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**Contribution of the Committee of Chief Statisticians of the UN System
to the HLG-PCCB on the efficiency of the UN statistical system**

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The 2030 Agenda, together with the recognition that policy on security, humanitarian action and human rights require evidence and regular monitoring, has increased the visibility of data and statistics in the UN system outside of the circle of national and international statisticians. Yet the response of the UN statistical system to this higher demand has largely remained fragmented, reflecting a complex UN system of agencies and inter-governmental structures organized mostly by theme. In this context, there is no single voice that can advocate for official statistics across all pillars of the United Nations (development, security, humanitarian and human rights).

Coordination of the UN statistical system is also an important issue. Beyond the UN secretariat, the UN family is a complex system of specialised agencies, funds, programmes and related organizations, with a myriad of governing bodies and mandates. The UN statistical system includes not only the statisticians who work throughout the system, but also those who are involved in supporting data collection, setting up monitoring and evaluation systems, including those for UN Development Assistance Frameworks, as well as those conducting data analysis and research and other tasks linked to the collection and use of data and statistics. The role of the Chief Statisticians of UN entities goes beyond the production of data and statistics. They also advocate for the use of high-quality statistics as a guide to policy making. The challenges faced by countries in coordinating their national statistical systems are mirrored in the UN system. UN statistical units have been developed over time within selected Secretariat departments and other components of the UN system. Most of these programmes have evolved in response to the need to provide evidence for guiding international policy on specific issues covered by UN entities and their governing bodies. This evolution may have produced some overlapping mandates.

The establishment of the Committee for Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) and the Committee of Chief Statisticians of the UN System (CCS-UN) has provided a platform for inter-agency coordination not only within the UN system (CCS-UN), but also between the system and statistical agencies outside the UN (CCSA). The CCS-UN was created by the Statistical Commission as a mechanism to bring together a representative from each organization to help coordinate and drive the work of the UN Statistical System as a whole. These bodies have created several mechanisms for coordination, resulting in joint work programmes on specific issues, joint questionnaires and the gradual removal of duplication in data requests addressed to Member States. The CCSA has also developed and adopted the *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities*, which mirror the *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* for international agencies; the CCS-UN has developed and adopted a UN common statistical quality framework.

There are many examples in the field of statistics of successful cooperation and coordination. The Programme on Statistics and Data, as part of the 10th Tranche of the Development Account, is a case in point. The Programme brings together ten statistical offices of the Secretariat to deliver coordinated technical assistance on statistics to countries. It is a model that could be followed throughout the UN system. Other practical examples of coordination include inter-agency and expert groups in areas such as national accounts and statistics on trade, industry, environment, gender and population, including migration. These work streams have provided fora wherein UN system entities can harmonize data, pursue joint methodologies and activities and reconcile, when necessary, inconsistent or contradictory demands coming from different governing bodies. The CCS-UN has also been an effective mechanism to discuss common approaches for supporting countries and addressing new and emerging issues like big data and geospatial information systems.

Although the domain of statistics has done well in establishing sound coordination mechanisms across the various parts of the system, there is further room for promoting a shared culture of coordination. There are no formal reporting lines that could be used to enforce common practices across the various parts of the UN system. Therefore, increased efficiency through coordination can be achieved only through a commitment to partnership supported by an expectation that all will gain through cooperation and by statistical leadership founded on recognized authority and profound knowledge of statistics. The UN Secretary General has direct authority to drive coordination across departments of the Secretariat. Through the CEB and other mechanisms, he can push for a more coordinated UN statistical system. The UN Development System reforms recently launched by the UN Secretary General, for example, aim at strengthening UN country teams, revamping the Resident Coordinator system and providing strategic direction, oversight and accountability for system-wide activities and results. The Statistical Commission and the regional statistical conferences have provided leadership by demanding cooperation and coordination around the statistical activities of the UN system. Thanks to this leadership, the domain of statistics has made much progress in coordination through the establishment of global and regional coordinating mechanisms. The Statistical Commission alone cannot change the reporting lines and accountability mechanisms of the organizations hosting the various components of the UN statistical system. In this context, effective coordination requires a shared commitment to cooperation and regular consultation and arrangements where all see the benefit of cooperating in equal terms. . The IAEG-SDGs provides a good example of an informal mechanism that brings together UN system entities around a common purpose.

The UN reform process led by the UN Secretary General presents a unique opportunity to improve system-wide coordination in all domains, including statistics. Enforcing coordination through a centralized mechanism will not be feasible for various reasons. Therefore, a stable means of respecting institutional mandates while also supporting the sound functioning of the system suggests a need to raise awareness about the role of statistics at high political levels while reinforcing existing coordination mechanisms and helping the system to become more than the sum of its parts. Without a change of mindset, and with only patches to the institutional structures, UN reform in the area of statistics will have only a marginal impact.

No one action alone can address the complexity of coordination and the need to promote official statistics at high political levels. In order to achieve maximum results, the Statistical Commission could contemplate a series of actions — a sort of road map — taking into account that advocating for official statistics, for example, may achieve different aims than improving coordination. Such a road map could include the following:

1. Strengthening the capacity of coordination mechanisms. Although the Statistics Division of UN DESA acts as secretariat of the CCS-UN, it does not have the resources to go beyond the simple secretariat support provided to the Committee's semi-annual meetings. A lack of dedicated resources to support collaboration and coordinated activities between meetings has limited the impact that the Committee has had. A strengthened secretariat, housed within the DESA's Statistics Division, would enable the CCS-UN to consider developing stronger agreements and acting as a more effective "peer-pressure" mechanism. This would require allocating additional resources to these functions. Such resources should be backed by institutional commitments at high levels, for example, in the CEB, where principals from across the UN system could acknowledge the need for coordination and commit their organizations to working coherently and jointly with other parts of the system. Also, closer ties to the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) could help to promote concrete solutions and secure adequate funding for coordination mechanisms, in part by including such work in the programme planning and budgets of the various components of the system (both Secretariat and agencies).

2. Strengthening coordination at different levels:
 - a. Global-level. The Statistical Commission is the collective expression of Member States on matters related to statistics. It is the primary forum where the statistical work of UN system entities is guided and coordinated. There are already coordinating bodies, such as the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys, that report to the Statistical Commission.¹ The Commission could consider embracing other topics, beyond surveys, where Member States feel that better coordination is needed.² The Commission could also become more closely engaged with the work of the CCS-UN group by considering regular reports from the Committee for discussion rather than simply for information.
 - b. Country-level. The coordination of technical assistance in statistics is connected to the overall coordination of UN interventions in the field. The UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) is the institutional mechanism that brings together and coordinates the work of UN agencies in the field. It could play a stronger role in coordinating the technical assistance offered to countries, including for work on statistics and data. The UNSDG enables all parts of the UN Development System to engage with Country Teams for better support to national statistical systems. This coordination takes place primarily through the newly established Task Team on Country-Focused Data and Reporting, under Results Area 1 on SDG implementation. The Task Team has a normative but not directive role: it enables coordination but does not have the power to require it.
 - c. Regional-level. Coordination of statistical work is regularly discussed and addressed in the statistical conferences or committees of the regional commissions. These provide other mechanisms where countries can promote coordination, taking into account the specificities of each region.
3. Consider the establishment of a Chief Statistician. At the national level, a chief statistician typically plays three important roles: (a) spokesperson or advocate for the importance of statistics, (b) coordinator of the national statistical system and (c) guardian of the impartiality and independence of statistics against political interference. A chief statistician at the national level is often referred to as the national statistician. The role of a chief statistician of the UN system could be somewhat different given the complexity of the system.
 - a. One can envisage a useful role as a chief advocate and spokesperson for statistics in the UN system. Every system needs a voice that can be called upon to explain to stakeholders, whether the media or politicians or the UN system itself, the important role that impartial statistics can play in informing decisions, formulating policies and ensuring accountability.
 - b. Equally, one can envisage a useful role for a chief statistician to defend the architecture of official statistics, including the *UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* and the *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities*, against any attempted political interference. The international stature of the chief statistician will be of critical importance for ensuring her or his credibility and effectiveness.
 - c. A coordinating role for the UN's chief statistician could be more challenging. The separate mandates and reporting structures of the different entities of the UN

¹ This Working Group works to enable harmonization of survey work between UN agencies and to ensure a concerted and comprehensive guidance to Member States on their survey work.

² For example there is the need to further harmonize the support and guidance on the data elements of administrative data systems so that the most cost-effective and efficient systems are developed in countries as they build out their service delivery.

system make it unclear, and almost impossible to envisage, how a common approach could be enforced throughout the system as currently configured. A chief statistician would not have the formal authority to commit all parts of the system to uphold common standards or actions. Effective coordination would require the voluntary cooperation of the various agencies and organization that form part of the UN statistical system, based on their common values and shared commitment.

- d. The location and positioning within the UN system would be very important. A chief statistician would be able to apply pressure to achieve effective coordination only if he or she were and were perceived to be an honest broker not representing any one agency or organization but the UN system as a whole. At the same time, the establishment of a chief statistician should not result in the creation of duplicative operational structures and should not weaken the existing structures of the many entities of the UN statistical system.
 - e. The position should have high visibility across the UN system and be of sufficient seniority and status to ensure that a chief statistician would be able to resist any inappropriate political pressure. To exercise such leadership, a chief statistician should be able to operate successfully in both technical and political environments. Unlike most positions at a similar level, an effective chief statistician should have a high level of technical expertise and suitable background qualifications. Without recognized technical competence, a chief statistician would not be able to exercise the moral authority necessary to bring UN agencies and organizations together.
4. Strengthening the voice of the Statistical Commission across UN inter-governmental bodies. The coordination challenges faced by the UN statistical system are often the same as those faced by national statistical systems, where responsibility for producing official statistics is often decentralized in thematic or regional institutions. Much of the statistical work undertaken by the agencies and departments of the UN system is mandated by bodies with no particular focus on statistical matters, and where member states are typically represented by line ministries (working at the national or sub-national levels). Advocating for a stronger coordination of UN statistical activities in these fora would amplify the voice of the Statistical Commission and strengthen its efforts to coordinate the work of the UN statistical system. The strategic participation of representatives of national statistical offices and the Statistical Commission in other functional commissions of ECOSOC or in higher-level inter-governmental bodies (such as those governing the specialized agencies) could give those bodies greater authority on statistical matters and push individual agencies to better coordinate their statistical work with that taking place elsewhere in the UN system.
 5. Strengthening the culture of cooperation within the UN statistical system by encouraging entities of the UN system to share information on their work programmes more systematically (especially at the country level) and to have joint fundraising activities.