

Statistical Commission

Fifty-third session

1–4 March 2022

Item 3 (p) of the provisional agenda

**Items for discussion and decision: business and trade statistics**

Background document

Available in English only

**Position Paper on Emerging Priority Areas of the  
UN Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics**

Prepared by the Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics

Position Paper on Emerging Priority Areas of the  
UN Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics  
*January 2022*

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### **I. Background**

1. This position paper is being presented to the UN Statistical Commission as a background document to inform the global statistical community on the areas of focus of the 2022-2025 work program of the UN Committee of Experts of Business and Trade Statistics (UNCEBTS).

### **II. Introduction**

2. At the 4<sup>th</sup> meeting of the UNCEBTS<sup>1</sup>, held June-July 2021, it was recognized that the Committee must respond to the new policy demands and user needs of business and trade statistics resulting from the structural changes to the economy and society emerging post-COVID19 (or “the new normal”). The Committee highlighted the fact that businesses do not only play a crucial role in economic development, but they also impact individuals, the environment, and society through various channels such as job creation, business dynamics, employment benefits, energy use and emissions, R&D, community support and so on. Decision makers need to have information which allows them to understand these issues to develop solutions in a timely and targeted manner. The pressure is strong on statistical systems to respond to these needs, while budget constraints are tight.
3. The Bureau of the UNCEBTS therefore agreed on the need to refine its strategic view on business and trade statistics to reflect these new requirements, such as the provision of more timely, high frequency and more granular data; the links of business and trade statistics to new emerging, and topical policy areas, and the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/business-stat/uncebts/Fourth\\_Meeting\\_2021/](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/business-stat/uncebts/Fourth_Meeting_2021/).

adjustments in the production framework needed to support these new requirements.

4. The strategic view is refined in two ways. From the one side the Committee underlines the importance of strengthening the integration of business with trade statistics, both horizontally (across statistical domains) and vertically (between data sources, statistics, and macro frameworks). Trade statistics, therefore, become a pillar of the future work of the UNCEBTS, with the creation of a dedicated Task Team on International Trade Statistics (TT-ITS), and the integration becomes a common approach of the UNCEBTS and its task teams in carrying out their work programme. The second aspect is the identification of emerging priority areas that reflect the new policy demands and user needs of business and trade statistics. These priority areas include *Digitalization, productivity and innovation; Wellbeing, and social inclusion; and Green economy*, in addition to meeting needs related to the sustainable development goals (SDGs), and are expected to guide the work of the Committee's task teams.
5. The paper aims at assessing the relevance of these emerging issues for both business and trade statistics data users, as well as potential indirect benefits for other statistical domains, such as environmental and social statistics. It also identifies implications on statistical systems, building on other international initiatives such as the 2024 SNA Update, the Network of Economic Statisticians and Intergovernmental Working Group of Experts on International Standards of Accounting and Reporting. Indeed, adjustments and evolution in the statistical production framework are essential to support the exploration and development of new outputs to meet users' needs in new priority areas, such as the use of new data and interoperable data infrastructure for secure and trusted microdata sharing, exchange and linking. Finally, it highlights the importance of using a well-established set of statistical concepts and definitions and the production of new data and indicators based on an enterprise-centered approach rooted in the statistical business register (SBR).

### **III. UNCEBTS Approach to business and trade statistics**

6. Due to the cross-cutting nature of the new policy demands and user needs related to business and trade statistics, the UNCEBTS promotes a holistic approach for business and trade statistics that foster the (horizontal) integration of business and trade statistics and other topical statistics, and the vertical integration of data sources, statistics, and the macro accounts through common concepts, methods and classifications.
7. Within this holistic approach, trade statistics becomes an important area of work of the Committee, which requires dedicated effort. In this regard, a Task Team on International Trade Statistics was created in 2021 with the objective of advancing a joint research agenda between business and international trade statistics for the revision of the trade-related standards taking into account the new demands of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Commission also recommended that the TT-ITS develops a program of work on a) new trade-related business indicators, b) the integration of international trade-related characteristics of businesses in the SBRs, and c) the promotion of the data and e-learning training programme on international trade statistics. Furthermore, the Commission requested UNCEBTS to actively coordinate the integration of the work programmes of the Inter-Agency Task Force on International Trade Statistics

(TFITS) as recommended by the Friends of the Chair Group on economic statistics to avoid duplication of work and advance the active collaboration between countries and agencies. The Commission also decided on revising the International Merchandise Trade Statistics: Concepts and Definitions 2010 (IMTS 2010) and the Manual on Statistics of International Trade in Services 2010 (MSITS 2010) while ensuring consistency with the update of other statistical standards, such as the System of National Accounts and the Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual. The Commission recommended that the Committee take this work forward with the representation and active participation of countries from different regions and international agencies.<sup>2</sup>

8. The horizontal integration is not only related to the integration of concepts, methods, and classifications between business and trade statistics, but also across other statistical domains in order to provide an integrated and consistent set of information to inform policies that are increasingly cross-cutting in nature. The horizontal integration would create new statistics and indicators to respond to emerging users' questions, notably connection between business, trade, well-being, sustainability, and digitalization.
9. The vertical integration refers to the implementation of common concepts methods and classifications across the statistical production process. It refers to the integration that starts from data sources, through business and trade statistics and all the way to the relevant macro-economic frameworks such as the System of National Accounts, The Balance of Payment and the System of Environmental Economic Accounts.
10. This integrated approach to business and trade statistics also requires investment in a new data infrastructure centred on the SBR, that fosters microdata linking and data sharing with all relevant bodies and that is facilitated by appropriate institutional governance mechanisms to provide access to micro data; microdata linking using exhaustive business registers; integrated surveys and survey frames; common access to administrative data; communication about common elements, such as classifications and definitions; shared IT resources and data processing instruments; and learning the methodological frameworks of related statistical domains.
11. The Friends of the Chair on Economic Statistics have characterized such coordination a 'whole-of-systems approach' for the system of economic statistics, in which "international organizations and NSOs may adopt a thematic approach as compared to a domain-specific approach to address a policy issue. This integrated view brings together a dashboard of a coherent set of statistics and indicators from the various domains of the system of economic statistics."<sup>3</sup> Regional and international statistical organizations also have a role to play in the 'whole-of-systems approach', whereby they "support collaboration of the national statistical

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<sup>2</sup> The Commission also decided on revising the International Merchandise Trade Statistics: Concepts and Definitions 2010 (IMTS 2010) and the Manual on Statistics of International Trade in Services 2010 (MSITS 2010) while ensuring consistency with the update of other statistical standards, such as the System of National Accounts and the Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual.

<sup>3</sup> *A Draft Framework of Better Outcomes and Recommendations for Action for the System of Economic Statistics*, Friends of the Chair on Economic Statistics, November 2020. [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/groups/focg\\_econ/meetings/5th/FOCG\\_5th\\_Meeting\\_Draft\\_Recommendations\\_v1.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/groups/focg_econ/meetings/5th/FOCG_5th_Meeting_Draft_Recommendations_v1.pdf)

partnerships to deliver globally and at scale; promote co-investments in statistical infrastructure through shared technology cloud-based platforms; trusted data sharing and exchange arrangements; shared central global repository of big data from global agreements with private sector owners; shared libraries of methods and algorithms; and a global register of MNEs (already underway in the GGR<sup>4</sup>).”<sup>5</sup>

#### **IV. Emerging priority areas in business and trade statistics**

12. During its 4<sup>th</sup> meeting in 2022, the UNCEBTS discussed priority areas in business and trade statistics that have emerged or gained particular significance since the COVID pandemic had spread through the world. After the disruptions caused by Covid-19, countries are looking for the ‘new normal’ associated with evolution in life-style and business strategy. This is often connected to major Recovery Plans that will reshape the structure of the economy focusing on green economy, digitalization and integrated social and economic projects. The UNCEBTS identified the following priority areas for its 2022-2025 work program:

- *Digitalization, productivity and innovation*
- *Wellbeing and social inclusion*
- *Green economy*

Each of these priority areas is further elaborated in the sections below, along with a description of new user needs in these areas, followed by identification of the existing data gaps and implications for statistical systems and data production frameworks.

##### **A. Digitalization, productivity, and innovation**

13. Digitalization, productivity, and innovation clearly play important roles in shaping the complex and fast-evolving economic and technological production environment in which businesses navigate today. Businesses today navigate a complex and fast-evolving economic and technological production environment, in which production, investment, ownership and finance require an integrated approach at the enterprise level to optimize the domestic and international business operations. The digital transformation, which has led to the integration of digital technology into all areas of business and society, is fundamentally changing how businesses deliver value to customers in order to stay competitive and thrive. Innovation, whether it be technological, organizational, process-oriented or otherwise, is not only driving the digital transformation but is also at the center of a business’s strategy for adapting to an ever-changing environment. Through innovation and digital adoption, firms have been able to produce more with less, develop new products and access global markets.

14. The rapidity of these transformations has led to a much more complex set of interactions in which businesses are involved when carrying out their activities when compared to the past. The measurement of how these technological and digital drivers impact business productivity levels and growth rates of businesses and industries at the local, national and global level is complex, and many data gaps can be identified in

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<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Statistical Commission at its 46th session in 2015 endorsed the creation of a global register of MNE groups to improve the understanding and the measurement of international trade and globalization statistics. (E/2015/24, Decision 46/107, Item d(i).)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

this respect. These data gaps can be broken down into the following high-level categories:

- Measurement of levels of sectoral productivity that are comparable across countries;
- Measurement of the value of intangibles and investments, such as IP, data, software, design, firm-specific training and branding and their contribution to productivity growth;
- Improving the timeliness of productivity data to allow for better and more timely analysis of specific impacts;
- Identifying the level of adoption of technologies in businesses and its contribution to business success;
- Improving the timeliness, coherence and adaptability of data on the adoption of technologies by businesses, as technologies change very rapidly;
- Data on the trends and developments of global value chains and their impact on globalization, with a focus on the role of MNEs in international trade; the impact of such value chains on productivity and on the services sector, as well as the role of innovation; and
- The link between globalization and digitalization to business innovations related to environmental and societal issues, such as climate change and well-being.

15. In order to fill these data gaps, the statistical systems need to be adapted, specifically by combining information from the business and trade areas and by developing new classification schemes and measurement criteria that are more relevant to fully capture the complexity of new businesses and industries. In the case of digitalization, productivity and innovation, the traditional SBR should be extended by adding activity indicators, expanding coverage to include unincorporated digital entrepreneurs and to cover intangibles (beyond software), digital services and intermediation platform among others.
16. The proliferation of digital interactions and digitally driven processes are generating vast amounts of data which are an invaluable input source for statistical systems. However, they are difficult to access and complex to process and interpret. As such, an area of priority must be the development and sharing of methods for classifying and standardizing of unstructured microdata and the collaboration in accessing company microdata, with focus on intermediation platforms.
17. Microdata linking is key not only to intra-firm analysis, but also for the development of statistics that support an integrated analysis of social economic and environmental policies. The UNCEBTS should work towards developing new guidance on microdata linking for businesses, individuals, households, and geospatial information.
18. Improving the timeliness of productivity and innovation data using nowcasting will be useful to inform policy making and other users.
19. Given the variety of data sources used by statistical systems currently, it is more important than ever to ensure that information is accompanied by reliable indicators. The development of a framework for quality indicators for non-survey

information is an important gap that must be filled. Such key quality indicators may help NSOs in identifying gaps.

## **B. Wellbeing and social inclusion**

20. Wellbeing and social inclusion are high in the global policy agenda and the role of businesses in these areas needs to be better reflected in the business and trade statistics. First, it is key to define the terms. Wellbeing generally refers to the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy. The relevance for business and trade statistics is in relation to how businesses – via their activities and behaviors – affect the wellbeing of their stakeholders. These stakeholders include their employees, their suppliers, and customers (i.e., also those parts of the value chain outside their direct control), and the local communities where production facilities are situated, as well as future generations. The concepts comprise objective as well as subjective aspects. Other aspects of wellbeing are also important but are considered out of scope for this position paper.
21. Likewise, social inclusion generally refers to the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society - or more precisely ‘the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society.’<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon is multi-dimensional, but it is the economic dimension which is relevant for business and trade statistics – more specifically, the intersection between business statistics and labor market statistics (seen from the demand side) which is in focus here.
22. Thus, a holistic approach to policy making implies, firstly, the need for new indicators where the enterprise sector is measured on (more) aspects that go beyond their contribution to GDP. Regarding wellbeing, emerging and foreseen needs point to additional metrics and details about:
  - Enterprises’ behavior and performance as employers in relation to decent jobs and wages, employment under special conditions for vulnerable groups, occupational health and safety, vocational training, interaction with local communities and taxes paid.
  - Enterprises’ investments, processes, products, behavior and performance in relation to climate change and the physical environment, i.e., the (re)use of input and energy in the production processes and the environmental (and health) effects of their products/services throughout their life cycle.
  - Enterprises’ organization, behavior and performance along the value chain in which they operate – i.e., irrespective of national and organizational/legal borders (‘arm-length’ or not), their sourcing strategies, imports/exports, and direct/indirect control of their supply chains.
23. Regarding social inclusion, emerging and foreseen needs point to additional metrics and details about:
  - The composition and diversity of the enterprises’ employees in relation to gender, age, family types, education, disabilities, origin/ethnicity, etc.
  - Enterprises’ behavior and performance in relation to inclusive recruitment and social responsibilities vis-à-vis labor market and social policies and in relation to non-discrimination.

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<sup>6</sup> World Bank. 2013. What Do We Mean by Social Inclusion?  
[https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/978-1-4648-0010-8\\_ch1](https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/978-1-4648-0010-8_ch1).

24. The holistic approach also amplifies the need for closer cooperation and coordination of metric and methods between business statistics and other domains, primarily labour market statistics, international trade statistics and environmental statistics and accounts. Most of the above-mentioned aspects are already being developed by different supra-/international fora – e.g., in ILO’s work on decent jobs and in OECD’s Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE) – although maybe not from an enterprise perspective. In order to avoid duplicate or conflicting work, a stronger international overview and cross-domain coordination is needed.
25. In addition to the needs for new indicators and closer coordination of statistical programs, the holistic approach to policy making also implies the need for a corresponding holistic approach to the evidence base for these policies. This evidence base comprises official statistics in its traditional formats, but, increasingly, it also comprises the integrable and flexible data environments that can be joined or formed with data partners inside and outside the sphere of official statistics. This growing demand for integrable and flexible data environments points to the importance of strong basic registers with unique identification of persons/households; enterprises/establishments, and buildings/dwellings/locations as the starting point and backbone through which other data can be linked. (It is noted that this requires a high degree of trust in government and effective confidentiality measures and remains a long-term objective in many countries.)
26. Among examples of integrated micro data environments already in operation or under construction in many countries are LEED (Linked Employer and Employee Databases). Among examples of possible future data environments are linked transaction data from specific enterprises (domestic and foreign) along specific supply-/value chains, e.g., a manufacturing enterprise and its suppliers of raw material and utilities, and its subcontractors, etc.
27. The growing demand for flexible micro data environments also points to the need for innovation in the area of data confidentiality. The traditional criteria and methods for applying confidentiality to statistical tables fall short of the needs in relation to contemporary dynamic and multidimensional data solutions.
28. Understanding the role and impact of enterprises beyond their contribution to GDP also implies the need for new types of information, including ‘soft,’ and to some extent, subjective, aspects, such as corporate strategies, ancillary processes, behavior (e.g., in relation to environmental aspects or civil society and local communities) and results at societal level.
29. Obviously, it will also involve access to and use of new data sources – an aspect where possibilities will vary considerably from country to country. Harmonized requirements for non-financial reporting (ESG reports in XBRL format) will be a key priority, and Big Data will hold a huge potential in relation to, e.g., data on use of energy and water resources.
30. Finally, the methodological implications and challenges in these areas should involve careful considerations as to what is the playing field for official statistics vs. that of academia and/or market-based analysts. It is likely that some of the above-mentioned areas will go beyond the capacity and ‘comfort zone’ of official statistics.



### **C. Green Economy**

31. The green economy is high on the policy agenda, not only in terms of reducing the impact of businesses on the environment and on climate change in both developed and developing countries, but also its capacity to increase productivity and employment growth in the long term. As testified by many policy initiatives around the world, the measurement goal in this area is twofold: to assess the environmental/climate sustainability of businesses and industries, as well as the impact of the green policies as a driver of businesses' competitiveness and entrepreneurship.
32. The conceptual framework of the System of Environmental and Economic Accounts (SEEA) already provides the statistical framework to address the interaction between the economy and the environment at macro level. However, efforts for the development of business and trade statistics that could better contribute to the compilation of these accounts and further address specific environmental concerns (at more granular and disaggregated level) should be further explored by the Committee, especially with respect to the development of new indicators rooted in the SBR.
33. In addition, measures of the impacts of business investments in green initiatives and adoption of green technologies and processes on business births, deaths, and survival and entrepreneurship would be extremely policy-relevant.
34. The design and implementation of a statistical framework for business statistics that consistently encompasses and fully integrates the above-mentioned issues call for a closer cooperation and coordination of metrics and methods between business statistics and other domains; primarily labor market statistics, international trade statistics and environmental statistics and accounts; research and development and innovation statistics; the identification of new data sources and data integration methods; and the design and implementation of new integrated datasets and indicators.

### **V. Future work programme of the UNCEBTS**

35. Within the context of the refined strategic view of the UNCEBTS for business and trade statistics, the UNCEBTS will aim to:
  - (a) improve the statistical infrastructure to boost the production of internationally harmonized and better quality business and trade statistics. This task includes, among the others. promotion of a global unique identifier; integration of SBR and trade registers; more consistent classification of statistical units; geospatial information; exploring new data sources: use of and access to big data and methods for data linking; harmonization of non-financial reporting and use of XBRL; Collaboration with UN Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, and the ESG Business Accounting initiative;
  - (b) develop new measures/indicators to address specific gaps identified in the priority areas and to overall increase granularity and timeliness: e.g., elaboration of additional indicators, particularly trade-related indicators, to be published in Volume II of the Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics;

(c) advance the methodological work: e.g., revision of the trade statistics manuals - the International Merchandise Trade Statistics: Concepts and Definitions (2025) and the Manual on Statistics on International Trade in Services (2025) and ensuring that they are coherent and consistent with other economic statistics frameworks; and

(d) strengthen capacity building programmes on business and trade statistics to facilitate their implementation in countries with the objective of leaving no one behind.

The Bureau and the task teams will develop concrete works plans for the next 2-3 years based on these overarching goals and to meet the new needs of users.