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Items for discussion and decision: management and modernization of statistical systems

Management and modernization of statistical systems

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Economic and Social Council decision 2019/210 and past practices. It contains details on the management and modernization of statistical systems. At its forty-ninth session, the Commission reiterated the importance of the new (fourth) edition of the *Handbook of Statistical Organization* in addressing common challenges and developing innovative solutions, and endorsed the proposed structure, priorities and content of the *Handbook*, subject to suggested adaptations and refinements to be duly considered during its drafting phase. The overall updating process is supported by a series of regional and subregional thematic conferences aimed at chief statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations. In the present report, the Commission is informed about the progress in drafting the updated *Handbook* and how the first thematic conferences have contributed to informing and enriching the fourth edition by identifying regional initiatives and national good practices. The background document under the agenda item provides links to the available draft chapters, as well as information on the thematic conferences and other useful material, and contains information on the minor rearrangements made to the structure of the *Handbook* that were considered during the drafting phase.

The action to be taken by the Commission is contained in paragraph 28 of the report.

* E/CN.3/2020/1.



I. Introduction

1. In order to monitor the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the related regional and national development plans, it is necessary for national statistical systems to produce many additional statistics and indicators more quickly and at a more frequent pace. That implies a need for statistical offices to review their institutional, organizational and technical processes in conformity with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. This need for statistical organizations to adapt and develop was stressed in the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data.¹

2. The modernization of official statistics is crucial to meet the expanding demands of policymakers, researchers, the media and civil society for high-quality, timely and disaggregated statistics. In that context, the Statistical Commission agreed, at its forty-eighth session, that an update to the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*, the third edition of which was issued in 2003, was needed. Since 1954,² the primary objective of the *Handbook* has been to guide chief statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations in developing and maintaining statistical capacity that is fit for purpose. It is proposed that the new (fourth) edition be entitled “Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems”. The *Handbook* is not intended to be followed in a prescriptive manner, as the situation in each country is unique and the usefulness of the guidance therefore depends on local circumstances. Instead, it provides descriptive information to guide and inform statistical organizations on important issues and topics, including those that are new and emerging.

3. At its forty-ninth session, the Statistical Commission endorsed the structure and outline of the next edition of the *Handbook*, including detailed annotations on each proposed chapter and its underlying sections. The outline consisted of 16 chapters, including an introduction, an overview and 14 substantive thematic chapters, as well as a number of annexes. The outline was based on a full review of the 2003 edition of the *Handbook* supported by a survey conducted among national chief statisticians and through other consultation mechanisms. The rounds of consultation confirmed that the next edition of the *Handbook* should not be written in a narrative manner but instead should serve as a checklist that can guide a statistical agency to develop and maintain statistical capacities that are fit for purpose. It was also made clear that the *Handbook* should be conceived as a living document to be updated regularly and should allow the reader to consult each chapter independently. Eventually, it may also contribute to the harmonization and alignment of concurring definitions and terminology that have emerged recently through various and sometimes uncoordinated initiatives and programmes at the global and regional levels.

4. Since the *Handbook* will be designed as a “living” document, it will be published primarily through an appropriate interactive Internet platform that can be continuously updated in a sustainable manner. To balance that more dynamic approach, the overview chapter will be the only printed chapter available in all official languages of the United Nations. There is a particular need for the overview chapter to be disseminated using the widest range of formats and languages, as it is intended to appeal to a broad range of users and stakeholders at all levels within and outside national statistical systems.

¹ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/hlg/Cape-Town-Global-Action-Plan/>.

² The first edition in 1954 was followed by the second edition in 1980 and the third edition in 2003. See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/hb/default.aspx>.

5. In terms of governance, the Commission proposed to set up an advisory group³ to guide the drafting process and ensure that an inclusive approach is taken to account for the various regional and national contexts, good practices, remaining challenges and recent initiatives. The Commission also suggested that the process be complemented by a series of thematic conferences at the regional and subregional levels that would allow best practices and challenges to be identified to inform the next edition of the *Handbook*.
6. The purpose of the present report is to provide the Statistical Commission with information on:
- (a) The overall governance and modalities of the drafting process of the next edition of the *Handbook*, including the role and tasks of the drafting team, the advisory group and the regional thematic conferences (see section II below);
 - (b) The progress to date in drafting the substantive chapters of the revised *Handbook*, including the outcome of the first thematic conferences, as well as an update on the structure of the *Handbook*, as endorsed by the Commission at its forty-ninth session (see section III below);
 - (c) The organization and planning of the remaining work to be accomplished for the release of the *Handbook* by the end of 2020 (see section IV below).
7. The background document under the agenda item contains more information on the suggested minor restructuring of the chapters of the *Handbook* since its endorsement by the Commission and provides weblinks to advanced drafts of the chapters already available on the wiki platform⁴ of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat at the time of the fifty-first session of the Commission.
8. The Statistics Division wishes to take this opportunity to thank⁵ the members of the advisory group for their valuable comments and guidance, as well as the multilateral development banks and other regional organizations that gave their support in organizing the eight regional thematic conferences.

II. Governance and modalities

9. The process of updating the chapters of the new *Handbook* started early in 2018 by establishing a core drafting team managed by the Statistics Division. That team is complemented by a pool of individuals mobilized on an ad hoc basis to contribute to more technical sections of the *Handbook* in their respective areas of knowledge and expertise.

³ The members of the advisory group are Brazil, Ghana, Kenya, Mongolia, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Suriname, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the State of Palestine, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Asian Development Bank, Eurostat, Open Data Watch, PARIS21, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries and the five regional commissions of the United Nations.

⁴ The Statistics Division wiki platform, established and maintained by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, is a website that allows collaborative editing of its content and structure by its users. Users can consult the platform either using registered credentials to gain access to more functionality, or without registration to only view, download or print content.

⁵ Particular thanks are given to the European Free Trade Association for contributing one full chapter of the *Handbook*, and to Eurostat for its substantial financial support to the overall drafting and editorial process.

10. As recommended by the Commission, an advisory group was established with the task of providing guidance to the drafting team, at regular intervals or upon request. The members of the advisory group were selected in such a way as to take advantage of existing statistical networks and initiatives at the regional and global levels, such as the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the High-level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics; the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics; the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information; and the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks. The updated *Handbook* will, to the extent possible, rely on the relevant global, regional and subregional initiatives emanating from those groups, as well as their deliverables and recommendations.

11. The starting point for each chapter is to create an inventory of innovative initiatives, reference material and guidelines and country experiences available at the national, regional and global levels on the topics relevant to that chapter. An initial draft of the chapter is then prepared and made available to all members of the drafting team, which reviews the initial draft to ensure completeness, consistency and alignment with international standards and good practices. The draft chapter is then shared with the advisory group for it to provide overall guidance, comments and feedback; to provide country-specific examples and good practices; and to suggest additional links to regional and global initiatives. Inputs received from the advisory group are incorporated and the updated draft chapter submitted back to the advisory group for its second review. Eventually, after the second round of consultation, the advanced draft chapter is posted on the Statistics Division wiki platform for further public comment.

12. To make the consultation process more inclusive, a series of regional thematic conferences on managing a statistical organization in times of change is being organized to share the purpose and contents of the updated *Handbook* to a wider audience of chief statisticians, senior managers of statistical organizations and policymakers. The conferences are being organized at the regional and subregional levels for participants to consider recent institutional, organizational and technical developments addressing prospective challenges and opportunities. They are also conducted to better understand and prioritize the emerging needs of statistical organizations to adapt and develop, as well as to exchange experiences and recent initiatives.

13. The series of conferences allows the drafting team to identify and collect additional information on good practices, challenges and initiatives that will contribute to and inform the next edition of the *Handbook*. The thematic conferences are structured around four main themes covering all substantive chapters of the upcoming *Handbook*, as follows:

(a) Strengthening the institutional and organizational frameworks of national statistical systems (linked to Strategic Area 1 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters III to V of the *Handbook*);

(b) Securing the quality of statistical information and improving data coherence through statistical analysis and analytical frameworks (linked to Strategic Areas 2 and 3 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters VI, VII and IX of the *Handbook*);

(c) Supporting the transformation of statistical production processes, from data collection to dissemination, in the context of the digital and technological revolution (linked to Strategic Area 4 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters VIII, X, XI, XIII and XIV of the *Handbook*);

(d) Mobilizing and securing adequate resources and infrastructure and promoting regional and global cooperation for the development of national statistical capacity (linked to Strategic Areas 5 and 6 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters XII, XV and XVI of the *Handbook*).

14. In total, a series of eight regional thematic conferences is expected to be held between October 2019 and December 2020: two conferences for Africa, one in English and one in French; one conference for Asia (not including Central Asia); one for the Pacific region; two conferences for the Americas (one for the Caribbean and another for Latin America); one conference for the Arab States; and one for South-East and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

III. Current progress

A. Chapters available, in progress and lessons learned

15. At the time of submitting the present report, advanced drafts have been made for the following eight chapters, which are available on the Statistics Division wiki platform:

- Chapter III: Basis of official statistics
- Chapter IV: National statistical system
- Chapter V: National statistical office
- Chapter VII: Quality management
- Chapter VIII: Data sources, collection and processing
- Chapter X: Dissemination and user communication
- Chapter XII: Human resources management and development
- Chapter XIV: Information technology management

16. The following six chapters are in the process of being drafted and are expected to be available by the end of March 2020:

- Chapter VI: Users and their needs
- Chapter IX: Analysis and analytical frameworks
- Chapter XI: Common statistical infrastructure
- Chapter XIII: Data, information and knowledge management
- Chapter XV: Management of finance, buildings and physical space
- Chapter XVI: International activities and collaboration

17. During the drafting process, the advisory group suggested that, with respect to the original layout of the *Handbook*, certain sections would be better placed elsewhere in their respective chapters or, in some exceptional cases, in another chapter. For example, the sections entitled “Relevance to other producers of statistics”, positioned at the end of most of the chapters, have been moved forward within their respective chapters in order to be more immediately relevant to the reader. For a few advanced draft chapters submitted before that recommendation was made by the advisory group, the shifting of those sections will be managed at a later stage, during the editorial process.

18. One major change suggested by the Advisory group was to merge chapter XV, on management of finance, buildings and physical space, with either chapter V, on

national statistical offices, or chapter XII, on human resources management and development. In addition, the consultation process uncovered some overlooked topics, such as statistical literacy, which is now included as a section within chapter X, on dissemination and user communication. It was also decided that chapter VII on quality management, would need to be slightly adapted in the light of the recently issued United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics.

B. Regional thematic conferences

19. A side event to the fiftieth session of the Statistical Commission was organized to launch the series of regional thematic conferences on managing a statistical organization during times of change. The event provided an opportunity to consult with national chief statisticians and senior managers from international organizations on the themes, structure and modalities of the forthcoming series of regional and subregional thematic conferences.

20. Two of the eight regional thematic conferences, on managing a statistical organization during times of change, were completed in 2019. These were held in South Africa from 7 to 9 October 2019 for English-speaking African countries, and in Barbados from 25 to 27 November 2019 for Caribbean small island developing States.

21. The Africa conference was organized jointly by the Economic Commission for Africa, Statistics South Africa and the Statistics Division. The conference brought together over 50 chief statisticians and senior managers from 21 national statistical offices. The conference was structured around four strategic sessions linked to the chapters of the *Handbook* (as mentioned above) and was invaluable in identifying key developmental issues for official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It will ensure that the *Handbook* provides relevant and sufficiently detailed advice that is illustrated by a variety of good practice examples.

22. The conference in the Caribbean was organized jointly by the Inter-American Development Bank, the Caribbean Community secretariat, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, the United Nations Children's Fund and the Statistics Division. The conference brought together over 40 chief statisticians and senior managers from 17 national statistical offices, as well as a smaller number of senior policymakers in the Caribbean. A variety of good practice examples to be illustrated in the *Handbook* were collected from participants. In particular, the Caribbean conference allowed for the identification of challenges and opportunities that are specific to small statistical offices with limited resources.

IV. Next steps

23. After March 2020, once all of the substantive chapters are available, an in-depth review of the overall structure of the *Handbook* will be conducted by the drafting team, in close consultation with the advisory group. The main objective of the review is to consolidate the 14 substantive chapters that have been drafted independently into one streamlined document, to improve the consistency and cross-referencing between the chapters and eventually to identify any unnecessary overlaps and possible gaps. During this phase, chapter I (introduction) and chapter II (overview) will be drafted, keeping in mind that the overview chapter targets a wider audience and will be made available in printed format in all official languages of the United Nations. As mentioned above, it was suggested by the advisory group that this new edition of the

Handbook be renamed “*Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*”.

24. As suggested by the Advisory Group, the level of technicality and detail of some of the chapters will also be reviewed to make them more strategic and executive. The *Handbook* will be a living document, and some more technical elements could appear in expandable text boxes. The exact specifications for its electronic publication through a web-based platform is still to be decided, but is expected to be provided in a printable and user-friendly format. The advisory group will be involved in the choice of platform for hosting and disseminating the overall *Handbook*.

25. Before the *Handbook* is fully finalized, it is expected that all thematic conferences will be completed to allow good practices and initiatives from across all regions to be incorporated. At the time of submitting the present report, it was planned to hold the conference for Asia on 12–14 February 2020 in Manilla and the conference for South-East and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia on 27–29 April 2020 in Uzbekistan. The first informal consultations for the conference for French-speaking African countries indicated that the event could take place in March or April 2020 in Morocco. However, the remaining conferences for the Pacific, Arab States and Latin America were still under discussion and pending funding.

26. At its forty-ninth session, the Statistical Commission stressed the importance of making more chapters of the *Handbook* in addition to chapter II available in the official languages of the United Nations and in other languages. This could be prepared in collaboration with Member States, as well as other regional or global partners. However, the modalities of such collaboration would need to be explored further.

27. Following the official release of the *Handbook* on the Internet by the end of 2020, a sustainable mechanism for its regular update will need to be established. It has been proposed that a standing advisory group be created to facilitate that process by identifying and collecting new practices, innovative solutions and emerging regional and global initiatives. The group could update the “live” *Handbook* every six months. A report containing a summary of the significant changes to the *Handbook* would be presented every second year to the Statistics Commission.

V. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

28. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To express its views on the overall governance and modalities of the drafting process of the next edition of the *Handbook*, including the role and tasks of the drafting team and the advisory group, as well as the organization and scope of the regional thematic conferences;**

(b) **To comment on the current progress achieved in drafting the substantive chapters of the revised *Handbook*, as well as the proposed minor update to the structure of the *Handbook*, as reflected in the background document;**

(c) **To offer its guidance on options for the Internet dissemination of the next edition of the *Handbook* and the mechanisms for its regular maintenance and update, including solutions for its translation into the official languages of the United Nations as well as other languages;**

(d) **To support the name change of the *Handbook* from “*Handbook of Statistical Organization*” to “*Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*”.**