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Transformative agenda for official statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, which was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2016/220 and past practices, will inform the Statistical Commission about a series of regional conferences held in 2015 and 2016 and the status of the drafting of regional action plans. The report will reflect on the implementation, in an internationally collaborative way, of the actions of the transformative agenda for official statistics at the national, regional and global levels. In particular, it is proposed that the Handbook of Statistical Organization be updated. The Commission is invited to express its views on the future course of action to promote the transformation and modernization of official statistics.

Points for discussion by the Commission are set out in paragraph 36 of the present report.

* E/CN.3/2017/1.







I. Introduction

1. The transformation and modernization of official statistics represents a proactive response by the global statistical system to an increasing and evolving need for high-quality and timely data by a broad range of users.

2. At its forty-seventh session in 2016, the Statistical Commission considered the report of the Secretary-General on the transformative agenda for official statistics (E/CN.3/2016/4).

3. The Commission reconfirmed the necessity of modernizing statistical systems around a standards-based architecture, taking into account national specificities in order to respond more effectively and efficiently to the demand for data in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related initiatives.

4 The Commission emphasized that the transformation of statistical systems is more than a technical issue. It involves high-level political commitment to enable access to and the use of administrative sources, big data and geospatial information for statistical purposes, secured through the appropriate national legislative frameworks and through partnerships established with public and private data providers. The handling of transformative processes requires enhanced training of, and leadership dialogues with, the senior managers of the national statistical agencies and the creation of a culture of high performance and high quality. The Commission considered interregional collaboration and global coordination mechanisms to be essential, in a select number of cross-cutting thematic areas, to the successful transformation of the institutional environment of national statistical systems and to the integration and modernization of their statistical production processes. Moreover, the Commission encouraged the notion of building on existing regional initiatives and programmes of the regional commissions, statistical agencies, multilateral development banks and international agencies, funds and programmes.

5. The Commission encouraged the organization of a series of regional conferences with the objective of formulating regional road maps for a transformative agenda for official statistics. The conferences were to focus on the five thematic areas identified in the report of the Secretary-General. The Commission requested that the conferences be conducted in close consultation and collaboration with Member States, regional commissions, regional development banks, regional statistical agencies and other stakeholders and that they take stock of existing programmes and activities for integrating and modernizing statistical systems, share innovative technology, know-how and good practice, and explore ways for eventually mobilizing funds and support.

6. The strategic objectives and elements of a transformative agenda for official statistics, as discussed at the original high-level global conference held on the topic in January 2015, are described in section II. These elements formed the basis for subsequent discussions at a series of regional conferences. The connection between the transformative agenda and the global action plan for sustainable development data is also covered in section II. In section III, general information is provided on the regional conferences, which were organized pursuant to the decision of the Commission at its forty-seventh session. Reports on the outcomes and conclusions

of the regional conferences will be made available as background documents. Proposals for a series of thematic conferences on the organization and management of statistical agencies are outlined in Section IV, the objectives being to discuss updates to the Handbook of Statistical Organization and address the key actions and recommendations from the outcome documents of the regional conferences on the transformative agenda as a way to promote the transformation and modernization of official statistics. The coordination of actions on the statistical activities of the multilateral development banks is outlined in section V. Points for discussion are set out in section VI.

II. Objective and strategic areas of the transformative agenda for official statistics in support of the global action plan for sustainable development data

7. Participants at the high-level Global Conference on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics, held in New York on 15 and 16 January 2015, concluded that the main objective of the transformative agenda was to support national statistical institutions in their efforts to formulate a strategic direction and a national action plan for transforming the institutional environment of their national statistical systems and for integrating and modernizing the statistical production processes of their sociodemographic, economic and environmental statistics programmes. The main focus of the transformation and modernization process is on building enhanced capacity into national statistical systems so that they are capable of efficiently and effectively meeting the ever-increasing need for statistical information and sufficiently flexible to adapt their operations to address newly emerging data demands that cannot be anticipated.

The primary responsibility of national statistical organizations is to provide 8. leadership in the provision of high-quality statistical data for data-driven decisionmaking in accordance with national priorities set by Governments, civil society, the business sector and the general public. With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States committed to adjusting their national economic, social and environmental policies so as to meet the Sustainable Development Goals and targets set out in the Agenda. The continuous and effective follow-up and review of the status of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of an amount of statistical data so enormous that even the most highly developed statistical services may find difficult to provide. To meet the challenge, national statistical institutions need to take the lead and collectively adopt the progressive implementation of a framework of actions in a select number of cross-cutting thematic areas. This framework would require action to be taken at the global, regional and national levels.

9. The following strategic areas were identified as being in need of strengthening: (a) coordination and partnerships; (b) communication and advocacy; (c) integrated systems for the production of statistics; (d) innovation through the use of new technologies and data sources; and (e) capacity-building and resource mobilization.

10. The above-mentioned strategic areas were the focus of discussion at all the regional conferences organized in 2015 and 2016. The conclusions drawn by the regional conferences provided the underpinnings for the development of regional action plans. Because the same strategic areas were also used by the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the development of a global action plan, its implementation is fully supported by the emerging regional plans. Countries are expected to update their national statistical strategies and related programmes of work on the basis of the regional action plans for transformation and modernization. By transforming, strengthening and modernizing their own statistical systems, countries will be empowered and better equipped to produce the base of statistical information required for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

III. Regional conferences on the transformative agenda for official statistics

11. It was proposed at the forty-sixth session of the Statistical Commission, and reiterated at its forty-seventh session, that the regional continuation of the joint initiative of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and Eurostat on the transformative agenda for official statistics would be based on a series of regional and subregional conferences organized in close consultation with the Member States, regional commissions, regional development banks, statistical agencies and other stakeholders. Seven regional and subregional conferences were held between November 2015 and October 2016, the intention being to build on and verify the recommendations provided by the Global Conference, take stock of existing programmes and activities for transforming and modernizing statistical systems, mobilize funds and share innovative technology, know-how and good practices and, eventually, propose regional road maps and related actions for the transformation of official statistics.

12. The regional and subregional conferences were organized as high-level forums for chief statisticians and senior managers of national statistical agencies; directors and senior managers of regional and subregional commissions, agencies and development banks and organizations and of multilateral and bilateral partners; and other stakeholders. The conferences were structured according to five main thematic areas identified at the Global Conference and, where appropriate, complemented by regional thematic priorities, namely: (a) coordination within and among the global, regional and national statistical systems; (b) communication and advocacy; (c) integrated statistical systems for data collection, processing and dissemination; (d) innovation and modernization through standards-based statistical business architecture; and (e) training and capacity-building and resource mobilization.

13. General information on the seven regional and subregional conferences is outlined in paragraphs 14-19 below. Detailed reports on the outcomes and conclusions of the conferences¹ will be made available as background documents.

¹ Reports and conclusions of the regional conferences for Africa; Arab countries; Asia and the Pacific; the Caribbean; Latin America; countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Mongolia; and south-east Europe and Turkey.

14. The African conference on the transformative agenda for official statistics was held in Libreville, on 21 and 22 November 2015. The conference was jointly organized by the African Development Bank (AfDB), Statistics Canada and the Statistics Division, with the support of the African Union, the African Centre for Statistics and Eurostat. The heads of the national statistical offices of 49 countries in Africa participated in the conference. Chief statisticians and senior managers of international and regional organizations and of multilateral and bilateral partners, as well as other stakeholders, were also invited to attend. In total, more than 80 participants attended the Conference, including from the regional office the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), ECPAT International, the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Hewlett Foundation and the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21). The conference also included the presentation of the outcome and achievements of the concluding International Statistical Fellowship Programme for Africa, implemented by Statistics Canada, to share knowledge and good practices among statisticians on the institutional arrangement, organizational structure and management of national statistical offices. The conference was held back to back with the eleventh Africa Symposium on Statistical Development and the joint session of the Statistical Commission for Africa and the Committee of Directors General of National Statistics Offices. The Symposium culminated with the adoption of a resolution for statistical development that embraces the aim and objectives of the transformative agenda. More recently, the Statistical Commission for Africa and Committee of Directors General of National Statistics Offices, at the joint meeting held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, from 28 November to 2 December 2016, adopted an African action plan and recommended that the actions be included in the revision of the Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa.

15. The Arab conference on the transformative agenda for official statistics was held in Ankara, at the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, from 5 to 7 April 2016. It was jointly organized by the Research and Training Centre, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the Statistics Division, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf and the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics. More than 40 participants, including from the Turkish Statistical Institute and the regional office of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), attended the event. Preparation of an action plan is under way, on the basis of the outcome and recommendations of the Arab conference, and was expected to be submitted at the next ESCWA Statistical Committee meeting, in January 2017.

16. The Asia-Pacific conference on transforming official statistics for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was held in Bangkok from 24 to 26 August 2016. The secretariat of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) organized the conference under the guidance of the Bureau of its Committee on Statistics and in cooperation with the Statistics Division. The conference brought together about 70 statistical leaders and development experts from the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, including senior representatives from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNFPA, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNESCO, the United

Nations Industrial Development Organization, the World Health Organization, Zonta International and the Community System Foundation. Conference participants were able to draw a clear path for collaborative efforts to strengthen statistics for the Sustainable Development Goals and, more broadly, to strengthen the transformation and modernization of national statistical systems in the region. The outcome of the conference is a draft collective vision and framework for action, which was put forward for consideration by the Committee on Statistics at its fifth session, held from 14 to 16 December 2016. Details of its considerations are included in the background documentation to the present report.

17. The Caribbean conference on the transformative agenda for official statistics was held in Bridgetown, from 7 to 9 September 2016. It was jointly organized by the secretariat of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Statistics Division, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), Statistics Canada and the Barbados Statistical Service, with the support of Eurostat and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). The Caribbean conference followed the thirty-seventh regular meeting of the conference of Heads of Government of CARICOM, held in Georgetown from 4 to 6 July, at which participants had endorsed an action plan for statistics in the Caribbean prepared by the Standing Committee of Caribbean Statisticians. The outcome and recommendations of the Caribbean conference on the transformative agenda, which could be considered a continuation and further development of the action plan for statistics, were endorsed by attendees at the forty-first meeting of the Standing Committee, held in Willemstad, Curaçao, from 24 to 27 October 2016. More than 40 participants attended the Caribbean conference, including from UNFPA, the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank, the Caribbean Tourism Organization, the CARICOM Development Fund, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, the Caribbean Regional Technical Assistance Centre, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the firm GOPA Consultants.

18. The Latin American conference on the transformative agenda for official statistics was held in Santiago from 14 to 16 September 2016. The conference, attended by 50 participants, including senior officials of regional offices of UNESCO and FAO, was jointly organized by ECLAC, IADB and the Statistics Division, with the support of Eurostat and CARICOM. The outcome and recommendations from the Latin American conference are expected to be endorsed by attendees of the Statistical Conference of the Americas, to be held in Santiago in April 2017.

19. The conference for the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia on the transformative agenda for official statistics was held on the premises of the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk on 6 and 7 October 2016. The conference was organized jointly by the National Statistical Committee of Belarus, ESCAP and the Statistics Division, with the support of Eurostat, the European Free Trade Association and the Moscow-based National Research University Higher School of Economics. It was held back to back with the Eurostat high-level seminar for countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia on modernizing official statistics. Chief statisticians and managers from the national statistical agencies of countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Mongolia participated in the conference, along with senior representatives from

the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Statistics Department of the Eurasian Economic Commission, as well as the Deputy Resident Representative of United Nations Development Programme in Belarus. The conference for south-east Europe and Turkey on the transformative agenda for official statistics was a one-day event, held in Zadar, Croatia, on 12 October 2016, as part of the annual meeting of the policy group on statistical cooperation organized by Eurostat. Participants at the conference discussed specific opportunities and challenges for the modernization and integration of official statistics at the regional and national levels and ultimately identified priority programmes and actions based on the European Statistical System development framework entitled "ESS Vision 2020: Building the future of European Statistics".

20. The open format of the conferences combined with the attendance of senior representatives of the participating countries, allowed for discussions to address opportunities, challenges and priorities for the transformation of official statistics in support of the 2030 Agenda. Participants reflected more specifically on the following topics: (a) the leading and coordinating role of national statistical agencies in the transformation of official statistics; (b) the strengthening of partnerships with the data community, users and other stakeholders to support the modernization and integration of official statistics; (c) good practices in the use of administrative records and the potential for using big data in the production of statistics and indicators; (d) the need to develop, at the global level, more coherent and integrated statistical frameworks for household and business data; (e) improvements to the interoperability of information technology tools and infrastructure through the alignment of statistical production architecture at the national and regional levels; (f) the means for advancing the development of regional and global platforms for trusted data and shared services, as well as for applications to be used for official statistics; (g) ways in which current and future national strategies for the development of statistics and other strategic plans could be revised and revamped to become catalysts for the transformation and modernization of national statistical systems; and (h) the means for developing a network to be used by global and regional statistical training centres that provide online access to knowledge material and e-learning courses.

IV. Key actions and recommendations for the implementation of the transformative agenda

21. Section IV outlines key actions and recommendations on ways to promote the transformation and modernization of official statistics.

22. On the basis of the outcomes and conclusions of the regional conferences on the transformative agenda, as reflected in the background documents, the participating national statistical organizations identified key actions and addressed challenges and opportunities specific to their countries and regions with regard to the process of transforming and modernizing official statistics.

23. The aforementioned key actions should be considered at the global, regional and national levels and should subsequently be reflected in updated statistical strategies and statistical programmes of work. Some regional commissions, along

with their regional agencies and development banks, have initiated updates to the regional strategies and programmes of work at their recent meetings. Such initiatives are critical indicators of the success of the regional collaboration process in transforming and modernizing the regional and national statistical systems.

24. At the global level, the Commission could consider a follow-up to the regional conferences on the transformative agenda for official statistics, in the form of a series of thematic conferences on the organization and management of a statistical agency. It was, furthermore, proposed that the thematic conferences would serve as explicit input in updating the third edition of the Handbook, which addresses the operation and organization of a statistical agency. Having thematic conferences provide the input for such updates is fully in line with the global action plan for sustainable development data and will build on the rich discussions held at the regional meetings and help to turn the Handbook into a support tool that all countries can use.

25. The proposed series of conferences could be organized along the following thematic areas, which are aligned with the topics covered by the third edition of the Handbook: (a) quality in official statistics; (b) communication and partnerships in official statistics; (c) statistical architecture for an integrated production system in official statistics; (d) information technology infrastructure in official statistics; and (e) capacity-building and resource mobilization in official statistics. Each of these thematic areas is briefly described below in terms of the strategic areas they cover and the related key actions as outlined in the outcome documents of the regional conferences and/or the regional action plans, as well as how they relate to the topics covered by the Handbook.

Quality in official statistics

26. The theme of quality in statistics relates to the key actions pertaining to the strategic area of coordination at and between global, regional and national statistical systems. The quality framework for official statistics, with the national quality assurance framework as its measurement instrument, provides the foundation for the coordination and leadership role played by national statistical organizations in the transformation of institutional arrangements and the modernization of national statistical production processes and outputs. These institutional arrangements relate to the following topics, covered in the Handbook: the structure of the statistical system, the coordinating tools used, the role of the chief statistician, the statistical legislative framework and the financing of national statistical system. Moreover, a conference on quality in statistics could build on expected global actions related to the review of the national quality assurance framework, the assessment and peer review mechanisms put in place at the regional level and the implementation of those mechanisms in selected countries. Furthermore, such supportive global and regional actions will support the monitoring of the 2030 Agenda and other emerging data needs and contribute to the updating of national strategies for the development of statistics with respect to transformation and modernization initiatives for national statistical systems.

Communication and partnership in official statistics

27. The theme of communication and partnership in official statistics is related to the key actions pertaining to the strategic area of communication and advocacy set out in the regional action plans. The theme also addresses the Handbook topics related to the relationship between national statistical systems and respondents, proprietary data owners, including owners of administrative data and big data, and the various users. The outcome of a conference on this thematic area could be of use in the development of guidelines on dissemination tools, such tools to be tailored, in format and technology, to the different dissemination needs of the various user groups. The user groups would include Governments, businesses, the general public, academia, the press and international organizations. Furthermore, work in the area could be helpful in the development and implementation of national communication strategies aimed at demonstrating and advocating the value of official statistics.

Statistical architecture for an integrated production system in official statistics

28. The theme of statistical architecture for an integrated production system in official statistics relates to the key actions pertaining to the strategic area of integrated statistical systems for the collection, processing and dissemination of regional action plans. This thematic area addresses the principles of organization and reorganization of the statistical agency, as covered in the Handbook. Among other things, such principles include the merits of making organizational changes within statistical agencies to create functional departments that would support the existing subject matter departments, with the former providing cross-cutting services on such matters as methodology, programming, quality assurance, data collection and dissemination, so as to enable the integration of statistics throughout the agency. With respect to the core functions of the agency, the principles could also consider the merits of mapping statistical production processes onto generic models of statistical production and architecture for harmonization and comparison purposes. Such efforts would facilitate the sharing of statistical methods and software tools and the standardization of capacity-building tools and techniques. As part of the Handbook topic related to the agency's core functions, the introduction of integrated statistical operations for basic statistics could also be considered, including the introduction of integrated household and business surveys, the use of administrative data and the establishment and maintenance of statistical registers of persons, businesses, produced assets and natural resources, including buildings, infrastructure and land. Along with the recommended strengthening of the expanded implementation of the System of National Accounts 2008 (2008 SNA) and the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, and the integration of geospatial data and big data in the statistical production processes, this thematic area would extend consideration to the adoption of a cost-effective, integrated, multi-mode and multi-source statistical production process based on statistical standards.

Information technology in official statistics

The theme of information technology in official statistics is related to the key 29. actions pertaining to the strategic area of innovation and modernization through a standards-based statistical business architecture, as outlined in the outcome documents of the regional conferences. This thematic area also covers the Handbook topic of managing information technology and could reflect the new options available to national statistical agencies as a result of technological progress and the advent of big data since the release of the third edition of the Handbook in 2003. It could cover consideration of the various options in harnessing the innovative and transformational power of information and communications technology in statistical production processes. The application of such considerations to the Handbook topics on managing information technology and the core functions of statistical agencies could be further extended to the coordination and standardization of statistical production processes through the sharing of technological infrastructure, data and software applications, the promotion of interoperable, open source technologies and the mainstreaming of the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) for the exchange of statistics among major statistical programmes. Moreover, in conjunction with the project of the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics, participants at a conference on this thematic area could reflect on the establishment of an interoperable network of national, regional and global platforms for data, services and applications, serving the official statistics community and accessible through a global online portal.

Capacity-building and resource mobilization in official statistics

30. This thematic area is related to the key actions pertaining to the strategic area of capacity-building and resource mobilization addressed in the outcome documents of the regional conferences. This thematic area also covers the Handbook topic of managing staff, which could include the provision of a well-planned policy on and active programme for recruitment, career development, education and training, with a view to acquiring the required diverse set of skills. The management of human resources is one the most critical components of the organization and management of a statistical agency. It addresses the various stages of technical and managerial training and the need to retain and develop staff, as well as the considerations that determine how specialized an agency's staff could be and what tasks can be outsourced. In today's information and technology environment, traditional technical training programmes and statistical courses on methods and standards could be complemented by training in innovative technology and in change management. The human resources programme should also make efficient use of the accessibility of a repository of training material and distance e-learning courses offered by an emerging network of regional and global platforms for official statistics operated by a network of regional and global training and research institutes. These thematic areas could also focus specific attention on the needs of vulnerable and fragile States, small island developing States, least developed countries and landlocked countries, with a view to building up sound and resilient statistical systems and attaining a mature level of statistical capacity.

31. The theme of capacity-building and resource mobilization in official statistics also covers the Handbook topic on financing the statistical system. Specific consideration could be given to seeking high-level buy-in for the value of official statistics and to promoting a culture of data-driven decision-making by Governments. In securing adequate resources for the national statistical programme, the updated Handbook could set out a strategy to identify and coordinate domestic and external resources that strategically address capacity needs for human resources and technology and identify resource gaps. This funding strategy could help to develop criteria and mechanisms for setting priorities for the mobilization of resources. In addition, the funding strategy could address opportunities for the participation of non-State actors in funding statistical activities through innovative financing mechanisms that use means consistent with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

V. Coordination of actions on the statistical activities of the multilateral development banks, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations

32. A memorandum of understanding on cooperation in statistical activities was signed on 6 April 2013 by the principals of AfDB, ADB, IADB, IDB, IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations. The objective of this newly created group was to enhance collaboration so as to support the strengthening of statistical capacity in Member States and facilitate the sharing of data, tools, standards and analysis to improve statistics for the monitoring of development outcomes, including those of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While it is recognized that each signatory institution plays an important role in providing support to improve data and statistics, collectively, they are a unique force with the capacity to mobilize support for development programmes and encourage coherent action by other donors and partners.

33. Following the establishment of the group, three potential strategic areas of collaboration and their corresponding actions were identified to maximize the group's effectiveness. These strategic areas were as follows: (a) establishing partnerships and strategies to improve the role and use of data; (b) addressing data gaps in statistical production and data accessibility; and (c) creating innovative approaches to statistical production and data sharing.

34. At its meeting, held at World Bank headquarters on 16 November, the group undertook a comprehensive review of its ongoing collaboration on inter-agency knowledge-sharing, with a view to promoting the alignment of its activities with the global action plan for sustainable development data and the regional action plans in support of the 2030 Agenda. For each of the strategic areas, existing actions in inter-agency collaboration were identified for further expansion, and potential new actions were identified, in a deliberate process aimed at aligning areas of inter-agency collaboration with the global action plan and the outcomes of the regional conferences on the transformative agenda, taking into consideration the respective mandates of each agency. 35. A background document to the present report, setting out the details of the group's inter-agency collaboration efforts, will be made available.

VI. Points for discussion

36. The Commission is requested to:

(a) Comment on the outcomes of the series of regional and subregional conferences on the transformative agenda for official statistics held in the period between November 2015 and October 2016;

(b) Express its views on the proposed organization of a series of thematic conferences on organization and management for the senior management of national statistical agencies, with the objectives of updating the third edition of the Handbook of Statistical Organization and of building on the strategic areas and related key actions identified in the outcome documents of the regional conferences held on the transformative agenda, with a view to transforming and modernizing national statistical systems;

(c) Express its views on the proposed strategic areas of action for the memorandum of understanding group on cooperation in statistical activities to improve the inter-agency coordination of statistics-related capacity-building activities in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its transformation and modernization agenda.