

SDG Data Flow Recommendations for IAEG-SDGs and CSSA

24 August 2018

The initial observations and recommendations below are the result of a second data flow pilot study conducted by the Task Team on Data Flows under the auspices of the UNECE CES Steering Group on SDG Statistics, which was carried out during July-August 2018. More information regarding the purpose, scope, instruments and findings of the pilot can be found at <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/SFSDG/Task+Team+on+Data+Flows+for+SDGs>.

Finding one

1. Most countries are strongly invested in the transmission of their data to the custodian agencies as shown by the strong participation in this survey on a voluntary basis and well beyond the geographical scope of UNECE.¹ Most countries strive to produce national statistics that are aligned with the UN global indicator metadata, while recognizing that international harmonization of the statistics will be challenging.
2. Most agencies involved in the survey by the selection of indicators ensured on-going dialogue with the task team to provide clarification on their process of collecting national data for global monitoring of SDGs in order to maximize quality, transparency and trust in the SDG global reporting and adherence to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.
3. The following recommendations are intended to contribute to this common aim.

Finding two

4. Most countries noted with appreciation the on-going efforts made by the UNSD to facilitate SDG data flows between agencies and countries and remarked on the continued improvements. They noted with appreciation the release of a dashboard listing contact focal points; and the posting of SDG metadata and global statistics on the UN website's UNSD database. They would like this work to continue and to go further.
5. Regarding information about focal points, custodian agencies regret that some countries have not yet transmitted their national focal point contact information, which has, impeded follow up to resolve data flow issues. In other cases, countries regret that the custodian agencies' focal point contact information is insufficient. For instance, for indicator 9.1.2, a name is provided without an e mail, phone number or physical address.
6. Countries also note that the calendars of agencies' request and of data collection are also too incomplete (and difficult to find on the UN website), limiting the current use of this tool for national data flow coordination.

Recommendations two

7. UNSD could post an online dashboard of focal point contact information for countries and custodian agencies, regularly updated with precise contact information for each indicator

¹ As of 24 August, 35 countries and 4 custodian agencies participated in the pilot. Of these, 28 were UNECE countries and 7 were CES countries (that is, primarily associated with another regional commission, such as ESCAP or ECLAC).

and the calendar of the data and validation request which should be agreed by the IAEG-SDGs.

8. Taking into account concerns for confidentiality, this dashboard should be password protected. It should be updated through secure login by the central focal points at each country and custodian agency. Countries would be responsible for maintaining the list of country focal points per indicator for their countries, and custodian agencies would be responsible for maintaining the list of custodian agency contacts per indicator and their calendar of data request and data validation, allowing for planning coordination on the national level. Reminders for updates could be timed with preparations for the SDG annual report to the Secretary General.

9. This dashboard should become a reference document between agencies and countries.

Finding three

10. SDG data transmission doesn't start from scratch in all cases. In fact, some data transmission are already well established with their own focal points and their own national mandate given by the Foreign ministry or another national line ministries. (For instance, the data transmission for indicator 17.1.2 is DAC members' obligation to OECD with their own process of data validation; similar existing data flows are in place for indicator 3.6.1 reporting on rate of death rate due to road traffic accidents and indicator 9.1.2 passengers and freight volume by mode of transport).

11. NSOs have sometimes mapped SDGs indicators with their national statistical system identifying a new data provider and a national focal point, not being aware of these existing data flows. Discrepancies might appear with new data sources and be source of conflict with agencies.

12. In some cases, custodian agencies directed their SDG data request to the previously established focal point without (also) informing the SDGs focal point.² In several cases, national SDG focal points are not aware of these existing data collections by agencies or recent requests from agencies for some indicators.

Recommendation three

13. To avoid such conflicts, national coordination within countries should be promoted. This will require some support from custodian agencies.

14. In particular, the SDG focal point nominated by the country should be systematically informed by the custodian agencies of existing national focal points for indicators and existing validation processes, where these have been established.

15. To accomplish this, custodian agencies are encouraged to put in copy (not hidden copy) the national SDGs focal point whenever they address any SDG data request to a previously established national data provider, including requests concerning non-statistical indicators. This recommendation applies even if the Custodian agency's request is broader in scope than the SDG indicator request alone (for instance, collection of data on education, of

² This should be indicated in the UN dashboard of focal points.

which some SDG indicators are included).

Finding four

16. The quality of metadata for indicators assigned as Tier 1 or Tier 2 is unequal. While most of that metadata are well structured and have good quality concepts, some metadata are incomplete,³ difficult to understand, and feature open questions and inconsistencies. For instance, metadata for indicator 17.3.1 are incomplete. The definition is limited to the ODA aspect of the indicator. Overall, it seems very similar to the metadata provided for 17.2.1, although it is intended, by its tier designation, to be conceptually clear and to have an internationally established methodology. The same can be said of indicators 6.4.1 and 6.4.2, for which there are many inconsistencies and open questions remain. Also, metadata for 15.4.2 does not take into account, that some countries experience greening of mountain areas due to climate change.

17. Metadata for Tier 1 and Tier 2 indicators are not reviewed by the IAEG-SDGs; only Tier 3 indicators are reviewed by IAEG-SDG to determine possible reassignment to Tier 2 or Tier 1 as concepts are clarified and agreed upon methodology is established.

Recommendations four

18. All metadata of Tier 1 and 2 indicators should be systematically reviewed by IAEG-SDGs to ensure that they conform to the quality and the format recommended by the IAEG-SDGs. Among these, priority of review should be given to those indicators that are subject to country signature.

19. Furthermore, the task team would like to encourage the IAEG to review certain indicator's tier classification. It is not evident, for example, why the indicator 17.3.1 is classified as tier 1 even though it is not produced and the custodian agency has not proposed a method for its calculation.

20. A dedicated venue should be allotted for countries (or agencies) to raise their questions on the interpretation of metadata and difficulties they have observed. Custodian agencies should be invited to answer the questions raised and to update accordingly the metadata in track changes (with date of update), which will allow countries to avoid unnecessary review.

Finding five

21. In several cases, NSOs mention that they were not asked to validate of some data associated with their country that is published in the UN global database, and, in some cases, they disagree with the data published. Sometimes, these are obvious errors (an error of unit for instance, for 9.1.2 and ITF data).

Recommendations five

22. The national focal point for SDGs should always be informed prior to the publication of data on the UN SDGs global database, even if these data have been validated by another

³ Or, even lacking altogether (for instance, see indicator 3.3.4).

process. It also gives the opportunity for a last check and validation of these national data.

Finding six

23. Some SDGs indicators could be collected with existing reporting mechanisms (for instance 6.4.1 and 6.4.2 Aquastat indicators), with some adaptation or extension of the current process.

Recommendations six

24. Agencies are encouraged to minimize the data reporting burden of Member States by utilizing existing reporting mechanisms and adapting them. They are encouraged to work with other international agencies working on these existing data flows to adapt them as appropriate and avoid duplicative reporting and unnecessary burden.

Finding seven

25. Data validation is sometimes complex, especially when metadata require the indicator to be modelled by agencies or calculated by agencies directly with open data sources (such as geospatial information).

Recommendations seven

26. Data validation requires sufficient time for countries and agencies to conduct their tasks professionally, and full transparency on the status of data which are released in the global database. Accordingly, a transparent validation process that allows maturation of review and agreement should be implemented.

27. Essentially, this is a documentation process. Systematically, the source of data should remain indicated in the UN global data base (i.e., country data, data estimated by the agency) and the status of validation (i.e., validated by country, cannot be validated by country (missing data), pending review) should be included in the data regardless of whether the statistics is published.

28. This modification to current procedures will make the global process more fully transparent. All data used to calculate the aggregate will be noted. Further, reporting on SDGs will be facilitated and potentially take greater advantage of other available data sources that meet acceptable standards of statistical quality. This can also help communicate clearly the responsibility of NSOs in providing national data. Moreover, the progress made in increasing the number of indicators validated by the focal points nominated by the national SDGs coordinator in itself is a measure of progress in country-led monitoring of SDGs.