

## TOWARDS A STATISTICAL SYSTEM

### Report prepared by ECE

## **1 What are the Boundaries of a UN Statistical System?**

### ***1.1 Who is a Statistical Producer?***

1. The assumption behind this paper is that the characteristics that are used to analyse whether a system of official statistics is effective are the same at national, supranational and international level. The best presentation of these characteristics, in the context of national systems, is given in Fellegi<sup>1</sup>. These characteristics can be used as criteria for assessing statistical systems, be they national<sup>2</sup> or supranational<sup>3</sup>. The present paper does not aim at a similar exercise of the UN system, but only tries to illustrate how these criteria might be applicable to the various types of statistical activities within the wider UN context. In so doing, this paper makes extensive use of the analysis of the supranational system mentioned in footnote 3.
2. These characteristics are derived from a concept of official statistics laid down in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.<sup>4</sup> The principles were adopted by UNECE in 1992, by the Statistical Commission in 1994, and were included in the SDDS and GDDS of the IMF. They address statistical systems at the national level, but at least from a formal perspective these principles are not directly applicable in the same way to statistical activities of international organizations<sup>5</sup>. Most statistical departments of UN organizations feel an obligation, as professional statisticians, to comply with these principles in their everyday work as much as possible. But unlike the situation at national level, there is no institutional recognition of this obligation. We will begin, therefore, by examining the reasons why this is so<sup>6</sup>.
3. Almost all UN organizations started their statistical activities as users of national data they collected, processed in a more or less elaborated way, and used for the non-statistical core activities of the organization. Some statistics were published as part of analytical or policy reports, but not as statistical products. The legal basis for all organizations allows them to collect data from national authorities for the purposes of the organization. With the exception of the latter prerogative, the situation in such an environment is very similar to what can be called a user ministry at national level; such a ministry (assuming for the time being that it is not a producer of official statistics itself at the same time) takes the statistics necessary for the performance of its tasks from the national system of official statistics, notably from the NSO, from international sources, or from any other source that is available.

4. Should all international organizations collecting data and using them for their own purposes be considered as “producers of statistics” that, together, form a statistical system of the UN? This would mean that almost all UN organizations would be producers in this sense, which would clearly stretch the analogy to national systems of official statistics (where this notion is much more restrictive) and to the EU (where EUROSTAT is the only producer of Community statistics within the EU Commission, with the European Central Bank and the Environment Agency being producers outside the Commission). Furthermore, data collection from Member countries will become easier and less burdensome through the use of Internet, and through more and more national official statistics being available as publicly accessible databases. This paper argues, therefore, for a more restrictive definition of a UN statistical system.
5. Given the problems with comparability of statistics collected from national authorities, the need for harmonisation and standardisation emerged quickly at international level. The instruments for engaging in this form of activity were various groups, acting under the umbrella of an international organization, and composed of representatives of member countries of this organization. As an example, the decision by ECOSOC in 1946 setting up the Statistical Commission mentioned “promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability”. All such standard setting is addressed to national official statistics for voluntary implementation. We understand standards here as any international agreement, in whatever form, on conceptual elements for phenomena to be measured by national statistics. Examples are definitions, classifications, or coverage related to statistical results, but not questionnaire or survey designs for data collection by national authorities from their statistical units (see below for the latter). At national level, standard setting is one of the major functions of producers of official statistics, acting together in a coherent way, which they carry out under the full protection of professional independence. It is therefore logical to assume that the function of standard setting for national statistical systems is one of the possible functions that are characteristic for a “producer” within the UN system.
6. The second function that is proposed as typical of producer status is closely linked to the first. It is about technical assistance to countries in implementing international statistical standards and in capacity building for official statistics. An organization that assumes it is qualified to assist national producers of official statistics has to have experience in this area that goes beyond the mere user perspective, and which can therefore be legitimately called a producer. A mere funding organization for technical assistance would not be considered a producer, however; at least the management and evaluation functions would have to be carried out in-house in the case where most of the fieldwork is contracted out.
7. The third possible function that is characteristic of a statistical producer, which evolved from the data collection processes mentioned above, is the dissemination of statistical products of international statistics. This is certainly the most visible function of the UN statistical system for stakeholders outside the UN and outside national statistical systems. Regular dissemination of statistical results to the public at large is a key characteristic of national official statistics as opposed to other sources, where dissemination to the public is much more selective. It is important to distinguish the term “statistical products” from the more

frequent type of reports by international organizations on policy issues, including the evaluation and analysis of policies, which may have extensive statistical documentation. Statistical products here are defined in a relatively narrow sense, i.e. as an authoritative set of internationally comparable and documented statistics that are available to the public in their own right, be it in hard copy or electronic form.

8. We have argued above that collecting data from national producers, without undertaking the additional activities of one of the three types above, is not sufficient to be classified a producer at international level. One exception, however, has to be made, i.e. when international organizations go as far as developing harmonised instruments for collecting (and processing) data from primary respondents such as households or businesses to be used at national level. Examples are the World Health Survey, or the International Comparison Project. Such activities are clearly distinct from asking member countries for (or taking directly from their websites) already existing national statistics; they are in fact a combination of statistical standard setting and their transformation into primary data collection tools. In most cases of standard setting, the latter part is left entirely to national statistics systems. When exceptionally this is not the case, such activities go clearly beyond any user framework and enter a producer framework.
9. On the basis of the present information, it is not entirely clear to us which UN organization would be called a producer of statistics along the above lines, and which organization would be better described as a user organization with respect to statistics. However, the criteria are meant to be operational so that they can be tested by each organization with respect to its own activities, which is part of the proposed action 1 below.

## ***1.2 What is Official Statistics within U.N.?***

10. Even after obtaining a list of producer organizations, there is a problem in distinguishing between “official statistics” at international level, and any other forms of activities or outputs related to statistics that the same organizations are likely to be involved in. This line is either blurred or simply ignored, which is understandable bearing in mind the conventional user framework. Moving to a producer framework requires that this issue be clarified first before we can speak about a system of UN official statistics in more detail.
11. This issue seems relatively clear for standard setting, technical cooperation, and direct survey methodology, where the first reaction might be that such activities are official statistics to 100%. A second look shows that this is not always the case. We will have a more detailed discussion of this in chapter 3, after having had a look at how official statistics is distinguished from other statistical activities at national level.
12. Firstly, there is a common legal framework for all producers of official statistics at national (in some countries federal) level, usually in the form of a statistical law. This legal text enshrines the fundamental principles of official statistics, and notably professional independence and confidentiality of individual information, at the level of the law, i.e. at a level where not only statisticians, but also governments are bound. Secondly, there is a list of producers of official statistics, either in the law itself, or in a kind of statistical programme

with a lower level legal status based on this law. Thirdly, at least in most countries, there is a statistical office as the main producer and disseminator of official statistics, which has no other non-statistical functions that could be in conflict with its core task. This is essential for the credibility and trust of users. Whereas the amount of concentration of the production with the NSO varies from country to country, the NSO (or in some countries another institution that is part of the statistical system) has coordination obligations, and coordination instruments, for the whole national system. The NSO enjoys some institutional specificity in comparison to other government agencies in order to protect it from any influence that may undermine its credibility and the trust in the data produced (this protection may be extended in an appropriate way to other producers). The staff of the NSO (and of the entire statistical system in some cases) have a primary identity as official statisticians, with career possibilities within the statistical system. Fourthly, the reference to fundamental principles excludes the possibility that official statistics is for government use only; it has a multi-purpose function and is a public good with e.g. new results to be made available to all users simultaneously, and with full transparency of sources and methods.

13. Even if not all countries have implemented these concepts of the fundamental principles fully, adopting the FP as an international standard for national statistical systems provides clear guidance of what the characteristics of a system of official statistics should be. Official statistics at national level can therefore be defined as all statistical activities that are performed under the legal coverage of and in full compliance with the fundamental principles. The outputs of these activities are authoritative results reserving as best approximation to an unknown reality and therefore as reference, with most of these results produced repeatedly at regular intervals so as to provide time-series.
14. In trying to apply the same criteria for the UN context, we will see some important differences. There is no common legal framework for statistics across the UN, and there is no conceivable way in which such a framework could be adopted and implemented as legally binding text. The list of producers (according to the proposed definition) could be generated relatively easily, but it will not have any legal status. This is equivalent to saying that any UN organization can start (or cease) to act as a producer on its own decision, which is different from the national set-up. There is no institutional specificity to decision-making processes in statistics as compared to other functions of the same organization, and the role of UNSD cannot be compared to the role of a NSO in a national statistical system, nor can the role of the Statistical Commission be compared to the role of a Statistical Council at national level (the latter is a body covering all official statistics, whereas this is not the case for the former today as regards statistics in the wider UN context). The issue of dissemination will be discussed further below, but internal users (and maybe users in governments of member countries) very often have privileged access to statistics in international organizations in terms of extent and timeliness.
15. The only possible way to define the scope of official statistics within the activity pattern of each UN producer is therefore the generic one, i.e. the reference to the fundamental principles, but in the absence of a legal framework that enshrines these principles, official statistics within the UN have to be defined through the de facto adherence to the fundamental principles.

### 1.3 *Provisional Definitions*

16. The following provisional definitions are proposed:

- a) A statistical producer within the UN system is an organization which engages in at least one of the following types of statistical activities on a regular basis:
  - i) disseminating statistical products containing documented reference series in whatever form (including electronically) to the public, based on data collected from national or international sources (with emphasis on official statistics) and systematic checks/processing for consistency and international comparability;
  - ii) setting conceptual standards in the broad sense (including definitions of good practices) for national official statistics, and monitoring the implementation of these standards;
  - iii) providing technical assistance to national producers of official statistics and capacity building in national systems of official statistics;
  - iv) developing standardised methodologies for statistical data collection, notably through statistical surveys, and for related processing at the national level, and assisting countries in implementing them.
- b) Official statistics within the UN are all activities by producers of official statistics mentioned under a) that are carried out with full respect of the UN fundamental principles of official statistics, i.e. amongst other things, resulting in multi-purpose information available to all users and to the public.
- c) The UN system of official statistics is the coordinated way of planning and carrying out the activities of official statistics by the various producers.

**PROPOSED ACTION 1: Each member of the CCSA is invited to check the applicability of the proposed definitions a) and b) within their own organization.**

17. It is understood that not all statistical activities of a producer may fulfil the proposed characteristics of belonging to official statistics according to part b) of the definition, and it is perfectly legitimate that for some statistical activities it may be preferable to continue their operation under what was described above as the user framework. Proposed action 1 therefore also addresses the question of whether the statistical activities of an organization can be classified without too many difficulties, and in a forward looking way, according to whether the proposed framework of official statistics is (or should be) applicable or not. It is also understood that the above action implies that each organization answers the question whether it is a producer in the above sense or not. If not, most of what follows in this paper would not be applicable to such an organization.

18. There might be a temptation to equate all activities of the statistical departments in a given organization with the sum of official statistics activities, and leave out from this umbrella all statistical activities in other departments. However, this assumption should be checked very carefully, both with respect to some activities of the statistical department (which may continue to be exclusively for internal purposes of the organization), and with respect to

statistical activities of other departments. If any activities listed in definition a) are carried out by other departments, they are strong candidates for being included as activities of official statistics even if the present situation may not correspond entirely to the requirements of official statistics.

## **2 Why do we Need to Move towards a Statistical System?**

### **2.1 *Are we a System Today?***

19. After having defined the scope of the UN system of official statistics in a preliminary way, there is a need to approach part c) of the above definition, the coordinated way of planning and carrying out the relevant activities. There is no agreed definition on what degree of commonality between the different actors of a supposed system has to exist so as to justify the notion of a system. Habermann<sup>7</sup> is of the opinion that a UN global statistical system, comprising two layers (National Statistical Offices and Statistical Offices of International Agencies respectively) exists, but he makes a clear difference between the first layer, for which a common ethos laid down in the fundamental principles is the major commonality, and the second, which “does not have a set of principles of official statistics like the national statistical offices”.
20. Given 1) the lack of institutional specificity of the statistics within each UN organization, 2) the preponderance of the organization’s information needs in shaping the statistical activities which may, as Habermann points out, result in being “given inconsistent directions”, 3) the lack so far of a common understanding of what official statistics within the UN should be, and 4) the absence of any instruments to ensure coherence of activities other than working out a consensus between all participants, it is not clear whether the present situation of UN statistics qualifies as “system”. The arguments in favour, according to Habermann, are the “shared commitment to develop and implement voluntary international standards”, which go as far as the pooling of resources between organizations to develop major new standards as the 1993 SNA.

### **2.2 *Is there an Outside Pressure for us to Move?***

21. In a situation where all UN organizations limit their statistical activities to what is described as user framework above (which includes collection of existing data from Member states), there is no obvious need to be organised as a distinct statistical system within the overall institutional framework of the wider UN context. There would be a need to avoid duplication in data collection, and to share data, but each organization’s activities would be primarily defined by the needs of the organization to which it belongs. Coordination of data collection for the unique purpose of being used by the organizations involved for their other tasks would not be sufficient in itself to speak of a UN statistical system.
22. The perspective is different, however, when we look at the four components of statistical activities mentioned under part a) of the above definition, including any data collection that is involved in such activities. The proposed overall framework for all these activities, i.e. the fundamental principles of official statistics, requires that such activities are not organised as

stove-pipes for purposes of individual users, but try to cover as many user needs with one activity, be they national or international. This requires bundling (and filtering) of user needs, and systematic enquiries about user needs beyond the users in their own organization, which is a decisive element in acting like a system. Furthermore, the statistical information needs of international organizations for their analytical purposes have recently had a tendency to become more interdisciplinary, as a reaction to the growing interdependence of various subject areas, both at national, continental and global level.

23. Even if one disagrees about the exact meaning and even more so about the implications of the term globalisation, a growing demand for internationally comparable statistics is one aspect everybody seems to agree upon. More and more international and national decision-making is based, directly or indirectly, on international statistics (rather than on purely national data). It is therefore fair to say that products with international statistics today have a far greater actual or potential impact beyond the organizations themselves than when international organizations started their statistical work. A good verification is the frequency of international statistical sources being quoted by media. It is certainly in this respect that products with international statistics have assumed a significance which equals, if not surpasses in certain areas, that of national products. It is only through the dissemination of good quality and timely statistical products that an institution can build up a public reputation as an important player in world statistics; therefore these activities are an important contribution to the reputation of the organization as such in the eyes of the public. Among the four characteristics listed as typical for producers, dissemination is the only one to reach beyond the community of producers and the internal users of statistics, and therefore one of the key issues in embarking on the way towards a statistical system.
24. Given that the origin of international statistics lies in national official statistics with their credibility backed by an institutional framework in line with the fundamental principles, and given that the international statistics are produced and disseminated by international organizations controlled by the same national governments which, at national level, have agreed to see national statistics produced in accordance with the fundamental principles, the credibility and quality label of national official statistics is, at least in the eyes of non-specialists, more or less automatically expected also of international statistical products. Some subject areas may be further advanced concerning the significance and use of international statistics, but it will be a question of time until all subject areas will have a market for international comparisons. The production and dissemination process of internationally comparable statistics will increasingly be seen as one important product line of official statistics to which national and international producers contribute (and where the exact division of work may change over time), but where it is as unimportant for the user to know exactly who contributed what as it is for the user of any other end-product. There has to be an overall quality and credibility label attached to such products, and this can only be ascertained if national and international actors adhere to the same basic principles as regards quality and integrity.

**PROPOSED ACTION 2: Do the members of the CCSA agree to the statement that UN official statistics should be driven by the same principles as modern national official statistics, i.e. the fundamental principles of official statistics?**

### 3. Implications of a System Approach for a Selected Number of Issues

#### 3.1 *Legal Framework and Organisation of the System*

25. What can a common framework of official statistics look like, if a proper legal text across all UN organizations is not feasible? The only option that does not seem completely out of any reach is the recognition, by a relevant senior body of each producer organization, that the activities of official statistics of this organization should be governed by the fundamental principles. As said above, the statisticians themselves try to do their best, but there has not been any deliberate decision by any UN organization concerning the applicability of the FP for some of its own statistical activities.

**PROPOSED ACTION 3: Each producer organization assesses the prospect for obtaining the applicability of the fundamental principles recognised at a high level within its own organization.**

26. A statistical system requires a certain structure, with actors and decision making processes being specified. A statistical system needs a clear centre with certain prerogatives, like NSOs of decentralised systems in a national context. One essential prerogative for such a centre would be to set binding standards for all activities of official statistics within the UN. The combination of UNSD and the Statistical Commission is today the only existing structure that might be developed to become such a centre.

27. The specification of the decision-making process, and the way the various producers interact if the system idea finds general support, is likely to be a difficult process. It may be helped by proposals put forward from outside experts, who are not influenced by any actor within the UN system. Such an exercise is a type of peer review, with special emphasis on proposals for organising and steering a UN statistical system that will remain decentralised. Such a peer review was also proposed in the EC-ESC document for the statistics cluster distributed to the CCSA at the Meeting in New York on 3 March 2003<sup>8</sup>. However, given that the emphasis of a peer review should be on developing the tools for better managing a statistical system in a coherent way, the question of whether to move towards such a system has first to be given a clear answer by the top level of each producer organization, simultaneously with any follow-up to proposed action 3 should the assessment of the prospects be positive. For the time being, the idea of a peer review should therefore be kept in mind for use at the appropriate moment. If such a decision should be made later on, it is important that it is not only a decision by statisticians, but that also the higher UN levels are fully behind the initiative; otherwise, the findings of a peer review face a risk of not being taken into proper consideration by them.

28. The recognition of the relevance of fundamental principles for the activities of official statistics is most important for the future centre of this system, i.e. UNSD and the Statistical Commission. This is a complete analogy to the national situation, where the NSO has to appear to be beyond all doubts in this respect. For UNSD and the Statistical Commission, such recognition would have to be made by ECOSOC, following a proposal from the

Statistical Commission. This needs careful preparation, but it can be assumed that the NSOs would strongly support this idea. It is in their own interest that both national and international official statistics work under the same principles, and that this be recognised at the political level.

**PROPOSED ACTION 4: UNSD is invited to prepare the necessary support, both within the UN and from Member States, for obtaining recognition by ECOSOC that its own activities and those of the Statistical Commission have to be carried out under the framework of the fundamental principles of official statistics.**

29. A necessary working tool for each statistical system is an overview of the ongoing and planned activities of official statistics by each producer. This is something that can be done without a peer review, and without waiting for official recognition of the fundamental principles. In concrete terms this would mean that each organization sets up a list of its planned activities that fall (or should fall) under the umbrella of official statistics; we will call this a statistical programme of a given organization. As a complement, a mechanism to synthesize these programmes by subject area across the UN system, in a similar way as was done in the Integrated Presentation, has to be set up. A concrete proposal could be that any organization that is a producer in the above sense and agrees to move towards becoming a partner within a system of UN official statistics adds all its activities of official statistics to the already existing Integrated Presentation of International Statistical Work in the ECE Region (Integrated Presentation for short) to the extent that this is not already the case. The title of the presentation would have to be changed accordingly. This proposal is also contained in the EC-ESC paper.

**PROPOSED ACTION 5: All producer organizations set up a list of activities of official statistics.**

**PROPOSED ACTION 6: The activities of these lists are integrated into the Integrated Presentation.**

### **3.2 *Adoption of Standards***

30. The recognition of relevance of the fundamental principles will also have some effects on the adoption of standards. As explained above, decisions about conceptual issues are at the core of the statistical work protected by professional independence. Insofar as standards at international level are adopted by a body composed of national statisticians that are bound by the fundamental principles, the process at international level is perfectly compatible. This the case for any standard adopted by the Statistical Commission. However, not all UN statistical standards are adopted by this body, and this affects in particular areas of social statistics.
31. Since statistical standards are addressed to national official statistics for implementation, it is important that they be adopted without political interference in conceptual issues. Moving towards a statistical system of the UN would therefore imply a strengthening of the Statistical Commission with respect to the adoption of statistical standards in all areas. A concrete proposal that will add a process for the adoption by the Statistical Commission called an

umbrella process to the existing adoption processes within each producer organization, has been developed elsewhere<sup>9</sup>. The benefits with respect to several of the fundamental principles are outlined there in detail.

32. An alternative to the umbrella process would be that each producer organization sets up a body of its own for this purpose, composed only of national statisticians. Such bodies exist with some UN Regional Commissions, but the function of adopting standards has been decreasing in importance in the last decade in relation to the other functions of such bodies. In view of consistency, the UN Statistical Commission should become the adoption body for statistical standards with the exception of very few cases. This would clearly strengthen the system. Introducing the umbrella process could start in a very near future for new standards developed by producer organizations other than UNSD that agree to this approach.

**PROPOSED ACTION 7: Do members of the CCSA agree that the Statistical Commission should adopt all forthcoming statistical standards, in addition to any adoption process specific to other producers?**

33. Another process that could start immediately, which was included in the EC-ESC paper, is the setting up of a continuously updated and publicly available list of valid UN statistical standards. It is likely that the umbrella process described above will address new statistical standards in the beginning, so this list would not be duplicative.

**PROPOSED ACTION 8: Can UNSD start to set up a regularly updated list of currently valid UN statistical standards, covering all producers of the wider UN system?**

34. A basic follow-up to the fundamental principles is that the political level may be involved in deciding what should be covered by activities of official statistics, but that the “how” part of the job, i.e. the specification of the standards, be left to the statisticians. There are, however, a growing number of examples where this clear division of work has not been respected within UN (which is another reason for the necessity to make the political level aware of the relevance of the fundamental principles for the statistical work of international organizations). Examples are “indicators” defined by UN summits, not only in the broad terms of what should be measured, but by specifying concrete summary measures.
35. The EC-ESC paper has proposed action by official statistics to bring back the discussion about the specification of such indicators to statistical fora, and not only about how the data for the concepts specified by others should be collected. We need to specify an operational mechanism that can ensure that official statisticians can filter proposals for specification of indicators coming from non-statistical bodies. This is urgent, and cannot wait until such a mechanism is suggested in a wider system of decision-making through a peer review. Such a mechanism would clearly involve statisticians from various UN organizations and from countries, and would work under the framework of the fundamental principles.

**PROPOSED ACTION 9: The Statistical Commission sets up a group to engage in discussions with policy-makers about specifications of future sets of indicators, to filter**

**sets of indicators already proposed by policy bodies, and to form the point of view of official statistics.**

36. Is standard setting carried out by UN bodies subsumed under activities of official statistics to 100%? For what is and will be presented to the Statistical Commission for adoption, the answer has to be yes. However, there is some conceptual work of UN statistical organizations, e.g. the additional specification prior to data collection of indicators defined by non-statistical bodies for the purpose of monitoring, which, in the present way of operating, is clearly related to the user framework. As explained before, it would be preferable to have both the basic and the detailed specification carried out under the final responsibility of statisticians, but until the full recognition of the fundamental principles is effective, non-statistical UN bodies are likely to continue to define indicators and to refer to statistical departments with executive functions of data collection.

### **3.3 *Technical Cooperation***

37. As regards the relationship between technical cooperation and fundamental principles, the EC-ESC paper contains some explanations and a proposal. For simplicity, they shall be repeated here. Advisory services and field projects undertaken or financed by UN organizations, and directed at generating statistics at national level, may be carried out or initiated as part of a policy activity by non-statistical units of those UN organizations. Such activities should involve the producers of official statistics in the country to contribute to the capacity building of national statistical systems.
38. We propose that the statistical and policy units of the UN organizations jointly establish a set of good practices for involving national statistical authorities, i.e. the NSO and any other relevant producer at national level, in various types of advisory services and field work activities related to statistics, so as to lay the ground for a successful continuation after the UN involvement comes to an end. Once adopted, these guidelines should be implemented by all relevant units of each UN organization, so as to maximise the capacity building effect for national statistical systems. Systematic association of national statistical offices, as well as sustained capacity building in national statistical systems, including the functional ministries, presupposes that such offices/systems are based on the fundamental principles of official statistics. If this is not yet the case, the advisory service or fieldwork activity should explicitly address this issue as well.

**PROPOSED ACTION 10: A group should be created to produce a set of good practices about how to bring technical cooperation activities by UN organizations in statistics in line with the capacity building of national systems of official statistics.**

39. Is all technical cooperation in statistics an activity of official statistics? In most cases, such activities are meant to be an initial push for national statisticians to take up the ball later. In these cases, they are clearly part of official statistics. There may be exceptional cases where there is an urgent need by an international organization to carry out an ad hoc survey in a very short time-span with no intention to repeat such an action. Such activities are not technical cooperation but surveys, and are dealt with in 3.5. In other cases, international

organization may be involved in technical cooperation that comprises research activities with some empirical data collection. There is nothing to be gained from bringing such activities under the umbrella of official statistics.

### **3.4 Dissemination**

40. At national level, most infringements of the fundamental principles relate to dissemination. Examples are: statistical products and releases have to be submitted for clearance to a non-statistical authority, ministries request statistical results to be delayed, altered or even suppressed from public release, advance access for some privileged users, etc. It is very important that the dissemination of statistical products by UN producers falls gradually into line with the standards of official statistics where this is not yet the case, given its strategic importance to reach beyond the statistical community. This also includes full access by the public to the metadata.

**PROPOSED ACTION 11: Each producer examines the processes around dissemination of statistical products within its own organization in the light of the fundamental principles and the SDDS.**

41. Another issue linked to dissemination is coherence in results across the various UN producers. An essential characteristic of a national statistical system is to ensure that coherent results are released in such a way that it is clear for the public what constitutes reliable statistical summary information on where the country stands or, in other words, an authoritative result that can be used as reference. At the same time, statistical systems must have the capacity and flexibility to generate results for specific requests by users.
42. In the case of the various UN organizations, slightly diverging results are disseminated by different organizations to the public even if the original data collection from member countries is coordinated between them, due to different strategies for updates, different methods of adjustments and other reasons. If the UN system of official statistics wants to provide to users information of the same status as those expected from national statistical systems, some changes are necessary.
43. We propose that starting with one or two subject areas to be defined, the producer(s) of the UN system active in this area should agree on setting up documented, updated, timely and comparable reference series of key statistics in a joint effort. This reference series should be easily and simultaneously accessible to all users in the UN organizations, national governments, and to the public. Experience has already been gained along these lines in the area of trade statistics. This proposal was also included in the EC-ESC paper.
44. International statistics can only become an authoritative source if the data collected undergo a systematic quality check for coherence, validity and compliance with international standards, with adjustments and qualifications added where necessary, before being disseminated and used, as is the case for national official statistics. Reference series at international level presuppose, therefore, that in the subject area(s) selected, there is an agreement between the agencies involved with respect to quality and documentation

standards and verification processes *for their own work*, and full transparency about the way these standards are implemented.

**PROPOSED ACTION 12: Is the concept of reference series across the UN agreeable to the members of the CCSA?**

**PROPOSED ACTION 13: Two subject areas should be selected, and groups set up accordingly, to work out a proposal for how to implement in an operational way the concept of reference series.**

45. Not all dissemination activities, and the related work prior to dissemination including data collection from national or international sources, are activities of official statistics. Some data collection may continue to be under the user framework, without dissemination of statistical products. The definition of statistical products has been given elsewhere. Where dissemination is partial, i.e. only for internal users and governments in member countries, this should be considered as an activity that is potentially covered by official statistics (with the need to open dissemination to the public at a later stage). The growing use of the Internet is a great help for making statistics accessible to the public simultaneously, or with a minimum of delay in comparison to internal users, but it increases at the same time the risk of incoherent statistics being disseminated by various organizations.
46. As regards data collection leading to statistical products: for any producer within the UN system who operates under the fundamental principles, the choice of the national or international data source must be covered by professional independence, and not be imposed by considerations other than reliability, quality aspects, timeliness and effectiveness. In countries where national official statistics is in compliance with the fundamental principles, producers within this system should be the primary source. Professional independence for international statistics also allows statisticians to qualify, alter, combine or otherwise process any data collected in order to improve comparability with international standards or coherence over time, provided these steps are documented.

**PROPOSED ACTION 14: Each producer examines the rules that govern the collection of statistical data in the light of the fundamental principles.**

### 3.5 *Surveys*

47. In cases where international organizations develop survey designs and questionnaires for implementation at national level in a more than experimental way, i.e. to obtain results that are representative for the whole country or major parts of it, this has to be considered as an activity of official statistics in all cases. The same holds for any activity to carry out such surveys through joint efforts between international organizations and institutions of the country.
48. The applicability of fundamental principles to such activities implies that:
  - a) transfer of knowledge as for technical cooperation should take place so that such activities can be integrated into the pattern of national activities;

- b) for this purpose, as well for the purpose of avoiding duplication with existing efforts of national statistics, it is absolutely necessary to involve, in addition to national users, relevant producers of national official statistics from the very beginning. Relevant producers are the NSO in all cases, and another producer competent for specific subject areas where relevant;
- c) that fundamental principles are respected during the process, including dissemination, both at national and international level.

**PROPOSED ACTION 15: A group should be created to set up good practices for cases where UN organizations develop instruments for and implement statistical surveys at national level.**

### **3.6 Staff**

- 49. The last item, particularly stressed in Fellegi's assessment of the European system, concerns staff. It was mentioned before that the possibility of a career within national statistics is a key characteristic of a national system of official statistics. Another one is an organised training system for staff in professional (and IT) issues that is specific for staff of statistical producers. Both elements are not only essential to keep and increase the know-how of staff in a rapidly evolving environment and therefore to increase their effectiveness, but also to foster an identity among staff of all producers as belonging to the same system with the same basic approach to official statistics. Most staff would see these aspects as major tests whether a statistical system exists de facto or is only a lip service.
- 50. Both elements are absent in the UN. There is a lot of investment in human capital made by statistical departments when they engage junior staff. The mobility pattern in most organizations, given the limited size of many statistical departments, is such that staff, after initial experience in statistics, moves on to non-statistical departments to a greater extent than flows in the opposite direction. Such staff are also unlikely to come back to statistics at a higher level later on. Some transfers between statistical departments of different UN organizations occur. This illustrates the necessity of exchanging views about this problem so as to have a longer-term return on the human capital investment for statistics as such. We also have to look at possible ways to combine career patterns of official statistics between the UN system, national systems, and those of other international and supranational organizations.

**PROPOSED ACTION 16: The issue of statistical career and other staff issues should become a regular item on the agenda of the CCSA**

- 51. Last but not least, the absence of a tailor-made training programme for UN statisticians is a serious gap that should be addressed as soon as possible. First priority should not be given to setting up additional training in subject areas, where use could be made of training possibilities provided by close-by NSOs or other international organizations. The emphasis should be on training about the fundamental principles, and what they imply for the various statistical activities international organizations are engaged in. But a prerequisite for training along such lines is that we indeed agree that the fundamental principles are, as is the case for

national statisticians, our common ground, and that we agree about their concrete implications for our work. The latter has not been spelt out so far, and the present paper is only a very timid step in this direction. However, without activities that aim at our staff, the fostering of a common culture of official statistics across our institutions is unlikely to progress.

**PROPOSED ACTION 17: The implications of the fundamental principles for the work of statisticians in UN organizations should be clearly spelt out in a joint effort organised by the CCSA.**

**PROPOSED ACTION 18: UNSD starts developing options on how to set up a training programme for UN statisticians with respect to the fundamental principles.**

#### **4 What to do First?**

52. The present paper has tried to be more precise about the possible scope and delimitation of a UN statistical system, and has listed many possible actions that would move on the present state of affairs, where the essential system characteristics are weak, towards a UN statistical system with effective functionality. Not all proposed actions can be started simultaneously, but it would be important to start with a carefully selected subset of those actions. These actions should be taken seriously and be communicated to our staff and superior bodies, and to the NSOs of our member countries.

**PROPOSED ACTION 19: The CCSA selects a subset of the actions proposed in this paper as a first step in moving towards a UN system of official statistics.**

53. Before embarking on this road, we should however make a conscientious decision that a UN statistical system, based on the fundamental principles of official statistics, is the common objective of the statistical departments of those organizations within the wider UN system that have producer functions, and that this intention is backed by the superior level of our organizations. As statisticians, we should assume the collective responsibility of having to try very seriously to move in this direction, so as to keep in line with what we recommend at national level, and to what more and more national statistical systems, as well as the European Statistical System, live up to. A growing mismatch between the basic framework within which national and UN official statistics operate is a threat to the global system of official statistics, which in a globalised world has to satisfy increasing demands for authoritative statistics into which users can have trust. A growing mismatch would also be counterproductive for our efforts to reinforce those national systems of official statistics that have not been able so far to operate in a suitable framework. And finally, we would also provide a disservice to our major users within our own organizations if we continue with business as usual.

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<sup>1</sup> I.P. Fellegi: Characteristics of an Effective Statistical System (Morris Hansen Lecture), *International Statistical Review*, vol. 64, pp. 165-219

<sup>2</sup> I.P. Fellegi and J. Ryten: A Peer Review of the Swiss Statistical System, Neuchâtel 2000, and by the same authors, A Peer Review of the Hungarian Statistical System, Budapest 2001. Furthermore, EUROSTAT has mandated a series of global assessments of statistical systems in non-EU European countries, which are not public however.

<sup>3</sup> The effectiveness of a supranational statistical office – pluses, minuses and challenges: a view from the outside, *Paper prepared by I.P. Fellegi and J. Ryten for the 49<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Statistical Programme Committee*, Luxembourg, 15 May 2003

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Europe: Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in the Region of the Economic Commission for Europe, adopted during the 47<sup>th</sup> Session, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1992

<sup>5</sup> As regards the EU as a supranational institution, an article in the EU Treaty, and the Council Regulation 322/97, mention most of the UN fundamental principles as binding for the whole European Statistical System, i.e. including the supranational level of the EU itself.

<sup>6</sup> See also: Heinrich Brügger and Svein Longva: International principles governing official statistics at national level: are they relevant for the statistical work of international organizations as well?, *Statistical Journal of the UNECE 15 (1998) pp. 221 – 235*.

<sup>7</sup> Habermann, H.: The Global Statistical System: What is it and Why Should We Care?, *Chance, Vol. 12, No. 2(Spring 1999)*, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Analysis of outputs for 2004-2005: Organisations that are members of the EC-ESC, Joint Report by UNSD and ECE, 13 February 2003

<sup>9</sup> Heinrich Brügger: A better Institutional Framework for Setting Standards of Official Statistics, *Paper presented at the United Nations Expert Group Meeting “Setting the Scope for Social Statistics”*, New York, 6 – 9 May 2003.