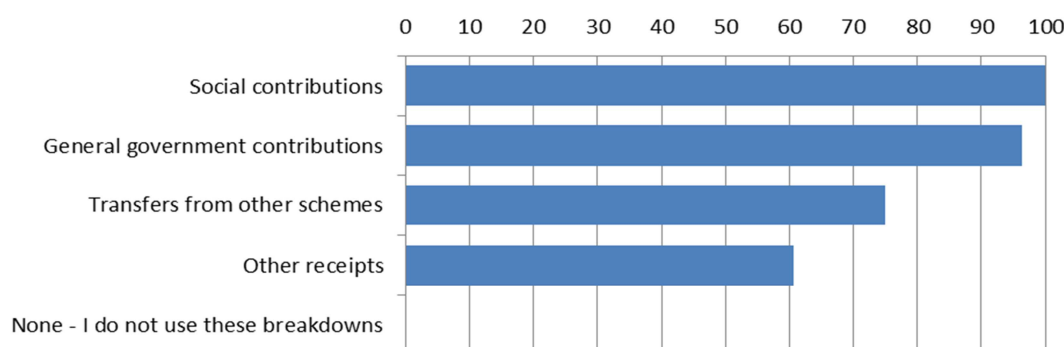
Figure 6 - Use of breakdowns of ESSPROS data on social protection expenditure (% users of social protection expenditure data)
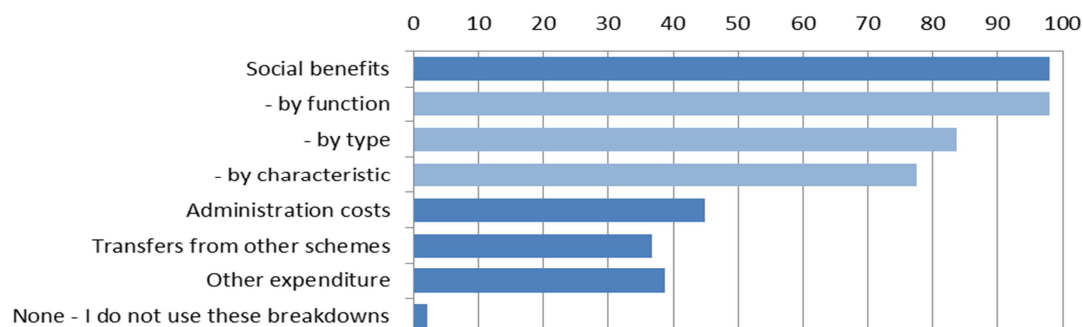
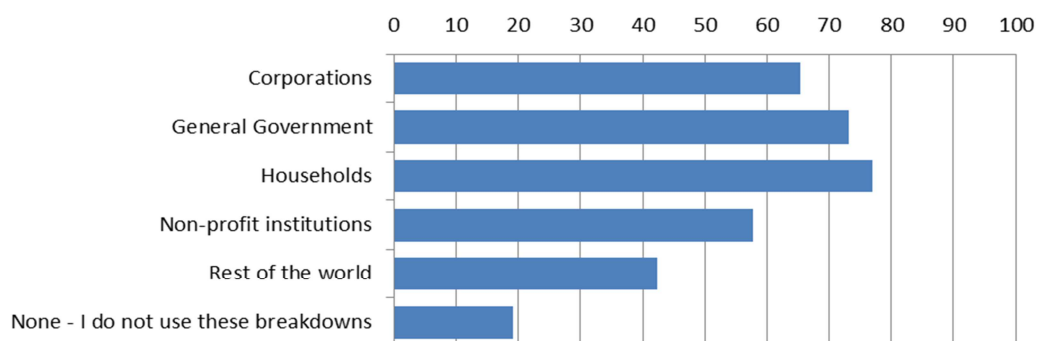Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

- Social protection receipts (see Figure 7): All users of data on social protection receipts (which are fewer than use the expenditure data – see Figure 5 above) use breakdowns of this data. Notably, all use data on social contributions (100%) while the use of receipts data on transfers from other schemes and other receipts is less common (60-75%). Further breakdowns of these categories of social protection receipts by sector of origin is used by four fifths of these users with those related to households, government and then corporations being the frequently most used (see
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- Figure 8).
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Figure 7 - Use of breakdowns of ESSPROS data on social protection receipts by economic type (% users of receipts data)

Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

Figure 8 - Use of breakdowns of ESSPROS data on social protection receipts by sector of origin (% users of receipts data)

Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

- Pension beneficiaries (see Figure 9): All users of data on pension beneficiaries use specific breakdowns of this data for at least one of the seven pension categories. In general, use of all breakdowns is relatively high (>70%). The most frequently used is that for old-age pensions (100%), followed closely by disability (94%) and survivors (94%).

Figure 9 - Use of Breakdowns of ESSPROS data on pension beneficiaries by category (% users of beneficiary data)
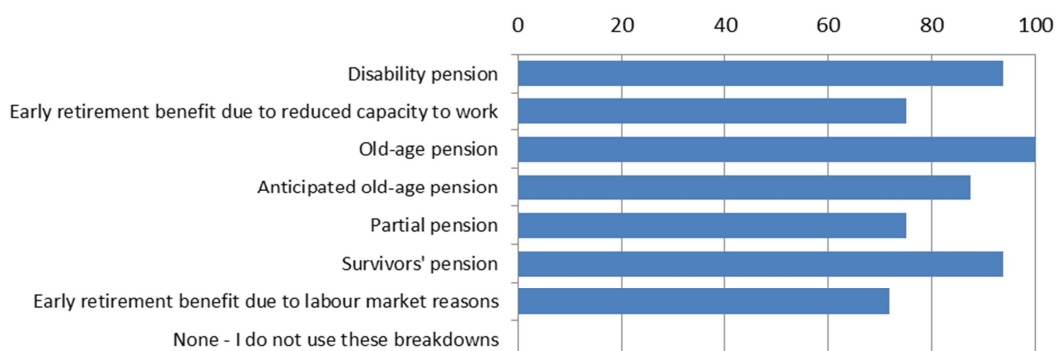
## 4.4   Importance of ESSPROS data and purpose of use

Among the users surveyed, the importance of ESSPROS data can be said to be relatively high with more than three quarters (78%) indicating that the data are very important or important for their work (see Figure 10). No respondents stated that the data were not important and only 3.4% stated that it was of little importance.

Overall, ESSPROS data is used mainly for quantitative analysis (Figure 11). 93% of users report using ESSPROS data for this purpose with time-series analysis (66% of users), cross-sectional analysis (59%) and comparison with other sources of data (59%) being the most common applications. This highlights the importance of ensuring a consistent application of the ESSPROS concepts between countries and over time.

The ESSPROS data are also widely used for qualitative analysis (80% of users) with background information and policy analysis being the most common applications (66% and 63% respectively).
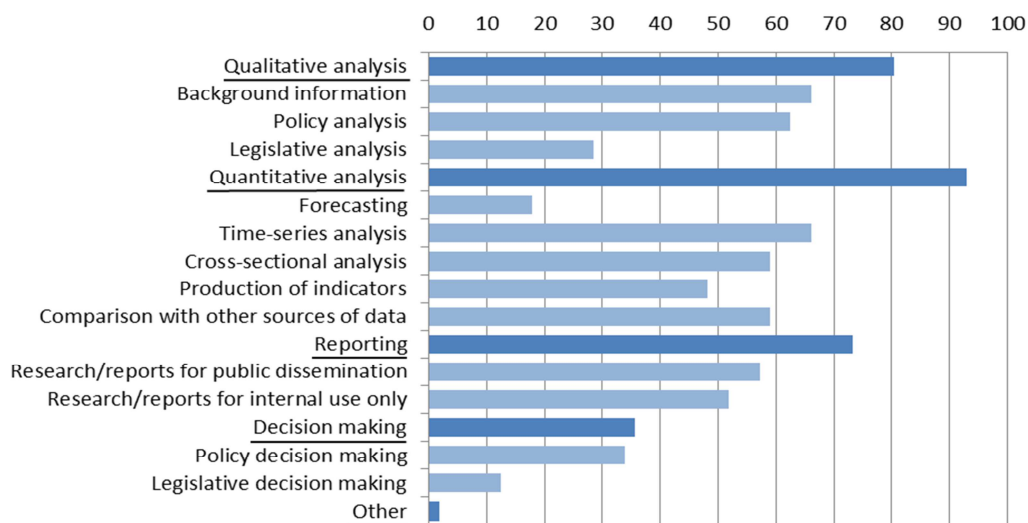
ESSPROS data are widely used in research and reports for public or internal use (73% of users), further underlining the need for the data to be of the highest quality possible.

Figure 10 - Importance of ESSPROS data for user's work (% users)
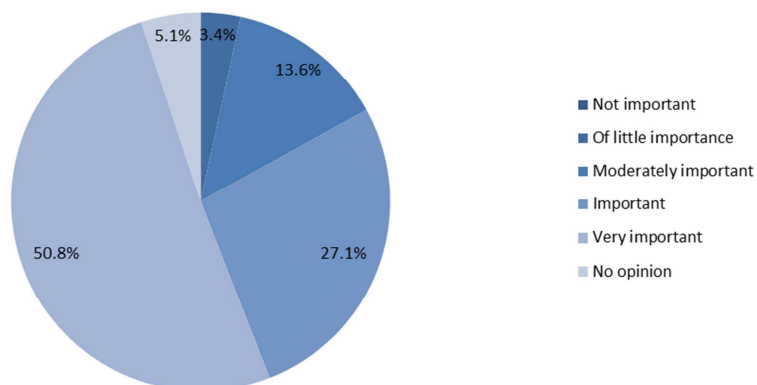
Figure 11 – Use of ESSPROS data (% users)

Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

4.5   Quality assessment

The European Statistical System (ESS) has defined the following quality criteria to be applied to statistical data:

- Relevance refers to the extent to which the statistical data satisfy the needs of the users.

- Accessibility and clarity: Accessibility refers to the physical conditions under which users can obtain the statistical data. Clarity refers to the availability of appropriate documentation linked to the statistical data and to the additional assistance which producers supply to users.

- Timeliness and punctuality: Timeliness of statistical data is the length of time between their availability and the moment at which the phenomena they describe occurred. Punctuality refers to any time lag between the release and the target date by which the data should have been delivered.

- Coherence aims to measure the reliability of the statistical data if combined with other statistics in different ways and for other uses.

- Comparability tries to measure the effect of the differences in the applied statistical concepts and measurement procedures when the statistical data are compared between geographic areas, over time or between different domains.

- Accuracy refers to the closeness of the statistical data to the unknown true or exact value of the measured phenomena.

Respondents were requested to provide an assessment of how ESSPROS fulfils each of these by selecting one of the following options: *very poor, poor, adequate, good, very good*. Overall the results were very encouraging with more than 90% of users reporting adequate, good or very good for each criterion. Nevertheless, numerous comments noted that there is room for improvement.

Figure 12 shows the average rating for each criterion. A lower overall average and greater use of "poor" ratings for timeliness/punctuality and comparability implies that these are the criteria for which users feel that improvement is needed. Timeliness/punctuality was the only criterion to receive any ratings of "very poor" and also had the lowest number of both "very good" and "good" ratings.

Figure 12 – Average rating of how ESSPROS fulfils ESS criteria

Note: A rating of 1 to 5 is allocated to responses reporting that the fulfilment of a given criterion was *very poor, poor, adequate, good, very good* respectively. The average rating is an average of these across all respondents which gave an opinion. The colour coding gives an indication of the contributions of different responses by evaluation to the total score.
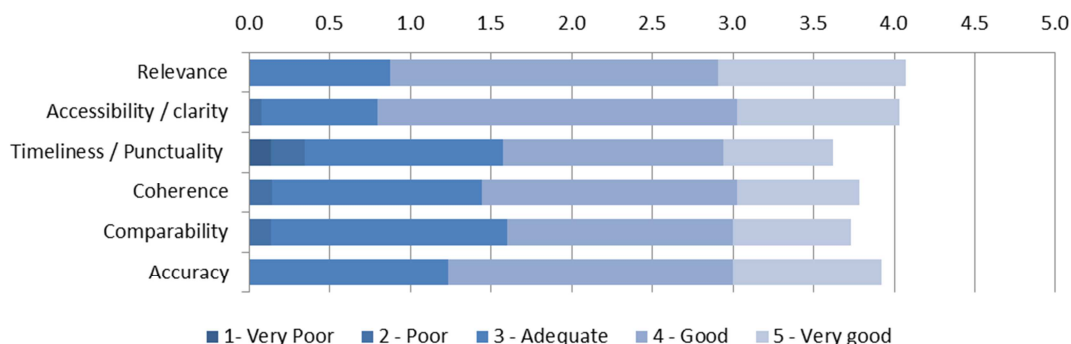
Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

4.6   Conclusions on usage of ESSPROS data

A first aim of the user questionnaire was to identify how users are using the ESSPROS data. The results demonstrated the following:

Awareness:

- Awareness is higher for quantitative datasets (100%) than for qualitative products (77%). Data on social protection expenditure is most well-known (98%) while **less than two thirds of users are aware of quality reports (64%).**

Use:

- Respondents were mostly heavy users with more than half (53%) reporting using ESSPROS data more than once a month.

- ESSPROS data are most often accessed via Eurobase (over 90% of users). However, **only a third of users (36%) have used the accompanying metadata (ESMS)** which provides important information on the data disseminated.

- Most users reported using quantitative datasets (98%) while fewer use the qualitative products (64%). Data on social protection expenditure are the most widely used (91%). The use of different datasets generally reflected levels of awareness among users.

Importance and purpose of use:

- More than three quarters of respondents (78%) indicated that ESSPROS data are very important or important for their work.

- ESSPROS data are most often used for quantitative analysis (93%) and in particular for time-series analysis (66%), cross-sectional analysis (59%) and comparison with other sources of data (59%). This highlights the importance of ensuring a consistent application of the ESSPROS concepts between countries and over time.

- The ESSPROS data are also widely used for qualitative analysis (80% of users) often for background information or policy analysis (66% and 63% respectively).

Quality:

- 90% of users consider the fulfilment of each of the ESS criteria as adequate, good or very good. However, **timeliness/punctuality** and to a lesser extent comparability received lower than average ratings suggesting that these are areas where users feel **there is** the most **room for improvement.**

5   PART 3: FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

A second aim of the user questionnaire was to identify what developments users would like to implement. A third of respondents (33%) indicated a need for social protection statistics that are not currently available from ESSPROS, highlighting potential interest to expand the system.

Two approaches were used to gather information on the ways in which users think existing data might be improved or extended to meet additional needs:

- To gauge the potential interest/usefulness in a number of predefined developments
- To allow users to freely indicate what additional data or breakdowns of existing data they need or would find useful.

Note that the former approach risks biasing the interpretation of what users really need (compared to the current situation) as it may promote interest in things that had not previously been under consideration.

5.1   Predefined developments

Users were asked about their interest in:

- Net social protection benefits following the enlarged approach

- Dissemination of data by scheme

- Dissemination of provisional estimates

5.1.1   Net social protection benefits following the enlarged approach

Net social protection benefits refer to "the value of social protection benefits excluding taxes and social contributions paid by the benefits' recipients complemented by the value of fiscal benefits" where fiscal benefits are defined to be "social protection provided in the form of tax breaks that would be defined as social protection benefits if they were provided in cash, excluding tax breaks promoting the provision of social protection or promoting private insurance plans"[6].

There are two approaches to the measuring net social protection benefit expenditure. The "restricted approach" defines net social protection benefits as gross social protection benefits less the value of the taxes and social contributions paid on those benefits by their recipients. As such it covers the same

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[6] Article 2 of the ESSPROS Regulation (EC) No 458/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2007:113:0003:0008:EN:PDF

recipients and implies no change to the scope compared to the Core system. Data following this approach are collected and disseminated annually. The "enlarged approach" builds on the restricted approach by adding in the value of social benefits provided solely through the fiscal system. Fiscal benefits reduce the amount of taxes and/or social contributions paid on all forms of income (e.g. from employment) and may apply to persons who receive no social benefits paid in cash or in kind. The enlarged approach therefore widens the scope of ESSPROS compared to the Core system.

Eurostat has already undertaken preliminary work to develop a methodology for the "enlarged approach" and identify the issues that may need to be overcome in order to implement such a collection. However, further work is still required before such a collection can be implemented.

56% of respondents thought that data on net social protection benefit expenditure following the "enlarged approach" described above would useful for their work. Given that only 66% of respondents were aware of the data on the net social protection benefit expenditure following the "restricted approach" this can be seen as relatively high.

Twenty two of those reporting that the data would be useful gave some indication of what they would expect to use this data for. Some responses identified a general uses such as quantitative analysis or policy analysis but some more specific uses were also mentioned:

- To provide an improved (more complete) view of social protection (9 respondents)
- For improved comparison of data on social protection between countries (9 respondents)
- As a comparable source of data on fiscal benefits – no EU wide source currently exists (3 respondents)

5.1.2   Dissemination of data by scheme

Social benefits are delivered through schemes organised by government and/or collective agreements. A social protection scheme is defined as a distinct body of rules, supported by one or more institutional units, governing the provision of social protection benefits and their financing. ESSPROS data are collected by scheme but currently only data aggregated across schemes are published and disseminated by Eurostat through its statistical database. In the past year a number of countries have agreed to disseminate the data by scheme, initially via Eurostat's CIRCABC system which has lower public visibility than Eurobase. Ideally, data by scheme would be made available for all countries through Eurobase.

59% of respondents thought that data on social protection expenditure and receipts broken down by scheme would be useful for their work. Twenty two of those reporting that the data would be useful gave some indication of what they would expect to use this data for. Several specific uses were often mentioned:

- To provide a clearer and more detailed understanding of a given country's social protection system (5 responses): Data by scheme can provide insight into the organisation and make-up of social protection systems and foster an improved understanding of the aggregate data.

- For analysis of data of individual schemes (5 respondents): Data would provide a means to analyse individual schemes or to compare schemes within a country or between countries.

- For analysis of data for groups of schemes (7 responses): Data would provide the means to identify groups of schemes (i.e. contributory/non-contributory schemes, schemes grouped by financing methods…etc.) and to conduct analysis of the data for these within a country and between countries.

5.1.3   Dissemination of provisional estimates

According to regulation (EC) No 458/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 April 2007 on the European system of integrated social protection statistics[7], ESSPROS quantitative data on social protection expenditure, social protection receipts and pensions beneficiaries for the year N is published by 31 October of the year N + 2. It is possible that provisional data could be made available with a shorter delay.

59% of respondents thought that an earlier release of provisional estimates (at aggregated level) for the latest reference period would be useful. Twenty one respondents provided information on what they would use such estimates for and what the benefits of having the data earlier would be. Some pointed out that use and benefits of such data would depend on the methodology adopted for releasing provisional data, the quality of this data and delay at which it is made available. However, the main benefit was clearly the reduced time lag so that analysis can be more up-to-date.

Many respondents reported that such data would be useful for publications and reports, particularly those feeding into policy making. Users from the European Commission focused on the benefits for reporting and analysis linked to the European semester. For example, the annual Employment and Social Developments in Europe report or the Joint Employment Report (annexed to the Annual Growth Survey) which are both published in the Autumn. In this respect, estimates released in the spring would allow more recent data to be included in the analysis.

Fourteen respondents gave information on the aggregates for which early release would be of most interest. All but one of these mentioned social protection expenditure and there was much less interest in provisional data on pension beneficiaries and social protection receipts (3 and 2 respondents respectively). Of the 13 interested in social protection expenditure, nine would want to distinguish expenditure on social benefits, eight would be interested in breakdowns by function, four by type (in cash/in kind) and three by characteristic (means-tested, non-means-tested). A small number of respondents referred to more detailed breakdowns by type of benefit or by scheme but this would appear to be outside the scope of provisional aggregates.

5.2   Other additional data needs

Respondents were requested to report any other data on social protection they would find useful but which is not currently available in any of the ESSPROS products.

Among the responses there were a few cases where the data identified would, to some extent, become available through one of the developments mentioned previously:

- Data on the financing of benefits by function: would become available if data were published by scheme – the detailed data could be used to construct estimates of financing methods by function.
- Further detailed data for housing benefits: would also be available if data were published by scheme, particularly if used in conjunction with the ESSPROS qualitative data.

There were also some cases where the data identified is, to some extent, already available:

- Data on average pension expenditure: the data required to construct such averages is already available through Eurobase. However, it is not currently disseminated in this form because it can be easily misinterpreted. A Statistics Explained article dealing with this issue is in preparation and will be

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[7] Regulation (EC) No 458/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 April 2007 on the European system of integrated social protection statistics.
http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2007:113:0003:0008:EN:PDF

published shortly. Of the three respondents who identified a need for this data, one noted that average pension expenditure for the main schemes would be useful. In order to provide this, data on pension beneficiaries by scheme would need to be available.

- Detailed information about the benefits included in the data: The qualitative information already provides detailed information on the benefits provided by each scheme and therefore covered by the different aggregates published. Publishing data by scheme would increase the possibilities to identify particular benefits.

Other requests that are not currently available and which are not part of the abovementioned developments were:

- Additional breakdowns of existing data:

    o Expenditure and receipts data broken down by sector: breakdown of expenditure and receipts between the government and non-government sectors; government sector data further broken down by level of government (i.e. local, regional and national).

    o Data for survivors' benefits broken down according to the retirement age: This data is collected voluntarily but not currently disseminated.

- New data:

    o More detailed qualitative information: ESSPROS provides detailed qualitative information but the request for more detail suggests that it is not sufficient.

    o Data on the effectiveness of social expenditures: There is currently no data on effectiveness. This is really a topic for evaluation and outside the scope of a statistical data collection.

    o Data on expenditure on long term care: While ESSPROS includes data on services which constitute part of long term care; there is no way to separate expenditure on long-term care from other health/old-age related expenditure.

    o Information on links with other sources of data (i.e. National accounts, COFOG, SHA, LMP): Work is already underway to provide clarifications on the links between the data of ESSPROS and that of national accounts and COFOG.

    o Data on social services: The scope of the ESSPROS data is limited to individual services and excludes collective services. Social services which are individual services in nature should be covered. However, those that are collective are not.

- New data – beneficiaries of non-pension benefits:

    o Respondents were requested to identify any statistics on the number of beneficiaries of non-pension benefits that they would find useful. Only eight provided such information. While one respondent stated that numbers of beneficiaries for all benefits would be useful others were more selective. The most frequently identified benefits were working age benefits in the unemployment function, in particular unemployment benefits (both full and partial), and in the social exclusion function, most notably social assistance and minimum income benefits. Others included non-pension benefits associated with sickness/healthcare, family/children, disability and old-age.

5.3   Use of other sources of data

Nearly four fifths of respondents (77%) reported using other sources of data to complement, or as an alternative to, ESSPROS data. Identifying which other sources users make use of, what these offer and the reasons users are using them provides some insight into the current limitations of the ESSPROS data.

Respondents were requested to identify the other sources they used from a predefined list or through additional open-ended comments. Use of the predefined sources is presented in Figure 13. The most frequently used is national data (67% of respondents). This is not unexpected given that two thirds of respondents are government institutions and national statistical authorities who are likely to have access to more detailed national sources on specific aspects of social protection.

The three international data sources most frequently used as a complement, or as an alternative to, ESSPROS data are those which have the largest overlap in scope with ESSPROS – DG Employment's Mutual Information System on Social Protection (MISSOC), OECD's Social expenditure database (SOCX) and national accounts. 41%, 38% and 34% of respondents used these sources:

- MISSOC provides detailed and comparable qualitative information about national social protection systems. In theory the scope of ESSPROS and MISSOC are the same so that the qualitative information of ESSPROS should cover the same benefits as MISSOC. However, the information on social protection is presented in a different way with a more detailed classification system and is updated biannually. Use of this to complement, or as an alternative to, ESSPROS data suggests that there is room for improving the qualitative information of ESSPROS or indeed to consider if there could be any scope to combine/share the information and reduce the burden of data collection.
- SOCX provides statistics on public and (mandatory and voluntary) private social expenditure and estimates of net total social spending. It is, for the large part, constructed using ESSPROS core data provided by Eurostat. OECD builds on this by supplementing it with data for elements which are not within the scope of ESSPROS, data for calculating the value of net social expenditure and data for OECD countries which are not covered by ESSPROS.
- National accounts data is much wider in scope as it is used to describe a country's economy as a whole but it does include a sub-set of data on social benefits. The scope of this is similar to that of ESSPROS. However, there are a number of deviations, the main one being that national accounts includes all benefits which meet the needs/risks associated with education. However, the organisation of the data is completely different.

The scope of the other predefined sources has a smaller overlap with that of ESSPROS. 23% of respondents use DG Employment's labour market policy database (LMP). LMP provides qualitative and quantitative information (expenditure and participants) on labour market interventions. There is some overlap in scope between ESSPROS and the LMP database in respect of unemployment benefits, early retirement benefits and some aspects of employment services. 18% of respondents use government finance statistics (GFS) which has the same scope as the national accounts in terms of social benefits but is limited to only the government sector.

Other complementary/alternative sources of data include Eurostat's European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), Eurostat's System of Health Accounts (SHA), World Health Organisation's (WHO) statistics, ILO's Social Security Inquiry (SSI), World Bank's Atlas of Social Protection Indicators of Resilience and Equity (ASPIRE) database, Asia Development Bank (ADB) statistics.

Figure 13 - Data sources used to complement, or as an alternative to, ESSPROS data (% of respondents)
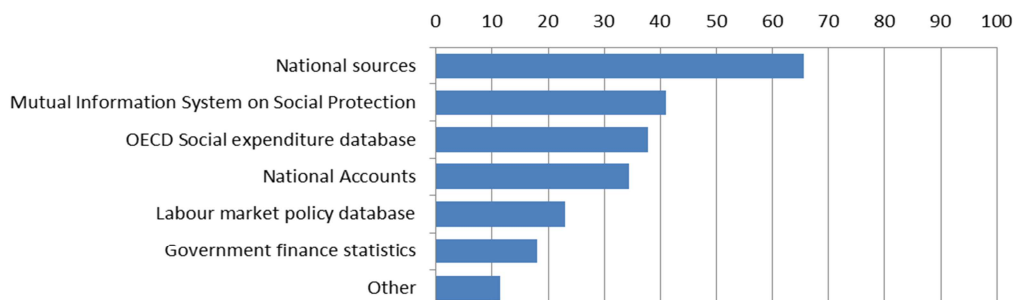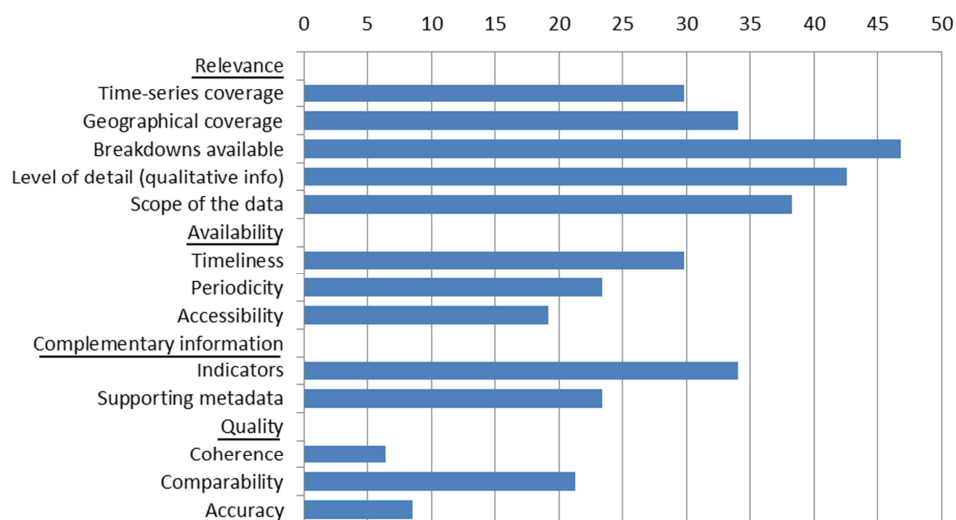

Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

The top three reasons for using complementary/alternative sources of data concern the relevance of the data, specifically the breakdowns available, the level of detail (qualitative information) and the scope of the data (see Figure 14). These reasons, identified by 38-46% of those using other sources of data, potentially highlight limitations/weaknesses in the ESSPROS data and underline the potential gains that may exist in formally identifying and clarifying the links with other sources of data on social protection, particularly international sources.

Encouragingly, far fewer respondents reported reasons associated with the quality of the ESSPROS data such as coherence, comparability or accuracy (6-21%) and the availability of the data such as timeliness, periodicity and accessibility (19-30%).

Figure 14 - Aspects of the data that are better than or complement the ESSPROS data (% users of other data)

Source: ESSPROS User questionnaire 2014

5.4 Conclusions on future developments

A second aim of the user questionnaire was to identify what developments users would like to implement. The results demonstrated the following:

- A third of respondents (33%) indicated that there are social protection statistics that they need but which are not currently available from ESSPROS, underlining the potential of further extending the data currently disseminated.

Predefined developments:

- The was a similar level of interest in the three predefined developments among respondents:
    o **56%** of respondents indicated an interest in the "**enlarged approach**" to measuring **net** social protection benefit expenditure. Given that only two thirds of respondents were aware of the existing data following the "restricted approach" this is a high response.
    o **59%** were interested in data on social protection expenditure and receipts broken down **by scheme.**
    o **59%** would like to see an earlier release of **provisional estimates** (at aggregated level) for the latest reference period.

Other additional data needs:

- Other data that respondents thought would be useful are:
    o Additional breakdowns of existing data: Expenditure and receipts data broken down by **sector**, data for survivors' benefits broken down according to the retirement **age.**
    o New data: More detailed **qualitative information**, data on expenditure on **long term care**, information on **links with other sources** of data (i.e. National accounts, COFOG, SHA, LMP), data on social services.

- In relation to **beneficiaries of non-pension benefits**, the most interest was in having data for working age benefits in the unemployment and social exclusion functions, in particular unemployment benefits (both full and partial) and social assistance/minimum income benefits.

Use of other sources:

- Nearly four fifths of respondents (77%) reported using other sources to complement, or as an alternative to, ESSPROS data. National data are most often used.

- The international data sources most commonly used are those with the most overlap in scope with ESSPROS – DG Employment's Mutual Information System on Social Protection (MISSOC), OECD's Social expenditure database (SOCX) and National accounts. 41%, 38% and 34% of respondents used these sources.

- The main **reasons for using alternative/complementary sources** concern the breakdowns available, the level of detail (qualitative information) and the scope of the data. This underlines the potential gains of clarifying the links with other sources of data on social protection.