

Co-ordination in the Global Statistical System: a possible way forward

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Abstract: Although the apex body of the Global Statistical System (GSS) is made up of member states of the United Nations, the International Statistical Organisations, who meet at the Committee for the Co-ordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA), have a vital role to play in the GSS. In the paper the authors analyse current work and future challenges in the GSS. They identify different actors active in GSS coordination, the role of CCSA and the major challenges being faced, such as governance of the system, integrating IT tools, implementation of standards, networking and improved transparency. They propose a path towards optimising existing resources. Networking in GSS is paramount; a new pathway could include better policies on data sharing, implementation of methodological standards and governance. The needs of developing countries must be better served by CCSA. Finally, there needs to be better synergy among the major ongoing global projects.

Key words and phrases: Global Statistical System, Committee for the Co-ordination of Statistical Activities, International Statistical Organisations.

1. The Global Statistical System: an introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the Apex entity for World Statistics is the United Nations

Statistical Commission (UNSC)¹. Of course there is no other body that assembles such a large number of official statistical organisations on a regular basis with a mandate to promote official statistics. Even the current session of the International Statistical Institute, despite its anticipated record attendance level, lacks such a specific mandate.

However, because it is a United Nations body, it must conform to United Nations procedures, thus leaving shortcomings. In the first instance, only sovereign states can be members of the UN, and thus the UNSC, so international organisations cannot be members. Second, the membership is generally confined to National Statistical Institutes, not national statistical systems. Whilst NSIs can and generally do speak on behalf of the other producers of statistics (for example, employment ministries might collect unemployment data, agriculture ministries might collect crop production data, health ministries might collect data on communicable diseases) in their countries, this is sadly not always the case. Thirdly, only 24 countries are actually members of the Statistical Commission; the other UN member states are classified as observers. Finally, there are (mercifully extremely rare) occasions when political rather than purely technical opinions have been voiced in sessions of the UNSC.

The above is in no way intended to be a criticism of the UNSC. In recent years, non-member countries have been attending the UNSC in record numbers as observers, as are the international organisations. All are able to express an opinion in the same way as the members can. Decisions are taken by consensus on the meeting, and very rarely through voting so the status as a member or non-member is irrelevant.

This paper intends to show how international statistical organisations can complement the work of the UNSC and help fill the gaps.

2. From ACC to CCSA (an acronym heaven?)

The first attempt to co-ordinate international statistical organisations took place in 1967 under the aegis of the United Nations' Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) which created a Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities (SCSA)². The ACC-SCSA existed until the ACC was abolished in 2001. It reported regularly to the UN Statistical Commission and the ACC parent body. The group had mixed success, but it was limited by the reluctance of some of the larger funding programmes to commit themselves to this body.

In Europe in the late 1980s³, there had been ad hoc efforts to co-ordinate statistical activity in a number of domains, such as Purchasing Power Parities and Unemployment Statistics. However, increased activity of the Organisation for Co-operation and Development (OECD), the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE) and, in particular, Eurostat, led to the creation of the ECE/Eurostat/OECD Intersecretariat for International Co-ordination in Statistics, or Joint Programme Review (JPR), as it became known. It first met in Luxembourg in September 1991.

¹ UN Statistics Division web site: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/commission.htm>

² A note on CCSA history and current functions, United Nations Statistical Division, August 2006, SA/2006/16

³ 50 years of the Conference of European Statisticians, Economic Commission for Europe, 2003, Chapter 8: Official Statistics Reshaped - the New Role of International and Supranational Organisations
<http://www.unece.org/stats/publications/50yearsCES.pdf>

Over time the meeting developed the Integrated Presentation of Work Programmes which recorded the statistical activities of up to 30 organisations in up to 55 statistical domains.

After the abolition of the ACC, the UN set up the United Nations System Chief Executives Board. However this was a purely UN body, so there was no scope to invite non-UN agencies, such as OECD and Eurostat. Many former members of the ACC-SCSA wished for the good work to continue, so in September 2002, an Inter-Agency Meeting on the Co-ordination of Statistical Activities was convened in Washington. It was here that it was agreed to set up the Committee for the Co-ordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) outside the UN formal structure. This group has witnessed a new enthusiasm with around 35 organisations regularly attending its meetings under joint chairmen (currently UNSD and Eurostat). A major achievement is the agreement on the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities⁴.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, it could be argued that the JPR has become a victim of its own success and no longer meets formally as the problems regarding duplication have largely been resolved. OECD and, more latterly, Eurostat, have become more global in their approach, so important issues are better discussed at the CCSA, rather than on a purely European level.

On the other hand, the model is catching on in other regions through the African Statistical Co-ordination Committee (whose main players are UN Economic Commission for Africa, African Union Commission, African Development Bank and the African Capacity Building Foundation). A similar body is also under discussion in the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific region.

3. Challenges to the Global Statistical System (GSS)

The recent achievements of the GSS (e.g. the revision of the SNA 1997) also put on evidence some of the weaknesses of the system such as the lack of full implementation of standards, the continuing rather weak coordination between donors in statistical capacity building, the unclear role of several global and regional fora on regular statistical meetings and the unbalanced position in the contribution of specific regions and countries to the global statistical system. Furthermore, the delay in coordination in social statistics compared to economic statistics and the difference between regions and countries with respect to the speed at which the infrastructure and information technology is used and implemented are important backlogs.

To ensure a statistical system which operates more smoothly and to accommodate the system to tackle even newer events, it is expected that some elements have to change over the medium and long term. Pieter Everaers pointed out in his article "future developments in the global statistical system" (Statistical Journal of the IAOS 2008)⁵ the following five:

- A better balance between the formal and informal governance structure
- Improved cooperation in making IT tools and methodologies accessible
- Improved governance structure on implementing standards
- A network that allows organisations to share new developments at an early stage
- Improved transparency and a strengthened assessment of quality

⁴ http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/Principles_stat_activities/principles_stat_activities.htm

⁵ Statistical Journal of the IAOS, Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics, Volume 25, Numbers 1,2, 2008, page 73

A better balance between the formal and informal governance structure

The main partners in the system need to communicate and cooperate more and give more guidance. The international and supranational organisations are increasingly heavily involved in setting standards for harmonisation and they play a key role in most of the projects and in cooperation and capacity building work. In groups of member states of the UN, a country is normally asked to take the lead, but the support of the international organisations is essential. The formal role and position of the international and supranational organisations needs an adjustment to a more balanced position, allowing the international organisations to more effectively contribute to the system.

Improved cooperation in making IT tools and methodologies accessible

The promotion of the exchange of use of tools is a prerequisite for the development of the global statistical system. Without these tools, access to harmonised classifications and standards is an illusion. A lack of cooperation in making these tools available for all organisations involved will delay the development of the system. Therefore, it has to be assured that developing countries have good access to these tools and systems, the open access to and distribution of which deserves the highest priority.

Improved governance structure on implementing standards

To face developments in society statistical standards and classifications need to be regularly updated. Currently, globalisation and, for example, climate change ask for a very quick update, with subsequent implementation also required within a short timescale. To face these challenges, all players in the system will have to cooperate on the introduction and harmonisation of new standards which are inevitable. If they do not cooperate, then they will stay outside the mainstream of global statistics. This holds true not only for the revision of standards, but also when accommodating new developments (Climate Change).

A large amount of effort and resources is needed for these update activities. Preparation and implementation is based on input from both the international organisations as well as the country statistical systems. To facilitate the work to be finalised and to allow as many countries as possible to be involved, increased funding and an adequate governance system is necessary. Compared to earlier times, a greater number of countries and regions are now concerned. A stronger governance structure is therefore needed. Examples of this are the implementation of the revised SNA (2008), the ICP project in 2011 and the census in 2010/2011. Also for some existing projects (Indicators for the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's)) this governance structure is a prerequisite.

There are many international projects on the agenda of the global statistical system (Census, SNA, ICP, MDG, Climate Change, etc) and the workload for the statistical offices and international organisations to follow these developments is high. Resource limitations, exacerbated by reductions in public budgets following the current financial and economic crisis, and reconsideration of tasks result in large international projects having to be planned carefully and with strong management in order that the agreed objectives can be reached.

A network that allows organisations to share new developments at an early stage

As described above, it is essential to have access to information and to participate in new developments in order to be part of the global statistical system. The meeting structure facilitates the exchange of ideas, the decision making process and the standard setting process.

To follow the developments, a permanent awareness of possible changes is needed. The challenges for the system are enormous, the costs very high. Wasting resources is evidently unacceptable. Therefore, the main stakeholders have to cooperate very closely together and inform each other openly on all new developments.

Improved transparency and a strengthened assessment of quality

The authority and credibility of statistics has become a main issue with increased emphasis on evidence based policy making. Transparency on methods used, quality, and meta information are needed to guarantee this credibility and authority. A self regulatory system of norms and values based on a commonly agreed set of principles and operationalised via a quality framework is essential for maintaining credibility. Examples are the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities and the Code of Practice of the European Statistical System.

4. The role of CCSA

The previous sections have shown some of the achievements of the Global Statistical System and also the enormous amount of challenges to it. To cope with these challenges, the system has to adapt its structure and to adjust working arrangements. The five changes described above are seen from the current situation and societal developments. Enhanced cooperation and communication between the main stakeholders is essential for improving or maintaining the credibility of the global statistical system. We will focus now on how CCSA could contribute towards this aim. These are the authors' personal views and do not express an official position of the CCSA.

The CCSA is an attempt to improve co-ordination across the global statistical system. A body of this type needs to exist and its main challenge is to make it more effective and equipped to face the previously mentioned challenges. The CCSA can play an increased role within its sphere of influence to increase coordination and support towards a stronger leadership in the GSS and more specifically in facilitating the well functioning of the ongoing global programmes on statistics. The global projects tend all to use the same group of leaders in international statistics (many of them gathered in the CCSA) and moreover – that is the issue of the coordination function of the CCSA – a large majority of the available experts for facilitating and supporting these projects in the less developed statistical systems. Especially in this field the coordination function of the CCSA should be used more. The recognition of the overlap between the global projects and the use of common resources leading to exhausting the global statistical system should lead to a permanent dialogue between the main stakeholders via a forum linked or part of the CCSA. .

Interest in the CCSA work has increased in the last years; nevertheless its work is still some way from optimal. Some obstacles need to be overcome: going from ad hoc initiatives to a strategic plan (CCSA proactive instead of reacting), improving the follow up of actions and establishment of a continuous work flow (at present work on assigned tasks tends to peak just before the annual meeting); improving communication and joint involvement of the stakeholders in major issues; enhance role of UN regional bodies and their contribution to the implementation of statistical standards; enhance the comparability of data reducing burden to stakeholders by contributing to the use of identified data sources, sharing data and information standards; improve coordination at an early stage.

Based on the consideration above it is evident that a more explicit management structure for the

organisations involved in the global statistical projects is needed. Therefore, the following measures could be considered to improve the efficiency of CCSA in contributing to the GSS:

- Creation of a CCSA Bureau
 - The Bureau and CCSA secretariat would be active in defining a strategic medium term action plan and in the continuous follow up of activities (e.g. CCSA task forces) as well as giving the necessary impulse towards the achievement of the objectives.
 - The Bureau also would be active in improving communication, organisation of special events, definition of the agendas and reviewing draft CCSA documents. Some activities (e.g. current CCSA TF on data sharing could benefit from an enhanced communication and awareness by the stakeholders on this issue).
 - The Bureau could meet once a year back to back alternatively with a CCSA special event or another international main meeting, such as the Conference of European Statisticians plenary.

- Definition of a medium term strategy with project matrix, respective activities and timetable
This would feed into the GSS overall plan and could proactively tackle the implementation of standards at thematic level; via the establishment of specific implementation work plans for international organisations. This would improve transparency and increase synergies with other projects (e.g. OECD Global project).

- Advise regional CCSA-type bodies (e.g. African Statistical Co-ordination Committee) and enable them to report back to the CCSA.

Taking into account the role of International Organisations in the Global Statistical system and in the current situation of scarcity of resources a more effective CCSA could actively contribute to the implementation of the objectives of the global system.