

Introduction

The 2018 edition of the United Nations *Statistical Yearbook* is the sixty-first issue of this publication, prepared by the Statistics Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, of the United Nations Secretariat. The contents of the *Yearbook* continue to be under review and the number of tables has been reduced as a result. Additional tables are expected to be introduced in future editions. Please send any comments or views to our email address, statistics@un.org. The tables include series covering an appropriate historical period, depending upon data availability (as of 31 July 2018) and space constraints, for as many countries, territories and statistical areas of the world as available. The tables cover a period up to 2018, with some of the data being estimated.

Objective and content of the Statistical Yearbook

The main purpose of the *Statistical Yearbook* is to provide in a single volume a comprehensive compilation of internationally available statistics on social, economic and environmental conditions and activities, at world, regional and national levels, for an appropriate historical period.

Most of the statistics presented in the *Yearbook* are extracted from more detailed, specialized databases prepared by the Statistics Division and by many other international statistical services. Thus, while the specialized databases concentrate on monitoring topics and trends in particular social, economic and environmental fields, the *Statistical Yearbook* tables aim to provide data for a comprehensive, overall description of social, economic and environmental structures, conditions, changes and activities. The objective has been to collect, systematize, coordinate and present in a consistent way the most essential components of comparable statistical information which can give a broad picture of social, economic and environmental processes.

The content of the *Statistical Yearbook* is planned to serve a general readership. The *Yearbook* endeavours to provide information for various bodies of the United Nations system as well as for other international organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations, national statistical, economic and social policy bodies, scientific and educational institutions, libraries and the public. Data published in the *Statistical Yearbook* may also be of interest to companies and enterprises and to agencies engaged in market research. The *Statistical Yearbook* thus provides information on a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues which are of concern in the United Nations system and among the governments and peoples of the world. A particular value of the *Yearbook* is that it facilitates meaningful analysis of issues by systematizing and coordinating the data across many fields and shedding light on such interrelated issues as:

- General economic growth and related economic conditions;
- Gender equality;
- Population by sex and rate of increase, surface area and density;
- Unemployment, inflation and prices;
- Energy production and consumption;
- Expansion of trade;
- The financial situation of countries;
- Education;
- Improvement in general living conditions;
- Pollution and protection of the environment;
- Assistance provided to developing countries for social, economic and environmental development purposes.

Organization of the Yearbook

After the first table which presents key world aggregates and totals, the tables of the *Yearbook* are grouped into three parts as follows:

- Part One: Population and Social Statistics (chapters II-VI: tables 2-12);
- Part Two: Economic Activity (chapters VII-XI: tables 13-22);
- Part Three: Energy, environment and infrastructure (chapters XII-XVII: tables 23-32).

The first table provides a summary picture of development at the global level. More specific and detailed information for analysis concerning regions, individual countries or areas are presented in the three thematic parts.

Part One, Population and Social Statistics, comprises 12 tables which contain more detailed statistical series on population and migration, gender, education, health and crime.

Part Two, Economic Activity, comprises 10 tables on national accounts, finance, labour market, price and production indices and international merchandise trade.

Part Three, Energy, environment and infrastructure, comprises 10 tables on energy, environment, science and technology, international tourism and transport, communication and development assistance.

Annexes and regional groupings of countries or areas

The annexes to the *Statistical Yearbook*, and the section “Explanatory notes” preceding the Introduction, provide additional essential information on the *Yearbook’s* contents and presentation of data.

Annex I provides information on countries or areas covered in the *Yearbook* tables and on their arrangement in geographical regions and economic or other groupings. The geographical groupings shown in the *Yearbook* are generally based on continental regions unless otherwise indicated. However, strict consistency in this regard is impossible. A wide range of classifications is used for different purposes in the various international agencies and other sources of statistics for the *Yearbook*. These classifications vary in response to administrative and analytical requirements.

Annex II provide brief descriptions of major statistical concepts, definitions and classifications required for interpretation and analysis of the data.

Annex III provides detailed information on conversion coefficients and factors used in various tables, and Annex IV provides a list of tables added, omitted and discontinued in the present edition of the *Yearbook*. Some Tables do not feature in this edition of the *Yearbook* due to space limitations or an insufficient amount of new data being available. Their titles nevertheless are still listed in this Annex since it is planned that they will be published in a later issue as new data are compiled by the collecting agency and where space permits.

Data comparability, quality and relevance

The major challenge continuously facing the *Statistical Yearbook* is to present series which are as comparable across countries as the available statistics permit. Considerable efforts have already been made among the international suppliers of data and by the staff of the *Statistical Yearbook* to ensure the compatibility of various series by aligning time periods, base years, prices chosen for valuation, and so on. This is indispensable in relating various bodies of data to each other and in facilitating analysis across different sectors. In general, the data presented reflect the methodological recommendations of the United Nations Statistical Commission issued in various United Nations publications, and of other international bodies concerned with statistics. The use of international recommendations promotes international comparability of the data and ensures a degree of compatibility regarding the underlying concepts, definitions and classifications relating to different series. However, much work remains to be done in this area and, for this reason, some tables serve only as a first source of data and require further adjustment before being used for more in-depth analytical studies. While on the whole, a significant degree of comparability has been achieved in international statistics, there will remain some limitations, for a variety of reasons.

One common cause of non-comparability of economic data is different valuations of statistical aggregates such as national income, wages and salaries, output of industries and so forth. Conversion of these and similar series originally expressed in national prices into a common currency, for example into United States dollars, through the use of exchange rates, is not always satisfactory owing to frequent wide fluctuations in market rates and differences between official rates and rates which would be indicated by unofficial markets or purchasing power parities. The use of different kinds of sources for obtaining data is another cause of incomparability. This is true, for example, in the case of employment and unemployment, where data are obtained from different sources, namely household and labour force sample surveys, establishment censuses or surveys, official estimates, social insurance statistics and employment office statistics, which are not fully comparable in many cases. Non-comparability of data may also result from differences in the institutional patterns of countries. Certain variations in social, economic and environmental organization and institutions may have an impact on the comparability of the data even if the underlying concepts and definitions are identical. These and other

causes of non-comparability of the data are briefly explained in the technical note associated with each table (see Annex II).

A further set of challenges relate to timeliness, quality and relevance of the data contained in the *Yearbook*. Users generally demand the most up-to-date statistics. However, due to the different development stages of statistical capacity in different countries, data for the most recent years may only be available for a small number of countries. For a global print publication, therefore, a balance has to be struck between presenting the most updated information and satisfactory country coverage. Of course the United Nations Statistics Division's website offers greater flexibility in presenting continuously updated information and is therefore a useful complement to the annual print publication. Furthermore, as most of the information presented in this *Yearbook* is collected through specialized United Nations agencies and partners, the timeliness is continuously enhanced by improving the communication and data flow between countries and the specialized agencies on the one hand, and between the United Nations Statistics Division and the specialized agencies on the other. The development of new XML-based data transfer protocols will address this issue and is expected to make international data flows more efficient in the future.

Data quality at the international level is a function of the data quality at the national level. The United Nations Statistics Division in close cooperation with its partners among the UN agencies and the international statistical system continues to support countries' efforts to improve both the coverage and the quality of their data. Metadata, as for example reflected in the footnotes and technical notes of this publication, are an important service to the user to allow an informed assessment of the quality of the data. Given the wide variety of sources for the *Yearbook*, there is of course an equally wide variety of data formats and accompanying metadata. An important challenge for the United Nations Statistics Division and its partners for the future is to work further towards the standardization, or at least harmonization, of metadata.

A crucial challenge is to maintain the relevance of the series included in the *Yearbook*. As new policy concerns enter the developmental debate, the United Nations Statistics Division will need to introduce new series that describe concerns that have gained prominence as well as to prune data as they become outdated and continue to update the recurrent *Yearbook* series that still address those issues which are most pertinent. Often choosing the appropriate moment when the statistical information on new topics has matured sufficiently so as to be able to disseminate meaningful global data can be challenging. Furthermore, a balance has to continuously be found between the ever-increasing amount of information available for dissemination and the space limitations of the print version of the *Statistical Yearbook*. International comparability, data availability, data quality and relevance will remain the key criteria to guide the United Nations Statistics Division in its selection.

Needless to say, more can always be done to improve the *Statistical Yearbook's* scope, coverage, design, metadata and timeliness. The *Yearbook* team continually strives to improve upon each of these aspects and to make its publication as responsive as possible to its users' needs and expectations, while at the same time focusing on a manageable body of data and metadata. Since data disseminated in digital form have clear advantages over those in print, as much of the *Yearbook* information as possible will continue to be included in the Statistics Division's online databases. Please feel welcome to provide feedback and suggestions to statistics@un.org.