

Concept Note

Regional/Sub-regional Conferences on Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics in support of the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Purpose and background

The regional continuation of the joint Eurostat-UNSD initiative on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics builds on the outcome of the Global Conference on the Transformative Agenda¹ held on 15 and 16 January 2015 in New York and the recognition of the Statistical Commission at its 46th session²³ for the need to strengthen the coordination of work streams between the global and regional levels.

New policy and data demands require an effective and efficient response through the modernization of national statistical systems, regardless of their respective level of statistical development, with the support of the regional and global statistical community. The Statistical Commission supported the call for the modernization of statistical systems taking into account, but not limited to, the following thematic areas: (i) coordination at and between the global and regional statistical systems; (ii) communication and advocacy; (iii) integrated statistical systems: data collection, processing and dissemination; through integrated statistical systems; (iv) innovation and modernization through standards-based statistical business architecture; and (v) training and capacity-building.

It is proposed that the regional continuation of the UNSD-Eurostat initiative on the Transformative Agenda for official statistics will be based on a series of regional and sub-regional conferences organised in close consultation with the member states, the regional commissions and agencies and other partners. It is expected that these series of Conferences will be held between November 2015 and October 2016 with the intention to build on and verify the recommendations provided by the Global Conference.

This concept note aims to give directions to such regional/sub-regional conferences.

¹ More information and material about the Global Conference can be found on the UNSD website: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/workshops/2015/NewYork/lod.asp>

² E/CN.3/2015/6 and its related background document <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc15/BG-TransformativeAgenda.pdf>

³ E/2015/24-E/CN.3/2015/40...and requested the Bureau of the Commission, with the support of the Secretariat, to conduct a mapping of the existing coordination mechanisms and work streams with a view to identifying those areas that require priority action for a transformative agenda for official statistics and to submit proposals for consideration by the Commission at its next session. <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc15/Report-E.pdf>

Objective of the Regional Conferences

The Regional Conferences on the Transformative Agenda will be organised with the objective a) to raise awareness and share information about transformative initiatives at the national, regional and global level; b) to set priorities for actions for the five thematic areas identified by the Global Conference and consider additional thematic areas; and c) to reflect on existing and new coordination mechanisms and to consider needs for capacity building.

As requested by the Commission, a progress report on the findings from the regional/sub-regional consultations are expected to be submitted at its next session in 2016 for its consideration.

The need for improving the coordination and alignment of the statistical programmes at the global and regional level is a response to new policy requirements, such as the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the role of statistics in measuring and monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁴. This response from the statistical community builds on the principle of national ownership, the increasing user need for more detailed and high quality statistics and indicators, the exploitation of non-traditional data sources and the use of innovative technology. This changing environment requires a statistical agenda that can mainstream modernisation of statistical production processes through a more integrated systems approach. The Transformative Agenda should not focus only on the modernisation of production processes at country level, but also aims at reconsidering the institutional environment for the production of official statistics in this changing environment and how the global and regional statistical community can promote and support this statistical transformation.

The Regional Conferences will be organised as High-Level Forums for senior managers of statistical agencies with the purpose to seek a broad consensus on the five thematic areas for the transformation of national, regional and international statistical systems, to identify recent initiatives that have emerged in each region, and eventually to discuss best practices implemented at national level. Each Regional Conference is expected to be structured according to these 5 main thematic areas identified at the Global Conference and where appropriate complemented with regional thematic priorities: (i) coordination at and between the global and regional statistical system (ii) communication and advocacy; (iii) data collection, processing and dissemination; through integrated statistical systems; (iv) innovative methods, tools and information technology infrastructure, including standards-based business architecture; and (v) training and capacity-building. A more detailed description of these 5 thematic areas can be found in the annex to this concept note.

A progress report on the drafting of the Transformative Agenda for official statistics based on the regional consultations will be presented at the forty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission in March 2016 and at similar regional statistical commissions in 2016. It is expected that a final report with a detailed

⁴ The Rio+20 outcome document: [The future we want](#); the UN Secretary Generals' Synthesis report (A/69/700): [Road to Dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet](#); the report of the UN Secretary General's High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda: [A new global partnership: Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development](#); and the report by the UN General Assembly intergovernmental Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals ([A/68/970](#)).

Transformative Agenda and concrete operational actions will be submitted to the forty-eighth session of the Commission in 2017 and at similar statistical commissions in 2017.

Time and venue

The series of regional/sub-regional conferences are expected to be held between November 2015 and October 2016. It is foreseen that these conferences be organised back-to-back as much as possible with other regular regional/sub-regional statistical events and meetings.

Participants

The Regional Conferences are targeted at Heads of national, regional and international statistical agencies. The participation of Heads/Chief Statisticians of national statistical agencies of less developed countries may be financed by the organisers. Multilateral and bilateral donors active in the respective regions should also have the opportunity to participate and contribute.

Organisation of sessions and expected outcome

The Regional Conferences have an expected duration of 2 to 3 days and will provide regional platforms for formulating an aligned global and regional Transformative Agenda for official statistics in support of the post-2015 development agenda.

The Conferences will include breakout sessions for which participants will be split into smaller groups to discuss concrete outputs and recommendations for the five thematic areas. The outcome of the breakout sessions will be then shared and discussed in plenary with the intervention of selected panellists.

For each of the Regional Conferences, one additional half-day will be dedicated for a meeting with all main multi-lateral and bilateral donors and selected countries to discuss more specifically needs for and coordination of capacity building programmes in the framework of the Transformative Agenda.

It is essential that during the 2 to 3 days of each Regional Conference, all participants from regional and global statistical agencies as well as from multilateral and bilateral donors actively participate.

Budget and resources

The financial contribution for the organization of the cycle of Regional Conferences on the Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics depends on the number of regional/sub-regional conferences held and on the extent they will be organised back-to-back with other statistical events and meetings. It is therefore expected that the costs for each of the conferences could be between USD 30,000 and 70,000, including funding of selected member countries, consultants and travel cost of UNSD officials. These amounts do not include contributions in-kind such as meeting facilities and interpretation from UN regional commissions and other hosting organisations that would also be in charge, under the guidance of the co-organisers, of the logistics and proceedings of the Conferences.

Annex

Coordination at and between the global and regional statistical system

Modernizing statistics and strengthening the global, regional and national statistical systems in order to respond more effectively and efficiently to the new policy requirements, such as the Post-2015 development agenda, require a truly coordinated global and regional statistical programme. Such programmes should be formulated around specific objectives like: (i) developing and implementing standards and principles; (ii) integrating statistics with national planning and development; (iii) supporting transparency and openness; and (iv) promoting the use of new methods, technology and data. An essential element next to the communication on such a programme, to make it effectively work is coordination. This coordination on a global level has to be governed by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) and takes into account when implementing all levels: international, regional and national level.

In the context of transforming the statistical systems at all levels, it is even more evident that there is a clear need to further strengthen the coordination at and between international and regional levels in order to formulate coherent global and regional work programmes on statistics which covers activities such as: (i) the development and mainstreaming of statistical standards; (ii) the alignment of technical cooperation activities in countries with common objectives; (iii) a reduction of the response burden to countries and avoiding duplication of efforts in international data collection and dissemination; and (iv) a communication/advocacy programme with common messages. A first priority on coordination is on the tentative list of SDGs indicators. Since data for the SDG are not all readily available from official statistics, it is important that the global and regional statistical system coordinates its programme of work with non-official statistics institutions/data providers in order to harness new and existing initiatives. Similarly, with geospatial information playing a vital role in the modern statistical business architecture, it is crucial for the statistical community to collaborate, if not integrate, with the geospatial information community.

In different contexts, coordination models can also be different. Existing models might need to be strengthened or adopted like the coordinating role of the CCSA, other governance models of coordination can be used and developed to facilitate specific situations, like models with a strong legal mandate or to more technical cooperation models. It is particularly important to have a regional approach to coordination and to fully align regional and international work programmes. Regionally, the suitability of the various governance models need further reflection, but should be reviewed to guide the strengthening of the governance structure of the global statistical system.

Coordination is also essential for the national statistical system. Effective coordination of the national institutions in the national statistical system is an enabling factor in the national implementation of an integrated statistical systems, the integration of statistics into national planning; the introduction of innovative tools, techniques and the use of non-traditional data sources; and in the implementation of international statistical standards and principles.

Communication and advocacy

Communication on and advocacy of official statistics are essential pillars of the work programme for national and international statistical organisations. They reflect the dissemination and outreach as well as the impact and added value of statistics for managing a society. Communication and advocacy contain a series of actions, of which branding, the communication on the values, go well beyond established better known activities like dissemination and making the statistical information accessible for a wider use.

Dissemination of information is in a competitive market for statistics more and more a field of innovation and modernization. Modern visualisation tools, access to meta information and quality profiles are essential elements of such a competitive way of disseminating result.

The comparative advantages and qualities of official statistics have to be communicated strongly. Therefore, branding of official statistics is crucial, given this competition from other data providers. The comparative advantages of official statistics include its' i) objectivity/independence, ii) transparency of its data and methods, iii) respect for privacy and confidentiality, iv) adherence to international standards and comparability of data, v) stability as a data provider, vi) the relevance of the information it provides, and vii) the quality of the data it provides.

Another important role of effective communication of the value of official statistics is to mobilize sufficient resources and investments, particularly in modernizing statistical systems. It is therefore important to communicate the business case that the benefits of an improved statistical system exceed the costs of a national programme for modernization.

Coordination of work in statistics cannot be done without appropriate communication between the national, regional and international organisations involved. Tools for such communication cover a wide variety of media, from meetings and conferences to guidelines and standards, newsletters to social media, and from general overviews to sharing best practices in specific thematic domains. Communication is also an element that creates the bridge to mutual trust across different entities working towards improving statistical systems and more generally, enhancing communication can help establish trust with the users and data providers.

Specific types of communication can be tailored to meet concrete needs. For instance, the benefits in maintaining quality standards can be useful to get non-official producers maintaining a specific standard of quality, and communicating the benefits of the use of administrative data for statistical purposes in lowering costs of collection and response burden could reduce the reticence of administrative data providers to share these data.

Integrated statistical systems: data collection, processing and dissemination of integrated statistics

The transformative statistical agenda proposes to guide countries towards an integrated National Statistical System (NSS) that encompasses statistical organisations and departments within a country that collectively produce official statistics for which the organisational structure, the production processes and the products and services are designed, implemented and monitored based on internationally agreed principles and standards for official statistics. The aim of the global and regional statistical programme on integrated systems is to assist countries in their priority setting for mainstreaming the required institutional arrangements and the statistical production processes along with the implementation of principles and standards, such as the SNA and SEEA.

Institutional arrangements for the modernisation and integration of statistical systems depend greatly upon the existing and future legal environment, the coordination and governance arrangements, the ICT infrastructure as well as the available human and financial resources. Integrated systems contribute and benefit from effective national coordination and management mechanisms, and the use of standard tools, methods and technologies that can be shared not only across the national statistical system, but also among national systems. Moreover, advancing a standards-based architecture for integrated statistical systems may further facilitate the global and regional coordination of capacity building programmes through standardization of various segments of the production processes, irrespective of the level of maturity of the national statistical system.

The design and implementation of integrated statistical systems warrant the adoption of international statistical standards and frameworks. International methodology, nomenclatures and guidelines are developed by international agencies to ensure that there is a standardised and consistent approach to classifying, measuring and reporting of statistical data. This approach will not only advance comparability between countries but, through the development of national adaptation of international standards and classifications will also lead to improved coordination and coherence of the national administrative information system. In that respect, statistical frameworks such as the SNA and SEEA offer the integrated measurement of different aspects of the economy, the society and the environment and have significantly contributed to the overall consistency, coherence and harmonisation of basic statistics and indicators. Notwithstanding, there is still considerable work to be done for developing international standards on the data collection for integrated sets of household and business statistics to complement the macro standards.

A programme of work on data collection, production and dissemination based on the integrated system architecture is proposed to foster global and regional coordination of the national household and business statistics programmes. The formulation of practical guidelines for the harmonisation of business and household statistics could consider the harmonisation of survey questionnaires, the use of administrative data sources and the development of a central metadata catalogue. Such a programme could also support the creation of a common portal on practices related to multi-source/mix-mode data collection, compilation and dissemination.

Related to this programme, two categories of data sources have to be considered for the production of household and business statistics. On the one hand, primary data which is the traditional source of

information for the production of statistics and is collected mainly through statistical surveys and censuses. The programme aim to address the traditional silo organisation of data collection, processing and dissemination across statistical domains such as the creation of shared or harmonized registers and frames, common sampling, collection and processing methodology. On the other hand, secondary (or administrative) data are collected for non-statistical purposes but may be reused for the production of official statistics. Secondary data may be drawn from public and/or private sources and can be further subdivided into structured data and unstructured data or big data. While the potential for and opportunities to use structured administrative data for the production of official statistics may be promoted in respect to the reduction of the administrative burden, further work needs to be undertaken under the programme on integrated statistical system about the access and use of big data.

Innovation and modernization through standards-based statistical business architecture

The swift technological development in which official statistics is operating is definitely challenging the way data are collected, processed and disseminated in the near future. The official statistical community, to remain relevant, should turn this challenge into an opportunity and fully exploit the innovative and transformational potential of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) for the production of statistical information. Examples are the application of social media and mobile devices for collection and dissemination, the introduction of the open data concept and cloud computing, the use of artificial intelligence and the mainstreaming of data visualisation. For a global and regional programme on the innovative and transformational power of shared ICT, it is proposed to identify common programmatic priorities for statistical systems at different levels of development.

In order to establish a collaborative global and regional programmatic component on innovation and modernization through a standards-based statistical business architecture for the Transformative Agenda, a degree of standardisation of production processes within a national statistical system, but also across national systems, is a prerequisite. In that respect, the work of the High-level Group for the Modernization of Statistics on generic tools and models supporting the design of standardised and integrated statistical business architecture has global relevance. With the uptake of these generic standards for integrated business processes, it is expected that international synergies and economies of scale can be achieved with the progressive introduction of similar business processes and structures at the country level. The establishment of common national data and metadata portals can be considered a high priority to advance data access and exchange as part of the standards-based business architecture. In this respect, standards such as SDMX and the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) could be mainstreamed in order to further promote transparency and facilitate regional and international data sharing and reporting. These two standards have provided valuable support to the modernisation of statistics, but their potential has probably not been fully exploited and to some extent, data exchange and transmission between organisations has remained rather traditional.

Cloud computing and cloud repository of data and metadata have emerged as viable options for use by the statistical system. In this regard, the practices of the cloud computing for official statistical purposes, such as those undertaken by the IMF, WB and AfDB initiatives in developing Open Data Platform, may be shared and explored. Moreover, the global and regional statistical programme could advance cloud computing by addressing the present perceived impediments about issues related to confidentiality and security and in particular investigated how and when cloud computing could be considered for access to micro data and sharing innovative “sandbox tools” for the production of statistics and the experimentation on Big Data.

The widespread proliferation of internet-enabled mobile devices, better access to broadband and the explosion of social media use, have changed the culture with which people interact with one another and is dramatically changing the way users and customers seek access to information, data and statistics.. In a society with an ever increasing ecosystem of information and data providers, the national statistical agencies should reconsider its existing basket of products and services to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive market. Therefore, it seems important to share and understand the new product

and service lines that are being developed to add value and relevance through the principles and standards for official statistics.

Finally, there is a large consensus that modernisation is an on-going process moving up the maturity ladder instead of a certain state or condition at a particular point in time. In that respect, the word “transformative” in “transformative agenda” expresses well the need to constantly adapt statistical systems to emerging external and internal environments. Thus, the standardisation of business processes through standard-based statistical business architecture should not be perceived as a straightjacket, but rather as a modular approach that can be applied flexibly depending on the level of maturity of the statistical system.

Training and Capacity building

Modernisation and integration of national statistical systems is not only a challenge for developing countries and transition economies but for all national statistical systems. Modernization is considered a continuous process to adapt to a fast evolving technological environment, which requires a continuous review of the way data are collected, processed and disseminated along with the adjustment of the institutional and organisational framework of official statistics. Moreover, it is recognised that delaying the implementation of integrated statistical systems, production methods and tools could compromise the capacity of the statistical community at national, regional and international level to respond appropriately to the swift evolving demands for high-quality statistics in the post 2015 era.

The deliberations on the post 2015 agenda brought statistical capacity building again to the forefront of the development agenda. While in recent years, good progress has been made in developing capacity to produce official statistics for policy making and general information purposes, in many countries the virtuous circle of (i) mainstreaming sound institutional and organisational environment, (ii) enhancing capabilities and infrastructure, (iii) adopting internationally agreed principles and standards, and (iv) improving statistical production processes was not systematically implemented. Therefore, despite the progress, it is widely acknowledged that the statistical capacity in many countries is still not adequate, and requires substantial support and additional investments for the monitoring of national and international development policies, including the post-2015 development agenda.

Reorganising and re-engineering the production processes of official statistics will take several years and will require high involvement of scarce expertise along with substantial additional investments in IT and infrastructure. It is acknowledged that these investments will produce in the medium and long run important efficiency gains, but that in the meantime, statistical authorities will have to continue with the regular production of information and the implementation of new statistical standards and frameworks. For less developed statistical systems, with reduced absorption capacity, this could be considered as a real challenge and make them vulnerable during the transition phase against users, stakeholders but also emerging competitors on the “market”.

During the Global Conference, the concept of a Modernisation Maturity Model (MMM) was proposed that would allow benchmarking national statistical systems against international principles and standards, best national practices on integrated statistical systems, and the use of various standard based modernisation tools. Also the tool could provide a common core for a “transformative check-up” that could support the accountability and coordination of deliveries among international and bilateral donors. The pending questions are how should such a MMM look like in practice and how the assessment tool with a common core could complement existing assessment and review tools such as snapshots, peer reviews and other assessments.

Modernization goes beyond the use of new ICT, standards-based modernisation tools and sound institutional and organisational arrangements. Human capital is probably one of the essential factors in the perspective of the modernisation of statistics. Therefore continuous training opportunities to statisticians and managers of the statistical agencies, including technical courses on subject matter statistics and related production processes as well as managerial courses on change/project management and

communication, should be provided by bilateral and multilateral partner organisations. In addition to in-country training and capacity building, initiatives for distance learning through e-learning portal have to be scaled up and coordination to be improved to seek economies of scale. Furthermore, during the overall transition process, communication and advocacy support to the Chief Statisticians could be provided on the benefits of the implementation of the transformative action plan.