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Items for decision: business and trade statistics

Business and Trade Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2023/325 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics, which is submitted to the Commission for decision.

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* E/CN.3/2024/1.

Report of the Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics

I. Introduction

1.   In its decision 54/108, the Statistical Commission:

(a)   Welcomed the report of the Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics, and expressed its appreciation for the work carried out by the Committee and its task teams;

(b)   Approved the establishment of a single task team on statistical business registers to combine the activities of the previous task teams on exhaustive business registers and capacity-building, endorsed its terms of reference, recommended that the task team coordinate its activities with relevant expert groups such as the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers, and suggested that a platform for sharing country practices on statistical business registers be established;

(c)   Welcomed the development of guidance on the integration of business and trade statistics, on the integration of a gender perspective into business and trade statistics as an approach to the integration of business and trade statistics with social and demographic statistics, and on data collection methodology for business statistics such as business surveys;

(d)   Expressed its appreciation for and took note of the progress of work on the revision of the trade statistics manuals, and requested the task team to undertake a wide and inclusive consultation with countries and organizations;

(e)   Underlined the importance of informal cross-border trade, notably its relationship with social and demographics dimensions, especially in developing countries, and requested the Committee to include this topic in the ongoing revision of the trade statistics manuals;

(f)   Stressed the importance of unique identifiers to facilitate microdata linking and the integration of data from different sources;

(g)   Endorsed the global initiative on unique identifiers for businesses, supported its main elements as described in the background document, and encouraged countries and relevant organizations to coordinate their activities in this area in an effort to provide solid infrastructure for statistical business registers;

(h)   Approved the work programme of the Committee, and commended the Committee's efforts to coordinate its activities with relevant groups of experts;

2.   The present report describes the progress of work over the past year and the future activities of the Committee to improve the integration between business and trade statistics and address new priority areas. The main achievements are: progress in the revision of trade statistics manuals; the finalization of the handbook on integrating business and trade statistics; and the development of the second volume of the *Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics*. Progress was also made in the area of the statistical business register, by developing the global initiative to improve the availability of unique identifiers for businesses. New priority areas call for the identification and development of cross-cutting activities between the Committee's task teams, as well as for closer collaboration between the Committee and other United Nations bodies responsible for other statistical domains, such as national accounts and social and environmental statistics. A relevant business case in this respect is represented by the inclusion of the gender dimension into business and trade statistics. The evolution and complexity of the activities

coordinated by the Committee and the length of time that has elapsed since its establishment in March 2019 indicate a need for a revision and upgrade of its mandate. The Commission is invited to express its views on the progress of work, the proposed amended mandate and to provide guidance on the elements of the work programme. Points for discussion are presented in section VI.

II. Activities of the Committee in 2023

3. The Committee held its sixth meeting from 18 to 21 September 2023 in Mérida, Mexico. The meeting discussed the main results so far achieved and the best way to address future priorities and challenges in the light of its consolidated strategic view on business and trade statistics.

4. The Committee noted that the current mandate of the Committee, established in 2019, was designed to fill the gap in business and trade statistics coordination and foster their integration and harmonization. The Committee also acknowledged that this process had been successfully undertaken and had led to a substantial rebalancing of activities between business and trade statistics. As a consequence, trade statistics and globalization activities need to be better represented in the mandate. In addition, data user needs are increasingly oriented towards the integration of business and trade statistics with other statistical domains. Furthermore, the opportunity to exploit new data sources should be explicitly considered as a goal of trade and business statistics to reduce the burden on the respondents and to produce more granular and timely information.

5. To facilitate stronger integration between business and trade statistics and stronger coordination across other statistical domains and with the macroeconomic frameworks, the Committee recommended an update of the mandate.

6. The Committee emphasized the importance of developing and strengthening the statistical business registers to integrate different statistical domains and provide users with additional information on emerging topics such as digitalization, gender, geospatial information, environment and social aspects. In this regard, the Committee recognized the importance of capacity-building and welcomed the collaboration with the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific in developing and organizing courses, webinars, training materials and technical assistance in selected projects of the Committee. The goal is to establish contact with national statistical offices in countries with different statistical infrastructure and provide technical assistance support to strengthen their statistical business registers and produce relevant indicators. The Committee also supported the development of the global assessment on the statistical business registers and welcomed the efforts to coordinate with the Wiesbaden Group on country progress reports.

7. In 2023, one of the focuses of the Committee was on the drafting and editing of the handbook on integrating business and trade statistics. The goal for the handbook is to provide a conceptual and methodological framework for integrating business and trade statistics, including national best practices, and to provide guidance for building and strengthening capacities on microdata linking to compile these statistics in an internationally comparable manner. It discusses leading-edge topics such as gender and other social information, digital economy and subnational statistics and contains proposals for new indicators for mainstreaming business and trade. The main target audience for the handbook includes statisticians in charge of producing business and trade statistics, with the aim of building and/or strengthening capacities for producing business and trade statistics. However, the handbook will also be useful for analysts and other stakeholders for understanding how business and trade statistics are integrated.

8.   The Committee also worked on the drafting and editing of volume 2 of the *Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics*. The goal of the *Manual* is to meet policy needs and provide an easier and better reading of foreign trade data. The task team on International Trade Statistics is proposing a list of principal macroindicators regarding both trade in goods and services. These indicators are being designed to meet the needs of users in terms of better quality and analysis of statistics on trade in goods and services by allowing for better monitoring of the trade situation and its impact on economic and social issues such as employment, economic growth, balance of payments and countries' international competitiveness, inter alia.

9.   The Committee welcomed the collaboration with the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics to mainstream gender perspective into business and trade statistics. One of the major components of the work is the development of the guidance note on mainstreaming gender into business and trade statistics, encouraging the planning, collection, production, dissemination and use of sex-disaggregated data, identification of data gaps, enhancement of methodologies and data sources and an expansion of data coverage. The guidance note lays the groundwork for a more gender-inclusive and equitable statistical landscape in all phases of the data value chain and will be used as input in the upcoming handbook on integrating business and trade statistics, which will include a section on integrating gender in business and trade statistics, and volume 2 of the *Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics*.

10.   An increasing number of countries are integrating geospatial information into statistical business registers, which represents an important step towards the development of an integrated statistical geospatial infrastructure. Recognizing the importance of this integration, the Statistical Commission, at its fifty-third session, in March 2022, requested the Committee to develop guidelines to assist countries to integrate geospatial information into statistical business registers. In close collaboration with the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information, the Committee has developed a report describing what it means to integrate geospatial information into statistical business registers, what the benefits of such integration are, how to integrate geospatial information in practice and how to maintain this integration in a sustainable manner. The report will build on existing country practices. The close collaboration with the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information will ensure that the guidelines are fully aligned with the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework.

11.   The Committee also discussed emerging areas of work such as the global initiative on unique identifiers, the integration of business and trade statistics with the environment domains, entrepreneurship, digitalization, multinational enterprises and the measurement of adoption of and investment in automation technologies. The Committee is exploring the need to develop a handbook of business statistics to address the emerging needs. A concept note will be developed to review the business case for developing such a handbook and brought forward to the seventh meeting of the Committee in September 2024 for discussion and recommendation.

III. Progress on the work programme of the task teams

A. Task team on business dynamics, business demography and entrepreneurship, led by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) of Mexico

12.   The work programme of the task team on business dynamics, business demography and entrepreneurship for the period 2023–2025 consists of four components, namely: (a) integration of gender into business and trade statistics;

(b) entrepreneurship, (c) contribution of enterprises to the economy; and (d) cross-cutting issues such as geospatial information and the contribution to volume 2 of the *Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics*.

13. The work on integrating gender into business and trade statistics is focused on two key objectives: first, identifying gender issues relevant to the business and trade sectors, and, second, developing methodologies for systematically collecting and reporting relevant gender-related information on a regular basis. Significant progress was made during 2023 in the area of the integration of gender into business and trade statistics. In close collaboration with the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics, the guidance note on mainstreaming gender into business and trade statistics was developed with the aim of highlighting the importance of such integration and providing an overview of the available international frameworks that link gender, business and trade statistics. Likewise, it describes country practices, and some of them are also included in an internal repository created by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat to leverage combined efforts for the inclusion of a gender perspective in business and trade statistics. The guidance note has been provided to the Commission as a background document.

14. The task team also discussed the plans to update the draft note on measuring entrepreneurship that was developed in 2021, based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-Eurostat Entrepreneurship Indicators Programme. The draft note will be expanded to include determinants such as information and communications technology usage, innovation, training, digitalization and other factors that foster entrepreneurial activities in micro- small and medium-sized enterprises. It is also expected that the perspective for measuring entrepreneurship based on the Evidence and Data for Gender Equality project will be incorporated in the note. During 2024 and 2025, a broad profile on entrepreneurship will begin to be developed through the use of a questionnaire template in selected countries enquiring about certain determinants and variables related to entrepreneurship in businesses.

B. Task team on globalization and digitalization, led by Statistics Canada

15. The work programme of the task team on globalization and digitalization from 2023 to 2025 consists of three principal components: (a) complement and build on current work to record current best practices from national statistics offices in terms of data sources and data collection methods and approaches for measuring e-commerce; (b) understanding the structure of large multinational enterprise groups and their impact on globalization and digitalization statistics; (c) an assessment of the work to date to develop measures of productivity in business statistics and measurement of adoption and investment in automation technology such as the use of artificial intelligence, robotics and their contribution to firm performance.

16. Given the potentially wide scope of both globalization and digitalization, a limited workplan has been proposed to maintain capacity to expand the scope of projects or add deliverables as priorities may emerge. With a stepwise approach, the task team will prioritize its efforts in providing practical advice and potential methodological guidance to portray e-commerce and its impacts more efficiently and accurately. It is envisaged that the draft report will provide recommendations on best practices and future areas of study with respect to new data sources and methods for measuring e-commerce to serve as an input and complement to the United Nations

Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) working group on measuring e-commerce and the digital economy.

C. Task team on international trade statistics, led by Statistics Portugal and Morocco

17. The task team on international trade statistics has focused on revising trade statistics manuals (*International Merchandise Trade Statistics: Concepts and Definitions 2010* and *Manual on Statistics of International Trade in Services 2010*) while ensuring consistency with the update of other relevant statistical frameworks, such as the System of National Accounts (SNA) and the *Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual*. The revision process involves developing and validating guidance notes through inclusive consultations, addressing topics such as informal cross border trade, valuations and the impact of trade on well-being, labour and productivity. The first global consultation was conducted in May 2023, and the second is planned for early 2024. Regarding the timeline, considering the requirements of prioritizing quality and resolving pending issues, including the revision of other trade-related standards, such as the revision of the Central Product Classification and the sixth edition of the *Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual* of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the trade statistics manuals are expected to be completed in late 2025 and submitted to the Statistical Commission for consideration in 2026.

18. The task team on international trade statistics has also worked on the handbook on integrating business and trade statistics and volume 2 of the *Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics* and other economics and social domains. The handbook is aimed at providing a conceptual and methodological framework for the integration of business and trade statistics, including gender, the digital economy and subnational statistics. Volume 2 of the *Manual* contains new indicators to meet policy needs and providing an easier and better reading of foreign trade data in the context of the mainstreaming and integration of business and trade statistics. These are set to be completed by the end of 2024 and submitted to the Statistical Commission in 2025.

19. The task team on international trade statistics has collaborated on trade and gender statistics with the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics, finalizing a guidance note encouraging the planning, collection, production, dissemination and use of sex-disaggregated data in business and trade statistics. The note is incorporated in the handbook on integrating business and trade statistics and volume 2 of the *Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics*, promoting a more gender-inclusive statistical landscape and providing a foundation for informed policy formulation, implementation and evaluation in the context of gender, trade and development.

D. Task team on statistical business registers, led by Statistics Netherlands

20. The Statistical Commission, at its fifty-fourth session, in 2023, approved the establishment of a single task team on statistical business registers to combine the activities of the two previous task teams on exhaustive business registers and on capacity-building. The mandate of the task team is: (a) to advance the methodological development of statistical business registers taking into account evolving user needs and continuous innovation; (b) to identify and develop tools to help countries to improve their statistical business registers; and (c) share knowledge and country practices.

21.   The task team has finalized the manual on the maturity model for statistical business registers to address the comments from the global consultation. Work will continue on the development of a toolkit for the maturity model and the development of a global assessment on statistical business registers.

22.   The global assessment is intended to be conducted regularly in order to obtain a global overview of the status of implementation of the statistical business register in countries and to identify priority areas for technical assistance and topics for further methodological guidance and future work. The basis for the global assessment will be the self-assessment questionnaire, a set of questions to assess the stage of maturity based on the maturity model, with additional questions. There was support from the Committee and the Wiesbaden Group for combining the country progress report with the global assessment. The task team will continue to collaborate with the Wiesbaden Group for the coordination of the global assessment on statistical business registers and the country progress reports collected by the Group.

23.   An increasing number of countries are integrating geospatial information into statistical business registers, which represents an important step towards the development of an integrated statistical geospatial infrastructure. The task team, in close collaboration with the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information, has produced a report describing what it means to integrate geospatial information into statistical business registers and which responds to Commission decision 52/107 (see E/2021/24-E/CN.3/2021/30). The report details the benefits for statistical business registers arising from implementing the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework, highlights how to integrate geospatial information in practice and how to maintain such integration sustainably. It will highlight existing good national practices. The report has been provided to the Statistical Commission as a background document.

24.   The task team has continued to work on a number of topics related to statistical business registers, such as: incorporating geospatial information in the statistical business registers, building on country practices; updating statistical business registers with a revised industrial classification; the methodological development of the joint Statistics Division-OECD global register of multinationals; the integration of the statistical business register and the trade register and the global initiative on unique identifiers for businesses. The task team will continue to work on the preparation of training materials and technical assistance related to statistical business registers and the organization of webinars on specific topics related to statistical business registers.

E.   Task team on well-being and sustainability, led by Statistics Denmark until August 2023

25.   The task team on well-being and sustainability, in collaboration with the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, organized a webinar series on business performance indicators related to well-being and sustainability in 2023. The webinar series provided an overview of the importance of measuring the impact of businesses on well-being and sustainability, a review of data sources, including non-financial reporting, and a forum to share country experiences and identify challenges and opportunities in the compilation of these indicators related to the environment and social aspects of well-being and sustainability. The webinars were well attended, with a majority from developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region but also from countries and international organization from other parts of the world.

F. Global initiative to improve the availability of unique identifiers for businesses

26. The Statistical Commission, at its previous session, in March 2023, endorsed the global initiative on unique identifiers for businesses, which was put forward by the Committee to strengthen the transparency on businesses in countries by improving their registration and the availability of unique business identifiers in administrative data sources in countries and to promote access to and sharing of administrative data for statistical business registers. The existence of a unique legal identifier is essential for a better use of administrative data in the statistical business registers and the linking of data from various sources.

27. The initiative is inspired by the similarities with vital statistics and civil registration systems, wherein vital statistics are viewed as part of a broader system which includes civil registration and identity management systems. In addition, in order to better understand globalization and the profiling of the multinationals in their cross-border legal ownership structures, it is important to link national unique identifiers with global identifiers, which will in turn facilitate the establishment and maintenance of global registers containing the legal structure of multinationals, in particular the Multinational Enterprise Information Platform, developed by the Statistics Division and OECD, and the link between business and trade statistics.

28. As part of a further outreach on this initiative, the Statistics Division, the Committee and the Global Legal Entity Identifier Foundation jointly organized a webinar series on the global initiative on unique identifiers for businesses in 2023. The main objectives of the webinar series were to create awareness of the global initiative and establish a collaborative platform for countries and international organizations to strengthen the registration system in countries.

29. The webinars were well attended and successfully brought together participants from different communities, including the central banks, national statistics offices, registers, experts from business register authorities and other administrative sources, as well as other stakeholders from various international and regional organizations. The webinars pointed to the importance of the availability of unique identifiers at the country level and called for the establishment of unique identifiers in countries when missing and promote access to administrative sources for statistical business registers.

30. The Committee proposes that the next focus be the exploration of concrete ways to strengthen the legal registration of businesses and the management of unique identifiers for the improvement of the statistical business register; the development of a strategy to further guide this initiative; the pursuit of synergies between the business registers and civil registration registers by adapting the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda to business registries; and the identification of possible pilot projects to demonstrate the importance of a sound business registration system to improve statistical business registers and the benefits of mapping to a global unique identifier and their use to jump-start their national systems of unique business identifiers.

IV. Digital economy, e-commerce and digital trade statistics: recent progress

31. At its 2020 session, in decision 51/121, the Statistical Commission welcomed the revised guidelines to produce information and communications technology statistics, recognized the importance of such statistics for sustainable development and for building resilience, and requested additional guidance on the compilation of statistics on information and communications technology services in relation to

e-commerce, the digital economy and the sharing economy (see E/2020/24-E/CN.3/2020/37). The *Manual for the Production of Statistics on the Digital Economy 2020* is now also available in Arabic, French, Spanish and Portuguese.[1]

32. In 2022, UNCTAD introduced an online course on the production of statistics on the digital economy. The course is designed to be administered on a regional basis, with the first implementation welcoming 38 participants (25 women) from 14 Pacific island States. Feedback was highly positive, indicating that online courses are a good way to transmit baseline knowledge for statisticians starting to explore a new area of statistics. Participants intended to share the *Manual*, core concepts and indicators and the course insights with their colleagues, with the aim of kick-starting the production of e-commerce and digital economy statistics in their countries. The Pacific Islands, like many developing countries, face resource constraints in carrying out survey-based data collection on the digital economy but participants were encouraged to carry out the activities on the compilation of balance of payment statistics in accordance with the recommendations in the *Manual* to illustrate other parts of the digital economy. The course will be delivered in other regions over the coming years.

33. In March 2023, UNCTAD published a report[2] taking stock of the availability of statistics on the value of e-commerce sales by businesses across countries. It found limited availability of such statistics, as well as significant variation in the sources and methods used in different countries. In May 2023, the UNCTAD Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy endorsed a recommendation from the Working Group on Measuring E-commerce and the Digital Economy to establish a task group on measuring e-commerce value. The report provides a foundation for the Task Group as it works to develop internationally agreed guidelines and recommendations for the production of e-commerce value statistics that are robust and comparable across countries. The first meetings of the task group were held in the fourth quarter of 2023, with participants from 25 countries and international organizations.

34. IMF, OECD, UNCTAD, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) jointly published a second edition of the *Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade*[3] in July 2023. While leaving the fundamental measurement framework unchanged, the second edition: (a) provides clarifications on the concepts and definitions related to digital trade, and on how to operationalize them; (b) offers extensive compilation guidance based on recent efforts in both developed and developing economies, covering a variety of relevant survey and non-survey sources; and (c) proposes a reporting template to record digital trade transactions. The *Handbook* provides a coherent measurement framework to guide compilers in their efforts to measure digital trade. The conceptual framework constitutes the basis for the compilation of statistics on digital trade which are internationally comparable and consistent with the broader economic accounts. However, further research and empirical testing will be needed to improve and refine the compilation approaches. The *Handbook* also provides the foundation for an active programme of technical assistance and statistical capacity-building, by which the four partner organizations, IMF, OECD, UNCTAD and WTO, can support statistical compilers as they seek to measure, monitor and respond to the challenges of measuring digital trade.

35. In November 2023, WTO and the Arab Monetary Fund funded the first regional workshop on measuring digital trade for Arab countries, based on the *Handbook on*

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[1] Available at https://unctad.org/publication/manual-production-statistics-digital-economy-2020.

[2] Available at https://unctad.org/publication/measuring-value-e-commerce.

[3] Available at www.oecd.org/sdd/its/handbook-on-measuring-digital-trade.htm; https://unctad.org/publication/handbook-measuring-digital-trade; and www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/digital_trade_2023_e.htm.

Measuring Digital Trade. The course was jointly organized with IMF, OECD and UNCTAD, and in cooperation with the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics. The activity also saw contributions from national experts. Other regions will benefit from the training in 2024.

V. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

36.   **The Statistical Commission is invited:**

(a)   **To endorse the amended mandate of the Committee;**

(b)   **To welcome progress made by the Committee and its task teams on advancing business and trade statistics;**

(c)   **To welcome the progress on the development of guidance on the integration of business and trade statistics and on integrating gender and geospatial aspects into relevant business and trade statistics;**

(d)   **To support the development of the global assessment on the statistical business registers and welcome the efforts to coordinate with the Wiesbaden Group on the country progress report;**

(e)   **To welcome the progress in the revision of trade statistics manuals;**

(f)   **To welcome the progress on the global initiative to improve the availability of unique identifiers for businesses;**

(g)   **To endorse the second edition of the *Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade*.**

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