Some practical recommendations on how to (not) use the information in the AMIS Policy Database

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The AMIS Policy Database aims to provide its users with detailed policy information that can be easily understood and analysed. To achieve this, it records qualitative policy information in a quantitative way and organizes the data so that it can be compared across countries, across policies and across commodities.

The complex nature of policy information implies that it is not always straightforward to record and classify this type of information. During the creation of the AMIS Policy Database, considerable time and effort was spent on harmonizing and organizing policy information. This process is described in detail in the Methodological Document.

This note highlights some issues that should be taken into consideration when using the data of the AMIS Policy Database for graphical representations and analytical purposes. The main purpose of this note is to avoid incorrect use of the information in the database which can lead to incorrect interpretations.

This note is not exhaustive and first-time users of the AMIS Policy Database are advised to also read the Methodological Document. Users who wish to represent policy information in figures can browse the interactive graphs on the page "policies at a glance"[1]. The graphs on this page and their underlying data can also be downloaded. Should you have any doubts about the correct use of the policy information in the AMIS Policy Database, feel free to contact us.

Recommendation 1: Do not count policy measures

Each line in the database contains information on a specific policy in a specific country on a specific commodity. Even though it is tempting to count the number of policies that a certain country has on a specific commodity group (e.g. wheat), it is strongly advised not to do this as it would invariably lead to incorrect interpretations. There are several reasons why the number of policy measures should not be counted:

> 1. Policy measures can be applied to a broad category (e.g. HS4 level) or to a specific category (e.g. HS8 level). Counting the number of policy measures ignores whether the policy applied to a very specific commodity or a broader category.
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> Consider for example country A which has three export taxes on three detailed categories of wheat (HS8 level) and country B which has only one export tax on a broad category of wheat (HS4 level). By simply counting the number of measures, one might conclude that since country A has three export taxes and country B has only one export tax, country A is more export restrictive than country B for wheat. However, this conclusion is incorrect as it ignores that by imposing one export tax on a broad category country B might prohibit exports much more than country A with three export taxes.

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[1] http://statistics.amis-outlook.org/policy/policiesAtaGlance.html

2. Countries can make small changes to their policies and most of these changes are documented in the database. The actual impact of these small changes on trade flows might be minimal in some cases. Counting the number of policy measures might give too much importance to minor policy changes.

Consider for example country A and country B which both implement a minimum export price on a specific variety of maize starting on 1-1-2010. During the next couple of months, country A might publish several notifications that provide extra explanations or provisions for this reference price, while country B does not publish any additional notifications. In the end, the minimum reference price remained at the same level in both countries. By simply counting the policy measures, one might conclude that country A has implemented more policies than country B. However, this conclusion can be incorrect if the actual minimum reference price did not change in either country and the extra provisions in country A were explanatory in nature.

3. Commodity descriptions and HS codes can change under different HS versions[2]. For example, under HS2007, HS code 100110 covered "durum wheat". However, under HS2012, this category was split between HS code 100111 ("durum wheat – seed") and HS code 100119 ("durum wheat – other"). As a result, a policy on durum wheat under the HS2007 nomenclature would only occupy one line, but would occupy two lines under the HS2012 nomenclature. When counting the number of policy measures, one would conclude that the country moved from 1 to 2 measures on durum wheat. However, this would be incorrect as the policy measure always covered the same commodity.

4. When policies are repealed, this information is recorded in the database. Even though the policy is no longer in force, it is deemed important to record the original policy as it might have influenced production, prices or trade patterns. By simply counting the number of policy measures one might incorrectly include the repealed policies.

Consider for example a biodiesel mandate in country A that was published on 1-1-2010 and that entered in force from 1-1-2010 until 1-1-2015. Suppose that country A repeals this biodiesel mandate in a notification that was published on 1-1-2013. The database will record both policies. However, when counting the number of policies on biodiesel, one might conclude that starting from 1-1-2013, two biodiesel policies were implemented in country A, while in reality no biodiesel mandates were in force from 1-1-2013 onwards.

More information on how to deal with repealed policies is given in Recommendation 2.

5. Countries can implement a policy without specifying an end date. If a country decides to explicitly eliminate a policy that had no original end date, then this information is recorded in a separate line in the database. In particular, an extra line is created that documents the notification that explicitly eliminates the policy and the Value Text field is filled with "elim". When counting the number of policy measures and ignoring the entry in this field, more policies would be counted than are actually implemented.

More information on how to deal with eliminated policies is given in Recommendation 3.

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[2] Refer to the Methodological note for more information on the Harmonized System (HS) nomenclature

6. Trade policies can be targeted at a broad category (equivalent to HS2 or HS4 codes). For certain trade policies, the database records as many lines as HS6 codes exist under the given HS4 (or HS2)[3] code. For example, if an export tax applies to rice (HS4 code 1006), then four lines are created, one for each of the HS6 codes under rice (namely 110610, 100620, 100630, and 100640). In this case, the original product name (i.e. rice) and the original HS code (i.e. 1006) are recorded in the fields [Product_Original_Name] and [Product_Original_HS] in the database. When counting the number of policy measures and ignoring the entries in these fields, more policies would be counted than are actually implemented.

Recommendation 2: Identify the period of implementation of a policy

Policies can be categorized in two types: policies that are implemented with only a start date (open-ended policies) and policies that have a clear start date and end date. When a change is made to a policy, this is recorded differently for open-ended policies than for policies with a start and end date. In the former case, the periods of implementation will always be successive while in the latter case, it is possible that the periods of implementation overlap.

When there is a change to an open-ended policy (e.g. the value changes or the specifications change), then an end date is created for the original policy which corresponds to the start date of the new policy minus one day. To indicate that the end date was created based on a new policy, the field [Imposed_End_Date] is filled with "yes". The new policy is recorded in a new line. Consider for example an open-ended policy with a start date of 1-1-2009 and value 5%. Suppose that the value of this policy becomes 8% starting from 15-6-2010. Table 1 illustrates how this change to an open-ended policy is recorded in the database.

Table 1 Illustration of a change to open-ended policy

CPL_ID	Start_Date	End_Date	Units	Value	Imposed_End_Date
67	01-01-2009	14-06-2010	%	5	yes
67	15-06-2010		%	8	

On the other hand, when there is a change to a policy that has a start date and end date, a new line is created in the database but the end date of the original policy remains unchanged. This implies that if the start date of the new policy occurs before the end date of the original policy, there will be overlapping periods of implementation. When analysing policies it is hence important to consider the field [Date_of_Publication] as it will indicate until which date the original policy was in effect. This is also valid for policies that are repealed (see example in Recommendation 1). Table 2 provides an example of how a change to a policy with a start date and end date is recorded in the database. In this example, the value of the policy was 4% from 01-01-2010 until 31-12-2012 and 7% from 01-01-2013 onwards.

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[3] Refer to the Methodological note for more information on how commodity information is collected and recorded in the database

CPL_ID	Start_Date	End_Date	Units	Value	Date of publication	Imposed_End_Date
68	01-01-2010	01-01-2015	%	4	01-01-2010	
68	01-01-2013		%	7	01-01-2013	

Recommendation 3: Identify policies that have been eliminated

When a notification explicitly eliminates an open-ended policy, a new line of information is created for which the field [Value_Text] is filled with "elim". The original policy's end date is set to one date before the date of elimination and the field [Imposed_End_Date] is filled with "yes". Table 3 provides an example of a policy that has been eliminated.

When analysing the data or representing the data in graphs, it is important not to include these lines as they do not report the creation of a new policy.

Table 3 Illustration of how an elimination of a policy is recorded in the database

CPL_ID	Start_Date	End_Date	Units	Value	Value_text	Imposed_End_Date
72	01-01-2009	03-03-2011	%	5		yes
72	04-03-2011				elim	

Recommendation 4: Be careful when interpreting licensing requirements

When analysing information on licensing requirements, a few issues need to be kept in mind:
-   The database only collects information on non-automatic export and import licensing, where exporters (importers) must obtain prior approval, in form of a license, to export (import) a good or commodity. This practice requires submission of an application or other documentation as a condition for being registered and authorised to export (import).
-   Most licensing requirements are open-ended, i.e. they have a start date but no explicit end date. Since countries will rarely explicitly eliminate a licensing requirement and since it is difficult to identify whether a new licensing requirement replaces an older one, the information on licensing requirements seems to accumulate over time. That is, as time progresses, the number of licensing requirements increases as the older licensing requirements are rarely ended. This issue should be kept in mind when comparing licensing requirements with other trade restrictive measures, for which it is easier to find end dates.
-   The licensing requirements recorded in the database are very diverse in nature: some licensing requirements just specify packing instructions while others are more cumbersome as they require registration and bureaucratic procedures.
-   The database only starts recording licensing requirements from 2007 onwards. Hence, any licensing requirements that were in place prior to 2007 are not reported in the database.
-   Export licensing requirements can accompany other export restrictive measures such as export quotas.

Recommendation 5: Compare export bans and export quotas

It is possible that a country imposes an export ban but allows some exports to a few selected countries. This extra information is collected in the database. The line in the database that records the export ban will indicate in the field [Notes] that there are export quotas associated with the export ban. For each of these countries, the database will also create a line with the export quota. The field [Condition] will indicate to which country the quota applies.

Consider for example country A that imposes an export ban on rice, but that allows 15,000 tonnes of rice to be exported to country B and 20,000 tonnes of rice to be exported to country C.

Table 4 Illustration of how export bans with export quotas are recorded in the database

Country_Name	PolicyMeasure_Name	Condition	Start_Date	Units	Value	Notes
Country A	Export prohibition		01-01-2008			Export ban is not applicable to country B and country C
Country A	Export quota	Exports to country B	01-01-2008	tonnes	15000	
Country A	Export quota	Exports to country C	01-01-2008	tonnes	20000	

Recommendation 6: Use the field [HS Code] to distinguish the raw materials from semi-processed commodities

The database collects policy information on agricultural commodities in their raw and semi-processed form. In the case of trade policies, the field [HS Code] allows users to distinguish the raw materials from the semi-processed commodities. Users can identify the lines that apply to wheat, maize, rice and soybeans in their raw form by selecting HS codes that start with 1001, 1005, 1006, and 1201, respectively.