Principles Governing International Statistical Activities

Prepared by UNSD

I. Background

1. In the wake of the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics by the UN Statistical Commission in 2004, the idea was born to create a similar set of principles that could guide the work of statistical activities on the international level.

2. Some of the guiding thoughts in the drafting/revision process were that the document should make a clear distinction between the principles and practices: the principles should guide all statistical activities of international organizations and the practices, on which the main focus was placed, are phrased without an intent of creating a ‘legally binding’ framework.

3. When endorsing the Principles on 14 September 2005, the Committee recognized the importance of the “Principles and Practices” on guiding professional statistical activities in international agencies and agreed that the Principles and Practices could be used in different ways by agencies, individually or collectively with others, depending on their specific needs and circumstances. It took note of the fact that “the mandate and governance of individual international organizations may be such that not all these principles and practices may be applicable under current circumstances, even though they can be used for future improvements”. The Committee also took note of particular constraints faced by some member organizations.

4. The “Principles and practices” were posted on the UNSD website. Subsequently, 25 out of currently 39 members endorsed the Principles. A list of endorsees is presented in annex 2 and endorsements are documented on the following website: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/Principles_stat_activities/endorse.asp.

II. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: Recent developments

5. At its 42nd Session in March 2011, the UN Statistical Commission “fully recognized the continuing critical importance of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics” and “acknowledged that the Fundamental Principles were still as relevant today as they have been in the past and that no revision of the 10 principles themselves was currently necessary”.

6. However, the Commission recommended the formation of a Friends of the Chair group to revise and update the language of the preamble of the Fundamental Principles in order to take into account new developments since the time when the Principles were first formulated, to assess how they can be re-enforced, and to develop a practical guide for the implementation of the Principles.

7. The Group finished its first task, drafting a revised preamble for the Fundamental Principles with the adoption of the revised preamble by the Statistical Commission at its 44th Session in 2013 (see E/CN.3/2013/33). The Principles with the revised preamble were subsequently endorsed by ECOSOC on 24 July 2013 and will be considered by the General Assembly for endorsement in October/November this year.

8. Currently the Friends of the Chair Groups is working on the four remaining tasks as mandated by the Statistical Commission at its 44th Session:

(1) formulate guidelines on how to strengthen implementation, based on good practices developed at the national and regional levels

(2) formulate guidelines on how to ensure the full independence of national statistical systems

(3) explore ways to effectively address perceived violations of the Fundamental Principles

(4) reflect upon how the applicability of the Principles could be extended beyond the realm of official statistics, specifically to the private sector.

9. Through a consultative process the group is expected to formulate some recommendations for the Statistical Commission to consider. The development of guidelines will build on a website on Fundamental Principles, created by UNSD.

III. Points for discussion

10. When considering the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, the Commission, in 2011, acknowledged that the Fundamental Principles were still as relevant today as they have been in the past and that no revision of the 10 principles themselves was currently necessary but rather stressed the need to focus now on implementation.

11. The Committee may wish to discuss whether a similar conclusion – no amendments, but renewed focus on implementation - would be valid in connection with the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities.
Annex 1: Principles Governing International Statistical Activities

1. Bearing in mind that statistics are essential for sustainable economic, environmental and social development and that public trust in official statistics is anchored in professional independence and impartiality of statisticians, their use of scientific and transparent methods and equal access for all to official statistical information, the Chief Statisticians or coordinators of statistical activities of United Nations agencies and related organizations, agree that implementation of the following principles will enhance the functioning of the international statistical system.


1) High quality international statistics, accessible for all, are a fundamental element of global information systems

Good practices include:

- Having regular consultations with key users both inside and outside the relevant organisation to ascertain that their needs are met
- Periodic review of statistical programmes to ensure their relevance
- Compiling and disseminating international statistics based on impartiality
- Providing equal access to statistics for all users
- Ensuring free public accessibility of key statistics

2) To maintain the trust in international statistics, their production is to be impartial and strictly based on the highest professional standards

Good practices include:

- Using strictly professional considerations for decisions on methodology, terminology and data presentation
- Developing and using professional codes of conduct
- Making a clear distinction, in statistical publications, between statistical and analytical comments on the one hand and policy-prescriptive and advocacy comments on the other

3) The public has a right to be informed about the mandates for the statistical work of the organisations

Good practices include:
• Making decisions about statistical work programmes publicly available
• Making documents for and reports of statistical meetings publicly available

4) Concepts, definitions, classifications, sources, methods and procedures employed in the production of international statistics are chosen to meet professional scientific standards and are made transparent for the users

Good practices include:

• Aiming continuously to introduce methodological improvements and systems to manage and improve the quality and transparency of statistics
• Enhancing the professional level of staff by encouraging them to attend training courses, to do analytical work, to publish scientific papers and to participate in seminars and conferences.
• Documenting the concepts, definitions and classifications, as well as data collection and processing procedures used and the quality assessments carried out and making this information publicly accessible
• Documenting how data are collected, processed and disseminated, including information about editing mechanisms applied to country data
• Giving credit, in the dissemination of international statistics, to the original source and using agreed quotation standards when re-using statistics originally collected by others
• Making officially agreed standards publicly available

5) Sources and methods for data collection are appropriately chosen to ensure timeliness and other aspects of quality, to be cost-efficient and to minimise the reporting burden for data providers

Good practices include:

• Facilitating the provision of data by countries
• Working systematically on the improvement of the timeliness of international statistics
• Periodic review of statistical programmes to minimise the burden on data providers
• Sharing collected data with other organisations and collecting data jointly where appropriate
• Contributing to an integrated presentation of statistical programmes, including data collection plans, thereby making gaps or overlaps clearly visible
• Ensuring that national statistical offices and other national organisations for official statistics are duly involved and advocating that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are applied when data are collected in countries

6) Individual data collected about natural persons and legal entities, or about small aggregates that are subject to national confidentiality rules, are to be kept strictly
confidential and are to be used exclusively for statistical purposes or for purposes mandated by legislation

Good practices include:

- Putting measures in place to prevent the direct or indirect disclosure of data on persons, households, businesses and other individual respondents
- Developing a framework describing methods and procedures to provide sets of anonymous micro-data for further analysis by bona fide researchers, maintaining the requirements of confidentiality

7) Erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics are to be immediately appropriately addressed

Good practices include:

- Responding to perceived erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics
- Enhancing the use of statistics by developing educational material for important user groups

8) Standards for national and international statistics are to be developed on the basis of sound professional criteria, while also meeting the test of practical utility and feasibility

Good practices include:

- Systematically involving national statistical offices and other national organisations for official statistics in the development of international statistical programmes, including the development and promulgation of methods, standards and good practices
- Ensuring that decisions on such standards are free from conflicts of interest, and are perceived to be so
- Advising countries on implementation issues concerning international standards
- Monitoring the implementation of agreed standards

9) Coordination of international statistical programmes is essential to strengthen the quality, coherence and governance of international statistics, and avoiding duplication of work

Good practices include:

- Designating one or more statistical units to implement statistical programmes, including one unit that coordinates the statistical work of the organisation and represents the organisation in international statistical meetings
• Participating in international statistical meetings and bilateral and multilateral consultations whenever necessary
• Working systematically towards agreements about common concepts, classifications, standards and methods
• Working systematically towards agreement on which series to consider as authoritative for each important set of statistics
• Coordinating technical cooperation activities with countries between donors and between different organisations in the national statistical system to avoid duplication of effort and to encourage complementarities and synergy

10) Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contribute to the professional growth of the statisticians involved and to the improvement of statistics in the organisations and in countries

Good practices include:

• Cooperating and sharing knowledge among international organisations and with countries and regions to further develop national and regional statistical systems
• Basing cooperation projects on user requirements, promoting full participation of the main stakeholders, taking account of local circumstances and stage of statistical development
• Empowering recipient national statistical systems and governments to take the lead
• Advocating the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in countries
• Setting cooperation projects within a balanced overall strategic framework for national development of official statistics
Annex 2: List of organizations that endorsed the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities (as of 1 September 2013)

African Development Bank Group (ABDG)
Asian Development Bank (ADB)
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA)
Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)
Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC)
European Central Bank (ECB)
Eurostat
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
International Labour Office (ILO)
International Statistical Institute (ISI)
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries
UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD)
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
World Bank (WB)
World Health Organization (WHO)
World Tourism Organization (WTO)
World Trade Organization (WTO)