



Session 3: Collection, management and dissemination of current best methods, minimum standards and best practices

**Principles governing international statistical activities – some next steps**

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1. **Background**

National statistical systems produce statistics that are supposed to address the policy and programme needs of their member States, mainly articulated through their governments. Producers that make up the system are well-defined and operate under some legal framework, such as a statistics law.

Is there a parallel situation for the international statistical system (ISS)? If not, can one be created? The answer to both questions is 'No'. There is no global governance system that determines clear and common policy needs for the World community, despite the many global conferences that could have been expected to provide such guidance. Moreover there is no acceptable basis as yet for identifying which statistical departments of international agencies should be considered as members of the ISS<sup>1</sup>. Not only is there no international legal framework for the activities of members of the ISS, each agency has its own framework which it jealously guards and is unwilling to have compromised.

Thus, while national statistical systems have the required institutional basis to establish and implement quality frameworks for their statistical activities, the ISS does not have such an institutional basis, and almost certainly cannot have one. Yet, heads of statistical departments of international agencies, in their professional capacities, recognize the importance of having such a quality framework for international statistical activities, one which should go beyond the boundaries of their individual agencies and have some commonality for all agencies.

It was on this basis that several decisions have been taken:

(a) The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) was created in September 2002 as a 'successor' to the defunct ACC subcommittee for Statistical Activities by an Inter-agency meeting of heads of statistical departments on coordination of statistical activities. When the Administrative Committee for Coordination of the activities of UN agencies, funds & programmes as well as UN specialized agencies (ACC) was reformed in 2001, all its formal subcommittees were abolished. It was further decided that the replacement system for the ACC, the Chief Executives Board, should no longer have formal subcommittees. The heads of statistical departments of international agencies however decided that the coordination of their statistical activities was so important as to warrant the creation of the CCSA.

(b) In September 2005, the CCSA formally recognized a set of 10 principles, with accompanying illustrations of good practices, for conducting statistical activities in international organizations after two years of discussions (See Annex 1).

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, (a) 'statistical department' is used to refer to any unit mainly engaged in statistical activities in an international agency irrespective of how it is called; (b) 'international agency' refers to any supranational agency even if it does not have global coverage.

(c) In September 2004, the CCSA also set up 4 task teams to make recommendations on i) the development of a quality framework; ii) establishing common frameworks for data and metadata exchange; iii) coordination of technical cooperation activities; and iv) strengthening the technical capacity of international statistical agencies through training. It is hoped that the conclusions of this Conference will further the work of the first task team.

(d) The CCSA in its March 2006 session adopted in principle the SDMX standards for data and metadata exchange. It is expected that the September 2006 session will make decisions relating to the implementation of these standards.

(e) The other task teams are also making substantial progress in coming up with proposals for concrete actions to be taken under the auspices of the CCSA. There are also other activities being undertaken with respect to continuing cooperation in data collection and exchange of software.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what could be the next crucial steps in making the principles operational. The principles and accompanying good practices are a mixture of what is now accepted as the three major categories of quality: institutional, process and product levels. They can mostly be implemented at the individual agency level but some go beyond to the wider system level.

## 2. **Institutional Prerequisites**

### 2.1 **Internal Agency Level**

Many international agencies have a more or less decentralized statistical system in which several units participate in statistical activities, however defined. P9.G1<sup>2</sup> stresses the importance of singling out one of these units as the coordinating and representational unit for statistical activities within the agency. This, though essentially an internal agency decision, is crucial for the successful implementation of the principles and practices in that: (i) those to be done on a global basis must have proper and consistent level of internal backing in the agency; (ii) those at the individual agency level should be promoted and coordinated by a single unit. One can argue that to a large extent this is already the case for the representational part for most agencies, as the same unit usually represents the agency in all official management-related statistical meetings such as the sessions of the CCSA and the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC). There is however need for further action on the internal coordination role.

The implementation of several other good practices under P9 as well as other principles depends on the existence of a well-designed and managed organizational system for statistics in an agency.

It would be useful to have guidelines established on good practices for organizing a statistical system in an international agency along the lines of the handbook produced for the organization of national statistical systems<sup>3</sup>. Granted no unique model may be best, the relative advantages of different systems can be presented and discussed with respect to the principles and practices and illustrated with concrete examples based on experience. A periodic peer review system of the organizational methods in each agency will also serve to bolster these guidelines.

### 3.2 **Global level**

Some of the principles and practices, e.g. those in P10 and P5, some of the recommendations in this paper as well as earlier ones on this same topic, can only be implemented collectively by all agencies. So, although as mentioned previously, the ISS does not have a global institutional legal framework which can be used to bolster

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper a particular principle is referred to using the notation 'Px', where x is the number of the principle in Annex 1, and 'Px.Gy' refers to the good practice of Px listed in the yth position.

<sup>3</sup> Handbook of Statistical Organization : The Operation and Organization of a Statistical Agency, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publications/>

this process, a suitable mechanism is required. The ISS exists through what can best be referred to as ‘creative ambiguity’. So any mechanism that is to be put in place must respect and act within this ambiguity. Any attempt to have a prescriptive, authoritarian mechanism will break the ISS, not foster its activities. Yet, there is room to maneuver.

Can the CCSA perform this role? Not as presently constituted or as it operates. The CCSA is at present not accountable to anyone, has no clear rules about the roles and responsibilities of members, and has a very informal system of management. Its Terms of reference<sup>4</sup> includes a commitment to make its annual decisions-and-actions-only report available to the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) and ‘if necessary or desirable’ to refer this report to the High Level Committee on Programmes of the United Nations Chief Executives Board (UNCEB).

### Accountability of CCSA

Although ultimately all international agencies are accountable to and governed by their member States, this accountability is not necessarily exercised through the UNSC for all agencies. The UNSC has authority over the work programme of UN Statistics Division and, to some extent, over those of the statistical divisions of the regional economic commissions and the UN funds and programmes. The coordination role mandated to the UNSC for the statistical activities of the UN specialized agencies gives it at best limited say, if at all, over their work programmes. These agencies have their own governance structures with a non-overlapping membership with the representatives of member States that go to the UNSC. Also, there are member agencies of the CCSA which are not specialized agencies or part of the UN family. So the UNSC does not have authority over these agencies with respect to their statistical activities. Thus, even if the reporting relationship from CCSA to the UNSC is strengthened, it will not be sufficient to cover the work of all members of CCSA. The CCSA cannot therefore be taken as totally accountable to the UNSC.

The UNCEB was set up by the Secretary-General, at the request of the UN Economic and Social Council, to ‘further coordination and cooperation on the whole range of substantive and management issues facing the United Nations system’<sup>5</sup>. It consists of the Executive Heads of 28 institutions, including UN funds and programmes as well as specialized agencies, World Trade Organization and the Bretton Woods institutions. The CEB probably has greater influence than any other system on the work of these agencies, including their statistical activities. It would seem useful therefore to strengthen the link between the CCSA and the CEB to give teeth to the decisions of the former. However again, there are members of CCSA outside the ambit of the UNCEB which means that even this procedure will not be sufficient to cover the work of all members of the CCSA. So the CCSA cannot be made totally accountable to the UNCEB.

This paper recommends a tripartite “governance” structure for the CCSA in which the CCSA should seek to establish formal links with the UNSC, as the voice of national statistical offices, with the UNCEB, as representing the collectivity of most of the international agencies and with the heads and governing structures of those agencies outside the UNCEB framework. (See Annex 2 for a diagrammatic presentation.) As the concomitant of accountability is extended authority, key decisions of the CCSA will then have greater and wider effect on what happens in the ISS.

### Structure of the CCSA

The seminal ECE paper ‘Towards a Statistical System’<sup>6</sup>, which started the ball rolling towards the adoption of the principles and practices, made recommendations on the criteria for identifying statistical producers at the

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<sup>4</sup> Report of the 1st Meeting of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (New York, 3 March 2003), <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/acsub/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://ceb.unsystem.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Document (SA/2003/9, 16 August 2003) presented by Heinrich Bruengger, Director of the ECE Statistical Division, at the second session of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA), held in Geneva, 8-10 September 2003.

international level. This proposal includes an implicit definition of what should be accepted as a statistical activity and which of these are to be taken as official statistics. It would be useful to re-examine these proposals in terms of establishing a formal basis for membership of CCSA and the roles and responsibilities of members, vis-à-vis decisions taken by the group. The current preference for an open all-inclusive membership does not easily lend itself to good governance.

The management of CCSA should become more structured than at present if it is to deliver on the implementation of the principles and practices. The present arrangement is informal with no clear guidelines about the role of the Chairman, the permanent Secretariat and the rest of the membership. Previous proposals to set up some form of a Bureau to manage the CCSA needs to be re-explored. Such a bureau would be involved in the management process and consultations to resolve difficult issues will no longer be done on an ad hoc basis.

Consisting as it does of heads of statistical agencies, the CCSA is essentially a policy body. It needs a technical advisory sub-system to deliberate and make recommendations on those technical issues of common concern to all agencies, on a referral basis. This is especially so with respect to the implementation of some of the principles and practices. The UN Expert Group on MDG indicators could have been reformed with its scope and membership widened to perform this referral role. However the preference for it to be accountable to the UNSC and the nature of its current membership and management preclude this possibility. For the time being, the CCSA would have to continue creating task teams and ad hoc technical groups to deal with such issues.

One of the conclusions from the first of these conferences<sup>7</sup> was the recognition of the importance of CCSA as a forum for the development of quality frameworks at the international level. It was also recognized that to do this, the mandate of the CCSA needs to be strengthened. The above recommendations are proposals for doing this. The next session of the CCSA in September 2006 has on its agenda the review of the CCSA after four years of existence. The reactions of this conference to these proposals would be most helpful to the CCSA in its discussions in September.

### 3. **Immediate Reporting Requirements**

The CCSA, in determining the principles and practices, recognized that agencies have mandates and governance structures which could make it difficult at present to immediately implement all these principles and practices. It therefore decided that, as an initial step, member agencies should review their individual practices as they relate to these principles and practices and put on their websites the reports of this review. No deadline was set for agencies to do this. Also, following the presentation of the principles and practices to the UN Statistical Commission, the Commission has requested that UNSD reports back in March 2008 on the extent of their implementation by international agencies.

The principles are couched in language that is general, almost generic, out of necessity and so reporting on their implementation could be very varied unless some common structure is developed for doing so. Although the CCSA is expected to ultimately adopt a full-fledged quality framework based on the principles, the immediate reporting required by the CCSA and the UNSC cannot await this adoption. It is therefore necessary that some outline reporting structure or template for use of agencies is developed in the interim. This could be presented to the CCSA in its September 2006 session for adoption, pending the outcome of the work being done by the Task Team on the quality framework.

At the Conference on Data Quality for International Organizations in Wiesbaden in 2004, a paper was presented by authors from the UNSD in which they advocated the use of an adapted form of the IMF Data Quality Assessment Framework (DQAF) for international statistics<sup>8</sup>. Without going as fully into the system as they

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<sup>7</sup> Follow up to the Q2004 Satellite Conference on Data Quality for International Organizations, UNSD, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/acsub/>

<sup>8</sup> SQUARING THE QUALITY CIRCLE: Towards a Quality Framework for International Official Statistics By Ivo Havinga, Gisele Kamanou, Stefan Schweinfest and Willem de Vries (United Nations Statistics Division), <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/acsub/>

proposed, the first level of DQAF could be used as an organizing principle for the immediate reporting structure. Thus the Principles and practices could be grouped into the 5 broad dimensions of (0) prerequisites; (1) integrity; (2) methodological soundness; (3) accuracy and reliability; (4) serviceability; and (5) accessibility. Agencies should then present their reports according to these dimensions. The principles cannot be placed into these dimensions on a one-to-one basis but the recognized good practices could be classified in this way. The proposal is that the UNSD, as secretariat of CCSA and author agency of the paper under reference, examines the method by which this could best be done, taking into consideration the additional good practices that were proposed by the UNSC at its March 2006 Session.

#### 4. **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the immediate next steps to be taken with respect to the principles and practices are:

- 4.1 Producing guidelines on good practices for organizing a statistical system in an international agency;
- 4.2 Agreeing on a mechanism for peer reviews of statistical systems in international agencies;
- 4.3 Review of the structure, mandate and accountability of the CCSA to provide the necessary institutional structure to underpin the ISS;
- 4.4 Establishing a structure for the immediate reporting by agencies of their practices vis-à-vis the principles and practices based on the first level dimensions of the IMF DQAF.

## **Annex I: Principles and practices for international statistics**

### **1) High quality international statistics, accessible for all, are a fundamental element of global information systems**

Good practices include:

- Having regular consultations with key users both inside and outside the relevant organisation to ascertain that their needs are met
- Periodic review of statistical programmes to ensure their relevance
- Compiling and disseminating international statistics based on impartiality
- Providing equal access to statistics for all users
- Ensuring free public accessibility of key statistics

### **2) To maintain the trust in international statistics, their production is to be impartial and strictly based on the highest professional standards**

Good practices include:

- Using strictly professional considerations for decisions on methodology, terminology and data presentation
- Developing and using professional codes of conduct
- Making a clear distinction, in statistical publications, between statistical and analytical comments on the one hand and policy-prescriptive and advocacy comments on the other

### **3) The public has a right to be informed about the mandates for the statistical work of the organisations**

Good practices include:

- Making decisions about statistical work programmes publicly available
- Making documents for and reports of statistical meetings publicly available

### **4) Concepts, definitions, classifications, sources, methods and procedures employed in the production of international statistics are chosen to meet professional scientific standards and are made transparent for the users**

Good practices include:

- Aiming continuously to introduce methodological improvements and systems to manage and improve the quality and transparency of statistics
- Enhancing the professional level of staff by encouraging them to attend training courses, to do analytical work, to publish scientific papers and to participate in seminars and conferences.
- Documenting the concepts, definitions and classifications, as well as data collection and processing procedures used and the quality assessments carried out and making this information publicly accessible
- Documenting how data are collected, processed and disseminated, including information about editing mechanisms applied to country data
- Giving credit, in the dissemination of international statistics, to the original source and using agreed quotation standards when re-using statistics originally collected by others
- Making officially agreed standards publicly available

### **5) Sources and methods for data collection are appropriately chosen to ensure timeliness and other aspects of quality, to be cost-efficient and to minimise the reporting burden for data providers**

Good practices include:

- Facilitating the provision of data by countries
- Working systematically on the improvement of the timeliness of international statistics
- Periodic review of statistical programmes to minimise the burden on data providers
- Sharing collected data with other organisations and collecting data jointly where appropriate
- Contributing to an integrated presentation of statistical programmes, including data collection plans, thereby making gaps or overlaps clearly visible
- Ensuring that national statistical offices and other national organisations for official statistics are duly involved and advocating that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are applied when data are collected in countries

**6) Individual data collected about natural persons and legal entities, or about small aggregates that are subject to national confidentiality rules, are to be kept strictly confidential and are to be used exclusively for statistical purposes or for purposes mandated by legislations**

Good practices include:

- Putting measures in place to prevent the direct or indirect disclosure of data on persons, households, businesses and other individual respondents
- Developing a framework describing methods and procedures to provide sets of anonymous micro-data for further analysis by bona fide researchers, maintaining the requirements of confidentiality

**7) Erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics are to be immediately appropriately addressed**

Good practices include:

- Responding to perceived erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics
- Enhancing the use of statistics by developing educational material for important user groups

**8) Standards for national and international statistics are to be developed on the basis of sound professional criteria, while also meeting the test of practical utility and feasibility**

Good practices include:

- Systematically involving national statistical offices and other national organisations for official statistics in the development of international statistical programmes, including the development and promulgation of methods, standards and good practices
- Ensuring that decisions on such standards are free from conflicts of interest, and are perceived to be so
- Advising countries on implementation issues concerning international standards
- Monitoring the implementation of agreed standards

**9) Coordination of international statistical programmes is essential to strengthen the quality, coherence and governance of international statistics, and avoiding duplication of work**

Good practices include:

- Designating one or more statistical units to implement statistical programmes, including one unit that coordinates the statistical work of the organisation and represents the organisation in international statistical meetings
- Participating in international statistical meetings and bilateral and multilateral consultations whenever necessary
- Working systematically towards agreements about common concepts, classifications, standards and methods
- Working systematically towards agreement on which series to consider as authoritative for each important set of statistics

- Coordinating technical cooperation activities with countries between donors and between different organisations in the national statistical system to avoid duplication of effort and to encourage complementarities and synergy

**10) Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contribute to the professional growth of the statisticians involved and to the improvement of statistics in the organisations and in countries**

Good practices include:

- Cooperating and sharing knowledge among international organisations and with countries and regions to further develop national and regional statistical systems
- Basing cooperation projects on user requirements, promoting full participation of the main stakeholders, taking account of local circumstances and stage of statistical development
- Empowering recipient national statistical systems and governments to take the lead
- Advocating the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in countries
- Setting cooperation projects within a balanced overall strategic framework for national development of official statistics

**Annex II: Structural links for CCSA – A Proposal**

