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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 chapter V, paragraph 4, of the report of the Statistical Commission on its forty-fourth session, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the final report of the Friends of the Chair on the coordination of statistical activities in the United Nations system, which is submitted to the Commission for discussion and decision. The report describes the activities and discussions of the group, elaborates various aspects of coordination and provides recommendations for improved coordination within the United Nations system. A related background document provides a description of the statistical units of the United Nations system and their respective work programmes. A second background document, on a long-term vision for effective global data collection, data sharing and dissemination, has been prepared by Mexico. The Commission is invited to express its views on the proposals for improving coordination of statistical activities within the United Nations system and possible priority areas for improved coordination.

* [E/CN.3/2014/1](#).



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

I. Background

1. At its forty-third session, in 2012, the Statistical Commission, by its decision [43/112 \(E/2012/24, chap. I.B\)](#), agreed with the proposal to form a group of Friends of the Chair, which would be tasked with reviewing the current situation in respect of coordination on statistical programmes within the United Nations system and with making proposals for improved mechanisms. Member States and representatives from relevant United Nations system entities with knowledge of the relevant institutional background were asked to participate in this group. The membership includes the following 12 States: Australia, Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, the Niger, the Philippines, South Africa, the United States of America and the State of Palestine. Representatives of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) were also invited to participate in the meetings of the Friends of the Chair.

2. At its forty-fourth session, in 2012, the Statistical Commission, by its decision [44/112 \(E/2013/24, chap. I.C\)](#):

(a) Reiterated the need for effective coordination of statistical work among United Nations system agencies, and international agencies in general;

(b) Took note of the work done by the Friends of the Chair and agreed with the proposed work programme, in particular with the focus on developing a quality framework;

(c) Welcomed the offers by the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities and United Nations system agencies to support the work of the Friends of the Chair.

3. The Friends of the Chair conducted three physical meetings. At its meeting held on 17 September 2012 in Frankfurt, Germany, on the side of the twentieth session of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, a representative of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico, serving as Chair of the Friends of the Chair group, discussed with United Nations entities the roles of the Committee, United Nations system entities and the regional commissions. The flow of statistical data within the United Nations system and the use of the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) were further points of consideration. At its meeting on 28 February 2013, held as a side event of the forty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission, the Friends of the Chair discussed possible options for improved coordination and made observations concerning the coordination of normative work (statistical standards), data collection and dissemination, and programmes of work. At an informal meeting held on 10 June 2013 in Geneva, the Friends of the Chair discussed options for improved coordination on data. Coordination in the area of methodological development and technical cooperation were topics as well.

4. One or several meetings were attended by the representatives of Mexico (Chair), Australia, Hungary, India, Italy, the United States of America and the State

of Palestine, as well as representatives of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), ILO, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNCTAD, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), ESCWA, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Statistics Division (UNSD) and the Universal Postal Union (UPU).

II. Aspects (dimensions) of coordination

A. Data collection and dissemination, and data quality

5. *Data collection.* Member States have often been concerned about receiving multiple data requests from international and regional organizations for the same or similar data which have to be responded to individually. It also puts in question the efficiency of the collection efforts. Therefore, there have been strong efforts by international and regional organizations to coordinate the data collection and to share data and thereby avoid duplication. In many cases, memorandums of understanding or other arrangements between organizations have been established which split (or centralized) the data-collection efforts and established a subsequent sharing of the raw data. There are also examples where data processing and dissemination are subject to a coordinated process, thereby realizing efficiency gains and ensuring consistency of data between organizations.

6. *Data dissemination and effective and efficient data exchange.* Initiatives such as UNdata which functions as a one-stop data portal bear the potential for a common dissemination infrastructure at the global level. Such efforts have been facilitated by open data policies which have been adopted by many agencies. The development and implementation of the SDMX standard¹ to standardize data exchange would go a long way towards rendering data transmission and exchange more effective and efficient. Existing and emerging good practices should be studied and adopted for additional areas. A first useful step in analysing the flow of statistical data within the United Nations system could be to construct a matrix of origin and destination of information.

7. *Data quality.* Quality measurement and assurance frameworks have been promoted by international organizations and adopted by countries for many years. The Friends of the Chair group supports the idea of a joint United Nations system quality assurance framework to facilitate the adherence to common data-quality principles and standards throughout the United Nations statistical system. The establishment of a “clearing house” for data would be highly difficult to achieve in practice (also owing to the resources requirements) and should not entail a focus on the data themselves, but rather on the underlying methodologies and quality principles.

¹ See <http://www.sdmx.org>.

B. Development and implementation of statistical standards

8. *Development of statistical standards.* The Statistical Commission is the international forum wherein almost all new or revised international statistical standards are approved and the work on these standards is initiated and coordinated. The coordination normally includes extensive expert consultations and the formation of working and expert groups which ensure that the knowledge and experiences of experts from countries and concerned agencies, including relevant United Nations system entities, are adequately utilized and taken into account. Also, throughout the process of development of new standards, worldwide consultations are conducted. The Commission process ensures that the international standards are consistent with each other, as applicable. The challenge lies in the coordination of statistical standards that are being developed outside the regular Commission mechanisms. The Friends of the Chair group urges all United Nations system organizations to provide regular reports on all their work on standards and methods to the Commission.

9. *Technical cooperation and capacity-building.* International and regional organizations that are part of the United Nations statistical system are conducting technical cooperation and capacity-building activities to support the implementation of international standards in countries to facilitate the collection of international comparable data. However, these activities might not always be well synchronized at the planning stage owing to various factors, such as different mechanisms for funding and organization. However, information about specific activities is frequently shared between organizations, and coordination and cooperation take place at the level of the conduct of activities. The Friends of the Chair group encourages United Nations system entities to improve the coordination of technical cooperation activities at the planning stage.

C. Current organizational arrangements

10. The United Nations statistical system consists of so-called secretariat units, funds and programmes and specialized agencies.² In essence, all statistical units in United Nations entities operate in an independent, decentralized manner, with their own mandates and constituencies and varying degree of programmatic supervision by member States. Against this organizational background, it would be difficult and time consuming to pursue a legal or institutional approach, adjusting or amending mandates, with coordination being made a requirement. Hence, based on recognition of the fact that it is impractical to “enforce” collaboration institutionally, effective cooperation in statistical programmes must continue to be built practically on goodwill. In this context, the compilation of descriptive information on entities and

² Statistical units and programmes within the United Nations system, the so-called secretariat units, include the Statistics Division, the regional commissions, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). Funds and programmes include, for example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Specialized agencies include the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

coordination mechanisms of the United Nations agencies (see the background document on statistical units) was considered to be a very useful first step towards sharing information and creating a vision of a United Nations statistical system.

11. *Role of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities.* The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities³ constitutes the main mechanism for coordination of international statistical work within the United Nations system, and beyond, with all international organizations with statistical programmes. The Committee has a broad mandate, encompassing six main activities, namely, the efficient functioning of the statistical system, common standards and platforms, development of methodologies, inter-institutional support, outreach and advocacy for statistics. The Committee reports regularly to the Statistical Commission. While it continues to provide an adequate overall umbrella for the coordination of international statistical programmes, it is not the appropriate forum for internal coordination within the United Nations.

12. *Mechanisms of coordination within the United Nations statistical system.* For the last few years, the Statistics Division in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat has convened a regular meeting of the key managers of United Nations statistical programmes. However, these meetings have neither a formal status nor a fixed agenda. In addition, there are meetings of the United Nations Statistics Cluster, which comprises the so-called secretariat units exclusively (no funds, programmes or specialized agencies participate therein), which share programming and budgeting procedures. In addition, the Statistics Division has initiated the holding of regular meetings/telephone conferences with the statistical units of the regional commissions so as to ensure the coordination of ongoing activities.

13. *Role of the regional commissions.* The regional commissions play an important and strategic role in the promotion of agreed standards to be applied by countries and are assisting in the process of efficient data transfer from member States of a particular region to the units of the United Nations system and international organizations in general. Further, it is at the regional level that data are frequently most intensively used and reviewed, as evidenced by the many publications on this subject matter and dissemination databases provided by the regional commissions.

D. Other relevant dimensions and considerations

14. *Tools that allow systematic analysis.* To systematically identify the various aspects of statistical coordination, it is useful to map them to the components of the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM).⁴ This Model provides an overview of all of the different activities undertaken in the production of official statistics, at both the national and international levels, which can help to structure, plan and evaluate the coordination efforts in specific dimensions. Specifically, the GSBPM framework can support the coordination of collection, processing, analysis

³ See http://unstats.un.org/unsd/accesub-public/workpartner_ccsa.htm.

⁴ See UNECE secretariat, "Generic Statistical Business Process Model, version 4.0 — April 2009", outcome of the Joint UNECE/Eurostat/Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Work Session on Statistical Metadata (METIS). Available from <http://www1.unece.org/stat/platform/display/metis/Generic+Statistical+Business+Process+Model+Paper>.

and dissemination of statistical data (processes 4 through 7). Furthermore, the application of the GSBPM framework can help identify possibilities and needs for coordination with respect to planning and budgeting of statistical programmes (process 1), design and development of systems and tools (processes 2 and 3), data preservation (process 8) and programme evaluation (process 9). The GSBPM also covers overarching statistical processes in which coordination activities and mechanisms are needed, such as quality and metadata management, and statistical framework management (e.g., coordination of standards and classifications).⁵

15. *Work programming and budgeting.* United Nations entities operate with a high degree of budgetary and programmatic independence. However, the integrated presentation of the programmes of work of the international organizations active in the European region, prepared annually for the Conference of European Statisticians, could provide a model for improved coordination in work programming. The Statistical Commission, whose current primary focus is on methodological issues, would have to broaden its purview to cover data collection and dissemination issues, as well as programme planning issues, to the extent adequate. The Commission could, for instance, request a review of data collection in a particular subject-matter area, such as health statistics.

16. *Professional principles and practices.* One important and mutually beneficial area of cooperation encompasses the implementation of professional principles in statistical work within the respective political contexts of the various United Nations organizations. The United Nations Chief Statisticians have agreed, within the context of part of the work of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, on a set of principles governing international statistical activities which will enhance the functioning of the international statistical system. Those principles were inspired by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, adopted by the Statistical Commission at its special session held from 11 to 15 April 1994 (E/1994/29, chap. V) and the practical guidelines for good practices in technical cooperation for statistics, endorsed by the Commission at its thirtieth session, held from 1 to 5 March 1999 (E/1999/24, chap. VIII). The set of 10 principles is accompanied by, and further elaborated in, a list of good practices.⁶

17. *Human resource management.* Staffing and human resources management is conducted mostly independently by the various entities of the United Nations statistical system. The only exception in this regard are the secretariat units, which have the same staff rules and regulations and among which staff can apply freely for open positions while retaining their contract. Special leave arrangements are another option which allows for a temporary move between organizations. In all other cases, staff have to terminate their contract with one organization in order to work for another. Training visits and short-term staff exchanges are options that should be

⁵ An alternative framework is provided by the life-cycle model of the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI). Similar to the GSBPM, this framework identifies the various dimensions that constitute not only the statistical production, but also the consumption process, including data conceptualization, collection, processing, distribution, discovery, analysis, repurposing, and archiving. Further details are available from <http://www.ddialliance.org/>.

⁶ http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/Principles_stat_activities/principles_stat_activities.asp.

explored further with a view to building a pool of staff with diverse technical and institutional experiences.⁷

18. *Statistical software and information technology.* Information technology and statistical software within the various entities of the United Nations statistical system are highly customized and often developed in-house for their specific purposes. Hence, information technology and software are rarely shared, if at all. However, the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities has frequently discussed items that relate to the use of information technology, such as data exchange and the implementation of SDMX.

19. *Central role of SDMX.* SDMX provides common terminology for statistical data and metadata, as well as technical standards for data and metadata transfer, which are essential for coordinating data and metadata transmissions between different organizations, and supports the idea of open exchange and sharing of metadata. In this regard, SDMX has the potential to become a key instrument in supporting coordination efforts within the various dimensions identified in the Generic Statistical Business Process Model.

III. Recommendations for improved coordination

A. Proposals for immediate and midterm action

20. *Meeting of the United Nations Chief Statisticians.* The meeting of the United Nations Chief Statisticians, as constituting the group responsible for the statistical coordination of the statistical programmes of United Nations entities, should be further strengthened and developed. It is recommended that this group be given a mandate to keep the Statistical Commission regularly informed on the group's work and progress in improving coordination within the United Nations statistical system.

21. The following further proposals for immediate and midterm action are made to the members of the United Nations statistical system:

(a) Create transparency of existing roles and mechanisms and systematically analyse statistical processes (e.g., by using the Generic Statistical Business Process Model) to identify possibilities and needs for coordination;

(b) Review and, where needed, improve the systematic sharing of information on work programmes and activities, in particular in the context of the planning of technical cooperation;

(c) Renew the commitment to coordination;

(d) Adopt best practices for data sharing and dissemination (implementation of SDMX as a statistical standard);

⁷ In this context, it is worth mentioning that the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities during its sixteenth session, held in Vienna from 1 to 3 September 2010, formed two task teams in order to address human resource issues (see SA/2010/19 of 1 December 2010). Task team 1 worked on "Defining the profile of international statisticians and recruitment policies" with the objective, among others, of sharing experiences and best practices in recruitment. Task team 2, on "Training of international statisticians; staff exchange and mobility", aimed at improving opportunities for training and mobility. The network of international statisticians is another, related initiative of the Committee.

- (e) Develop a metadata repository of international and regional organizations (encompassing a catalogue of providers and their data provision agreements);
- (f) Adopt common elements of a data quality assurance framework.

B. Areas for future consideration

22. *Long-term vision for effective global data collection, data sharing and dissemination.* As coordination and technology develop, common data hubs might be established in the future at the international, regional and national levels. Countries would have to cooperate and establish national data repositories with so-called certificates of origin, which could, for example, eliminate discrepancies at the international level. While this is certainly a long-term process, it should nonetheless be agreed as a goal. Its achievement would be supported by the current developments in SDMX. A practical approach could entail starting with domain-specific pilot projects to help in identifying best practice models. The data exchange model established in the European Union could serve as another basis for action.⁸

23. *Incorporation of coordination into mission statements and/or mandates of United Nations organizations.* The entities of the United Nations statistical system are encouraged to examine the possibility of including an explicit mandate for coordination in their mission statements in order to institutionalize coordination as a task.

IV. Issues for discussion

24. **The Statistical Commission is invited to endorse the proposal of mandating regular meetings of the United Nations Chief Statisticians, who would take on further work on United Nations system coordination, based on the conclusions and recommendations of the Friends of the Chair contained in this report. The group of Chief Statisticians would be asked to report back to the Commission.**

⁸ For further details, see the background document prepared by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico.