

17th EU-LFS methodology workshop
 Neuchâtel, Switzerland
 25-26 April 2024

Design of national questionnaires for the eight-yearly EU-LFS modules – using the example of the 2023 module on pensions and labour market participation

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Abstract: Although Eurostat's explanatory notes provide operational definitions, implementation guidelines and even model questions, a crucial part of the process of designing the questionnaires for the eight-yearly EU-LFS modules is still left to the NSIs, covering in particular the exact wording of the module questions as well as their placement with respect to the core questions. These choices are heavily dependent on the specific national circumstances, including technical aspects such as survey mode and rotation scheme of the national LFS, institutional and cultural factors such as federalism, national legislation and language, as well as a possible need for additional information by third parties.

The present paper illustrates some aspects of this topic using the example of the Swiss questionnaire for the eight-yearly pensions module implemented in 2023. The focus lies on the difficulties encountered when adapting the module questions to the particularities of the Swiss pension system as well as to additional data needs at the national level. The main conclusions are that to some extent, national customization of Eurostat's model questionnaires for the eight-yearly modules is unavoidable and that a more intensive exchange between NSIs on this topic is desirable, as it poses a variety of challenges.

Keywords: EU-LFS, eight-yearly modules, 2023 module on pensions, survey research, questionnaire design, customization of international model questionnaires to national circumstances

Introduction

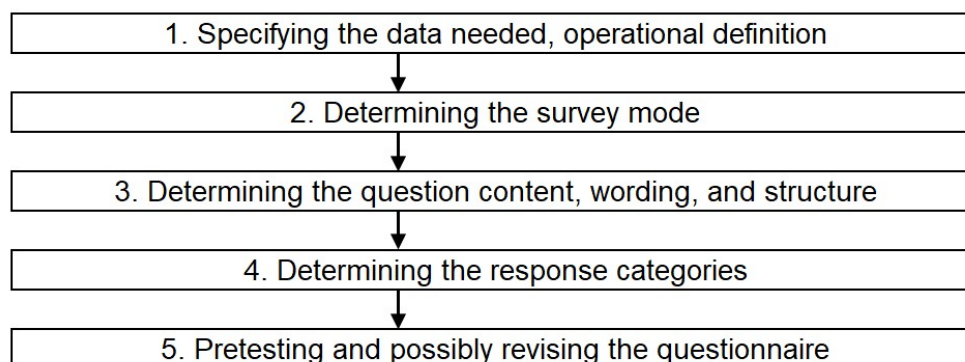
Under the new legal framework for European statistics relating to persons and households (IESS regulation), the structure and content of the European Labour Force Survey's (EU-LFS) eight-yearly modules should remain stable over time (European Commission 2020, 4). However, given the far-reaching revision work that Eurostat's labour market statistics task force 2 (LAMAS TF2) has performed on the former ad-hoc modules on which they are based, and given the fact that the first implementation cycle will only end in 2028, most of the eight-yearly modules must be considered as new modules for the time being.

This implies that National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) must deal intensively with some of the fundamental aspects of the process of questionnaire design when implementing these modules, in particular with regard to their adaptation to specific national and sometimes even sub-national circumstances. Throughout the last years, the sporadic and purely informal exchange among colleagues from different NSIs has shown that they often face similar problems, and that it might be fruitful to establish a more institutionalized sharing of experiences, allowing NSIs to learn from each other. In this vein, what follows gives a brief insight in two of the main challenges encountered when designing the Swiss questionnaire for the 2023 EU-LFS module on pensions, and summarizes how they were overcome.

National “customization” of Eurostat’s model questionnaires

The process of questionnaire design, from the initial conceptualization until putting the final questionnaire into the field, is generally described as shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1: The main steps in the process of questionnaire design (adapted from Brancato et al. 2006, 13-58).



Of course, except for determining the survey mode, LAMAS TF2 has already meticulously gone through these steps when preparing the model questionnaires for the eight-yearly EU-LFS modules. Nevertheless, it has always been clear that the NSIs are free to revisit some or all of these steps, and hence to deviate from the model, as long as the definitions and guidelines set out in the explanatory notes are respected. In most cases, such customization is not only possible but virtually unavoidable, for there is a multitude of national and sometimes even sub-national particularities that affect all five stages represented above.

Thus, the need for (additional) survey data on a given module’s subject (step 1 in Fig. 1) depends on the priority of this subject on the national political agenda, but also on the availability of relevant register data. The survey mode used for the eight-yearly modules (step 2 in Fig. 1) is likely to be the same as for the core LFS, however, this latter depends on a series of demographic and infrastructural factors that can vary considerably from one country to another. In return, survey mode, as well as other technical features of the national LFS, such as rotation scheme or the placement of the questions with regard to the core questions, have a significant influence on wording and presentation of both questions and response categories (steps 3 and 4 in Fig. 1). And finally, institutional and cultural factors such as federalism, national legislation, and language, have obviously to be taken into consideration at any stage of the process of designing national questionnaires.

The complexity of its topic and the substantial differences in national pension system setups across Europe make the eight-yearly EU-LFS module on pensions a good example to illustrate these challenges. For this purpose, the following paragraphs briefly discuss two of the major problems that aroused in the case of Switzerland when implementing this module for the first time in 2023, one due to a specific feature of the national old age pension scheme and the other in relation to the additional need for data on pensions and the transition to retirement at the national level.

Adaptation of the 2023 pensions module to the Swiss pension system

Eurostat’s model questionnaire for the eight-yearly pensions module contains a series of questions on different types of financial old age provision, respectively on the respondents’ entitlements for future old age pensions (Eurostat 2020, 16-17). The answers to these questions are then to be aggregated into the variable PROVTYPE. However, in the case of Switzerland, there is no use for the PROVTYPE-question concerning a statutory old age pension, because the Swiss federal law stipulates that all natural persons domiciled in Switzerland are entitled to a minimum statutory old age pension, independent of labour market participation, and that, on the other hand, contributions to the statutory old age insurance are mandatory for all insured persons aged 20 and over (Confédération suisse 2024, Art. 1a). In other words, it is known from the outset that in Switzerland, every person in PROVTYPE’s

target population has entitlements for a statutory old age pension and has made respective financial provisions in the past. For this reason, the question on statutory old age provision was not asked in in the Swiss version of the 2023 EU-LFS module on pensions, and the information was imputed instead.

Fig. 2: 2023 version of the first model question for PROVTYPE (Eurostat 2020, 16). As it is known from the outset that in Switzerland, every person in PROVTYPE's target population has entitlements for a statutory old age pension and has made respective financial provisions in the past, this question was not asked in in the Swiss version of the 2023 EU-LFS module on pensions, and the information was imputed instead.

*There are different forms how financial provisions can be made for your old age.
Do you have entitlements for an old age pension paid by a statutory scheme?*

1. Yes
2. No
Don't know / No answer

By contrast, the corresponding model question had been kept in the Swiss questionnaire for the previous, 2012 version of this module, despite the fact that it was already redundant at that time. Remarkably, 6.2 percent of the respondents had then answered that they did not have or that they did not know whether they had such entitlements (cf. Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Unweighted frequencies of the variable BUILDPN1 in the Swiss version of the 2012 ad-hoc module on the transition from work to retirement. In terms of content, BUILDPN1 corresponds to variable derived from the first model question for PROVTYPE.

BUILDPEN1, Switzerland 2012		frequency	percent
Yes	total	2430	93.82
	- men	1263	
	- women	1167	
No	total	71	2.74
	- men	42	
	- women	29	
Don't know	total	89	3.44
	- men	33	
	- women	56	
N	total	2590	100

Data source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Swiss LFS 2012

Of course, this was not the only modification that had to be made to Eurostat's model questionnaire for the 2023 module in order to adapt it to the Swiss pensions system, but it gives a sound example of how the mere translation of a model questionnaire, without any adaptation to national or even local circumstances can lead to not only redundancy and unnecessary response burden, but even to erroneous results.

Adaptation of the 2023 pensions module to additional data needs at the national level

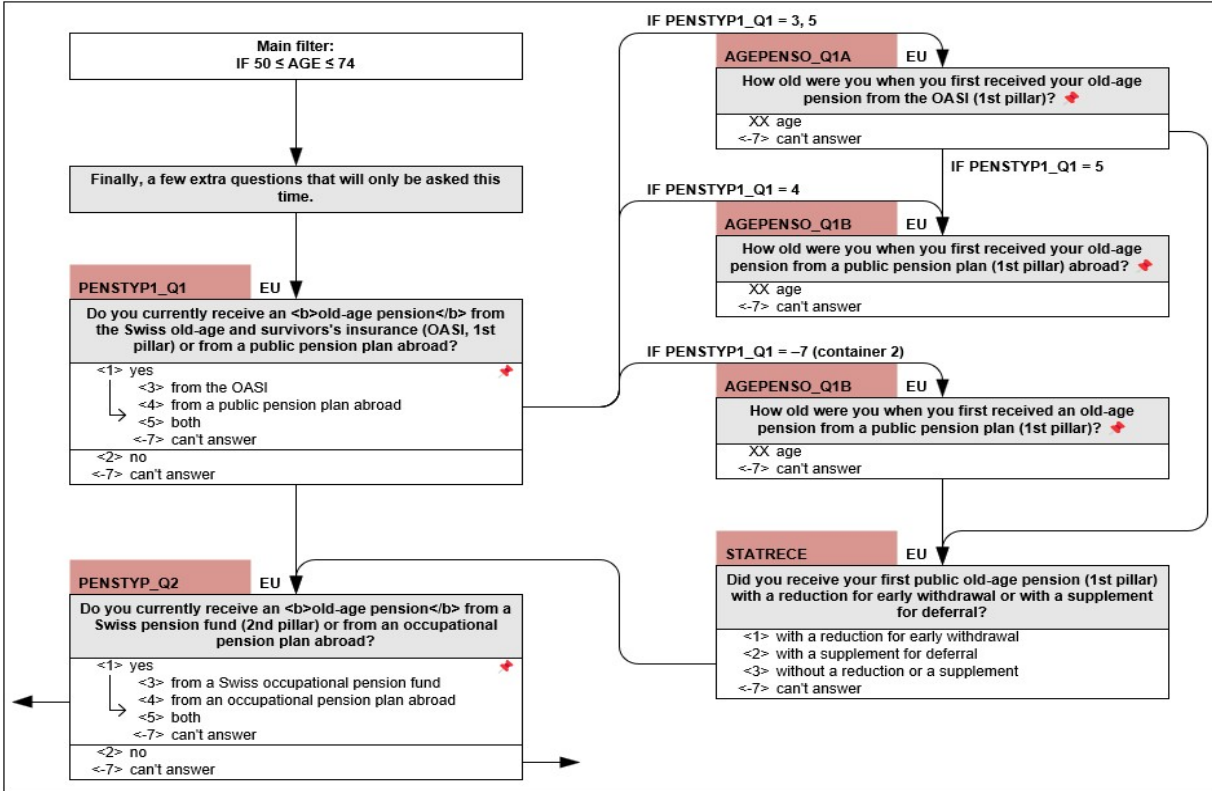
From 2002 to 2019, there was another module on social security and the transition to retirement in the Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), which was implemented approximately every four years, and which was specifically designed to meet the information needs of our internal colleagues from the Income and Living Conditions Section as well as from other federal offices. One of the main purposes of this national module was to collect information about the respondents' occupational and personal

old age provisions, in order to shed light on the future generations' financial security at the age of retirement (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2021). As for the European pensions module, the focus was thus on respondents aged 50 or more.

However, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO) meanwhile has gained access to register data containing this information for all persons who started receiving payments from any old-age pension scheme in Switzerland as of 2015. Ever since, the main part of the national module on social security has gradually become redundant and only fills the gap for the shrinking cohort that retired before 2015. Moreover, in its present form, Eurostat's eight-yearly pensions module covers most of the other information that was formerly derived from the national module, in particular the information about the respondents' situation when first receiving an old age pension. Given this situation, it had been decided to abandon the conduction of the national module and to complete the 2023 European module with some extra questions instead.

One fundamental issue when adding new questions to an existing questionnaire consists in the compatibility of the underlying concepts and definitions. In this particular case, there was indeed a slight but significant difference with regard to the scope of interest: while Eurostat's explanatory notes explicitly stipulate that pension from abroad should also be taken into account (Eurostat 2020, 4), the main data users at the national level focus exclusively on pensions from the Swiss pension system. As displayed in Fig. 3, a follow-up question about the origin of a given pension had therefore to be included for all three model-questions for the variable PENSTYPE1 (receipt of a statutory, occupational and/or personal pension), and in case a respondent reported both a Swiss and a foreign pension, the question for the variable AGEPENSO (age at the first pension receipt) had to be asked for each.

Fig. 3: Excerpt from the flow-chart of the Swiss version of the 2023 EU-LFS module on pensions, highlighting the follow-up questions to PENSTYP1_Q1 and PENSTYP1_Q2, and the multiple versions of AGEPENSO_Q1.



Furthermore, contrary to Eurostat, the national data users were also interested in lump sum payments rather than only periodic payments. And finally, against the backdrop of an ongoing political debate about the financial viability of the Swiss pension system, they wanted to obtain a more complete picture of the respondents' labour market situation at the beginning of any pension receipt as well as at the receipt of a lump-sum payment, which is why Eurostat's prioritization of statutory pensions in the question for PENSSITU and the following variables could not be retained in the Swiss questionnaire.

As a result, the Swiss version of the 2023 pensions module ended up being composed of a total of 39 questions as compared to only 23 questions in Eurostat's module questionnaire, and the filters for the multiple versions of the questions for PENSSITU swelled into long sequences of complex conditions. In actual fact, only few respondents had to report their labour market situation for multiple points in time, because the vast majority of respondents either received only one pension or had started receiving their different pensions simultaneously. But even though this means that these adaptations did not significantly affect the overall respondents' burden, it made the programming and handling of the questionnaire and the processing of the collected data considerably more difficult and resource-consuming.

Thus, this example illustrates how what is often referred to as "the simple addition of just a few extra questions or answer categories" to an existing module questionnaire can quickly get very tricky and hence increase the risk of biases and errors, especially when the complementary questions' focus differs somewhat from the module's main focus.

Conclusions

The above examples from the Swiss version of the 2023 pensions module could easily be complemented by similar episodes regarding any of the eight-yearly EU-LFS modules. It can therefore be generalized that, due to the high level of detail of these modules' topics, some sort of customization is often unavoidable in order to make Eurostat's fit-for-all model questionnaires work in a specific national environment. As these necessary adaptations can potentially concern all stages of the process of questionnaire design, this situation confronts NSIs with numerous challenges. For this reason, a more regular exchange of experience on this topic, to be maintained at least until the end of the first eight-year cycle, seems worth considering.

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