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Assurance Frameworks

Report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

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 Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks. The report presents the activities of the Expert Group in support of the implementation of the United Nations national quality assurance framework manual for official statistics, which contains recommendations on quality assurance, an updated national quality assurance framework, practical guidance for its implementation and reference materials on quality assurance in the global statistical system. The report highlights the role of quality assurance for the use of new data sources and as an operational and strategic tool for statistical offices. In addition, the report contains the proposed programme of work of the Expert Group for the next two years to support countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework. The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2021/1.



Report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

I. Introduction

1. In its decision 50/106, the Statistical Commission welcomed the report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks, expressed its appreciation for the work of the Expert Group over the past two years and took note of the results of the survey on the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks and the fact that many countries had yet to implement a national quality assurance framework. The Commission adopted the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics and the recommendations contained therein. It welcomed the manual as an important contribution in guiding countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework, including for new data sources and new data providers, and for data and statistics for the Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The Commission requested that the manual be made available in all official languages of the United Nations as soon as possible and that the Expert Group finalize the implementation guidance, taking into consideration the need for countries to conduct self-assessment. The Commission recognized the need for coordination of the work on national quality assurance frameworks with related work on the Handbook of Statistical Organization,¹ the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and open data. It also recognized the need for capacity-building and training for the implementation of a national quality assurance framework and welcomed the planned initiatives to support countries, through means such as the establishment of an expert forum, advocacy and the sharing of good practices, training materials and tools. The Commission welcomed and endorsed the proposed programme of work of the Expert Group for the years 2019 and 2020, and its updated terms of reference (see annex), and requested it to expand its membership.

II. Work of the Expert Group in the past two years

2. After adoption by the Statistical Commission in March 2019, the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics underwent a final editorial and production process. In November 2019, Member States were informed that the manual was available as an official United Nations publication.² Jointly with the release of the manual, the Expert Group issued a self-assessment checklist based on the United Nations national quality assurance framework contained in the manual.³

3. Member States, international and regional organizations and partners responded to the call for support for the translation of the manual into the official languages of the United Nations. The Russian version of the manual was provided by the National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan, with financial support from the World Bank and the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, facilitated by the Economic Commission for Europe. It was made available on the website of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat in July 2020.⁴ A French version of the manual has been provided by the National Institute of Statistics of Cameroon and will be available shortly. In addition, a Spanish version of the manuscript is currently

¹ Now the Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems (see Commission decision 51/120).

² Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality>.

³ Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality/tools>.

⁴ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality/un-nqaf-manual>.

being prepared in a collaborative effort by Colombia, Mexico and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and is expected to be available in the first quarter of 2021.⁵ It is expected that the translated manuscripts will be issued as official United Nations publications, depending on the available funding for final editing and production.

4. As part of its activities to support implementation in countries, the Statistics Division organized a workshop on the implementation of a national quality assurance framework for official statistics in countries of the Africa region. The workshop was held in Addis Ababa in October 2019 in cooperation with the Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia and the African Centre for Statistics of the Economic Commission for Africa. The Division conducted a similar workshop in Belgrade in December 2019, in cooperation with the Statistical Office of Serbia, the Economic Commission for Europe and the Statistical Office of the European Union, for countries of the Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and Central Asia subregions. A total of 16 countries and several participants from regional organizations attended each of the workshops. Both workshops introduced the United Nations recommendations on quality assurance and the United Nations national quality assurance framework and covered basic and advanced topics of quality assurance based on country examples and the use of a quality assurance checklist. Earlier, in May 2019, the Division had already contributed to a workshop on the quality of statistics for Sustainable Development Goal indicators organized by the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific in cooperation with the Statistics Department of the International Monetary Fund and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, which was held in Chiba, Japan, and attended by 17 countries.

5. In March 2020, the Expert Group organized a side event at the fifty-first session of the Statistical Commission on the theme “Quality assurance as a tool of official statistics in the new emerging data ecosystem”, which illustrated advanced and exemplary approaches to statistical quality assurance. The Expert Group also reviewed chapter VII of the Handbook of Statistical Organization, on quality management, and provided its comments to the advisory group on the Handbook.

6. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and other factors slowed down progress in the work of the Expert Group. However, at a meeting held in September 2020, many members of the Expert Group and organizations were able to report that their respective activities for the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in countries had continued and that significant progress was being achieved, in many instances supported by the new manual and the recommendations contained therein. At the same meeting, the Expert Group agreed to launch an engagement plan to drive further activities. The meeting also elected the United Kingdom as the new Co-Chair and reconfirmed the Philippines as Co-Chair.

7. The following 22 countries are currently members of the Expert Group: Botswana, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Niger, Norway, Philippines, Russian Federation, South Africa, Ukraine, United Kingdom and Viet Nam. The following nine international and regional organizations joined the Expert Group: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Statistical Office of the European Union, the World Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic Commission for Europe, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

⁵ Notice was received that a Chinese version is forthcoming. There has also been interest in translating the manual into Arabic.

Five countries and one regional organization joined in 2019 following the meeting of the Statistical Commission, thereby strengthening and expanding its membership.

III. Manual and related outputs

8. The manual was developed by the Expert Group. It is intended for use by anyone interested in or working on the quality assurance of official statistics. It contains United Nations recommendations on statistical quality assurance based on the 10 Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, the updated United Nations national quality assurance framework, practical guidance for its implementation and reference materials on quality assurance in the global statistical system. Specifically, it provides guidance for developing a national quality assurance framework and for its implementation throughout the national statistical system. It also provides guidance for addressing quality assurance in the case of new data sources and new data providers, and for data and statistics for the Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

9. As indicated above, the Expert Group issued a self-assessment checklist based on the United Nations national quality assurance framework contained in the manual. The checklist is intended for conducting regular and rigorous quality assessments of statistical systems with the objective of identifying improvement actions. It can also be used to provide an initial assessment for learning purposes or to introduce staff to quality assurance. The self-assessment checklist has already been used in several training workshops and has been found to be very useful.

10. In conjunction with the development of the manual, the Expert Group agreed to develop a road map for the implementation of a national quality assurance framework, to address the issue of certification, to consider the development of additional quality checklists for specific purposes, to develop e-learning, to establish an improved website on data quality assurance and an expert forum and to further reach out to countries. Work on these additional outputs has been undertaken, and an e-learning module for the manual is expected to be released in the first quarter of 2021. The Expert Group will pursue the completion of the outputs in conjunction with its new engagement plan.

IV. Focus of work and planned activities

11. The objective of the Expert Group is to support countries in the development and implementation of their national quality assurance frameworks. The manual is the anchor of its efforts. The Expert Group aims to provide additional materials and conduct additional activities that promote quality assurance and support implementation. It welcomes similar efforts by others and the sharing of information and practices. The Expert Group has developed a new engagement plan to support and promote knowledge-sharing and the cross-fertilization of best practices. In the engagement plan, the Expert Group envisions the conduct of country experience showcase sessions, webinars, learning sessions and working groups on specific topics. Events and sessions will be open to experts and, where appropriate, a wider audience.

12. Quality assurance and the national quality assurance framework are important tools for statistical offices to address operational and strategic challenges. The role of new data sources and new data providers in the new data ecosystem and the importance of safeguarding the role of official statistics as a trusted source of information in a changing environment are recognized by the Expert Group and in the manual. The Expert Group has identified the efforts of statistical offices to measure COVID-19 and its impact and the use of new sources of data as priority topics to be

addressed in its engagement activities. Furthermore, the Expert Group is expected to discuss the role of quality assurance in the emerging concept of data stewardship.

V. Programme of work of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks for 2021–2022

13. It is suggested that the Expert Group carry out the following activities over the next two years (2021 and 2022) in support of the development and implementation of a national quality assurance framework in countries:

(a) Promote the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics and support its translation into the official languages of the United Nations;

(b) Support countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework throughout the national statistical system, considering specific needs such as assuring the quality of new data sources;

(c) Maintain and further update the website on quality assurance of the Statistics Division;

(d) Conduct a programme of activities and events on quality assurance to further build the community of experts and share best practices;

(e) Further assess the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in countries;

(f) Report to the Statistical Commission in March 2023.

VI. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

14. **The Commission is invited to take note of the present report.**

Annex

Updated terms of reference of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

1. The Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks will:

(a) Promote the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics and support its translation into the official languages of the United Nations;

(b) Support countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework throughout the national statistical system, considering specific needs such as assuring the quality of new data sources;

(c) Maintain and further update the website on quality assurance of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat;

(d) Conduct a programme of activities and events on quality assurance to further build the community of experts and share best practices;

(e) Further assess the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in countries;

(f) Report to the Statistical Commission in March 2023.

2. The Expert Group consists of its current members and observers and is open to a limited number of additional countries and organizations that wish to join its work, while ensuring balanced regional representation. Member States will elect two Co-Chairs. The Statistics Division will act as the secretariat of the Expert Group.

3. The Expert Group will conduct its work electronically but will meet face-to-face should the possibility and need arise. Participation in the Expert Group is self-funded.
