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Items for discussion and decision: coordination of statistical activities in the United Nations system

Report of the Friends of the Chair on the coordination of statistical activities in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request by the Statistical Commission at its forty-third session (see E/2012/24, chap I.B), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit a progress report by the Friends of the Chair on the coordination of statistical activities in the United Nations system. The report describes how the group was established, sets out an initial discussion on priority areas and provides a briefing on a meeting between the Chair of the group and the chief statisticians of the organizations of the United Nations system. The report also contains a proposal for a programme of work to enable the Friends of the Chair to conclude its tasks. An accompanying background document provides a more detailed description of the United Nations Statistical Information System and current existing coordination mechanisms. The Commission is invited to comment on the programme of work and provide guidance for the completion of the tasks of the Friends of the Chair.

* E/CN.3/2013/1.



I. Background

1. At its forty-third session, in 2012, the Statistical Commission, by its decision 43/112:

(a) Welcomed the report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/2012/15), which addressed concerns raised at the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission; stressed the importance of effective coordination on statistical programmes within the United Nations system; and agreed that the time was right for a general review and assessment of the existing coordination mechanisms;

(b) Agreed with the proposal to form a group of Friends of the Chair, which would be tasked to reflect on the current situation and to make proposals for improved mechanisms; a new terms of reference would be prepared taking into account the comments received;

(c) Affirmed the need for the active and full participation in the Friends of the Chair by representatives from relevant United Nations system entities with knowledge of the relevant institutional background, and noted with appreciation the interest from Member States and United Nations entities to participate in this process;

(d) Entrusted the Chair of the Statistical Commission, in consultation with the Bureau and the Co-Chairs of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, to address relevant issues for the functioning of the Friends of the Chair;

(e) Requested the Friends of the Chair to report to the Commission at its forty-fourth session, in 2013.

II. Establishment of the Friends of the Chair

2. The National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico offered to take the lead in establishing the Friends of the Chair and worked closely with the secretariat of the United Nations Statistics Division in reaching out to Member States. All countries that had explicitly expressed their interest in joining the Friends of the Chair were invited. A number of additional countries that had shown an interest in the issue of coordinating statistical activities during the Commission debate were approached to join the Friends of the Chair so as to ensure a balanced regional representation. The group was formally established at the beginning of July 2012 with a membership of 12 countries and areas: Australia, Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, the Niger, Palestine, the Philippines, South Africa and the United States of America. In accordance with decision 43/112 of the Statistical Commission to fully involve relevant organizations of the United Nations system, representatives from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund were also invited to participate in the Friends of the Chair. These entities represent the four broad categories of United Nations institutions, namely, secretariat units, regional commissions, specialized agencies and funds and programmes.

3. As a first step, the Friends of the Chair reviewed the proposed terms of reference (E/CN.3/2012/15, annex III), taking into account the discussion at the Statistical Commission, and agreed on two revisions to the original proposal. First,

since the issues of coordination within the United Nations system are quite complex owing to the varying institutional arrangements, it was decided that the work of the Friends of the Chair would have to be extended over a two-year period, and that the group would report on these matters to the Statistical Commission at its forty-fourth and forty-fifth sessions, in 2013 and 2014 respectively. Second, the group included in its terms of reference the full participatory status of the four international organizations mentioned above. The final version of the terms of reference is presented in the annex to the present document.

4. An initial discussion of the priorities of the Friends of the Chair raised a number of issues. It was stressed that improved coordination of statistical activities in the United Nations system was not an end in itself, but should rather be seen as a tool to help United Nations entities deliver statistical outputs according to the mandate that Member States have entrusted to them. It was recognized that a lack of coherence between the mandates of United Nations entities might be a source of failures in the functioning of the global statistical system. However, this did not mean that the Friends of the Chair should request changes to the mandates of the entities, which would be a lengthy and complicated process, but rather that proposed options should be practical and take current institutional arrangements into account. The participation of representatives from Member States and United Nations organizations was definitely considered crucial, as they contributed to a better understanding of the rules and legal aspects.

5. Against this background, the following issues were mentioned as areas for the Friends of the Chair group to work on:

- (a) Data collection and dissemination, including supporting infrastructure, for example, UNdata;
- (b) Development and implementation of statistical standards;
- (c) Support for countries through technical cooperation and capacity-building;
- (d) Current organizational arrangements;
- (e) Professional principles and practices;
- (f) Work programming and budgeting;
- (g) Human resources management matters;
- (h) Statistical software and information technology.

III. Consultation with the organizations of the United Nations system

6. Bearing in mind the special concern of the Commission for full participation in the Friends of the Chair by representatives from United Nations system entities with knowledge of the relevant institutional background, an important step was to seek dialogue and exchange with representatives of the United Nations system. For that purpose, a meeting was held on 17 September 2012, in Frankfurt, Germany, between representatives of United Nations entities and a representative of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico, representing the Chair of the

Friends of the Chair, in the margins of the twentieth session of the Committee on the Coordination of Statistical Activities. The Chair of the group initiated the discussion with a presentation, which included a review of extensive research on the issue of coordination and a reflection on the rationales for effective coordination, such as efficiency gains and avoidance of data discrepancies. It was recognized that coordination was a continuous and complex challenge that requires all stakeholders to work closely together in order to comply with the mandate from the Statistical Commission to develop a viable proposal for effective coordination in the future.

7. In the discussions, the representatives emphasized the key difference between the national and international statistical systems, namely, the lack of a regulatory and legislative framework at the international level. Contrary to that, statistics coordination at the working level in the United Nations system was sometimes complicated by the diversity of mandates and reporting structures within the United Nations. In that context, the central role of the Statistical Commission was highlighted as the global intergovernmental body dealing exclusively with statistics and recognized fully by the United Nations entities whose core business was statistics. That central role might also be recognized by the professional statisticians working in United Nations specialized entities whose core mandate was not statistics, but it was not formally recognized by their institutions and governing bodies. It was cautioned that a limiting factor was that the Statistical Commission tended to represent the views of the national statistical offices rather than national statistical systems. Furthermore, several participants pointed to a potential conflict due to the fact that they were formally accountable in terms of statistical programming to a number of other intergovernmental bodies, such as the International Conference of Labour Statisticians and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. Those intergovernmental processes had a comparable status to that of the Statistical Commission and therefore any decision to change the formal arrangements in the statistical programming and practices of United Nations entities could be effective only if made at the level of the Economic and Social Council or the General Assembly. The challenges of coordinating national statistical systems, for example, between national statistical offices and line ministries, were to some extent mirrored at the international level.

8. The proposal to create a United Nations data clearing house was considered with some scepticism owing to several factors, namely, that such a process would require all United Nations governing bodies to agree to delegate decisions on data collection and dissemination to another entity; that, in order to be fully functional, considerable additional resources would be needed; that subject matter expertise on the large spectrum of data handled by the various United Nations entities was not centrally available; and the possible time delays that a systematic data review process could introduce.

9. Nevertheless, some elements of the idea were considered favourably, namely, that some form of peer review could be beneficial; that existing mechanisms such as UNdata could be used to identify and address some of the data problems; and the notion of shared quality principles. It was suggested that a common and explicit United Nations data quality framework be developed.

10. In order to move forward with the mandate and the responsibility given to the Friends of the Chair, the United Nations system entities discussed the following points of consensus:

(a) The United Nations entities are committed to working constructively with the Friends of the Chair to define appropriate and improved coordination mechanisms;

(b) The strategic role that the regional commissions play in promoting the agreed standards to be applied by countries and in assisting in the process of efficient data transfer from the Member States of a particular region to the units of the United Nations system and the international organizations in general must be recognized;

(c) The Committee on the Coordination of Statistical Activities, as the key body tasked with statistical coordination, is in principle the appropriate forum to address the general issue of data consistency at the international level and must be encouraged to do so. United Nations system entities can play a leadership role by forging and establishing agreements and arrangements between the United Nations system entities first, which may later serve as models for the larger Committee group;

(d) A first useful step in analysing the flow of statistical data in the United Nations system could be to construct a matrix of data origin and destination in order to evaluate the problem and to look for practical solutions. In this context, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico offered to develop a concept note for an information exchange model that would be presented to the Commission in a background document;

(e) The clearing house idea should not focus on the data themselves, but rather on the underlying methodologies and quality principles. In this context, the role of the statistical data and metadata exchange initiative should also be analysed as part of a long-term solution;

(f) The United Nations Statistics Division, in close collaboration with the four international members of the Friends of the Chair, will work on a better description of the current United Nations Statistical Information System, including existing coordination mechanisms, in order to assist the Friends of the Chair to analyse the current situation and make proposals for improvements.

IV. Programme of work

11. In line with the commitment made by the United Nations system entities, the Commission will have before it a background document providing a more detailed description of the United Nations system and existing coordination mechanisms to allow for a better analysis of current problems and potential solutions. The following information on each organization will be presented:

- (a) Organization name and United Nations entity type;
- (b) Mandate, including governing body;
- (c) Fields of activity;
- (d) Statistical work programme, including main outputs and customers of the statistical outputs of the organization;
- (e) Data collection and data dissemination policies, including thematic coverage and national counterparts;

- (f) Structure;
- (g) Number of professional and support staff;
- (h) Existing coordination mechanisms with other United Nations organizations.

12. The following steps are suggested for the consideration and approval of the Commission:

(a) In April 2013, the Friends of the Chair is to agree on a full list of aspects and dimensions of coordination that must be addressed in its final report;

(b) In May and July 2013, the Friends of the Chair is to elaborate an analytical text for each of the dimensions, including a description of the current arrangements, highlighting strengths and weaknesses and making specific recommendations;

(c) In August and September 2013, a first draft report is to be prepared, in consultation with United Nations system organizations;

(d) In October and November 2013, the report is to be finalized for submission to the Statistical Commission.

13. The Commission is invited to comment on the programme of work and provide guidance for the completion of the tasks of the Friends of the Chair.

Annex

Proposed terms of reference for the Friends of the Chair on enhanced coordination of statistical activities in the United Nations system

It is proposed that a group of Friends of the Chair be established, composed of representatives of Member States and selected United Nations system organizations, to further consider the issue of the coordination of statistical activities within the United Nations system.

The following matters should be specifically considered within the scope of the remit of the Friends of the Chair:

- (a) The priority areas that require coordination and the outcomes desired by Member States;
- (b) Options for the implementation of coordination within these areas and the mechanism;
- (c) Reporting to the Statistical Commission at its forty-fourth and forty-fifth session, in 2013 and 2014, on these matters.

It is envisaged that the Friends of the Chair will take into account in its deliberations the various layers of the United Nations system, focusing in the first instance on those statistical entities that fall within the purview of the Secretariat of the United Nations and the United Nations funds and programmes. However, if it becomes clear that significant coordination issues have arisen whose scope extends beyond that purview, then the Friends of the Chair should also report on those matters.
