

Does the UN need a Chief Statistician?

Paper prepared by Switzerland, 26 October 2017

The objective of this paper is to initiate consultations on exploring the possibility of designating a senior official as United Nations Chief Statistician. The paper addresses the origin of the request and the importance of bringing to the attention to the UN Statistical Commission in 2018. It attempts to identify challenges and opportunities and outlines suggested next steps.

1 Audit report by Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS)

1.1 Office of Internal Oversight Services Report 2016/032

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS)¹ conducted an “audit of the management of the statistics subprogramme and related technical cooperation projects in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs” from October 2015 to January 2016. The audit covered the period from January 2014 to December 2015. The results of the audit were published on 22 April 2016 as Report 2016/032².

According to the report, “the audit was conducted to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the DESA governance, risk management and control processes in providing reasonable assurance regarding the effective management of the statistics subprogramme and related technical cooperation projects in DESA.”

The key controls tested for this audit were:

- (a) Subprogramme management: controls that provide reasonable assurance that adequate and effective processes are established to guide the planning, direction, coordination, and execution of the statistics subprogramme activities; and
- (b) Regulatory framework: controls that provide reasonable assurance that policies and procedures: (i) exist to guide the operations of the Statistics Division; (ii) are implemented consistently; and (iii) ensure the reliability and integrity of financial and operation information.

1.2 Results of the audit: recommendation #3: A UN chief statistician

The main outcome of the audit states that the DESA governance, risk management and control processes examined were initially assessed as *partially satisfactory* in providing reasonable assurance regarding the effective management of the statistics subprogramme and related technical cooperation projects in DESA. Based on the audit, OIOS made six recommendations to address issues identified through the audit process.

The third recommendation states: “**DESA should, in consultation with the Statistical Commission, explore the possibility of designating a senior official as United Nations Chief Statistician to coordinate statistical matters across United Nations entities**”.

¹ <https://oios.un.org>

² Publicly available on the OIOS website at <https://oios.un.org/page?slug=report>.

This recommendation is based on the following observations presented in paras 30 and 31 of the report:

“30. The large number of players in the field of statistics presented coordination challenges. For example, the regional commissions ... reported to their Executive Secretaries, both administratively and substantively. As long as individual United Nations entities retained the right to release data independently, overall accountability for statistical matters would remain undefined. Whereas coordination risk was being mitigated through informal and ad hoc arrangements, a more structured arrangement could increase accountability.

31. The United Nations Secretariat does not have a position of Chief Statistician, who could be accountable for the statistics produced by the United Nations and its entities. DESA had also not designated any official in the Department to serve as the Secretariat’s focal point or Chief Statistician to effectively service the Statistical Commission on statistics matters globally, as the issue was not given priority. The need for a central focal point had become more crucial following General Assembly resolution 70/1 (Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development), which mandates the Secretary-General to prepare an annual progress report on Sustainable Development Goals in cooperation with the United Nations system based on the global indicator framework on data produced by national statistical systems and information collected at the regional level.”

The OIOS audit report and in particular recommendation (3) were brought to the attention of the Statistical Commission at its 48th Session in March 2017 through the programme statement by the Director of UNSD (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/48th-session/documents/statements-5-programme-statement-unsd-E.pdf>).

The Commission “took note of the recommendation of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, expressed in an internal audit of the statistics subprogramme conducted in 2016, that the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in consultation with the Statistical Commission, should explore the possibility of designating a senior official as United Nations Chief Statistician to coordinate statistical matters across United Nations entities. The Commission agreed that this topic should be discussed further by the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” (Decision 48/117, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/48th-session/documents/Report-on-the-48th-session-of-the-statistical-commission-E.pdf>)

2 Current structure of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)

A director at the D-2 level heads the UN Statistics Division (UNSD) and is assisted by the Executive Support Unit, the Capacity Development Section and other staff in the Front Office, such as a special assistant. The substantive work of the Division is carried out by five branches: a) the Economic Statistics Branch; b) the Trade Statistics Branch; c) the Demographic and Social Statistics Branch; d) the Environment and Energy Statistics Branch; and e) the Statistical Services Branch.

For the biennium 2014-2015, the subprogramme was allocated \$44.1 million from (i) the regular budget under the DESA programme budget - \$34 million, regular programme of technical cooperation – 2.5\$ million, and Development Account - \$1.4 million; (ii) extra budgetary funds - \$4.7 million; and (iii) revenue-generating activities in the statistical revenue account - \$1.5 million. The subprogramme’s major outputs were servicing of intergovernmental and expert bodies and producing recurrent and non-recurrent statistical publications and technical materials.

3 Existing coordination mechanisms

In the UN system, there are a number of organizations, divisions and programs that are active statistical producers. Even within DESA, UNSD is not the only division that produces data and statistics. Many UN funds and programmes have their own statistics division; for example UNESCO, FAO and the ILO, as well as all five regional commissions.

The Statistics Division performs substantive work in the area of statistics as mandated by the Statistical Commission and serves as secretariat to the Commission. A core function of the Division has been the coordination of international statistical programmes and activities. Co-ordination of Statistics is taking place at different levels as follows:

- a) Coordination among the five regional commissions and UNSD has been facilitated through regular bi-monthly conference calls. In addition, physical meetings take place back to back with other coordination meetings, such as one ones further outlined below;
- b) A second level of coordination takes place on the level called “cluster”, which includes UNSD, the regional commissions as well as other secretariat entities, namely UNODC, UNCTAD, UNEP and UN Habitat;
- c) The third level is the meeting of the Chief Statisticians of the United Nations System which includes all secretariat entities and all other United Nations funds and programmes (see <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/unsystem/default.htm>);
- d) The fourth level of coordination takes place in the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities and includes all United Nations entities and other international and regional organizations (see https://unstats.un.org/unsd/accespublic/workpartner_ccsa.htm).

4 Challenges and opportunities

Creating the position of a chief statistician of the United Nations is associated with many opportunities but also challenges, some of which as a first step are listed below.

Opportunities include:

- A UN Chief Statistician would increase the visibility of statistics in the whole UN System. This is important because the implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires a high volume of data and statistics. To fulfill this task, a higher degree of communication amongst the producers of data as well as between users and producers of data and statistics is crucial.
- Additionally, a higher accountability that was already mentioned in the audit report could strengthen the statistics produced by the UN system.
- Finally, a deeper coordination can lead to a more efficient global statistical system that will reduce on the long-term the costs.

On the other side, there are some challenges:

- Which rights (powers) should a UN Chief Statistician have regarding the UN statistics producers inside the UN Secretariat, within the UN System or even outside the UN System?

Some other obstacles that need to reviewed and addressed include:

- Review of existing legal frameworks – does the political situation allow for this type of overarching chief statistician role?

- Discussion on the budgetary implications.
- Exploration of tools and mechanisms a Chief Statistician could use that would allow him/her to coordinate with other UN statistics producers.

5 Possible questions and next steps

5.1 Possible questions in a study

As shown above, many questions are not yet answered and need a deeper study. The following questions should be reviewed:

- a) What are the expected benefits of creating the position of a UN Chief Statistician?;
- b) Which organizations should be covered under the umbrella of the coordination of an UN Chief Statistician?;
- c) Is there a legal framework or precedent that allows for the creation of a UN Chief Statistician?;
- d) How can the installation of a Chief Statistician respond to different elements raised during the discussion on the repositioning the UN development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda?;
- e) What costs would occur and how could they be covered?;
- f) What is the best institutional setting to install an UN Chief Statistician?;
- g) What experiences have been made by other organisations when they installed a Chief Statistician?;

5.2 Next steps

The following next steps are suggested:

- October 2017: UN Statistical Commission Bureau comments on this report;
- November 2017: High-level Group on Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building (HLG-PCCB) considers the topic, report and establishes a subgroup to look into the questions raised above and provide its results in a background document to the Commission in 2018;
- November/December 2017: The HLG-PCCB (and the Bureau) will report on this topic in their document to the UN Statistical Commission;
- February 2018: The finalized report will be distributed as background documents to members and observers of the UN Statistical Commission;
- March 2018: Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the United Nations system considers the topic;
- March 2018: As included in the HLG-PCCB report and as a background document, the topic (and points for decision) will be considered by the UN Statistical Commission and decisions on the next steps will be taken.