

Global Conference on a
Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics:
“Towards a Strategic Framework for Statistics in Support of the Post-2015 Development
Agenda”

Concept Note

Purpose and background

The Global Conference on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics is organized jointly by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat). The conference seeks to formulate an adequate response to the increased demand for detailed and timely data to monitor progress on the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda. These goals and targets are universal in the sense that they concern all UN member states, but they are specific at the same time in the way they are formulated at sub-national, national and regional levels. These new demands require a more efficiently functioning national statistical system. This Conference is organized as a High-Level Forum of official statisticians with the purpose to seek a broad consensus on the strategic framework for statistics for the consideration of the 46th Session of the Statistical Commission in March 2015.

This Conference can also be seen as a direct follow-up to the Friday Seminar on “Managing the Data Revolution”, which took place on 28 February 2014 as a side-event of the 45th session of the Statistical Commission. The objective of that seminar was to clearly emphasize the strategic necessity of modernizing the national statistical systems in order to respond not only to the regular requests for sound official statistics, but also to emerging needs, such as those that will inevitably arise from the post 2015-development agenda and the expansion of integrated economic, social and environmental statistics.

Most significantly, the Global Conference is a follow-up to Decision 45/103 taken by the Statistical Commission in March 2014 after its discussion of the programme review of the Friends of the Chair Group on the Broader Measures of Progress, in which the Commission requested

- (1) to engage in the debate on the data revolution, and reiterated the critical need for adequate statistical capacity, both technical and institutional, and the need for coordinated efforts and investments to fill the data gaps and satisfy the new data requirements,
- (2) to address the need for the development of new data sources, methods and methodologies resulting from the requirements of the post-2015 development agenda, taking into account the possibilities of new technologies,
- (3) to include in its future work programme the issue of household surveys and their critical role in providing data for the post-2015 development agenda, and

- (4) to address the need for an integrated statistics approach and for a shared standard business architecture and information model allowing for efficiency gains to meet the new demands of the post-2015 development agenda.

The general context of this Global Conference is set by the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (2012) and its outcome document “The Future We Want”, the report of the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda calling for a “data revolution” that was released in 2013, and most recently the Open Working Group discussions and negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets as well as the conclusions by the Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution and Sustainable Development.

Time and venue

The *Global Conference on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics* will take place in New York at the United Nations Headquarters from 15 to 16 January 2015.

Participants

Heads of national, regional and international statistical agencies will be invited to participate in the Conference. This High Level Forum is expected to provide an occasion for the exchange of views and ideas and the contribution of the expertise and experience of its participants on a strategic framework for statistics in support of the post-2015 development agenda and consider its management implications for the statistical system.

Outcome

The conference will aim at bringing together the different initiatives, threads of work and efforts done and planned in the context of the topic of the Global Conference based on which it is expected to formulate a strategic framework for statistics in support of the post-2015 development agenda. The conclusions of the Global Conference will be presented to the Commission’s 46th session in March 2015 as part of a report for discussion and decision and any related actions taken by the Commission will subsequently be included in the Commission’s final report to ECOSOC.

Main themes of the Conference

The following main themes will be discussed during the two-day Global Conference under its various agenda items, subject to finalization of the organization of the sessions of the Conference.

New requirements from policy demands for the global statistical system

The Global Conference has the purpose to determine the path and set the strategy for developing and implementing the statistical response to the call for measuring and reporting progress towards achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs), as included in the outcome document “The Future We Want” of the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. In that document, world leaders with particular emphasis “recognize[d] that progress towards the achievement of the goals needs to be

assessed and accompanied by targets and indicators, while taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and levels of development.”¹ In this context, the Rio+20 Conference also recognized the need for integrated social, economic and environmental information and called for holistic and integrated approaches to sustainable development for decision making at national, sub-national and local level. The ability of the national statistical offices and national statistical systems of countries to effectively, efficiently and sustainably measure and report progress towards meeting the SDG targets and goals through the use of relevant indicators is therefore a key component of the post-2015 development agenda.

The urgency of addressing the national statistical capacity to measure and report on progress in sustainable development was highlighted in the report of the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. It concluded that a “data revolution” was necessary to improve the quality of statistics and information available to citizens. Since then, the political momentum around data and their relevance to the development agenda has grown steadily. A transformative change, referred to as data revolution – described as a scientifically sound and sustained, transformative effort toward improving how data are produced, analysed and used – is needed to generate the necessary flow of high-quality, timely and sustainably produced data in support of the post-2015 development agenda. Reliable and timely data that cover all significant aspects of sustainable development as formulated in the 17 goals adopted in the Open Working Group process in July 2014, are needed to ensure that the decisions by governments, international and regional agencies, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, academia, the private business sector and even the general public are evidence-based. Integrated statistics are required to address multi-dimensional phenomena such as poverty, sustainable production and consumption, climate change and globalization and are indispensable for the new post-2015 development agenda.

To achieve the above described goal, traditional statistical processes will need to be redesigned to become more integrated and efficient and to yield timelier and better and/or differently disaggregated data. Administrative records must be improved and adequate legislation put in place at the country level ensuring access to those data and regulating their usage, with the utmost respect for confidentiality, privacy and caution in data storage and dissemination. In addition to the more widespread use of administrative data, in order to provide official statistics with more immediate, regular and consistent statistical information, the thematic coverage of surveys and the range of administrative sources used must be expanded to integrate the new concerns emerging from the current development debate. Efforts must be made to prepare statistical services to be able to collect disaggregated data at the lowest possible level, by sex, age, geography, income (wealth quintiles), disability status, ethnicity, indigenous status and other vulnerable social groups, and, if and when the need arises, by other categories and groupings so that they can be used directly by local communities and actors, and serve as a meaningful vector for change at the grassroots level.

New, non-traditional data sources need to be leveraged and considered for adequacy to enrich the sources of official statistics so that the data needs in new development areas can be satisfied and timely, detailed and spatially disaggregated data can be produced and made available to decision makers to provide them with the necessary statistical information to address inequalities, the relationship between the

¹ “The Future We Want”, outcome document of the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, United Nations, 2012, para. 250.

environment and the economy and other current and emerging issues. The innovative and transformative power of IT must be harnessed: from the collection stage (through, for example, the use computer-assisted collections through mobile devices), to the dissemination stage (through advanced visualization tools, such as data on maps).

Data liberation and transparency about their production are part of the data revolution. Open access to data, metadata and underlying methodologies will not only promote transparency and ensure accountability, but also unleash the analytical creativity of users. In this process, official statisticians must develop new approaches to educate their data users, be it politicians, academics, the corporate sector or the general public, to assist them to understand and interpret statistical data correctly.

Modern statistical production processes based on common statistical business architecture

Building on the leadership and recommendations of the High-level Panel and the Secretary-General's report *A Life of Dignity for All*, in addition to the previously mentioned documents and initiatives, and in particular, being able to benefit from the expertise of participants during the present Global Conference, a framework for statistics in the form of a transformative strategy is in the process of being formulated to outline how national statistical offices and their statistical systems need to transform the statistical production processes to be able to meet the emerging multi-dimensional and integrated data demands of the post-2015 development agenda and related Sustainable Development Goals indicators, how the transformation process can be financially assisted and what other institutional and management implications at national, regional and global level are there or should be elaborated. This strategic framework is taking shape and is to be designed so that it forms the basis for a more concrete programme with short, medium and long-term actions by statistical services. These programmatic actions are to be agreed gradually and should contribute to closing the data gaps, strengthening national statistical capacities and improving regional and international coordination in delivery of capacity building and mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the SDGs. In a broader sense, they should be instrumental in providing the information basis for evidence-based decision making that should make possible to improve well-being for the widest possible range of the world's population, the ultimate goal in the SDGs and in the post-2015 development agenda. In addition, it should incorporate the new opportunities in statistics linked to innovation, technological progress and the surge of new public and private data providers outside the conventional data production by national statistical systems of countries and also through effective public-private partnerships that strengthen accountability at the global, regional and national level. The public-private partnerships with business, civil society, academia and other relevant actors should be mobilized through existing and new networks.

The transformative agenda for statistics requires a considerable, concerted and sustained investment in national statistical capacity building based on the technical and institutional aspects of the integrated statistics approach. It is through these sustained investments in a modern integrated statistical production architecture that a comprehensive and effective monitoring and reporting of social, economic, and environmental perspectives of the universal and transformative post-2015 development agenda can be established.

Work on designing the integrated statistical production architecture will need to be launched now, however, it can only be implemented progressively, over time, based on country-determined priorities and

in a way to meet immediate country needs through quick wins. It has to be innovative and indicate how traditional and domain-specific statistical production processes have to be redesigned to become more integrated and cost effective, contribute to reducing response burden and yield timelier, high quality and better/differently disaggregated data. Household and business surveys will need to be designed and redesigned in national integrated survey systems against a backbone of central business and civil registers supported by and linked to administrative data sources, population, housing, agriculture and other censuses.

With the intent of fully exploiting administrative sources for statistical purposes, access to administrative records must be significantly improved in many parts of the world to provide more immediate, regular and consistent statistical information for official statistics purposes. Regarding business and household surveys, their thematic coverage must be expanded to integrate the new socio-economic and environmental concerns emerging from the current state of our world and its people and the ongoing development debate. Efforts must be made to collect disaggregated data at the lowest possible level by a range of different disaggregations. The new integrated statistical production architecture must be a flexible system to allow the integration of the statistical measurement of future new emerging issues without the need for costly modifications to the system.

Innovations in data collection, data dissemination, data access and data analytics

The new integrated production architecture will also introduce innovations to incorporate non-traditional sources of data including “big data” that so far have not been used or have been underutilized in official statistics. Notwithstanding their potential benefits for use in producing official statistics, the suitability of new, non-traditional data sources for official statistical purposes has to be thoroughly examined, evaluated and solutions should be found how to exploit the potential benefits by creating links of the non-traditional data sources with traditional ones and resolving their incorporation into official statistics while maintaining the existing strict quality and other requirements followed by official statistics. It must not be allowed that the use of non-traditional sources compromises the professional standards of official statistics laid down in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and risk public trust in official statistics either at the country, or international level.

The innovative and transformative power of ICT must also be harnessed, in view of the ubiquitous availability of communication networks: from the collection stage (e.g., multi-mode through the use of mobile devices and satellites), through the analysis stage to the dissemination stage (e.g., open data portals and advanced visualization tools using geo-location data and maps). The innovations should also extend to facilitate the access, interpretation, analysis and use of data effectively in the daily work of all categories of data users.

Innovations also have to be introduced in promoting metadata driven production, data and metadata exchange and IT processes, which will allow further standardization of statistical processes, analytics and applications for which close and enhanced national, regional and international collaboration will be necessary in building and implementing common statistical products and services.

This innovation drive will extend to open access to data, respectful of national and international data confidentiality, right to privacy policies and right to access information, to promote transparency and ensure accountability, at the same time unleashing the analytical creativity of users.

Means of implementation

Business as usual is not an option and will be insufficient for making the transition from the existing to modern national statistical systems to meet the data reporting needs for the post-2015 development agenda and to provide evidence based information for country-level decision making to promote sustainable development, its interlinked social, economic and environmental components at national, regional and world levels. It is necessary to articulate an advocacy strategy that maintains the political momentum of high interest in the availability of better data world-wide and mobilizes domestic and external resources to make considerable and sustained investments in the human, technical and institutional aspects of a modern national statistical production architecture for creating and maintaining sustainably managed and constantly evolving national statistical systems responsive to the new challenges faced by societies individually and collectively at present and, anticipating changes affecting future generations. This strategy should reach out to national policy makers for domestic resource mobilization and regional and international funding agencies, including the donor community, for regional and global resource mobilization. In this context the strategy should also address the coordination of statistical capacity building efforts at the country level, for the most efficient use of domestically and internationally available resources, particularly for critical areas of institution building, including the legal and regulatory environment, upgrading statistical staff skills, register and frame setting (i.e. census taking), integrated system of household and business surveys, use of administrative data, maintenance and updating of statistical classifications. The strategy should encompass flagship initiatives in various statistical domains including basic population and social statistics (e.g. civil registration and vital statistics programmes, migration statistics, labour statistics, poverty statistics) basic economic and environment statistics (e.g. energy, agriculture, environment, merchandise trade, trade in services and globalisation statistics), national, international and environmental-economic accounting (including satellite accounting of health, tourism, etc.) and statistics of cross-cutting issues such as governance, security, or climate change giving careful consideration to the domains where existing concepts, methodologies may need to be updated or new ones developed.

The international statistical community is aware of the magnitude of this task, the urgency to deliver results and the professional responsibility to do a good job. It is also aware of constantly shrinking financial resources for statistical work at country and international levels, therefore the exchange of ideas on resource mobilization at this Global Conference is considered essential.

Organization of sessions and the agenda of the Global Conference

The Global Conference being organized as a platform of exchange and debate, motivated the co-organizers to limit, for practical reasons, the circle of participants mainly to representatives of invited national, regional and international statistical institutions. However, to make the consultative process an inclusive process, other events are most likely to take place on the margins or after the 46th session of the Statistical Commission in March 2015 and will build further on the guidance from the Commission. It is expected that future events will involve a broader range of stakeholders in consultations on the transformative process aiming at increasing the efficient operations of statistical services globally, and may include participants from e.g. academia, business sector and donor community etc., with the format of those events to be decided later as it may include country-level meetings, retreats, online discussion

forums and others. The present Global Conference will certainly provide input and useful suggestions also for the organization of such future events.

The agenda of the present two-day Global Conference will be organized in 4 main blocks and in addition, will include an opening and closing (concluding) session.

Main blocks/sessions:

1. New requirements from policy demands for the global statistical system
2. Modern statistical production processes based on common statistical business architecture
3. Innovations in data collection, data dissemination, data access and data analytics
4. Means of implementation

All documents of the Global Conference will be made available on the Conference website at: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/workshops/2015/NewYork/lod.asp> .