UNITED NATIONS
United Nations Statistical Commission
Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics
GWG Bureau meeting

First meeting – 21 March 2018, 13:15 EST
By video-conferencing

Agenda item (1) –

The GWG at the 49th session of the UN Statistical Commission
Note by UNSD

The 49th session of the UN Statistical Commission took place from 6 to 9 March 2018 at the UN headquarters in New York. The Commission also features many side-events, which start as early as the Friday before, which was Friday 2nd of March, 2018, in this case. The following is a chronological review of events and issues, which had a bearing on the work of the GWG

Friday Seminar on Emerging Issues, 2 March 2018, 10 AM – 6 PM

The title of this Friday Seminar was "The data revolution in action: building a federated system of SDG data hubs and collaborative platforms for innovation". The seminar was meant to explore how a global federated system of interoperable data hubs and innovation platforms could improve the way governments, international organizations, and partners from civil society, business and academia share, integrate and use both traditional and new sources of data and information for sustainable development.

Sylvie Michaud of Statistics Canada represented the GWG in one of the panels. We had hoped that the GWG would be given a larger role, but in the end we were crowded out by the community around the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data.

The seminar focused foremost on national reporting hubs for SDG data and the advocacy for Open Data initiatives.

Tuesday Lunchtime Seminar on Proof of Concept of the GWG Platform for trusted data collaboration, 6 March 2018, 1:15 PM – 2:30 PM

The two co-chairs (UK and Denmark) of the UN Global Working Group (GWG) on Big Data for official statistics gave an overview of the recent activities of this group, notably: collaboration with the private technology and data providing companies; further development by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) of the UK of a collaborative space with common services and tools; and

involvement of NSOs in specific projects being developed with some of the global technology companies (specifically Google, Microsoft and Amazon). The lead data architect at ONS, UK, then demonstrated some of the functionalities, which have already been created and are available as common tools for the statistical community. The GWG work will complement and cooperate with other initiatives, such as the data hubs for SDG reporting, or the efforts on modernization of official statistics at regional level. The panelists confirmed that the cooperation and alignment are important; and at technical level they have already been discussed. Shared data and methods, combined with the collaborative process, would ultimately enable countries to quickly implement new ways of compiling statistics. The side event demonstrated the proof of concepts of GWG Global Platform. This is an open process and the global statistical community is invited to join. The Statistics Division is the secretariat of the UN GWG and active in all its activities.

Wednesday morning, 7 March 2018, Agenda item 3(e) Big Data for official statistics

Denmark, as co-chair of the GWG, orally introduced this agenda item during the official part of the 49th session of the Statistical Commission, and was followed by further introductory remarks of the United Kingdom, which is the other co-chair of the GWG. The introductory remarks are given in Annex 1.

We counted 27 interventions on this agenda item, which were unanimously supportive of the work of the GWG, and only had Mexico voice some critical notes, especially regarding further work needed on the business case.

The draft decision on Agenda item 3(e) is given in Annex 2. During the adoption of the draft Decisions on Friday, Mexico suggested to add "of data hubs" at the end of point (k), and the United Kingdom suggested to replace the second part of point (f) with reference to production of official statistics including the SDG indicators.

Thursday morning, 8 March 2018, 8:15 AM – 9:30 AM, Meeting of the UN Global Working Group on Big Data

Heather gave an overview of the status and progress of the GWG platform and Niels informed about the task teams of the GWG. Ronald reported on the letter which was circulated by the co-chairs shortly before the Commission and the positive responses, which had been received. Concretely, the following organizational matters of the GWG Committee were discussed: (1) new structure of the GWG; (2) possible new task teams; (3) development of the GWG platform; (4) data collaboratives on the platform; and (5) partnerships with private sector. About 26 persons participated in the meeting mostly from national offices, but also about 7 international organizations were represented.

Annex 1: Introduction to Agenda item 3(e)

Statistical Commission
Forty-ninth session
6 to 9 March 2018
Item 3(e): Big Data for official statistics
Document: Report of the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics

Oral introduction

Introducer: Niels Ploug, Statistics Denmark, and Heather Savory, UK Office for National Statistics, Co- Chairs of the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics

Chair [Niels]

Distinguished delegates

As co-chair of the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics, it is my great pleasure to introduce the report of the working group for this agenda item.

Before doing so, I would like to thank ONS, UK, the other co-chair of the Global Working Group, all the member countries and international organizations involved with the working group, and, in particular, the team of the UN Statistics Division which has gone to great lengths in supporting this work over the last four years.

The report, which you have before you, responds to the request made by the Commission last year to further articulate and develop a global collaboration platform for trusted data, methods, partners and learning. This platform will initially be for research and development to share and develop common data, methods, and applications. My colleague from ONS, UK, will explain this in more detail in her statement.

The Global Working Group most recently met in Bogota in November 2017 and agreed on a declaration, which recommends global data collaboration, facilitated by the platform. Transparent partnership agreements will need to be developed with private and public-sector organizations so that partners in the data collaboratives contribute and derive value through a business model which is sustainable for all stakeholders.

Since Bogota, a delegation of the global working group met with private sector companies to discuss concrete action on partnership. The co-chairs thereupon wrote to country members of the working group requesting their interest to participate in various projects, in the short term.

I am happy to announce that several countries and several private sector companies have committed to execute a number of specific projects, such as projects on price data, tourism and mobile positioning data, consumer confidence indicators, agriculture and land cover data. The projects will be executed over the next 18 months as proof of concept of data collaboration on the global platform.

The Global Working Group makes a few proposals in the last section of the report, namely a new governance structure for the global working group, additional data collaboratives, further work on the global platform and further development of a capacity building program in this area.

All countries are welcome to join in this work in the future, we intend to 'leave no-one behind'.

Thank you.

Chair [Heather]

Thank you, Niels.

Distinguished delegates

Following on from my co-chair Niels Ploug, I am pleased to inform the Commission that efforts are underway to better integrate the work program of the GWG with the work of the UNECE HLG on Modernization of Official Statistics and the work of the European Statistical System (ESS). Moreover, further work is underway to extend the work of the GWG through initiates with the Regional Commissions. The main purpose of these collaborations is to make better use of the limited technical capabilities of the staff and financial resources available at national, regional and international statistical agencies around a common agenda developing the global platform as a federated system of regional and national platforms.

We continue to set out an ambitious agenda to innovate and modernize official statistics by establishing data collaboratives and developing trusted methods, applications and services to be shared at a national, regional and global level.

As described in the GWG report to the Statistical Commission, the GWG has already delivered on many topics, such as the handbook on the use of earth observations; methods for the use of scanner data and training in the use of mobile phone data. Also, ESSnet has delivered valuable statistical studies in the use of Big Data on enterprise characteristics, employment statistics, transport statistics, etc. and has recently embarked on the formulation of the second phase of these studies. Additionally, the African Development Bank has delivered on the African Highway through national and regional data hubs.

Much more needs to be done to help realize the full potential of Big Data for official statistics. We consider this a time of terrific opportunity to show that through data collaboration and strategic

partnerships our offices can reap the benefits of new data sources and new technologies to produce better statistics. This warrants a deepening of the coordination and collaboration across our global statistical system not only between our national and regional statistical agencies, but also working closely with private sector cloud providers and proprietary data owners.

Earlier this month a delegation of the GWG met with teams from Microsoft and Google in Seattle and New York. Similar consultations are underway with other private cloud and data providers. Partnerships are being forged with industry and prominent academics to research and develop standards and principles for privacy preserving techniques to be used in the development of the global platform where we will experiment to combine data sources across a range of data at different levels of sensitivity.

These very inspiring and promising partnerships will pave the way for new forms of collaboration in the modernisation of statistics. Prominent national statistical offices, private technology companies, proprietary data owners and academia have all expressed interest and a willingness to contribute staff time, training, tools, applications and cloud server facilities and we will move forward to set up a range of collaborative, innovative projects with social impact.

These newly emerging research and development partnerships focussing on the use of the Big Data for statistics will also, through the Proof of Concept work, allow us to explore the options for a future business case which is of benefit to all partners, including delivering a sustainable long-term financial model for the Global Platform for the use of Big Data for official statistics.

The Commission is invited to give its views on these proposals.

Thank you.

Annex 2: Draft decision on Agenda item 3(e)

Decision 7: Big data for official statistics (Item 3e)

The Statistical Commission:

(a)   Congratulated the Global Working Group (GWG) on Big Data for official statistics on the progress made;

(b)   Appreciated the products delivered by the GWG so far in the form of handbooks, methods and training materials;

(c)   Urged the GWG to make all its products and services easily available ensuring that the quality of each of these products is vetted by an appropriate advisory group whose membership might include experts from national statistical agencies, academia, scientific and technical partners, and other communities as appropriate;

(d)   Confirmed that the use of Big Data and other new data sources is essential for the modernisation of national statistical institutions so that they remain relevant in a fast-moving data landscape;

(e)   Highlighted the opportunity for Big Data to fill gaps, to make statistical operations more cost effective, to enable the replacement of surveys, and to provide more granularity in outputs;

(f)   Encouraged the GWG to build on the success so far, by delivering practical products and services, for instance learning materials how to produce statistics or new outputs based on new data sources;

(g)   Commended the GWG conferences on Big Data for Official Statistics for showcasing the latest developments, specifically commended the most recent, well organized and graciously hosted conference in Bogota, Colombia, which included hands-on training;

(h)   Supported the Bogota Declaration which gives direction on the envisioned way forward in this area;

(i)   Supported the GWG plans to establish global data collaboratives and data services where the statistical community will work in partnership with technology companies, data providers and academia, including work to formulate standards and guidelines for data governance and information management;

(j)   Emphasized the need to carefully address societal challenges of trust, ethics, privacy, confidentiality and security of data;

(k)   Endorsed the GWG proposal to further develop a global platform as a collaborative research and development environment for trusted data, services and applications using exemplars from the GWG task teams to drive the development of a proof of concept based on a federated architecture;

(l)   Agreed that the proof of concept phase for the UN GWG Global Platform should run from now until March 2020, reiterated the need to present the business case and requested that work on the legal, ethical and funding considerations are initiated during this phase;

(m)   Underlined the importance of capacity development activities, especially for developing countries, in the use of satellite data, mobile phone data and other new data sources, such as data from e-commerce platforms;

(n)   Requested that the GWG links its work closely with initiatives ongoing at regional level, paying attention to different user needs and circumstances;

(o)   Took note of the interest expressed by some countries to host future conferences on Big Data for official statistics;

(p)   Welcomed the keen interest of countries to join the GWG and its task teams.