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Background document
Available in English only

Items for discussion and decision: working methods of the Statistical Commission

Data Governance

Draft note prepared by the Statistics Division of DESA

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This is a living document and will be further developed and revised in the coming year. The goal is to set a frame to initiate discussions and frame the scope of the workstream that will enable the Statistical Commission to take part in the broader discussion on data governance and define its role.

The dynamically evolving data and statistics landscape and on-going digital transformation necessitates a comprehensive review of data governance practices in national statistical systems. The evolving nature of data requires national statistical offices to deal with technical, semantic, legal, and organizational interoperability across domains, organizations, and sectors, ensuring that diverse data and digital infrastructures can be effectively shared, integrated and re-used. They also need to be more aware of potential risks associated with data sharing arrangements, data management and shared data dissemination, which could lead to data breaches, privacy violations, and diminished public trust.

A main objective of this work is to bring together elements of data governance and determine how they relate to the mandate of Statistical Commission, a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (the Council), and the expanded scope of work of national statistical offices within the national statistical systems. Ensuring that common terminology is used allows us to better understand what is the role of the statistical offices and the Statistical Commission in the larger data governance sphere. After defining elements of data governance, the next step is to examine the role of the Statistical Commission has and develop a strategy within the Statistical Commission to support various initiatives and help enhance the capacities of national statistical offices to proactively participate data governance in their national context. The main objective is to address which elements within the broad topic of data governance which reaches far beyond national statistical offices and across the data and statistical ecosystem are within the scope of the Commission and NSSs. This work is forward looking as we set the stage for the accelerated pace of digital transformation.

While the concrete discussions are new, aspects of data governance have been addressed within the scope of the working groups of the Statistical Commission for many years. Bringing together key components related to data governance from the working groups on data quality, data stewardship, fundamental principles of official statistics, data interoperability, and new data sources such as big data, administrative data, citizen-generated data, etc., will build links for a common understanding and provide a basis for future discussions on data governance. Linking elements of the topic covered by each domain builds a solid foundation and maximizes synergies to launch the upcoming work on data governance. With common terminology and understandings, we can build consensus on the role of the Statistical Commission as we devise a common vision and approach.

Background

Data governance not only applies for official statistics. The landscape of data and statistics is experiencing a paradigm shift. This is reflected in the revised terms of reference¹ of the Commission that were adopted by the Council in 2022. The updated mandate of the Commission emphasizes the need for technology innovations, the promotion of practices for the generation of information aligned with the fundamental principles of official statistics that ensure coherence, comparability, data privacy, among others, and the importance of partnerships. This calls for a better, more thorough understanding of how governance of data applies across the national statistical system.

The Statistical Commission is a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It focuses on official statistics and is the primary body for the coordination of the global statistical programmes in general and of the United Nations statistical and data-related system. In 2022, the Council requested the Commission to play the role as the apex for discussions, knowledge exchange and sharing of best practices on statistics and data across all domains, to develop and maintain international statistical standards and norms, tools and methodologies, to support and bolster the development of sustainable national statistical systems, to develop and build the capacity of national systems, to advocate for the professional community of official statistics, and to ensure continued innovations to adapt to the changing statistical and data system.

The 2022 update to the terms of references of the Commission emphasizes the need for technological innovations, the promotion of practices for the generation of information aligned with principles that ensure coherence, comparability, data privacy, among others, and the importance to build partnerships. This calls for a better, more thorough understanding of how governance of data applies across the system. In a related background note² to the 56th session, the Bureau has further explored ways to address the expanded mandate of the Commission.

In 2024, the Friday seminar focused on data governance³ across systems: exploring strategies for official statistics. The seminar started with an introduction to data governance work at the international level, and brought together key players from national statistical offices, international organizations and private sector and academia to discuss applications of data governance in each sector. The seminar ended with a rich discussion on the potential roles of the Commission in this field. The discussions were raised at the official meetings, and the Commission decided that “an overview of data governance as discussed in the Friday Seminar on emerging issues; data governance with the aim of launching a

¹ <https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/documents/TOR-English.pdf>

² https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_56/documents/BG-3c-Role_of_the_Statistical_Commission-E.pdf

³ <https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/events-details/un55sc-23022024-M-data-governance/>

process towards the development of common terminology and definitions for data governance”... should be provided (Decision 55/102(c)⁴).

Purpose

The paper will lay out the larger space and suggest ways in which we statisticians cover a part.

Data governance can be described as the policies, guidelines, standards, procedures, and practices that regulate the generation, management, use and reuse of data. It addresses the overarching vision for data within a system, and how it is shared, accessed, and integrated while mitigating risks and maintaining trust. The framework and the strategy of implementation of data governance differs across domains and is dependent on national contexts especially the regulatory framework and data culture. It is essential for the global statistical community as the data space evolves in a dynamic fashion to discuss different ways of addressing data governance and explore commonalities that can help define the role and the strategies of the national statistical offices within the larger landscape of data governance across the national data ecosystems.

Data governance has been discussed across various groups at the national and international levels. It applies to data within the private and public sectors and on how data is exchanged between them.

Other intergovernmental processes and related work

In 2023, the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) approved the position paper⁵ “International Data Governance—Pathways to Progress”. Another functional commission of the Council, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) focuses on science and technology and its impact on development⁶. In 2024, at its 27th session, a report⁷ of the Secretary-General on “Data for Development” laid out the opportunities and challenges of data governance.

Adopted in September 2024 at the Summit of the Future, the *Global Digital Compact*⁸ addresses digital-related challenges and includes a call for a dedicated working group on data governance within the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD). The Compact has an objective to “advance, responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches”, highlighting the link between digital and data governance. Tasked by the Global Digital Compact, the CSTD is establishing a dedicated working group which will hold multi stakeholder dialogues on data governance at all levels, reporting back to the 81st session of the General Assembly.

⁴ https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_55/documents/2024-36-FinalReport-E.pdf

⁵ <https://unsceb.org/international-data-governance-pathways-progress>

⁶ <https://unctad.org/topic/commission-on-science-and-technology-for-development/about>

⁷ https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecn162024d2_en.pdf

⁸ <https://www.un.org/digital-emerging-technologies/global-digital-compact>

It is also important to note that with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs there is the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government⁹ (DPIDG) that addresses effective, accountable and inclusive governance and public institutions for sustainable development, including through innovation, digital government and digital transformation.

Given the increasing relevance of data governance in multiple policy domains, it is essential that the Statistical Commission, CSTD, and other relevant working groups coordinate their efforts. Strengthening collaboration among these bodies will ensure alignment, avoid duplication of efforts, including between global and regional levels, and support Member States in navigating the complex landscape of data governance.

This current note and ongoing discussions within the Statistical Commission aim to compliment and contribute to this border work on data governance.

A few points on defining data governance

Challenges that exist include no agreed definition, broad set of actors, cross-cutting nature of data governance, differing purposes of data collection/data use, the emergence of new data sources and integration methods, new players entering the data market such as social media platforms, private sector, legislative and legal arrangements, *among others*.

Purpose of data collection

National statistical systems collect data for statistical purposes, provide data as public good, and support the decision-making process. There is consent from the individuals on how data can be used. However, data collected by private sector for commercial reasons is collected for different purposes. There are different parameters used, and bridging the different purposes is an important area that needs further development.

Private sector, particularly big tech companies, social media platforms, e-commerce, retail platforms, and telecommunication companies, among others, plays an important role in the current data ecosystem. At the heart of governing data is trust in data privacy, on data flows and sharing, and ethical data use and reuse of data.

Global versus national data governance

One of the challenges is that data governance has global and national aspects. Global data governance has been addressed in the extensive work of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) and HLCP. In 2023, the CEB and HLCP endorsed and approved the position paper on *International data governance – pathways to progress*, and in 2024, the *Proposed normative foundations for international data governance: Goals and Principles*¹⁰.

⁹ <https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/>

¹⁰ [https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2024-](https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/CEB_2024_2_Add.1_Normative%20Foundations%20for%20International%20Data%20Governance%20%28final%20advance%20unedited%29.pdf)

[11/CEB_2024_2_Add.1_Normative%20Foundations%20for%20International%20Data%20Governance%20%28final%20advance%20unedited%29.pdf](https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/CEB_2024_2_Add.1_Normative%20Foundations%20for%20International%20Data%20Governance%20%28final%20advance%20unedited%29.pdf)

National statistical offices (NSO) play a critical role in national data governance; however, in some contexts and national settings, the NSO might not be at the leading role. We need to understand a wide range of issues, including governance structure, institutional and regulatory framework, data strategies and policies, data quality management/assurance mechanisms, data privacy, data security, data ethics, data integration and interoperability, stakeholder engagement and communication, among others. All facets of how data is managed, used and transferred across the system to allow for its use for official statistics need to be fully understood and addressed in a data governance framework. There is a need to better understand countries' approaches to data governance. This is linked to the work undertaken by the Statistics Division and others on national data ecosystem being carried out as part of the update to the *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*¹¹, specifically Chapter 5 on National Data Ecosystems and Governance¹²). A short working definition is that national data governance is a system of decision rights and accountabilities for the management of the availability, usability, integrity and security of data¹³.

Terminology and definitions

Some definitions do exist, such as the working definition contained in the Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems and ones used by OECD and ESCAP. There are also a number of national definitions in use. One task of the working group of the Statistical Commission will be to collect national definitions to derive a proposed definition related to the national statistical systems.

In the Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems, a working definition for data governance is included in the newly compiled Chapter 5 on National Data Ecosystems and Governance¹⁴. The working definition is a system of decision rights and accountabilities for the management of the availability, usability, integrity and security of the data and information to enable coherent implementation and co-ordination of data stewardship activities as well as increase the capacity (technical or otherwise) to better control the data value chain, and the resulting regulations, policies and frameworks that provide enforcement.

OECD¹⁵ defines data governance as “the technical, policy and regulatory frameworks to manage data along its value cycle - from creation to delegation - access policy domains including health, research, public administration, and finance. It ranks as a top priority for governments aiming to maximize the benefits of data while addressing challenges such as privacy and intellectual property as well as competition and empowerment.”

¹¹ <https://projects.officialstatistics.org/hb-mgnt-org-nss/handbook/intro.html#>

¹² <https://projects.officialstatistics.org/hb-mgnt-org-nss/handbook/chapters/C5/C5.html>

¹³ https://projects.officialstatistics.org/hb-mgnt-org-nss/handbook/chapters/C5/5_2_Working_definitions.html#

¹⁴ <https://projects.officialstatistics.org/hb-mgnt-org-nss/handbook/chapters/C5/C5.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/data-governance.html>

ESCAP¹⁶ has undertaken extensive work in their region and have developed a definition as well as a framework. The ESCAP definition of data governance is defined as the exercise of authority and control over the management and transformation of data with the objective of enhancing the value of data assets and mitigating data-related risks. In this ESCAP framework, there are 5 pillars, namely, vision and policy intent, data management policies, rules and institutions, data custodians and data stewards, data sharing, data accessibility and data integration, and data sharing, risks and mitigation.

Mapping initiatives

It is essential to have an overarching vision before we can define the roadmap to get there. The goal to prevent splintering across the statistical community calls for an urgent common approach and implementation strategy of data governance.

Emergence of data communities around specific domains

Adding to the complexities is the emergence of domain-specific work on data governance. This results in more confusion and further splintering of efforts. For example, work on defining data governance related to children and rights being carried out by UNICEF among others.

The Statistics Division has developed a Wiki¹⁷ Statistics on Data Governance, which contains an initial mapping to provide a comprehensive overview of related initiatives. This tool contains a list of relevant publications and events that are related to data governance.

Working groups of the Statistical Commission

Over the years, numerous groups have been established under the auspices of the Commission in order to examine topics of methodological interest, to develop normative documents and to coordinate the work of multiple actors. Typically, the outputs produced by the groups have been submitted to the Commission for discussion and eventually for endorsement. The arrangements and mandates of various groups operating under the Commission reflect a spirit of inclusiveness and collective ownership. At its 51st session, the Commission endorsed the [Reference framework for groups under the Statistical Commission](#) as a useful and flexible guideline. In order to address the wealth and breadth of official statistics, the Commission has **eight distinct types of groups**.

Data governance is cross-cutting, and its components are closely interlinked with the work of many current working groups of the Statistical Commission. While the concrete discussions are new, aspects of data governance have been addressed within the scope of the working groups of the Statistical Commission for many years. Bringing together key components related to data governance from the working groups on data quality, data stewardship, fundamental principles of official statistics, data interoperability, and new data sources such as big data, etc., will build links for a common framework and provide a basis for future discussions on data governance. Linking elements of the topic covered by each domain builds a solid foundation and maximizes synergies to launch the upcoming work on data

¹⁶ <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2024/data-governance-practices-asia-and-pacific>

¹⁷ <https://unstats.un.org/wiki/display/DataGovernance/Data+Governance>

governance. With common terminology and understandings, we can build consensus on the role of the Statistical Commission as we devise a common vision and approach.

In its over 50 working groups, some key elements being addressed which include: data quality, data stewardship, data interoperability, fundamental principles of official statistics, big data and data science, data exchange, geospatial information, among others. Exploring how these groups¹⁸ address components of data governance will help clarify the role of the Commission. Within the Statistics Division there are a few other workstreams such as the development of the Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems and the two collaboratives on administrative data and citizen data that are relevant to the discussion around data governance.

Guiding questions and recommendations

At its 55th session, the Commission called for the launch of a process towards the development of common terminology and definitions for data governance. This paper is an initial step in that process. It aims to prepare for a common vision and a way forward, allowing for an encouraging interplay with others, such as the CSTD.

A few key questions that can be explored include, but are not limited to the following:

- How is data governance being addressed within your domain? How does your work relate to data governance?
- How is data governance being addressed within your national statistical system and national data ecosystem in general?
- What are the priorities and challenges in instituting effective national data governance framework (particularly institutional and regulatory framework) in your country?
- How can data governance effectively address the issue of public trust and protection of privacy when using new data sources and new integration methods?
- What key partners should be included in scoping data governance?
- How NSOs can effectively engage other data communities?

Action plan

1. Organize the high-level forum on official statistics being planned for 3 March
2. Establish a working mechanism of the Statistical Commission on data governance (See Annex 1), with the aim to develop common terminology and definitions, and to support the working mechanism established under the Global Digital Compact as part of the Pack for the Future
3. Report back to the 57th session of the Commission in 2026

¹⁸ NOTE: Further details on the links between the groups work will be inserted.

Annex 1.

Terms of reference of working group of the Statistical Commission on data governance

- I. Background
- II. Objectives - The mechanism will be tasked with:
 - A. Developing a common set of terminology around data governance,
 - B. Facilitating the exchange of national practices and experiences at regional and global levels, including through a knowledge repository, and
 - C. Proposing a way forward for the Commission to address the shifting needs of national statistical systems in response to growing innovation and increasing data availability.
- III. Organization and conduct of work
 - A. The group will meet online regularly.
- IV. Composition
 - A. The group will comprise of XX experts from national statistical offices and XX experts from IOs, private sector, CSOs. Members will be nominated through existing regional mechanism for an initial period of two years. The following criteria will be used: regional, sector composition?
 - B. The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs will act as the secretariat.
- V. Expected duration
 - A. The group will work under the Commission for an initial expected duration of two years.
- VI. Proposed activities
 - A. Survey on national definitions and settings
 - B.
- VII. Expect outputs and outcomes
 - A. Lexicon of definitions - Data ecosystems, components of data, data governance
 - B. Proposed agenda item for the statistical commission
 - C. Report back to the 57th session of the Commission updating on the progress