



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
21 December 2020

Original: English

Statistical Commission

Fifty-second session

1–3 and 5 March 2021

Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*

**Items for discussion and decision: data and indicators for the
2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2020/211 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators. In the report, the Expert Group describes the activities undertaken in 2020 pursuant to Statistical Commission decision 51/101, including: (a) a methodology review of the indicator framework and tier classification updates; (b) an update on the ongoing activities relating to the work stream on data disaggregation; (c) measurement of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the Sustainable Development Goals; (d) indicator refinements; and (e) activities of the three working groups on measurement of development support, statistical data and metadata exchange and geospatial information, respectively. The Commission will also have before it the following background documents: (a) a document on COVID-19 and the global indicators for the Goals; (b) a practical guide on data disaggregation for the Goals; and (c) a compilation of tools/guidance regarding existing materials for data disaggregation.

The Commission is invited to comment on progress made by the Expert Group and the direction of its future work. The action to be taken by the Commission is set out in paragraph 30 of the report.

* E/CN.3/2021/1.



Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators

I. Introduction

1. As mandated in General Assembly resolution 70/1, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators was tasked with the development and implementation of the global indicator framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹ The Expert Group developed a global indicator framework, which was adopted by the Assembly at its seventy-first session, on 6 July 2017, in resolution 71/313 on the work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda.

2. The present report describes the work carried out by the Expert Group from March to December 2020, on the basis of the programme of work agreed upon by the Statistical Commission and in accordance with Commission decision 51/101. In section II of the report, the Expert Group summarizes its work on the current indicator framework. In sections III and IV, it presents the activities of the work stream on data disaggregation and the three working groups on measurement of development support, statistical data and metadata exchange (SDMX) and geospatial information, respectively. In section V, the Expert Group describes its programme of work for 2021 and, in the final section of the report, it lists the key points for consideration and discussion by the Commission.

II. Implementation of the global indicator framework

3. In 2020, owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Expert Group increased the frequency of open meetings focused on selected topics related to Sustainable Development Goal monitoring. These meetings were held in a virtual format in June and September,² each attended by 260 to 270 participants from member countries, observer countries, international and regional organizations and stakeholders. Between the open meetings, the Expert Group continued to interact electronically and held 10 virtual meetings over the course of the year.

4. The eleventh meeting of the Expert Group was held virtually from 3 to 5 November³ and was attended by over 300 participants, including representatives of Member States, international agencies and entities and other stakeholders. At the meeting, the Expert Group reviewed the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal indicator framework. It updated the tier classification on the basis of the annual review of the availability of data; discussed ongoing work on data disaggregation and its future workplan, as well as aspects of a metadata review, including activities of a new subgroup; reviewed the work of the three working groups; and shared experiences and best practices relating to implementation of and reporting on the Goals at the national, regional and global levels, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Goals, and data innovations and capacity-building activities for the Goals.

5. Membership of the Expert Group increased in June 2020 with the addition of the Republic of Korea. Japan and the Republic of Korea share the membership for Eastern Asia, with Japan serving as a member from June 2019 to May 2020 and the Republic of Korea from June 2020 to May 2021. Japan currently serves as an ex officio member and Chair of the Statistical Commission.

¹ General Assembly resolution 70/1.

² See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs>.

³ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/meetings/iaeg-sdgs-meeting-11>.

A. Methodology review of the indicator framework and tier classification updates

6. In accordance with its approved programme of work, the Expert Group conducted a review of the availability of data for tier I and II indicators in the global indicator database, as at 20 October, in order to assess country and population coverage for each region for which those indicators were relevant. The review was presented at the eleventh meeting of the Expert Group. One tier I indicator did not have sufficient data coverage and was reclassified as tier II; nine indicators met the criteria for being reclassified as tier I; and two tier II indicators were reclassified as multi-tier indicators (with one component of the indicator moving to tier I, while the remaining components remained in tier II).

7. According to the updates to the tier classification following the reviews, of the 231 unique indicators, 130 are tier I indicators, 97 are tier II indicators and 4 relate to multiple tiers (with different components of the indicator classified in different tiers). The Secretariat will update the tier classification on an annual basis following the review of the availability of data for tier I and II indicators and will post the latest information at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification>.

8. As at 4 November 2020, the Global Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Database includes data for 200 of the 231 individual indicators and more than 1.4 million data records. Two additional indicators are planned for inclusion in the database in December. For the majority of the indicators with missing data submissions, custodian agencies have indicated a projected date for submission, mostly until the first quarter of 2021, or have provided a data plan.

B. Proposed annual refinements

9. In accordance with General Assembly resolution [71/313](#) and the plan and criteria agreed upon by the Expert Group with respect to possible minor refinements on an annual basis (see [E/CN.3/2017/2](#), para. 21), the Expert Group reviewed the list of indicator refinements proposed by its members and by custodian agencies and agreed to nine refinements to be presented to the Statistical Commission for its consideration (see annex).

C. COVID-19 and the Sustainable Development Goals

10. Owing to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on progress towards the 2030 Agenda in all dimensions of sustainability (economy, society and the environment), the Expert Group agreed to look at the global indicator framework in the light of the global pandemic in order to examine areas of high impact. The assessment was also in response to the massive structural changes in economies and societies that have occurred because of the pandemic and because of the increased impacts on vulnerable groups, including poor and marginalized groups, and on women. The Expert Group also noted that many national statistical offices have experienced disruptions and delays in the collection of data for the Sustainable Development Goals.

11. The Expert Group determined indicators deemed high-impact by examining data and information related to the impact of the pandemic in the various domains. In addition, each indicator was examined in relation to the pandemic, and the impact was assessed on the basis of existing empirical evidence and knowledge. The finalized list of Goal indicators that are highly affected by the pandemic will be available in a background document on COVID-19 and the global indicators for the Goals.

D. Metadata review and the Expert Group subgroup on metadata

12. One of the tasks of the Expert Group is to regularly review methodological developments and issues related to the indicators and their metadata (see [E/CN.3/2017/2](#), annex I, para. 1 (c)). In doing so, the Expert Group routinely reviews the metadata of the indicators in the global Sustainable Development Goals indicator framework, including when a custodian agency requests an indicator tier reclassification or revises the methodology for an indicator. Recent reviews of metadata for translation projects revealed deficiencies and quality issues in the current metadata documents.⁴ The Expert Group therefore decided to form a subgroup to conduct a more thorough and comprehensive review of the metadata. The subgroup will address current and future issues identified in the metadata documents, aiming to improve the overall quality of metadata for the Goal indicators in order to facilitate better implementation of the indicators for countries and for data transmission. The work will be linked to existing initiatives such as the metadata template developed by the working group on SDMX, translation projects undertaken by countries and partner agencies and the work on updating the electronic handbook on the Goal indicators.⁵ The following member countries have joined the subgroup: Canada, Colombia, France, Germany, Ireland, Malaysia, Sweden and the United Republic of Tanzania. The subgroup anticipates that its work will last from November 2020 to April 2021, after which the activities and timeline will be updated.

13. In addition, the Expert Group reiterates the review procedures for metadata updates submitted by custodian agencies, including the following:

(a) The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat sends a request for data and metadata updates at the end of each year. All other metadata updates are initiated by the custodian agencies. The Division reviews the submitted metadata updates with tracked changes (available on the metadata repository page). If the updates with tracked changes do not significantly change the methodology, the metadata are updated; otherwise, the metadata are reviewed by the Expert Group;

(b) The Expert Group provides comments or requests additional information and explanations from the custodian agencies. Once all raised issues have been addressed, the updated metadata are posted on the metadata repository page.

III. Work stream for data disaggregation

14. In its decision 51/101, the Statistical Commission welcomed the identification of data disaggregation as one of the main areas of work of the Expert Group for 2020 and agreed that the Expert Group should develop guidelines and build capacity on disaggregated data to measure progress for those who are vulnerable or in vulnerable situations. Past work on data disaggregation by the Expert Group included the development of a minimum disaggregation set, a comprehensive summary of disaggregation standards for all Sustainable Development Goal indicators, a compilation of categories and dimensions of data disaggregation currently in place and planned by custodian agencies and a compilation of policy priorities by disaggregation dimension.⁶ In 2020, building on previous work, the Expert Group developed a compilation of existing tools and methodologies for data disaggregation and established a task force on small area estimation for Goal indicators. In addition,

⁴ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata>.

⁵ See <https://unstats.un.org/wiki/display/SDGeHandbook/Home>.

⁶ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/disaggregation> and <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/50th-session/documents/BG-Item3a-Data-Disaggregation-E.pdf>.

it provided input to the development of a practical guide on data disaggregation for the Goals, developed by the Asian Development Bank and the Statistics Division and presented as a background document.

15. Throughout 2020, the Expert Group conducted a stock-taking survey to develop a compilation of existing methodologies, guidelines and tools for data disaggregation that have already been developed and agreed upon by key international expert groups, mechanisms or committees. The work is aimed at providing countries with a centralized reference of useful resources on data disaggregation. The respondents to the questionnaire included relevant established city and expert groups under the Statistical Commission, international expert groups and committees, United Nations entities and selected stakeholders focusing on vulnerable populations and disaggregation data collection methods, such as household surveys. The compilation is available as a background document of the Expert Group and will also be available online at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs>.

16. In 2020, the Expert Group and the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys established a task force on small area estimation for the Sustainable Development Goals, with the goal of providing practical tools with accompanying case studies in order for countries to use small area estimation for Goal monitoring. The task force's objectives include standardizing small area estimation applications and an assessment of the methodologies, encouraging the provision of small area estimation methodology in standard statistical software and centralizing relevant documents of reference. The task force is currently developing practical guidelines on small area estimation for the Goals, which will also be made available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs> in 2021.

IV. Working groups of the Expert Group

17. The three current working groups established by the Expert Group focus on the following topics: SDMX, geospatial information and measurement of development support.⁷ Each working group is composed of members of the Expert Group and other invited representatives, as determined in their respective terms of reference.⁸

A. Working Group on Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange for Sustainable Development Goal Indicators

18. The Working Group on Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange for Sustainable Development Goal Indicators consists of representatives of 12 countries and 10 international agencies and is currently chaired by France. The Working Group released the first official data structure definition for Goal indicators in June 2019. Data exchange has since been established with about 22 countries and five international agencies. An SDMX application programming interface has been established for the Global Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Database. In 2020, a decision was made by the Working Group to adopt more frequent updates to the data structure definition, up to four times a year when needed, in order to ensure that the data structure definition and the application programming interface are in sync with the global database.

⁷ The Working Groups on Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange for Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and the Working Group on Geospatial Information were established in 2016, and the Working Group on Measurement of Development Support was established in 2020.

⁸ The terms of reference, membership and other important information regarding each working group are available at <http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs>.

19. A draft metadata structure definition was released in late 2019. Following a request by Member States, Sustainable Development Goal metadata concepts were aligned with existing metadata standards, such as the single integrated metadata structure, the global metadata concept scheme and the SDMX glossary. A pilot reference metadata exchange for the Goals was conducted in the second half of 2020. The pilot was greatly facilitated by metadata authoring tools, developed by the Statistics Division, which can retrieve rich-text metadata from a Word template and convert it to SDMX. The SDG Lab facilitates the uploading of SDMX data and metadata. Production SDMX metadata exchange for Goal indicators is expected to be established in 2021. An SDMX artificial programming interface is already available for reference metadata for the Goals and is expected to be populated with all available global metadata in 2021.

20. The Statistics Division has carried out a number of capacity-building activities in SDMX data exchange for Sustainable Development Goal indicators. They include the Division's project in support of Goal monitoring, funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for 20 countries in Africa and Asia (see [E/CN.3/2020/2](#)). Technical training is also provided through the tenth tranche project of the United Nations Development Account, with partners including the regional commissions, the United Nations Children's Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the African Development Bank. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, capacity-building activities were held in a virtual format in 2020, including a large-scale training session jointly organized by the Statistics Division and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. To facilitate the adoption of SDMX exchange among data reporters, including countries and international agencies, the Working Group is developing an information site with links to the data structure definition and metadata structure definition, technical documents, tutorials and a non-technical guide on how to start in the implementation of Goal data flows in SDMX, and also to share good practices.

B. Working Group on Geospatial Information

21. The Working Group on Geospatial Information, chaired by Ireland and Mexico, comprises 14 Member States, nine custodian agencies and representatives of three regional commissions, invited groups and experts. The Working Group convenes regular virtual meetings and annual plenary meetings, formally reporting to the Expert Group. Owing to the complementary and cross-cutting nature of the 2030 Agenda, the Working Group also contributes to a report, with the Secretariat, to the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, under the Committee's agenda item entitled "Geospatial information for sustainable development".

22. The sixth meeting of the Working Group was convened in Mexico City from 9 to 11 March 2020. The agreed work plan identified short- and longer-term activities aimed at improving the Working Group's working modalities with the Expert Group and custodian agencies; developing guidance and sharing proven practices in the application of geospatial information for the production, visualization, dissemination and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals and disaggregation by geographic location; and supporting the integration of statistics and geospatial information and strengthening the interlinkages among relevant groups, including the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information and the task team on geospatial information of the Economic Commission for Europe High-level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics.

23. The outcomes of the Working Group's short-term activities were presented to the Expert Group at its eleventh meeting in November 2020, which commended the

progress made. Progress included providing mechanisms and tools that enable countries using geospatial information for the Sustainable Development Goals to communicate in an accessible and interactive manner that explains how progress has been made; highlighting the Working Group's wiki as a communications mechanism to foster improved communication and collaboration within the Working Group and between the Working Group and the Expert Group; and reviewing the 231 indicators of the global indicator framework to identify 99 indicators that can be disaggregated by geographic location, or for which geospatial information or Earth observations can be used to inform the production, measurement and monitoring of indicators.

24. To respond to subparagraph (i) of Statistical Commission decision 51/101, in which the Commission encouraged further work on a better integration of geospatial and statistical information to better monitor the 2030 Agenda through the Working Group, the Working Group is now focusing on its longer-term activities and is developing a geospatial road map for the Sustainable Development Goals as a document that can build a bridge between the statistical and geospatial actors working on the Goals. The road map is aimed at realizing the as yet untapped transformational potential that geospatial information can bring to the Goals and complementing the existing work of the Commission on the global indicator framework.

25. The Working Group intends to submit the road map for consultation and agreement by the Expert Group in the coming intersessional period, in preparation for its consideration and adoption by the Statistical Commission at the fifty-third session of the Commission, in 2022. To further strengthen and raise awareness of the substance and intent of the road map, an advance draft will be submitted as a background document to the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management for information at its eleventh session, in August 2021, under the agenda item entitled "Geospatial information for sustainable development". Under that item, the Secretariat primarily updates the Committee of Experts on its work in strengthening geospatial information for sustainable development. The Working Group uses that opportunity to inform the Committee of actions that it could take to strengthen its work in that area.

C. Working Group on Measurement of Development Support

26. The Working Group on Measurement of Development Support was established by the Statistical Commission at its fifty-first session, in March 2020. It is composed of 21 Member States, with balanced regional representation.⁹ On 27 May, the newly established Working Group conducted its first meeting virtually. The meeting elected Colombia and Norway as Co-Chairs and agreed on a timetable of work and on work arrangements. Since then, the Working Group has conducted monthly meetings with high levels of attendance and participation. Brazil, the Netherlands and the Republic of Korea joined the Working Group as observers. The Working Group has regularly informed the Expert Group about its progress of work.

27. At the onset, the Working Group focused on defining its work within the existing mandate. The discussions were facilitated by an internal background paper prepared by the Statistics Division, in which the Division outlined the history of United Nations efforts to measure development support, showed how that history had influenced the selection of other indicators in the Sustainable Development Goals framework and suggested eight questions for consideration by the Working Group. It was widely agreed that the eight questions identified in the background paper covered key issues

⁹ The terms of reference of the Working Group on Measurement of Development Support and its membership can be found at [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/TOR%20MDS%20WG%20\(April%202020\).pdf](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/TOR%20MDS%20WG%20(April%202020).pdf).

for discussion. The responses to an initial survey on those questions reflected a diverse set of views. A follow-up survey on questions related to the purpose of the new indicator, its possible components and measurement was conducted in September. In the meeting of the Working Group held in October, members of the international task force on total official support for sustainable development and its secretariat, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, gave a presentation on the methodology and practice of such support, while the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development made an introductory presentation on South-South cooperation, covering its evolution, broad definition, guiding principles and debate around its measurement.

28. During the discussions, it became clear that there were different views on various issues and that more work was needed on some components of development support under consideration. Accordingly, the Working Group established a research agenda that includes South-South cooperation, mobilizing private finance and international public goods. The objective of the Working Group is to provide a proposal to the Expert Group for an indicator under Sustainable Development Goal target 17.3 in October 2021 that meets the requirements and can find wide support.

V. Work programme of the Expert Group

29. It is suggested that the Expert Group carry out the following activities between March 2021 and March 2022:

(a) Focus on the implementation of the indicator framework, including the integration of geospatial information and statistics for the 2030 Agenda; the sharing of experiences and best practices on Sustainable Development Goal monitoring, including on national platforms and dashboards for the Goals and best practices for communicating data for the Goals; encouraging data innovations, including automating data and metadata transmission using SDMX; and reviewing and making recommendations on capacity-building for the Goals in coordination with the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

(b) Regularly review methodological developments and issues related to the indicators and their metadata and improve the overall quality of metadata for the Goal indicators through the programme of work of the metadata subgroup;

(c) Continue the work stream on data disaggregation in order to provide further guidelines and liaise with the other working groups and existing mechanisms for the data disaggregation work;

(d) Continue the work of the working groups on SDMX, geospatial information and measurement of development support and review the workplans of the working groups to ensure that they are in line with the work of the Expert Group;

(e) Hold quarterly open meetings and the twelfth meeting of the Expert Group in the fourth quarter of 2021, and continue to interact through monthly meetings.

VI. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

30. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To take note of the work conducted by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators in response to the decisions of the Commission;**

(b) To take note of the background document on COVID-19 and the global indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals, the practical guide on data disaggregation for the Goals and the compilation of tools/guidance regarding existing materials for data disaggregation;

(c) To express its views and adopt the annual refinements (as contained in the annex);

(e) To express its views and adopt the proposed programme of work of the Expert Group for 2021.

Annex

Annual refinements to be made to the global indicator framework

Sustainable Development Goal and current indicator text (contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development)

Refinement of indicator

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

2.5.1 Number of plant and animal genetic resources for food and agriculture secured in either medium- or long-term conservation facilities

2.5.1 Number of (a) plant and (b) animal genetic resources for food and agriculture secured in either medium- or long-term conservation facilities

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

3.d.2 Reduce the percentage of bloodstream infections due to selected antimicrobial-resistant organisms

3.d.2 Percentage of bloodstream infections due to selected antimicrobial-resistant organisms

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

4.2.1 Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex

4.2.1 Proportion of children aged 24–59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex

4.c.1 Proportion of teachers qualified in basic education by education level

4.c.1 Proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualifications, by education level

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

10.7.3 Number of migrants killed while attempting to cross maritime, land and air borders

10.7.3 Number of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

12.c.1 (a) Amount of fossil-fuel subsidies as a percentage of GDP; and (b) amount of fossil-fuel subsidies as a proportion of total national expenditure on fossil fuels

12.c.1 Amount of fossil-fuel subsidies (production and consumption) per unit of GDP

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

13.2.1 Number of countries with nationally determined contributions, long-term strategies, national adaptation plans, strategies as reported in adaptation communications and national communications

13.2.1 Number of countries with nationally determined contributions, long-term strategies, national adaptation plans and adaptation communications, as reported to the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Sustainable Development Goal and current indicator text (contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development)

Refinement of indicator

13.b.1¹ Number of least developed countries and small island developing States with nationally determined contributions, long-term strategies, national adaptation plans, strategies as reported in adaptation communications and national communications

13.b.1 Number of least developed countries and small island developing States with nationally determined contributions, long-term strategies, national adaptation plans and adaptation communications, as reported to the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

14.1.1 (a) Index of coastal eutrophication; and (b) floating plastic debris density

14.1.1 (a) Index of coastal eutrophication; and (b) plastic debris density

¹ Indicator 13.b.1 is a repetition of 13.2.1, with a focus on two subgroups of countries.