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Items for discussion and decision: implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Report of the Friends of the Chair on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its forty-third session in February 2012 (see E/2012/24, chap. I.A), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Friends of the Chair on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which was established at the forty-second session of the Commission. The report describes the work of the group towards a new draft preamble and summarizes the main findings of an implementation survey conducted in 2012. In line with a request by the Statistical Commission, it also describes the road map for submitting the Fundamental Principles to the Economic and Social Council. The Commission also has before it a background document containing the proposed revised text of the preamble, as well as a detailed description of findings of the implementation survey.

The Commission is requested to adopt the new preamble, discuss the findings of the implementation survey and provide guidance on further work on strengthening the Principles.

* E/CN.3/2013/1.



I. Introduction

1. At its forty-second and forty-third sessions, in 2011 and 2012, the Statistical Commission discussed the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.¹ The Commission acknowledged that the Fundamental Principles were still as relevant today as they had been in the past and that no revision of the 10 principles themselves was currently necessary. It recommended, however, that the United Nations Statistics Division facilitate the formation of a Friends of the Chair group to revise and update the language of the preamble of the Fundamental Principles in order to take into account new developments since the time when the Principles were first formulated, to assess how they can be strengthened, and to develop a practical guide for their implementation. The Commission also asked that a review of the implementation of the Principles be conducted and that the Principles be submitted to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly for endorsement. The Commission recommended that the Friends of the Chair group complete its work in time for the twentieth anniversary of the Fundamental Principles in 2014.

2. The Friends of the Chair on Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics was constituted in September 2011, comprising senior statisticians from the following 12 countries: Australia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United Republic of Tanzania and United States of America. The Statistical Offices of the European Communities and of the Economic Commission for Europe were invited to serve as observers. Katherine Wallman (United States) agreed to serve as the Leader of the group, with the Statistics Division acting as the secretariat.

3. The report describes in section II the status of the ongoing debate on a revised preamble. Section III summarizes the findings of a global survey conducted in 2012 on the implementation of the principles. In section IV the way forward is described, in particular the steps necessary to take the Fundamental Principles to the higher political levels in the United Nations for endorsement. Section V proposes some points for discussion.

II. Preamble²

4. At the time of the writing of the present report, the Friends of the Chair group had conducted several rounds of discussions on the issues that are proposed to be included in a revised preamble. A large number of members of the Friends of the Chair group contributed actively to those discussions, underscoring the importance of the preamble.

¹ See E/2011/24, chap. II.K., E/CN.3/2011/17, E/2012/24, chap. II.K. and E/CN.3/2012/14; for background information also refer to the records of a high-level forum, held on 21 February 2011, on the topic "Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: Threats and Responses", available at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/statcom_2011/Seminars/High_level_forum/default.html.

² For the current version of the preamble, see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/FP-English.htm>.

5. The first round of discussion was conducted electronically in early 2012, and produced a “long list” of proposed elements that might be included in a revised preamble, including recalling the purpose of official statistics; references to the role of official statistics to support the sustainable development agenda; recognition of the increased technological possibilities and the increased role of regional and international agencies; mention of the increased availability of new data sources (administrative data) and new data types (geo-referenced information); acknowledgment of the continuous importance of capacity-building; expression of the strong commitment to quality and quality management; recalling the essential notions of trust and credibility of official statistics; and a statement of need for the Principles to be respected by all stakeholders of the statistical process.³

6. The Friends of the Chair group then held a meeting on the occasion of the forty-third session of the Statistical Commission in February 2012 in New York. During that discussion a majority of representatives expressed the desire to keep the preamble “short and crisp”, targeted primarily to high-level users (for example, ministers). The preamble should also not repeat the actual principles. A suggestion was made for a “three-bullet” preamble. On the other hand, it was also recognized that (i) there was value in preserving a historical reference to the 1994 preamble, which provides contextual information; and (ii) many of the valuable elements on the longer list, mentioned above, could be effectively used, for instance, in the context of developing guidelines for the implementation. This is particularly true for those elements that describe key contextual changes for official statistics, which have occurred in the past 20 years (technology, new data and sources, role of international agencies).

7. The Commission, at its forty-third session, also provided the following guidance. The Commission “took note of the suggestions made by Member States regarding the redrafting of the preamble and the development of guidelines to support the implementation of the Principles”. In that context, it invited the Friends of the Chair to consider, in particular, the following issues:

- (i) The question to whom are the Fundamental Principles and their preamble addressed;
- (ii) The applicability of the implementation of Principles beyond national statistical agencies to all entities engaged in the production of official statistics, including those at subnational level;
- (iii) The need to highlight the importance of professional independence of national statistical offices and to obtain explicit Government commitment in this regard;
- (iv) The role of the international statistical community in the effective monitoring and support of the implementation of the Principles.

8. Taking this guidance into account, the Friends of the Chair group subsequently conducted a further electronic round of consultation in the fall of 2012, attempting to identify the essential elements of the preamble. While the process of consensus-building had not been completed at the time of the writing of the present report, it is clear that a majority of representatives favour the following three key elements:

³ See also background document for the forty-third session of the Statistical Commission, available at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc12/BG-FPOS.pdf>.

- Bearing in mind the critical role of high quality official statistical information in analysis and informed policy decision-making in support of sustainable development, peace and security, as well as for mutual knowledge and trade among the States and peoples of an increasingly connected world, demanding openness and transparency
- Bearing in mind that essential trust of the public in the integrity of official statistical systems and confidence in statistics depends to a large extent on respect for the fundamental values and principles that are the basis of any society that seeks to understand itself and respect the rights of its members; in this context, professional independence and accountability of statistical agencies are crucial
- Stressing that statistical principles, in order to be effective, have to be enshrined in the institutional frameworks that govern official statistical systems and be respected at all political levels and by all stakeholders in national statistical systems.

9. In addition, some members of the group favoured the inclusion of a “contextual reference” to the United Nations development agenda, in particular given the intention to present the Principles together with the revised preamble for endorsement at the higher political level of the United Nations:

- Recalling recent decisions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council⁴ highlighting the fundamental importance of official statistics for the national and global development agenda.

10. The Friends of the Chair group will conduct further consultations on this topic in the coming weeks and intends to present to the Commission in a background document a finalized version of the proposed revised preamble.

III. Results of the implementation survey

11. The Division, in consultation with the Friends of the Chair Group, developed a questionnaire allowing countries to report their experiences with the Fundamental Principles in a uniform way and provide a self-assessment on the level of their implementation. The questionnaire was based mostly on the 2003 questionnaire, owing to the continued relevance of most questions and to allow for historical comparison. The final version of the questionnaire in 2012 consisted of 75 questions, of which 56 were identical (with possibly minor editorial amendments) to the 2003 questionnaire and 19 were additional questions. As in the previous round, the final questionnaire was translated into Arabic, French, Russian and Spanish. It was sent by e-mail to 193 national statistical offices of Member States and posted on the Division website on official statistics.⁵ By 15 November 2012, the Division had received 115 responses. The background document presents the detailed results of the survey based on those responses. Table 1 gives an overview of the responses and how they compare to the 2003 survey.

⁴ See General Assembly resolution 64/267 and Economic and Social Council resolutions 2006/6 and 2005/13.

⁵ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/globreview-2012.aspx>.

Table 1
Overview of response rates: 2003 and 2012⁶

		<i>Recipients</i>		<i>Respondents</i>		<i>Response rate for this geographic area (percentage)</i>
		<i>Total</i>	<i>Percentage of all recipients</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percentage of all respondents</i>	
Developing countries	2003	145	76	73	65	50
	2012	146	75	73	63	50
Including least developed countries	2003	49	26	15	13	31
	2012	50	26	22	19	44
Developed countries	2003	47	24	39	35	83
	2012	48	25	42	37	88
Total	2003	192	100	112	100	58
	2012	194	100	115	100	59
Africa	2003	53	28	23	21	43
	2012	54	28	23	20	43
Americas	2003	36	19	14	13	39
	2012	36	19	12	10	33
Asia	2003	48	25	36	32	75
	2012	48	25	36	31	75
Europe	2003	42	22	34	30	81
	2012	43	22	34	30	79
Oceania	2003	13	7	5	4	38
	2012	13	7	10	9	77
Total	2003	192	100	112	100	58
	2012	194	100	115	100	59

12. Out of the 115 replies received in 2012, approximately two thirds had also replied in 2003 (74 replies = 64 per cent) and approximately one third replied for the first time (41 replies = 36 per cent); 37 countries that participated in the 2003 survey

⁶ Data based on replies from 193 Member States and one observer.

did not send a questionnaire back in 2012 and 42 countries did not participate in either survey round.

13. The 2012 questionnaire contained 68 questions (the 2003 questionnaire had 54 questions), which were structured according to the 10 Fundamental Principles, and four introductory questions. The 2012 questionnaire also asked three additional concluding questions on the improvement of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles. For principles 1 to 9 the questionnaire (in both rounds) started with a general question on the level of implementation of the particular principle in the country. The replies to these general questions are presented in table 2.

Table 2
Implementation of principles

	<i>In your country, overall, this principle is:</i>							
	<i>Fully implemented</i>		<i>Largely implemented</i>		<i>Somewhat implemented</i>		<i>Not implemented</i>	
	<i>2003 (percentage)</i>	<i>2012 (percentage)</i>	<i>2003 (percentage)</i>	<i>2012 (percentage)</i>	<i>2003 (percentage)</i>	<i>2012 (percentage)</i>	<i>2003 (percentage)</i>	<i>2012 (percentage)</i>
Principle 1 Relevance, impartiality and equal access	44	61	45	29	9	10	1	0
Principle 2 Professional standards, scientific principles and professional ethics	59	63	37	34	4	4	1	0
Principle 3 Accountability and transparency	43	54	50	41	6	5	1	0
Principle 4 Prevention of misuse	37	54	37	25	19	17	7	7
Principle 5 Sources of official statistics	49	49	42	41	8	9	1	1
Principle 6 Confidentiality	80	90	19	10	0	0	1	0
Principle 7 Legislation	77	77	17	17	4	5	3	0
Principle 8 National coordination	31	28	44	52	19	20	6	0
Principle 9 Use of international standards	45	49	50	46	5	4	1	1
Principle 10 International cooperation	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

14. Given the vast differences between statistical systems around the globe, it was decided that both survey rounds would not specify whether the questionnaire referred to the national statistical office or the national statistical system. However, in order to allow for better analysis of the replies, a question was added in 2012 at the beginning of the questionnaire asking whether the actual answers referred to the national statistical office, the national statistical system or “other”. Thus, 91 replies referred to the national statistical office and 23 replies to the national statistical system. Six respondents checked both answers, indicating their reply referred to both. One respondent replied “other,” specifying that the questionnaire in some cases referred to other producers of statistics.

15. Progress in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles can be (or attempted to be) measured through various methods. The background document describes the 2012 responses and compares them, wherever possible, to the 2003 results on an aggregated level.

16. Another way to get a trend was through retrospective questions asked in the 2012 questionnaire. Following are the results of the answers to those specific questions.

Overall, do you think the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics has improved in your country over the past 10 years?

17. Almost all respondents stated that the implementation of the Fundamental Principles had improved over the past 10 years. A little less than two thirds assessed this improvement as “a lot/in many ways” and a little more than one third assessed it as “somewhat/in some ways”. This is consistent with the findings presented in table 2, where for most Principles the implementation is shown to have shifted from “largely implemented” to “fully implemented”.

Overall, do you think the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics will improve in your country over the next 10 years?

18. Again, almost all respondents stated that the implementation of the Fundamental Principles would further improve over the next 10 years. A little more than two thirds assessed this improvement as “a lot/in many ways” and a little less than one third assessed it as “somewhat/in some ways”. This is despite the already reported high implementation rates for many Principles.

In your opinion, how can international organizations help improve the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in your country?

19. The answers to this question fall into the following few categories:

- (i) Advocacy on the political level;
- (ii) Workshops, seminars, presentations on the Fundamental Principles in various contexts, including national workshops in which all producers of official statistics in a country and/or government officials and other users participate;
- (iii) Compilation of best practices in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles;
- (iv) Technical assistance in general.

20. To summarize the results of the 2012 implementation survey, it seems that, on the basis of this self-assessment, many advances were made in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles over the past 10 years and that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics have been implemented well.

21. This is evident from the overall assessment of the implementation of each principle, the replies to the more detailed questions under each principle and the qualitative analysis of the details and comments provided for each question and/or principle. Confidentiality (principle 6) and legislation (principle 7) continue to be the most fully implemented principles; on the other hand, national coordination (principle 8) and prevention of misuse (principle 4) continue to be the least implemented principles.

22. Moreover, chief statisticians expect the implementation of the Fundamental Principles to improve even further in the next 10 years and suggest that advocacy on the political level, further training for management and staff working in official statistics, a compilation of best practices and technical assistance in general will help achieve this.

IV. The way forward

23. In addition to updating the preamble and conducting an implementation survey, the Commission formulated two specific requests, namely, submitting the Fundamental Principles with their revised preamble to the higher political levels at the United Nations and developing an implementation guide to further support Member States in their implementation efforts.

A. Endorsing the Fundamental Principles at the higher political levels in the United Nations

24. In order to submit the Fundamental Principles to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly for endorsement, it is suggested to include in the report of the Statistical Commission, which is routinely presented to the Economic and Social Council, an explicit draft resolution for the Council to adopt, which would include a recommendation to transmit the resolution to the General Assembly for further endorsement at the highest level. It is noteworthy that this will require a concerted effort between Member States and the Secretariat. In particular, it would be helpful if national statistical agencies reached out to their respective representatives in the Council and the Assembly in order to seek a dialogue. That would provide an opportunity to explain the rationale and the history of the Fundamental Principles, and thus generate support for the endorsement of the Fundamental Principles at these political levels.

B. Strengthening the implementation of the principles

25. The discussion on how the principles can be strengthened and what practical guides can be developed to assist countries will certainly benefit from an analysis of the detailed results of the review exercise as contained in the background document. It is suggested that the Friends of the Chair group conduct such analysis and develop

a set of proposals, taking into account the discussion at the session of the Statistical Commission. The Friends of the Chair group will also examine to what extent any practical guide could build on existing instruments, such as the 2003 United Nations *Handbook of Statistical Organization*⁷ and the country practices database on the Statistics Division website, providing reference material from Member States that is relevant in the context of implementing the Fundamental Principles. The group will also discuss the possibilities of a more continuous evaluation of how countries implement the Fundamental Principles and the important role the regional commissions can play in this context. Generally, the task of supporting Member States in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles will be an ongoing one.

V. Points for discussion

26. The Commission is invited to:

- (i) **Adopt the revised preamble of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics as contained in the background document;**
- (ii) **Recommend to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly the endorsement of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics;**
- (iii) **Review and discuss the findings of the implementation survey and recommend ways to strengthen the implementation of the Principles.**

⁷ *Handbook of Statistical Organization, Third Edition: The Operation and Organization of a Statistical Agency, United Nations* (New York, 2003), (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.XVII.7).