Economic and Social Council

Statistical Commission
Fifty-third session
1–4 March 2022
Item 3 (o) of the provisional agenda*
Items for discussion and decision: Network of
Economic Statisticians

Report of the Network of Economic Statisticians

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2021/224 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the first report of the Network of Economic Statisticians to the Statistical Commission for discussion. The report provides the proposed mandate, governance structure, and working and reporting arrangements included in the terms of reference of the Network. It also includes information on the activities and deliverables of the proposed work programme of the Network, building on the endorsed recommendations of the Friends of the Chair group on economic statistics for an agile and more responsive system of economic statistics based on four thematic workstreams: (a) networking (collaboration and user consultation); (b) transforming and challenging the system (statistical infrastructure and operations, and data solutions); (c) enabling (institutional arrangements and governance); and (d) experimenting, integrating and documenting (statistical framework and methods). In addition, the report contains details on the proposed sprints (the short-duration operational mechanism adopted by the task teams of the Network to realize a series of a set amount of work and deliverables for the thematic workstreams of its work programme) for 2022. The Commission is invited to endorse the terms of reference of the Network, express its views on the progress made by the Network and its sprints and endorse the proposed activities and deliverables of the work programme for 2022. Action to be taken by the Commission is set out in paragraph 28 of the report.

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* E/CN.3/2022/1.

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Report of the Network of Economic Statisticians

I. Background

1. At its fifty-second session, the Statistical Commission approved the recommendation of the Friends of the Chair group on economic statistics to establish a new network of economic statisticians to facilitate networking, coordination and communication on new innovations, experiments and best practices for the purpose of making progress on priorities to keep economic statistics relevant; requested that its mandate be clearly defined and provide a transparent and collaborative horizontal coordination mechanism for all existing groups; and recognized the need for that network to coordinate with other statistical committees and groups, as appropriate, for the purpose of measuring the multidimensional relationships between the economy, environment and society of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

II. Introduction

2. In the present report, the first of the Network of Economic Statisticians, the Network describes its proposed mandate, which builds on the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair group on economic statistics for an agile, collaborative and responsive system of economic statistics based on the following four thematic workstreams: (a) networking (collaboration and user consultation); (b) transforming and challenging the system (statistical infrastructure and operations, and data solutions); (c) enabling (institutional arrangements and governance); and (d) experimenting, integrating and documenting (statistical framework and methods).

3. With the intent of establishing an agile, collaborative and highly impactful approach to improving the responsiveness of the system of economic statistics to swiftly evolving policy demands, the Network should facilitate better cooperation and networking among national statistical offices of all Member States, in close consultation with international and regional statistical organizations and bodies. Better cooperation and networking, the need for which was further reinforced by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, will enable national statistical offices to reimagine their business models, develop innovative and coordinated statistical programmes and adopt best practices and working methods, in collaboration with other government agencies and representatives of academia and private and non-governmental organizations, to produce trusted and timely statistics catering to user demands.

4. Moreover, the Network should facilitate better access to and use of statistical infrastructure and operations and data solutions, through trusted services provided by global and regional statistical infrastructure, for data collection and access and for the implementation of standards, including through experimental estimates.

5. In addition, the Network should undertake regular user consultation and promote communication and partnerships through regional and global forums and surveys of statistical groups and entities with the purpose of helping the system of economic statistics to identify emerging themes and common priorities and discover and address duplications and gaps in the work programmes of statistical groups and entities. It is expected that continued dialogue will facilitate the system's operating coherently, collaboratively and inclusively for the actors involved.

6. Furthermore, the Network should facilitate a better and more responsive system of economic statistics to pivot to integrated economic statistics by extending the statistical framework in support of the measurement of the world's swiftly evolving economies and enabling experiments with the integration of the rapidly changing information demands of policymakers. This pivot should also allow the system of economic statistics to achieve improved granularity and timeliness, as well as better

integration of the measures of economy, society and the environment to inform the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and address issues raised in the report of the Secretary-General entitled "Our Common Agenda" (A/75/982).

7.   In that report, the Secretary-General makes explicit reference to the need to take collective action to meet current challenges. An important aspect of that is bringing together Member States, international financial institutions and statistical, science and policy experts to identify a complement or complements to gross domestic product (GDP) that will measure inclusive and sustainable growth and prosperity, building on the work of the Statistical Commission. In addition to identifying complementary measures, the process would need to agree on pathways for national and global accounting systems to include additional measurements and to establish systems for regular reporting as part of official statistics.

8.   The Network is well placed to bring that report and the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair group on economic statistics, as approved by the Statistical Commission, together. The Network can take the above-mentioned expected outcomes forward in multiple ways by better networking and through user-centred partnerships in the creation of global data assets; better challenging the system through use cases in co-production and co-investment; better enabling the system through improved working methods among statistical groups; and better documenting the international conceptual and practical guidance on methodological standards and collective scaling of capacity-building and training programmes, which can be combined with early implementation through regular experimentation with and testing of statistical standards to meet rapidly evolving user demand.

9.   The four workstreams should also address the following lessons learned from the three rounds of global COVID-19 surveys of national statistical offices:

        (a)   That low-income and lower-middle-income countries are ready to engage with international partners to meet emerging demands in terms of the use of new data sources, methods and technologies, supported by appropriate assistance and funding to overcome their major impediments;

        (b)   That the majority of national statistical offices across all income groups see a need for co-investment in:

        (i)   The production of granular data through the linking of microdata from surveys and administrative sources through registers of people and businesses and the integration of statistical and geospatial data;

        (ii)   The production of high-frequency statistics and indicators through the use of big data and data science for high-frequency statistics.[1]

III. Work programme of the Network

10.   With its focus on action to improve the system of economic statistics through networking and engagement with existing statistical groups and entities rather than creating another layer of governance, the Network considers sprints to be the most appropriate working method. Sprints will not only increase the speed of development of the system for shared priorities, but also increase the Network's ability to act in an agile manner to formulate statistical responses to fast-evolving socioeconomic and

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[1] The survey of national statistical offices during the COVID-19 pandemic was conducted by the World Bank and the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, in coordination with the five regional commissions. Overall, 149 offices (76 per cent) participated in at least one of the three rounds of the survey in 2020. For more information, see https://covid-19-response.unstatshub.org/statistical-programmes/covid19-nso-survey/.

environmental circumstances by undertaking a set amount of work in a short time frame to deliver specific deliverables for shared priorities. The sprints could also facilitate the identification of emerging themes and priorities and discover and address duplication and gaps in the work programmes of statistical groups and entities. Moreover, by engaging with such groups and entities, the sprints could amplify or broaden existing work or propose work on new shared priorities to existing or new groups and entities. For each sprint, the composition of the participants is determined anew, so as to align with its multidisciplinary requirements, but each sprint will continue to follow transparent and inclusive working methods, as all members of the statistical community will be informed and invited to take part.

11. To take the four workstreams forward, including the establishment of the Network, three sprints had been developed at the time of writing. The organizational sprint, led by Statistics Canada, will take the work forward on workstream (a), "Networking (collaboration and user consultation)", and workstream (c) "Enabling (institutional arrangements and governance)". The data access sprint, led by Statistics Netherlands, will advance the work on workstream (b), "Transforming and challenging the system (statistical infrastructure and operations, and data solutions)", while the sprint dealing with work on "beyond GDP", led by the United States Bureau of Economic Analysis and the Office for National Statistics of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, will develop the work on workstream (d), "Experimenting, integrating and documenting (statistical framework and methods)".

A. Organizational sprint

12. At the first meeting, held on 3 November 2021, participants reviewed the mandate from the Statistical Commission for the Network based on the final report of the Friends of the Chair group. Draft terms of reference were presented as a reference document for the mandate and governance, working methods and membership of the Network. The second meeting, on 24 November, was focused on finalizing the terms of reference and the start of discussions on user engagement through regional and global forums on economic statistics and surveys of statistical groups and entities, as well as a branding and communications strategy. At the third meeting, on 15 December, participants were to finalize the deliberations on user engagement, continue to discuss the branding and communications strategy and begin to discuss subjects for future sprints. At the fourth meeting, on 12 January 2022, participants will conclude discussions on future sprints and develop a two-year rolling workplan. The report of the meetings and the terms of reference will be made available as background documents.

B. Data access sprint

13. Access to data other than data from surveys has become a critical need for all national statistical offices, as users expect more granular and timely information, as well as relevant statistics on emerging societal phenomena. Privately held data represent promising additional sources of information for such offices. However, gaining access to such data stores is a complex endeavour. As such, sharing insights and best practices could be beneficial to obtaining access in a coordinated and efficient way. The main objective of the sprint is to take significant steps towards a negotiation strategy with private data holders, including a description of the process to find a path from an economic statistics information need, via the identification of potential privately held data sources, and the articulation of specific data requests, to facilitating access. Additional deliverables may include technical solutions for data access; awareness of privacy and confidentiality issues; risk management, governance

and contingency plans; budget and resource requirements; and a communication strategy for stakeholders. The work will build on existing regional and inter-agency partnerships with the private sector and academia. With the experience gained, global commitments to facilitating access to privately held data for official statistics through inclusive partnerships could eventually be generated.

14.   The work will be undertaken by a joint task team of the Network and the Committee of Experts on Big Data and Data Science for Official Statistics. It is expected to be launched in early 2022 and will comprise four interrelated meetings. Invitations will be sent to all Member States for them to express interest in participating. There will be a focus on a common theme, "Global value chains and e-commerce", of which the precise scope is expected to be further articulated and narrowed to specific industries, depending on the interest of participating partners. A summary report will be provided as a background document.

C. "Beyond GDP" sprint

15.   While traditional measures of economic performance still have a place, there appears to be an increasing gap between the information contained in aggregate GDP data and what is important for the general public's well-being and the contributions and conditions of nature. This means working towards the development of a statistical system that complements measures of market activity with measures centred on people's well-being and measures that capture inclusiveness and sustainability. Many approaches, frameworks and specific measures have been put forward. One such approach is that of "beyond GDP", another pertains to well-being, while yet another relates to inclusive wealth. The broad aim of the sprint will be to scope the work carried out in these domains internationally, identify best practices, identify areas of high priority for research on the extended statistical framework for economic statistics, amplify existing work on the multidimensional framework for integrated statistics and identify specific, contained research areas for which internationally coordinated work would produce substantial additional value in closing the gap in the pivot to integrated economic statistics.

16.   While the theme of "beyond GDP" has a broad scope, the work will focus on specific topics that hold promise for the development of an extended statistical framework for economic statistics, such as intangible capital, natural capital, expanded aggregates of economic welfare, expanded distribution accounts, financial technology (known as fintech) and financial accessibility, and sociodemographic and national transfer accounts.

17.   The kick-off event is planned for February 2022, and the entire sprint will comprise four meetings in the first quarter of 2022. A summary report of the meetings held in February will be provided as a background document.

IV. Terms of reference of the Network

18.   The Statistical Commission is the entity that establishes the Network, approves its terms of reference, including its mandate and work programme, and monitors its progress. The mandate of the Network is periodically reviewed by the Network itself. Any proposed amendments are submitted to the Commission for endorsement.

19.   The mandate of the Network is focused on facilitating networking, coordination and communication between national, regional and global organizations in the system of economic statistics and promotes global partnerships with academia and the private sector for a responsive system of economic statistics that functions efficiently in

response to changing user demands. In addition, the Network ensures that proper mechanisms are in place to gather, document and inform all the actors in the system of economic statistics about data and analysis needs so as to respond with effective policies to current and future socioeconomic, environmental and geospatial issues.

20.　The Network enables horizontal coordination to ensure that the entire suites of committees of experts and statistical groups in the system of economic statistics are leveraged to address data priorities and scale up good practices already established by countries and regional and international organizations. Innovation and pivots are accelerated by facilitating continuous sharing of national and regional experiences and following agreed principles of networking, co-investment, governance and experimentation for the system of economic statistics.

21.　The main task of the Network is to identify broad horizontal priorities for experimentation and testing within the system of economic statistics through regional and global consultations and specific surveys with statistical groups and entities. Those priorities may be of a short-term and medium-term nature but also may be an immediate early warning response delivered at speed on swiftly emerging and changing policy demands, for example those related to the pandemic.

22.　Members of the Network comprise high-level economic statisticians from national Governments and international and regional organizations with a broad and in-depth horizontal knowledge of the priorities and issues in the system of economic statistics in its broad definition (including social and environmental dimensions). In addition, members are selected to ensure equitable regional country and agency representation. They are appointed for an initial period of three years with the possibility of renewal. The Network elects two Co-Chairs, who represent the Network at international meetings and promote its mission and mandate. They work in collaboration with the Network's Bureau to establish the annual workplan and monitor progress.

23.　The Network will convene task teams to carry out its work programme in 2022 in support of specific projects and sprints. It will set up appropriate monitoring mechanisms to nurture and follow the further development of identified minimum viable products by existing or newly established statistical groups and entities. In many respects, the work of the task teams is preparatory, and their short and intense life cycle ensures that momentum is sustained to meet clear objectives.

Better networking and organization

24.　Through the organizational sprint, regional and global user consultations and surveys of statistical groups and entities will be organized to determine broad horizontal priorities and to contribute to better coordinated programmes, practices and working methods in support of national statistical offices around the world. In addition, bringing together a network of senior experts on economic statistics will support the propagation of work throughout the statistical system and its partners.

Better data and data solutions

25.　Through the data access sprint, multi-partner consultations are expected to identify best practices for global co-investment and co-production strategies in data and data solutions for official statistics. This global approach and strategy to gain access to privately held data, as well as administrative data, should include global facilitation of data access, a global training programme, the implementation of statistical standards and the production of experimental indicators. In turn, this will lead to the development of better and early indicators, as well as improvements to the statistical capabilities of national statistical offices and international statistical organizations.

Better statistical methods and framework

26. Through the "beyond GDP" sprint, the Network promotes working methods for the continuous and iterative updating of global statistical standards through experimentation with and testing of methodological changes in countries and pursues a broad integration framework with multidimensional and broader measures of progress for the system of economic statistics.

Better user consultation, communication and partnership

27. Through regional and global consultations and surveys of statistical groups and entities, which are the Network's raison d'être, as well as its modus operandi, the Network focuses on bringing experts and practitioners on economic statistics together. These platforms will facilitate collaboration and exchange and devise practical solutions by working together. By developing enduring regional and global consultative user platforms in close consultation with regional commissions and agencies, horizontal priorities can be established that meet early warning and short-term and medium-term user requirements and identify and address overlaps and gaps in existing statistical programmes.

V. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

28. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To express its views on the progress made;**

(b) **To endorse the terms of reference of the Network;**

(c) **To endorse the proposed activities and deliverables of the work programme of the Network for 2022.**

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