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A Better Institutional Framework for Setting Standards of Official
Statistics*

by

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A Better Institutional Framework for Setting Standards of Official Statistics

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Brief outline of the current way of setting standards in social statistics

1. The setting of statistical standards in social statistics at world level can be described as decentralised. The responsibilities for statistical activities in general, and therefore for setting standards as a subset of statistical activities, is assumed to be an annex competence, either explicit or implicit, to the main subject area in which the many UN specialised agencies act. This set-up reflects the general UN approach that statistical activities should in the first instance serve the information needs of the organisation to which a statistical service is attached.
2. As a consequence, the extent to which standards for statistics are set in a given area of social statistics is driven by the needs for information, analysis, as well as programme planning, implementation and evaluation, of these specialised agencies, i.e. as an instrument to ensure that the organisation receives comparable statistics which are relevant for the specific purposes of these organisations, both from the subject area and country coverage points of view. In view of this purpose, the setting of standards may not even be a distinct activity from data collection, either in organisational terms or in time, but may become an integral part of an activity to generate relevant statistics in a limited period of time, e.g. through a questionnaire for data collection with national authorities, or as part of a survey design for internationally funded data collection at national level. Nor are there necessarily explicit procedures to formally adopt statistical standards as a separate step.
3. It is necessary to briefly discuss at this point what is meant, in the context of this paper, by the term “statistical standard”. It is used in a rather broad sense, including all types of recommendations from international organisations², addressed at producers of national official statistics, for recommended use by these producers if it is decided, at national level, that official statistics in a given subject area should be produced and disseminated in a regular way. Such standards may refer to defining and delimiting certain concepts, translating such concepts into a set of variables for the production of statistical results and into a recommended terminology, the breakdown of such results through standards in the form of classifications, and the translation of the recommended outputs into methods of data collection and processing, especially in terms of statistical surveys or censuses. Since the topic under consideration in this paper is limited to social statistics, the term statistical standard in this paper does not include standards applicable to official statistics in general (economic, social and environmental), e.g. concerning dissemination, organisation

¹ I thank Angela Me from the Statistical Division for her valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Since this paper is about standards at world level, we will not include here the issue of EU statistical standards which are developed and adopted by a supranational organisation.

and confidentiality. All forms of a standard, whether it is called good practice, manual, guide, recommendation, framework classification, or system, are subsumed under the notion of standard, provided it is not considered as draft standard for further testing or discussion, but meant to be used in the regular production of official statistics at national level.

4. It is easily understandable that, as a consequence of the main approach to social statistics at world level, it is extremely difficult to obtain an overview on the currently valid set of standards in social statistics. A partial exception is a specific subset of standards, the classifications, where the classifications web site of UNSD (www.un.org/depts/unsd/class) has proved an important tool in keeping and disseminating up-to-date information on economic and social classifications. Furthermore, there are no mechanisms to ensure that the standards of the different areas of social statistics are at least checked for mutual compatibility before adoption by the various organisations. Difficulties caused through incoherence will therefore only emerge at national level, and especially in statistical systems where most parts of social statistics are centralised in a national statistical institute. The broad spectrum of processes leading to standards also leads to uncertainties about the definition of what should be considered as a standard in the above sense, and about what the status of a given standard is. In addition, the coverage of different subject areas in social statistics by standards is uneven; to the knowledge of the author, no international statistical standards exist for the area of crime and justice, in spite of the increased relevance of statistics in this area for many countries.
5. In standard setting for social statistics, the role of the Statistical Commission is a limited one. With the notable exception of demographic statistics, the Statistical Commission is not considered as a body for decision making on standards in most parts of social statistics where specialised UN agencies have a subject matter policy competence and, derived from this, a competence to decide on statistical standards. Such agencies normally inform the Statistical Commission about their ongoing work, including the setting of standards, which may give rise to a substantive discussion from time to time. However, it is fair to say that substantive discussions with representatives from member countries about new or revised standards in social statistics, if they take place at all, are mainly organised under the umbrella of specialised agencies³, and it is not always guaranteed that the national representatives in such fora include those agencies that are likely to act as producer of official statistics in the specific subject area to be covered by the emerging standard. The discussion at the Statistical Commission on such issues, if it takes place at all, addresses aspects like burden to countries caused by statistical work of specialised agencies, the coherence between standards of different areas within social statistics, or in comparison to economic statistics, the use of such standards in cross-cutting issues like the information society or millennium development goals, but rarely focuses on the methodological adequacy of the standards as such.

³ The ECE, as one regional Commission of the UN, organises joint meetings with specialised UN agencies on statistical issues, including emerging statistical standards, in order to make sure that national statistical offices are invited to such meetings.

6. Recently, efforts to advance the cause of social statistics have been made through so-called city groups. City groups are composed of statisticians, both from national statistical offices and international organisations, and sometimes from research organisations, who commit themselves to contribute, and not just to attend. Examples are the Sienna, the Rio, the Washington, or the Canberra group. Such city groups are informal insofar as they are not part of an intergovernmental structure of any international or supranational organisation, but it was agreed, at the Statistical Commission in 2000, that they should keep the Statistical Commission informed, and that the Statistical Commission can even give concrete tasks to such groups. Some of these groups, e.g. the Canberra group, have produced recommendations in the form of a manual, but the Statistical Commission has only taken note and not adopted them as official statistical standards.

What is the situation in macro-economic statistics?

7. Macro-economic statistics at world level is covered by standards of three organisations: the UN through the Statistical Commission, the IMF, and (if for the purpose of this paper price and wage statistics are considered part of macro-economic statistics) the ILO. For the UN part, the Statistical Commission formally adopts standards such as the SNA⁴ and others, whereas for the IMF and ILO standards, the situation is similar to what was described for social statistics in terms of information and discussion at the Statistical Commission, but without any formal role. However, the main difference in substance is that with the System of National Accounts, there is a framework standard (in the sense of a de facto higher ranking standard) for all economic statistics, which is explicitly accepted by all more specialised standards for macro-economic statistics. This commonly agreed understanding ensures a satisfactory (but not yet maximum) co-ordination between standards set by IMF or ILO and the SNA.
8. Given that the SNA93 not only covers economic indicators expressed in monetary terms (either at current or constant prices), but also employment and population aggregates, the co-ordinating influence of the SNA is felt even in sectors of social and demographic statistics such as employment, labour force, migration and other demographic statistics, income distribution and consumption of private household statistics, at least insofar as standards are concerned.
9. In institutional terms, macro-economic statistics exhibits two more components where there is no parallel in social statistics: a very active and permanent inter-secretariat working group on the main standard SNA, where the international and supranational organisations active in the conceptual development meet regularly, and more recently,

⁴ The SNA is a co-production of five international and supranational organisations, but OECD, IMF and World Bank did not have a formal adoption process at a level comparable to the Statistical Commission. Adopting the European version of the SNA, the ESA, in the EU context of a supranational organisation is a special case and will not be considered any further in this paper. For simplicity, the SNA is therefore considered to be a UN standard.

a permanent advisory group for SNA composed by experts from countries around the world, which should make sure that the aspect of implementation in national frameworks of official statistics is given adequate weight in setting the agenda for the revision and development of standards.⁵ With UNSD acting as secretariat for both groups, it is also guaranteed that one organisation follows the entire area continuously and with the necessary know-how. The results of all these institutional components is a much better coherence between the standards, a clear understanding of what is an officially adopted standard, with one international organisation that feels clearly responsible to act as a clearing-house for all initiatives in this area, and as disseminator of information on on-going work to the whole statistical community in a coherent way.

10. Another important element is the frequent use of existing statistical standards for economic statistics by international organisations in forms of reporting requirements for their member countries (or for certain subsets of their member countries), or commitments by member countries to start a process towards gradually fulfilling such reporting requirements. The most important examples are the Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS) and the General Data Dissemination System (GDDS) of the IMF. Countries are free to commit themselves to any of these two sets of requirements or commitments, which include, among others, the obligation to produce key macro-economic statistics such as GDP, Balance of Payments, or CPI, according to the official international standards. Once countries have subscribed to one of these requirements, their compliance (for SDDS), or progress towards compliance (for GDDS), is monitored. This is a great incentive towards use of international standards by national official statistics.

What can social statistics learn from macro-economic statistics with respect to mechanisms for adopting standards?

11. The first lesson normally drawn from a comparison between economic and social statistics is the lack of a formally adopted and widely recognised conceptual framework in social statistics comparable to the SNA in economic statistics. Many attempts have been made to close this gap intellectually, but so far they have failed to reach the stage of explicit implementation as part of regular production of national official statistics. This paper is not the place to outline the reasons for this development. But the lesson to be drawn is that waiting for the adoption of a conceptual framework as a precondition for better integrating social statistics is like “putting all eggs in a single basket”, the timing and acceptance of which is very uncertain, and which may therefore never be able to hold all the eggs.
12. On the other hand, the great number and variety of actors within the UN system dealing with social statistics, and the great variety of either explicitly or implicitly setting standards, is a big obstacle, both from the point of view of national producers, and that of the growing community of users of international statistics. The latter type of users would like to see such international statistics produced with a similar degree

⁵ For the issue of economic classifications, where an additional group is active, see para. 19.

of authority as national official statistics. Continuing to be as dispersed as has been the case up until now in the production of future standards is likely to further increase the gap between achievements in economic vs. social statistics, and will expose the international system of statistics, and the UN in particular, to complaints of being ineffective, unprofessional and badly managed. The perception of failure in this important part of statistics would undoubtedly have effects on the perception of international statistics per se, and ultimately also discredit national official statistics.

13. One way of addressing this shortcoming, without having to wait for a conceptual framework similar to SNA, would consist in adding to the great variety of processes and places where standards in social statistics are prepared, tested, refined and adopted, a process that could be called the umbrella process. Instead of having an umbrella framework like in economic statistics, social statistics at world level would in future be characterised by a common umbrella process. This process would be an identical step shared by all standard setting procedures in the area of social statistics, irrespective of the diversity of all other steps. To be clear: such a process would not in any way replace existing processes in the various organisations, nor change the responsibilities of each organisation; it would just add an additional layer, either in parallel to or at the very end of this process.
14. The umbrella process that is proposed for consideration can, in the given institutional framework of today, only be a formal adoption of each statistical standard by the Statistical Commission. In operational terms, this would mean that, either in parallel to or after completion of any standard setting process within a specialised agency or other UN body, aimed at a given subset of social statistics, the Statistical Commission would have to add its own adoption process that is successfully applied in macro-economic statistics. The proposal is that explicit approval of a standard in social statistics by the Statistical Commission would in future be a necessary requirement for such a standard to be called a standard of official statistics or, in other words, that without explicit adoption by the Statistical Commission it would not be possible to name any methodology in social statistics as a standard of official statistics at world level. The term “formal” is intended to express the need for an explicit decision for adoption by the Statistical Commission, but is also meant to include a substantive check according to various criteria (and is therefore not “formal” in the sense of a mere rubber-stamping procedure).
15. What is the benefit of this umbrella process? It should not be seen as just another bureaucratic obstacle, but rather the process by which it is ensured that the standards proposed fit into the overall framework of official statistics as described by the fundamental principles of official statistics, which, among other principles, list relevance, professional independence and co-ordination. The fundamental principles that are relevant for standard setting are described in detail in paragraphs 22 to 29. Furthermore, a discussion of proposed statistical standards in the Statistical Commission would also address the issue of cost-effectiveness of the introduction of the new standards at national level. By requiring a successful completion of the umbrella process as a necessary step for being labelled an official statistical standard,

an updated list of valid standards can be derived easily at any moment. In the beginning, the important and resource consuming task of catching up with the existing set of standards (i.e. identifying, filtering, and the adoption of the still relevant part by the Statistical Commission) will have to be carried out in parallel to applying the umbrella process to any forthcoming new or revised standard.

16. Adding the proposed umbrella process would hopefully also give more incentives to specialised agencies for finding ways towards a more systematic inclusion, from the very beginning of their own processes, of the community of national official statisticians, notably from national statistical offices. There will have to be close co-operation between the specialised agency on the one side and the fora working under the Statistical Commission (see below) and UNSD as their secretariat on the other during the whole process until adoption. Concerning the final steps of adoption, by a high-level forum of the specialised agency on the one hand and by the Statistical Commission as conclusion of the umbrella process on the other, the sequence may be chosen either way, but for reasons given in para. 27 one sequence is slightly preferable.
17. There are other lessons that can be learnt from economic statistics. One of the most important is that UN standards in themselves are not sufficient to guarantee that they be used. Countries have an important international incentive to produce economic statistics such as the SNA, and many other economic indicators such as the CPI, according to international standards and in a regular way because of commitments to the Bretton-Woods institutions, notably to the IMF. This adds to strong incentives to produce economic statistics through the requirements of national users and of the national and international economic operators. It has to be mentioned here that the area of labour market is already covered by both the SDDS and GDDS of the IMF, and the GDDS adds population, education and health. It would be interesting to investigate in detail how much the absence of clearly recognised statistical standards in social statistics (other than labour market and population statistics) has prevented an earlier extension of requirements of the SDDS/GDDS type to a wider set of social statistics.
18. An extension of requirements/commitments to produce statistics according to international standards should be welcomed in social statistics for another reason. Unlike economic statistics, where the ups and downs at national level are the prime message of interest to many users (both specialists and the public at large), this is not the case in social statistics (with the notable exception of labour market and migration statistics), due to the relative stability over time of many social phenomena in one country (with transition countries during the transition phase being a very important exception). Sound international comparisons, based on recognised standards, are therefore a very important complement for releases at national level in order to highlight where a country stands. Furthermore, social statistics are mostly expressed in non-monetary terms and, provided the different countries adhere to agreed standards in the compilation of national statistics, can be compared directly, without having to use elaborate constructions such as PPPs.

19. One of the expert groups reporting to the Statistical Commission is the Expert Group on International Economic and Social Classifications. While this group does its best to follow all work in social statistics concerning classifications, it states in its report to the 33rd session of the Statistical Commission (E/CN.3/2002/20) that, compared to economic classifications, “the expert group has been much less aware of the demands and processes that have generated the international standard social classifications”⁶. This reflects again the de facto difference in the co-ordination of economic vs. social statistics in a very important subset of standards, and this in spite of a group that is explicitly mandated to treat economic and social classifications in the same way. The resulting difference in practice is not to blame on this expert group, but is a logical consequence of the other institutional differences between economic and social statistics, notably the fact that there are much more custodians of classifications in the social area, and that no umbrella process for the adoption of such classifications exists.
20. One other lesson from economic statistics: UNSD has to interpret its role in social statistics in a comparable way to macro-economic statistics. This includes feeling responsible for the overall coherence of the standards, playing a proactive role in the various forms of interaction with the specialised agencies so as to inform, and if necessary guide, them in view of the requirements of the umbrella process, and taking steps to “catch up” with the existing stock of standards in social statistics (the status of many standards are not clear, see above, so this would mean assembling, identifying, filtering, assessing coherence and need of revision, and finally bringing an existing standard to the new umbrella process, or asking the responsible agency to start a revision process before submitting it to the Statistical Commission). It is clear that this will have resource implications for social statistics within UNSD.
21. UNSD should not be left alone with this extended role in social statistics, however. It should be assisted by an expert group which combines, in a balanced way, country representatives and representatives from international and supranational organisations⁷. This group would give UNSD assistance in its co-ordination role in social statistics and the associated catching-up process. All fora dealing with social statistics in a broad sense possess one difficulty, however: sustainability. They need experts as members who are able to cover the whole range of topics, and such persons as part of official statistics are not too numerous. If sub-area specialists within the wide range of social statistics were regular members of these new fora, their interest in attending these groups regularly might be limited after an initial period, and their attendance might drop over time. These groups would then be vulnerable to criticism of unbalanced representation, thus reducing their impact. As a consequence, only international organisations (and national statistical offices) with a broad coverage of areas within social statistics would be permanent members of this new expert group;

⁶ Annex, para 7.

⁷ Alternatively, the same set-up as for national accounts could be created for social statistics, with an inter-secretariat group and a separate advisory group composed of country representatives.

specialised UN agencies would have a right to be invited when issues in their sphere of competence are discussed.

The fundamental principles of official statistics and their relationship to standard Setting

Relevance

22. The present decentralised method for setting standards should ensure that for the prime use of these standards, i.e. by the specialised organisation itself, it can be assumed that the criterion of relevance has been assessed with a positive outcome. However, official statistics is a multi-purpose activity that should serve many users of statistics at the same time, and filtering and bundling information needs of various groups of users is one of the core functions of a statistical system. Before being adopted, statistical standards have therefore to be assessed not only against the information needs of the leading international organisation, but also against those of national users, the public at large, and other users at international level.
23. In most cases, specialised agencies have extensive networks with national ministries in their sphere of competence. An international framework for assessing the relevance of statistical standards for government users (and in certain cases even for user organisations outside government) at national level is therefore in place. It is less clear whether these networks are really used for the purpose of systematically assessing proposed international statistical standards against the information needs of national key users. Such a process would be output-oriented, and is therefore not the same as having an ad hoc meeting of national experts to check the methodology of a data collection exercise by an international organisation.
24. An early involvement of national statistical offices, which is one of the desired side effects of the introduction of the new umbrella process, is also likely to contribute to the assessment of relevance of new standards in a broader context. On the other hand, the proposal to add the umbrella process to the existing processes, rather than to see it replacing the existing processes, is mainly motivated by ensuring the relevance of statistical standards for the key policy user at international level.

Professional independence

25. Whereas relevance addresses the output-oriented “what” part of the activity of official statistics, where it is clearly legitimate that major (or priority) decisions are made by politically legitimised authorities outside official statistics proper, the main objective of professional independence is to keep the official statisticians’ decisions about the “how” part of official statistics (methods of data collection, definitions, classifications, and most importantly, forms and content of dissemination) clearly out of reach of political interference and away from conflicts of interest, so as to maintain the trust of all users in the impartiality of the results. This division between the “what” and the “how” parts is clearly applicable to standard setting at the

international level as well. In this context, the meaning of the principle is that the decision on whether to start work on a new standard, or a revision of a standard, should be user driven and, if major resources are involved, should be legitimised by policy bodies in order to ensure relevance. Decisions on the substance of the standards in terms of methodology in the broad sense, including definitions, are clearly part of the “how” aspect and should therefore be made by bodies that are exclusively composed of official statisticians. This principle does not imply that no consultation with users during the process of developing methodological standards should take place (to the contrary: users should be associated all along the process), but rather that the final decisions on all aspects of the “how” should be in the hands of a body of statisticians that is clearly free (and perceived to be free) of any other interest than the impartial measurement.

26. In this respect, a systematic adoption of statistical standards by the Statistical Commission, as proposed through the introduction of the umbrella process, would be a great step forward. The formal adoption bodies of specialised agencies, if they exist at all, are not composed of statisticians alone, even if they might use the label statistics. It is, of course, legitimate to have policy or mixed bodies adopt a statistical standard from the point of view of relevance for the organisation concerned (and the national ministries which are their governing bodies), but the additional adoption by the Statistical Commission as proposed above would add the necessary layer of adoption from the professional point of view by a body that is clearly perceived as operating under the umbrella of professional independence. This would greatly enhance the value and status of such standards for national statistical systems, and increase the possibility for inclusion in requirement lists of the IMF type.
27. As a consequence, the sequence of final adoption steps between the specialised agency and the Statistical Commission would preferably be to see the umbrella process completed by the Statistical Commission first, thus enshrining the methodology, to be followed by the adoption process from the relevance point of view through a policy body of the competent specialised agency (where this is required by the rules of this agency, or considered desirable for other reasons). The two processes would have to be co-ordinated so as to ensure that the end-result is the same. This intensive form of co-operation should then also be reflected in the way the standard is disseminated, e.g. by clearly signalling on the cover page the co-responsibility and co-production of various organisations, as in the case of the SNA.

Co-ordination

28. The fundamental principle no. 8 requires statistical systems to be coordinated. The main issue in the national application context is a) the co-ordination of data collections, notably through statistical surveys, so as to avoid duplication, and of other steps of data production, so as to ensure that definitions used by various producers of the same system are harmonised and that data sources can be shared between different subject areas, and b) the co-ordination of dissemination, so as to avoid the release of contradictory results and ensure consistence in terminology

across all producers of official statistics. The co-ordination effort has to be implemented already when national statistical programmes are prepared (the filtering and bundling tasks referred to above). Another aspect of the co-ordination task, often (but wrongly) assumed to be self-evident, is to ensure that the fundamental principles are implemented to the same extent by all producers of official statistics at national level (e.g. by having the same definition, and the same practice, with respect to statistical confidentiality).

29. It is fair to say that within the UN, many of the co-ordination functions listed above are not (or not yet) very prominent or explicit. At first sight, standard setting may not be the most immediate concern for co-ordination, if compared to issues like data collection and dissemination of results by various UN organisations. The minimum requirement for co-ordination in this respect should be that at any moment, a clear list of valid UN standards is available (as well as advice for implementation to member countries), and that the mechanism for amending this list (either by adding new items or revising existing ones) is clear and ensures prior checking for mutual coherence and fulfilment of relevant criteria for official statistics, such as the multi-purpose relevance and the ability of being integrated into national systems of official statistics. It has been mentioned above that for social statistics, these minimum co-ordination requirements are presently not fulfilled (with the partial exception for classifications). The introduction of the umbrella process, together with a more proactive role of UNSD and active new expert group, are therefore a necessary element to improve the situation with respect to co-ordination.

How to get the process started, or let incentives work

30. Should the introduction of the umbrella process be preceded by a formal mandate by ECOSOC to the Statistical Commission? Hopefully not, because otherwise precious time would be lost. Moreover, ECOSOC does not have any formal power over specialised UN agencies anyway, so it would not be clear what would be gained by addressing ECOSOC explicitly, as compared to getting the process directly started by the Statistical Commission itself.
31. The process could be started in a quite simple way, by the Statistical Commission announcing that it has mandated UNSD to maintain a continuously updated list of standards of official statistics in the area of social and demographic statistics. Only items would be included in the list that were formally adopted by the Statistical Commission. The list would therefore start with standards that have already gone successfully through this adoption process, which is the case mainly for demographic statistics.⁸
32. It is hoped that such an announcement would create enough incentives for specialised agencies to submit to the Statistical Commission what they presently conceive as

⁸ It would be left to UNSD, with the assistance of one or both group(s), to assess whether existing standards falling in this category are still sufficiently relevant to be included in the list as such, or whether they should first undergo a process of revision.

being statistical standards in their respective areas. However, it would be highly desirable that any standard that had been officially adopted by a high-level policy body of a specialised agency, and notably social classifications, would be included in the umbrella process as soon as possible. The Statistical Commission, assisted by the expert group, would have to assess the proposals against a number of criteria to be written down and made transparent, before asking the Statistical Commission to act on such proposals. UNSD and the expert group, assisted by the custodian specialised agencies for the standard, would have to assess whether the standards should be submitted for adoption by the Statistical Commission in their present forms, or whether, for reasons of efficiency and clear indication to countries, it would be preferable to wait for the results of a revision process of such a standard that is on the way or immediately ahead.

33. As for development work leading to new standards, it would in principle be left to the discretion of each specialised agency what exactly they would submit to the Statistical Commission for formal adoption. This possibility exists today as well, but not much use is made of it. Hopefully, the incentives created by the umbrella process would be instrumental in changing this situation. Only once a standard has been included in the list, any subsequent revision would have to be adopted by the Statistical Commission as well, and any development work leading to such a revision would have to be announced as early as possible.
34. There are several advantages of starting the process in this “soft” way. The idea of the umbrella process can be tested in this way. There is no infringement on the prerogatives of any specialised organisation (there are free to decide what they perceive as standards of sufficient importance to launch the umbrella process), and the catching up process with respect to existing standards is distributed over time. The disadvantage is the risk that the different agencies interpret the notion of statistical standards differently, as is the case today, and will, for this or other reasons, propose a more or less inclusive list to the Statistical Commission for adoption. But it can be expected that the growing list will reveal those parts of social statistics which are less covered than others, which would leave the UNSD, a specialised agency, the expert group, a city group or the Statistical Commission to take appropriate initiatives to start a process by which such gaps are addressed.

Delimitation issues

35. At least for the first 5 years, it would be prudent to limit the umbrella process for standards for “statistics” in a given area, and leave aside all “indicators” type of standards. Standards for statistics should ideally precede standards for indicators, which should be based on components already defined as parts of statistical standards. However, proposals for indicators have emerged from various sides without making sure that recognised statistical standards as building blocks exist, and the Statistical Commission has taken appropriate action to streamline and co-ordinate these indicator efforts, and to bring the discussion back to statistical issues (including those related to the fundamental principles). Something like an umbrella process

seems to have emerged for indicators through these actions already, and merging this process already well under way with a new process would not be beneficial for either part. For these pragmatic reasons, it is proposed to keep these two processes separate for the time being, although the delimitation (i.e. the definition of what is an indicator) is far from clear.

36. The issue of social classifications has already been mentioned above. Whether such classifications should continue to be followed by the expert group on international economic and social classifications, or by the new expert group on social statistics, should be decided on the basis of efficiency, synergy and workload. The existing classification group has to steer important revisions of economic classifications in the near future, and their membership is likely to reflect this priority. Together with the issue of synergy, this may point to the solution of subsuming social classifications together with standards in social statistics with the new expert group. If the future arrangement will look like the second option, the title of the existing group should be adapted accordingly.
37. A further issue that should receive some attention is the geographical coverage of the standards that are submitted to the umbrella process. The Statistical Commission is an actor at the global level, and therefore it is the correct body for the adoption of statistical standards with intended worldwide application. Regional standards would be left to appropriate high-level statistical bodies of regional commissions. The problem is that not all regional commissions have a body composed exclusively of official statisticians of sufficiently high status to act in this capacity under the umbrella of professional independence. In such cases, adoption by the Statistical Commission under this umbrella process, at the request of a regional commission, should not be excluded and should be examined case by case.