



**An Phríomh-Oifig Staidrimh**  
Central Statistics Office



*United Nations Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics*

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***Draft Recommendations for Access to Data  
from Private Organizations for Official Statistics:  
The Way Forward***

**Note for Discussion**

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**Background**

Since its creation, and in accordance with its mandate, the GWG has been trying to promote access to new data sources for official statistics. In 2015, it drafted so-called Principles for Access to Big Data Sources for Official Statistics. These Access Principles were meant to strike a balance between the legitimate interests of organizations holding Big Data and the public need for official statistics based on Big Data. Their basis was an appeal to the social responsibility of those organizations and they were closely linked to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

The Access Principles were discussed at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Global Conference on Big Data for Official Statistics, which was held in Abu Dhabi from 20 to 22 October 2015. The draft Principles appeared to be generally supported by the statistical community and other participating stakeholders. However, it was also noted that the Access Principles should be broadened to all types of data held by private organizations. After the Global Conference in Abu Dhabi, the GWG modified the Access Principles accordingly. Since then, they have been presented to stakeholders at several occasions, notably the 13th World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Symposium (Hiroshima, 30 November to 2 December 2015), the Joint OECD and PARIS21 Workshop on Access to New Data Sources for Statistics (Paris, 17 and 18 December 2015) and the ESS Task Force on Big Data (Luxembourg, 18 and 19 February 2016). No new issues arose at those meetings.

The question what body – if any – would eventually be asked to formally adopt the Access Principles was left to be answered at a later stage. This note addresses this question, by looking at the need for adoption and proposing a way forward.

## The Need for Adoption

It is clear that access is needed to data from private organizations for official statistics, that guidance is needed for all involved in making such access possible, and that the Access Principles are generally considered to be a good start for such guidance. However, this does not necessarily imply that formal adoption should be aimed at, as the Access Principles can be used as guidance even if they are not adopted formally – in fact, they are already used.

It should be kept in mind that, depending on the body of adoption, the adoption process may take a long time and the outcome of that process may be uncertain. The ease or difficulty of adoption also depends on the status of the Access Principles. Although they were never intended to be legally binding, formal adoption would give the Access Principles a certain status. In fact, there is a trade-off between status and ease of adoption.

The case for some form of formal adoption has three pillars:

- In dealing with stakeholders, NSIs would benefit from being able to make reference to Access Principles that are also recognized outside the NSI itself.
  - Certain NSIs, such as Statistics Netherlands, are trying to change their statistical legislation in order to obtain access to new data sources. It would help if they could point to formally adopted Access Principles, especially if they reflect a balance between public and private interests.
  - When talking to holders of relevant data in an attempt to obtain that data and forge partnerships, it would also help if reference could be made to such an external source.
- From contacts with data holders it has become clear that in many cases they have a cooperative attitude and recognize their social responsibility, but they can only convince others in their organisation to actually collaborate if they have an external justification. Again, referring to formally adopted Access Principles would then help. This mechanism is strong: In some cases private organizations even indicate that they would welcome legislation obliging them to provide the data, so that they are relieved from providing a justification for doing that on a voluntary basis.
- Access to new data sources is an issue for many umbrella organizations, such as branch and trade organizations. They need to work out access principles for their own domain (industry, type of data sources) and could base them on more general and global principles. Again, justification is made easier if reference can be made to formally adopted Access Principles. Since umbrella organizations may have a quite diverse membership, it helps that the Access Principles reflect a balance between public and private interests.

There is not only a case for some form of formal adoption, but there is also a case for *quick* adoption. The need for access to new data sources is urgent, since developments go quickly. New data needs are urgent, such as for a number of SDG indicators. And the need for guidance is also urgent, as statistical legislation is already in the process of being adapted to the new needs, partnerships are being created, and umbrella organizations are busy with discussing data access issues.

## The Way Forward

Given the desirability of a short adoption process, it would make sense to change the term “Principles” into “Recommendations”, in order to emphasize that their adoption would not imply any legal or non-legal obligation. This change of wording would make clear that the aim of the recommendations is to provide guidance. In fact, the principles or recommendations themselves state the voluntary basis of providing data access.

In order to be adopted, the Access Recommendations must have the right contents, of course. From the discussions with stakeholders so far, one may conclude that the Access Recommendations appear to have stricken the right balance between public and private interests. However, the consultations of stakeholders so far may not have been broad enough. If that is the case, one more cycle of consultation might be considered, although that would go at the cost of timeliness, so the consultation round would have to take place within a strict time frame.

The length of the adoption process would be minimal if it were simply the GWG itself that adopts the Access Recommendations. The GWG could then place the Access Recommendations on its site, mentioning the date of adoption. From that moment on, NSIs, data holders and umbrella organizations may refer to the Access Recommendations.

Of course, adoption of the Access Recommendations is only part of what has to be done in order to ensure access to new data sources. After adoption of the Access Recommendations, implementation guidelines will be needed that are specific to industries and data sources. In collaboration with the GWG, UNSD may contact relevant bodies in order to foster the development of such guidelines in line with the Access Recommendations. Further work on promoting partnerships between the statistical community and private data holders will remain necessary. The adoption of the Access Recommendations would only be the start.

In short, this is the proposal:

- Change the name of the Access Principles into “Recommendations for Access to Data from Private organizations for Official Statistics”.
- If deemed really necessary, organize one more cycle of consulting stakeholders, within strict time limits.
- Let the GWG formally adopt the Access Recommendations and put them on its website as a formally adopted document, so that organizations can refer to it.