

Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)

Annual Report 2000

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Background

The OECD Program *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (DeSeCo) was initiated at the end of 1997 and managed by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office with support from the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

DeSeCo is part of OECD's effort within the framework of INES to continue work in the area of competencies and skills of the youth and adult population and to develop over time a coherent strategy for defining, selecting and measuring competencies and skills.

Context

The complexity of the demands generated by an increasingly interdependent, changing and conflictual world places the objectives of education and the strategies to achieve education goals in center stage of the debate on broad educational reform. In line with a growing concern about the adequacy and quality of education and training and the actual return on public educational expenditure, there has been since the mid-1980s an increased policy interest in comparable outcome indicators in the education field. In fact, measuring the quality of education outcomes, estimating economic and social returns to learning, and identifying key determinants to educational success is an ongoing discussion topic that stimulates keen interest around the world.

This interest in new information raises important questions about what is most needed. Beyond basic skills such as reading, writing, and calculating, what competencies are needed for the individual to lead an overall successful and responsible life and for contemporary society to face present and future challenges? What are the normative, theoretical, and conceptual foundations for defining and selecting a limited set of the most relevant competencies? These questions are the basis for an international and interdisciplinary endeavor conducted under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and led by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO). This project entitled *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (DeSeCo) has been set up to develop research in the area of competencies.

Objectives

DeSeCo seeks in collaboration with ongoing OECD assessment programs, to analyze the theoretical foundation, the rationale of the definition and selection process of key competencies and their relationship to the social and economic environment. Further it aims to provide guidelines for future developmental work for the assessment of broad human competencies in an international context. The elaboration of assessment instruments is beyond the scope of this study.

The main objectives of DeSeCo are:

- **To develop normative, theoretical, and conceptual foundations for defining and selecting key competencies.** The program seeks through an interdisciplinary scientific approach, within an international context, to develop a common, overarching theoretical framework for the identification of the competencies needed for individuals to lead an overall successful and responsible life and for society to face the challenges of the present and the future. The construction of future measures in the form of relevant indicators should be based on a refined and solid, theory-based foundation.
- **To develop reference points for the development and understanding of future indicators of competencies and for the validation of education indicators, and to provide a basis for more accurate and appropriate interpretation of empirical results.** The work of the program will provide a resource for the process of defining and selecting key competencies, as well as for the development and understanding of future measures aimed at producing relevant indicators of skills and competencies. For this it is crucial to support an iterative process between conceptual and empirical work through close linkages with INES-related activities in the domain of competencies.
- **To respond, in the long term, to information needs of policymakers.** The DeSeCo Program is embedded in the long-term strategy of INES to develop a broad basis for international comparisons of education outcomes and to develop relevant and theoretically based criteria for the successful evaluation of education systems and learning outcomes more generally.

2000 Activities

In addition to completing a paper synthesizing inputs to DeSeCo during previous years, DeSeCo devoted considerable effort in 2000 to developing working plans for activities that will come to fruition during 2001. Annex A shows how these activities are related to the conceptual framework of DeSeCo.

Synthesis of DeSeCo Work

Conceptual work on key competencies continued as a major DeSeCo activity through the preparation of a synthesis of the ideas developed in scholarly papers and at the October 1999 symposium. The work was initiated by holding two working meetings with the authors of the papers. Attendees at the first meeting – which was held in Paris at UNESCO – included Monique Canto-Sperber, Alexandra Draxler, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Helen Haste, and Cecilia

Ridgeway. Robert Kegan, Frank Levy, and Richard Murnane attended the second meeting, which was held in Boston at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

A paper laying out DeSeCo's thoughts on a number of theoretical and conceptual issues and delineating common features among the proposed approaches to defining and selecting competencies was drafted after the meetings and then revised several times throughout the year. In March, the first draft was distributed to all symposium participants for comments. The final revision of the paper was published in the compendium for the 4th General Assembly of the OECD Indicators of National Education Systems (INES) Program held on September 11–13, 2000. The paper presents a conceptual overview of the concept of key competencies as influenced by theoretical models and concepts, visions of society and individuals, cultural context and biographical variability, and political negotiation and consensus development. A summary of the synthesis for each of these areas can be found in Annexe A under *initial findings/ results*.

The findings of the synthesis were presented to the PISA Board of Participating Countries Executive Committee, which met in June 2000 in Seoul, at the sociology of education meeting of the International Sociological Association in Groningen, the Netherlands, and in September 2000 to the OECD/INES General Assembly in Tokyo and the IAOS Conference "Statistics, Development and Human Rights" in Montreux, Switzerland.

Preparation of a DeSeCo publication

DeSeCo's proposal to publish a book based on the contributions to the program was accepted by Hogrefe & Huber Publishers. During the year, authors of expert papers revised their papers and as part of the editing process the authors were contacted for final clarifications and modifications. The book will be published in spring, 2001.

Country Contribution Process

A central issue of the DeSeCo Program is that the definition and selection of key competencies is largely a process of negotiation among various stakeholders. National input into the process is an important step if a consensus among countries concerning key competencies is to be reached. During 2000, ongoing discussions were held to structure an activity to incorporate a country-level perspective. The Education Committee and the CERI Governing Board approved this activity in November, and the invitation letter to the INES National Coordinators was sent in December 2000.

The main objectives of the CCP are to identify in the national context competencies that are considered most relevant in and across various social fields, to understand the means or mechanisms by which the definition and selection of key or relevant competencies are arrived at in national-level initiatives, to provide information concerning DeSeCo-type country activities and perspectives, and to obtain feedback from the countries involved in the CCP on the relevance of the DeSeCo Program and findings in their view.

Countries have been offered two options for participation, one involving a workshop and written comments, the other involving preparation of a summary report. In the workshop option, a national coordinator – in cooperation with the DeSeCo CCP Coordinator – will be responsible for inviting a group of key players representing different arenas (policy, business, civil society, education, etc.) to participate in the CCP by attending a one-day meeting and

providing input during and after it. The DeSeCo CCP Coordinator will draft a country summary report based on workshop minutes and statements submitted by participants after the workshop. In the summary report option, countries are asked to consult national stakeholders representing different arenas (policy, business, civil society, education, etc.) and to submit a written report providing a country perspective on issues addressed by DeSeCo.

CCP activities will take place during the first half of 2001. Comparing national contexts and looking for elements that have a cross-national relevance, thus combining national and international perspectives, will provide new and creative inputs to the ongoing debate and lead to a better understanding of the overall context and ultimate relevance of the work conducted under the program. The DeSeCo CCP-Coordinator will produce a synthesis of the results of the entire CCP, which will be presented at the 2nd international symposium.

Consultation and Exploration of International DeSeCo-related Activities

During 2000, plans were formulated for an activity to complement the Country Contribution Process by seeking to map more systematically the various initiatives, programs and projects related to questions considered by DeSeCo that either have been undertaken in recent years or that are currently being planned by international organizations other than the OECD. The following organizations could be of particular interest in this respect: UNESCO and its Institute of Statistics, the World Bank and related institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank, the International Bureau of Education, the European Union, and the United Nations Development Programme. Some of the themes and questions guiding the Country Contribution Process could be put to good use, although many would need to be adapted. This activity will be implemented during 2001.

Additional Expert Papers

Three terms of reference were prepared for additional expert papers. These papers will be commissioned and written during 2001.

A perspective from education research

This paper will discuss - on the basis of the relevant research literature in the field of education/education science - the various disciplinary contributions and the three generic key competencies proposed in the contribution to the OECD INES 4th General Assembly with regard to the overarching questions and objectives guiding the DeSeCo Program. The structure and functions of the identified competencies will be evaluated from the perspective of education research/science, both in terms of the conceptualization of a competency itself and in terms of how competencies relate to each other. In addition, when discussing a competency, the demands and contexts wherein the competency applies, and the level of mental complexity involved, should be discussed. Based on existing theory and research in education, the paper will address key competencies at the level of observable entities and thus go beyond the abstract level of the sets of key competencies suggested by experts representing other disciplines.

The paper will also address the question of the current and/or ideal role of societal institutions in promoting and fostering key competencies within the population. This includes first and foremost the role of education, with its specific institutions and processes. But the role of other potential sources for developing and transmitting competencies, such as friends, parents

and wider family, the workplace, the media, and religious and cultural organizations, will also be taken into account.

Competencies for participation in civil society

In keeping with DeSeCo's commitment to an iterative process between theoretical work and empirical studies, this paper will review the conceptual basis for the competencies identified in the IEA Civics Education study in comparison to the approach to key competencies and the generic key competencies proposed in the DeSeCo contribution to the General Assembly. The framework for looking at civic competencies at a cross-national level that was developed by the IEA Civics Education study provides an excellent basis for further work to operationalize the generic key competencies proposed by DeSeCo in a specific social field. If appropriate and feasible, this may eventually include an analysis of CivEd data related to the generic key competencies.

Strategy paper: towards broadening the coverage of human competencies

This paper will propose a set of recommendations of possible avenues and future steps that have good potential for contributing in the short-, medium-, or long-term to developing internationally comparable indicators of *key competencies for all* within OECD's INES program. The paper will be based on a reflection on DeSeCo's current work with regard to the overarching research questions and on the topic of which methodologies are most appropriate for development work leading to key competency indicators. The recommendations will take into account the long-term nature of the overall endeavor. It will also consider what might be the next practical steps towards establishing a conceptual framework for key competencies that is rooted both in scientific theory and interpretable in policy terms. Such a framework should provide a clear conceptual basis for developing options for making choices about future assessments of skills and competencies and derived outcome indicators that broaden the coverage of human competencies as currently pursued within the OECD-INES program.

This strand of work is also expected to contribute further insights concerning issues related to social and cultural diversity. Cultural variability has been recognized throughout the study as a crucial dimension that needs to be specifically addressed when defining, selecting, measuring and developing key competencies. Further, the work will provide additional information regarding the negotiation and consensus building processes that are pursued at the international level in terms of selecting and defining key competencies.

Future activities

Many of the activities planned during 2000 and discussed above will be implemented during 2001. These include the Country Contribution Process, the consultation and exploration of international DeSeCo-related activities, and the expert papers. In addition, planning will take place for the 2nd international symposium and final report. Annex B presents the future objectives for DeSeCo with respect to the 2001 through mid-2002 and 2002 through 2006.

The 2nd International DeSeCo Symposium 2002 and final report

A second international DeSeCo Symposium (approximately 150 to 200 persons) is scheduled for 11-13 February 2002. The symposium will take place in Geneva.

The focus of the second symposium will be:

- Important competencies in and across critical social fields: Scientific, practical and political considerations
- Key competencies in different contexts – national and cultural variability
- Lifelong learning – development of key competencies
- Key competencies – next steps towards indicator development

The purpose of the Symposium will be to produce input for a final report from the DeSeCo project setting out whatever consensus and differences of viewpoints emerge. In addition, the outcomes from the Symposium will be presented to the Education Committee and CERI Governing Board at their meetings in April 2002. At that point, OECD will seek to engage Member countries in establishing a broad consensus on those competencies, which play are particularly relevant for the evaluation of learning outcomes at the international level and to start mapping out a strategy for the assessment of adult skills. At that point it is also expected that there will be a better understanding of the resource implications of such an undertaking.

Contact Address

Any questions or comments on DeSeCo can be addressed to:

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ANNEX A: Overview of the Topic, Initial Findings and Proposed Activities

Theoretical Models and Concepts

Guiding questions

What do the notions of competence, key competencies, and skills mean?

Is the basic premise of a limited number of key competencies justified? Can a set of competencies of prime importance for a successful life and effective participation in different fields of life - including economic, political, social, and family domains, public and private interpersonal relations, individual personal development - be identified? If so, what is the nature of these competencies and what distinguishes them as key competencies? How can they be described and theoretically justified? What are the components of these competencies?

Do key competencies operate independently, or should they be viewed as an interdependent set or constellation of competencies?

Initial findings/results

Based on a commissioned report¹, we recognize that in social sciences there is no unitary use of the concept of competence, no broadly accepted definition or unifying theory. In fact, the meaning of such terms varies largely depending on the scientific perspective and ideological viewpoints involved and on the underlying objectives associated with their use, both at scientific and political levels. As such, DeSeCo adopts a pragmatic conceptual approach, limiting the use of the concept with criteria that are more or less explicit, plausible, and scientifically acceptable.

A competency is the ability to meet a demand of a high degree of complexity. Competencies encompass not only knowledge and skills but also strategies and routines needed to apply knowledge and skills, as well as appropriate emotions and attitudes and the effective self-regulation of these components.

Competencies are learned. Acquiring competencies is viewed as an on-going, lifelong, learning process.

Within the DeSeCo Program key competencies are provisionally defined by three conceptual elements. Key competencies assume a mental autonomy that involves an active and reflective approach to life; they are multifunctional, meaning that they are needed to meet different important demands and to solve multiple problems; and they are transversal across social fields. Three generic key competencies have been identified, namely acting autonomously and reflectively, using tools interactively, and joining and functioning in socially heterogeneous groups.

¹ Franz E. Weinert (1999), *Concepts of Competence*, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel. (downloadable at www.deseco.admin.ch)

Proposed activities

- **Country Contribution Process: relevance of key competencies in and across various social fields**
- **Consultation Process in different international organizations: relevance of the interim findings of DeSeCo from the perspective of international organizations**
- **Expert Opinion from the perspective of education sciences: key competencies as learnable and observable entities and related considerations**
- **Expert Opinion with regard to key competencies in civic life**

Vision of Society and Individual/ Normative Reference System(s) for Identifying Key Competencies

Guiding questions

Defining key competencies raises questions such as what for? in support of which objectives? according to which criteria?

To what kind of world do we aspire? What constitutes a successful life in a modern democratic society? What are the critical fields of life for which key competencies are needed?

What are the selection criteria for prioritizing a limited number of key competencies, etc.?

Initial findings/results

Conceiving key competencies is inevitably influenced by what is valued in societies and by the goals set for human and socio-economic development. And at the same time, depending on how key competencies are formulated, certain visions of individuals and society are strengthened or weakened.

To enhance the debate on key competencies which democratic societies could propose both within and outside the OECD context, the normative frame of reference of the endeavor first needs to be made explicit i.e. the underlying model of society must be clearly stated as such.

Principles postulated in major international human rights documents can serve as a starting point to derive and then describe competencies necessary for individuals to participate successfully in contemporary democratic societies. These principles transcend a vision that includes democratic values, respect for the law and for the rights of other, the importance of school as an institution for imparting knowledge, skills and competencies to the young, and learning as a lifelong endeavor.

This kind of normative comprehension always remains prescriptive.

Key competencies should reflect a notion of what constitutes a good and successful life for individuals beyond the satisfaction of elementary personal needs. Consistent with any major moral theory², a good and successful life includes close relationships with other people, an understanding of oneself and one's world, autonomous interaction with one's physical and social environment, and a sense of accomplishment and enjoyment. This broad and rich

² Monique Canto-Sperber and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, (1999), *Competencies for the Good Life and the Good Society*, A Philosophical Perspective, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel.

conception of a successful life represents an alternative to approaches that consider key competencies predominantly from the perspective of productivity and competitiveness.

Proposed activities

- **Country Contribution Process: basis for establishing priorities of indispensable key competencies in national context**
- **Consultation Process in different international organizations: basis for establishing priorities of indispensable key competencies in the international context**

Cultural and Biographical Variability

Guiding questions

To what extent are key competencies immutable with reference to social, economic, and cultural conditions?
To what extent are they generally valid from country to country, region to region?

What are the political, social, and economic factors that influence the definition and selection processes of key competencies in different socio-economic and cultural environments, and how is this influence exercised?

To what extent is it possible to identify key competencies independently of age, gender, status, professional activity, etc?

Do we need the same basic, universal key competencies when we are young, join the workforce, establish a family, advance in our professional or political career and when we retire? Or are certain competencies particularly important in the various phases of life, and if so, which ones?

Initial findings/results

Social and individual diversity is an undeniable fact. Thus, it is important to construct key competencies at a relatively abstract level, recognizing that their development and application may take many forms depending on social and individual factors.

It is assumed that a society cannot survive without setting standards and defining normality, and thus giving priority to certain social practices and competencies while neglecting others, that there are universal values from which we can derive competencies, at least descriptively, that cross cultural boundaries, and that there are sufficient commonalities between individuals and across societies to adopt a normative frame of reference for identifying key competencies relevant for contemporary democratic societies.

With respect to the multitude of possible approaches to the subject as well as the diversity of societies and lifestyles a healthy scepticism towards the attempt to identify a limited number of key competencies valid across nations and regions is not unwarranted. Some authors found the undertaking rather problematic (see Perrenoud), and others (see Goody) viewed it as an altogether impossible enterprise. Yet, it is evident that a debate about human excellence and standards within contextual and biographical variability cannot be limited to a scientific discussion albeit a broad and open-minded one. It necessarily implies ideological and political considerations as well.

The three generic key competencies identified earlier in DeSeCo's interim findings (see above), together with the conceptual elements, are proposed as a potentially productive avenue for exploring and studying concrete forms of key competencies as manifested in actions, behavior, and choices of individuals and groups in different social fields (such as

personal, social, economic, political, and cultural life), at different stages in life, and in different cultural contexts.

Proposed activities

- **Country Contribution Process: key competencies from national perspectives**
- **Consultation Process in different international organizations: key competencies from the perspective of international organizations.**
- **2nd DeSeCo Symposium: forum for debate, exploration, and reflection**

Political Negotiation, Consensus Formation

Guiding questions

Politicians and practitioners, actors in various social spheres define, develop and promote competencies and key competencies following their own logic in relation to the specific socio-economic context. According to experts in various spheres of activity, which key competencies are necessary for understanding and acting in different potential areas of application: economic institutions, various political and social domains, social communication in a multicultural society, public and private interpersonal relations, personality development, etc.?

What is the role of policy and practice in defining, selecting, and describing skills and competencies as “key competencies?”

What is the rationale for identifying and selecting key competencies that would match present and future needs in society and the economy?

What are the mechanisms in place to define, negotiate, and select ‘what really matters’ in terms of key competencies? To what extent are negotiating procedures and decision-making processes on the agenda of educational, social, or economic policies?

Initial findings/results

Defining and selecting key competencies for a successful life is an attempt to explicitly value some competencies over others. This undertaking cannot be restricted to an academic discussion.

The definition and selection of key competencies largely depend on power relations, political decisions and ethical choices. Furthermore, if abstract and general formulas of humanistic and ethical goals for education may find a consensus in democratic societies, their implementation in a specific socio-economic context may raise conflict of interest in what is taught, how teaching takes place, or how educational establishments are organized. The same holds true for the description and application of key competencies.

Recognizing that defining and selecting key competencies is ultimately the result of a political negotiation process, in which researchers can only be partners among others, we encourage within the DeSeCo Program the dialogue between scholars, representatives of the economic world and the social sphere, as well as policy makers. As we continue to develop our ideas about key competencies, we need to work towards a conceptualization that is both theoretically grounded and relevant to the policy world.

Proposed activities

- **Country Contribution Process: main features of the public debate, political negotiation and consensus formation**
- **Consultation Process in different international organizations: main features of the public debate, political negotiation and consensus formation**
- **2nd DeSeCo Symposium: forum for debate, exploration, and reflection among different social actors**
- **Expert Opinion: Competencies for participation in civil society**

Transmission Process

Guiding questions

Which institutions and/or agencies are responsible for the training and developing of key competencies, within and without the formal education system? What role(s) do schools play in the teaching of key competencies? And what of other potential sources, such as parents, the working environment, media, the church and cultural organizations?

How could overall policy-making in different sectors, including but not limited to the education sector, promote the teaching and learning of key competencies? To what extent can the transmission of key competencies be controlled by policies?

Initial findings/results

This topic hasn't been considered during the first phases of the work.

Proposed activities

- **Expert Opinion from the perspective of education sciences: lifelong learning – development of key competencies and social institutions involved**
- **Country Contribution Process: Key competencies and education**

Measures and Indicators

Guiding questions

How can the identified key competencies be observed, operationalized and measured? To what extent are qualification standards and assessment practices in the business world (e.g. hiring and evaluating employees) and other social fields related to key competencies?

What are potential approaches towards operationalizing key competencies?

Initial findings/results

Although some authors commented on the feasibility and appropriateness of measuring various competencies, this topic hasn't been considered systematically in the first phases of the work.

Proposed activities

- **Expert opinion: recommendations for indicator development strategy**
- **Country Contribution Process: first elements with regard to assessment, indicators and benchmarking**
- **Consultation Process in different international organizations: first elements with regard to assessment, indicators and benchmarking**

ANNEX B: Future Objectives

Short and Mid Term Objectives (2001 – mid-2002)

- Identify competencies that are considered most relevant in and across various social fields (such as the political and civic spheres, business and labor market sectors, and family life) in different social and economic contexts.
- Analyze the means or mechanisms by which the definition and selection of key or relevant competencies are arrived at.
- Propose a set of theory-based generic (key) competencies relevant for different socio-economic contexts
- Clarify the cultural and national variability of key competencies
- Consider the role of social institutions in developing key competencies.
- Propose elements of a strategy for developing internationally comparable indicators of key competencies
- Suggest approaches and methodologies that are most appropriate for development work leading to key competency indicators.

Long Term Objectives 2002 - 2006

- Continue the work towards establishing a conceptual framework for key competencies that is both rooted in scientific theory and interpretable in policy terms;
- Provide a clear conceptual basis for the continued development of international assessments of skills and competencies and for the selection of outcome indicators that broaden the coverage of human competencies; and
- Influence research and innovation on the conceptualization and measurement of skills and competencies relevant to education policy.

ANNEX C: DeSeCo Sources (for further reading)

- Swiss Federal Statistical Office (1999), *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo), Background Paper, 2nd revision*, Neuchâtel.
- Laura H. Salganik, Dominique S. Rychen et al. (1999), *Projects on Competencies in the OECD Context: Analysis of Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations*, SFSO, OECD, ESSI, Neuchâtel.
- Franz E. Weinert (1999), *Concepts of Competence*, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel. (downloadable at www.deseco.admin.ch)
- Monique Canto-Sperber and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, (1999), *Competencies for the Good Life and the Good Society, A Philosophical Perspective*, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel.
- Jack Goody (1999), *Education and Competences, An Anthropological Perspective*, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel.
- Helen Haste (1999), *Competencies Psychological Realities, A Psychological Perspective*, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel.
- Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane (1999), *Are There Key Competencies Critical to Economic Success?, An Economics Perspective*, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel.
- Philippe Perrenoud (1999), *The Key to Social Fields: Essay on the Competencies of an Autonomous Actor, A Sociological Perspective*, DeSeCo Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel.
- Various Authors (1999), *Comments on the DeSeCo Expert Opinions*. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Neuchâtel
- Dominique S. Rychen and Laura H. Salganik (2000), *Definition and Selection of Key Competencies*, in Fourth General Assembly of the OECD Education Indicators Programme, The INES Compendium, Contributions from the INES Networks and Working Groups, p. 61-73. OECD. Paris

All contributions and reports are downloadable at www.deseco.admin.ch. The publication *Projects on Competencies in the OECD Context: Analysis of Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (1999)* can be ordered free from the DeSeCo Secretariat (see Contact Address).

Note: DeSeCo documents can be cited as expert reports from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, as shown in the example below:

Helen Haste (1999), *Competencies; Psychological Realities, A Psychological Perspective*, Deseco Expert Report. Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Neuchâtel.