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Items for discussion and decision: data in support of the post-2015 development agenda

Transformative agenda for official statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2014/219, and contains information about the Global Conference on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics organized jointly by the Statistical Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat). The recommendations of the Conference contained in the transformative agenda for official statistics are included in a background report. The Commission is invited to comment on these recommendations and advise on the future course of action.

Points for discussion by the Commission are contained in the final section of the report.

* E/CN.3/2015/1.



I. Introduction

1. This report presents information on the Global Conference on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics, organized jointly by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat). At the time of reporting, the Conference was scheduled to be held on 15 and 16 January 2015 at United Nations Headquarters. The transformative agenda containing the recommendations of the Conference are provided to the Commission as a background document.

2. The general context for the Global Conference was set by the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20 to 22 June 2012, and its outcome document entitled “The future we want”; by the 2013 report of the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (A/67/890), in which a “data revolution” was called for; and most recently, by the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals in its discussions and negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals, and targets, and by the conclusions of the Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development.

3. The Conference was organized as a follow-up to the Friday seminar on “Managing the Data Revolution”, which was held just prior to the forty-fifth session of the Commission on 28 February 2014.

4. The objective of the Friday seminar was to emphasize clearly the strategic necessity of transforming the national statistical systems in order to respond not only to the regular requests for sound official statistics, but also to emerging needs, such as those that will inevitably arise from the post-2015 development agenda and the expansion of integrated economic, social and environmental statistics.

II. Purpose of the Conference

5. The Conference is being organized as a high-level forum of official statisticians with the objective of seeking a broad consensus on the transformative agenda for official statistics. That transformative agenda should be an adequate response to the increased demand for more detailed and more timely data to monitor progress on the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda. These goals and targets are universal in the sense that they concern all United Nations Member States, but at the same time, they are specific in the way they are formulated at the subnational, national and regional levels. These new demands require a modernized national statistical system which produces official statistics more efficiently, more cost-effectively and in a sustainable, integrated and internationally coordinated way, based on an inclusive partnership. The Conference aims to determine the strategic direction for the statistical community in measuring progress towards achieving the sustainable development goals.

III. Participants

6. The heads of about 40 national statistical offices and 20 regional and international statistical agencies have been invited to participate in the Conference. The presence of many chief statisticians is expected to provide an occasion for a strategic discussion on the response of the statistical community to the demands of the post-2015 development agenda, and on the management implications for the statistical systems.

IV. Outcome

7. The Conference will bring together the different initiatives in the context of its topic with the objective of formulating recommendations for a strategic transformative agenda for official statistics in support of the post-2015 development agenda. The actual recommendations are included in the background document for the present report and serve as the basis for the deliberations of the Commission to reach consensus and decide on actions to be taken.

V. Main themes of the Conference

8. The two-day Global Conference will consider the main themes set out below.

Theme 1: New requirements from policy demands for the global statistical system

9. In the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, entitled “The future we want”, world leaders recognized that progress towards the achievement of the goals needs to be assessed and accompanied by targets and indicators, while taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and levels of development.

10. In that context, the Conference also recognized the need for integrated social, economic and environmental information and called for holistic and integrated approaches to sustainable development for decision-making at the national, subnational and local levels. The ability of the national statistical offices and national statistical systems of countries to effectively, efficiently and sustainably measure and report progress towards meeting the sustainable development goals and targets through the use of relevant indicators is therefore a key component of the post-2015 development agenda.

11. The urgency of addressing the national statistical capacity to measure and report on progress in sustainable development was also highlighted in the report of the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, wherein it was concluded that a “data revolution” was necessary to improve the quality of statistics and information available to citizens.

12. Since then, the political momentum around data and their relevance to the development agenda has grown steadily. A transformative change, referred to as a data revolution — described as a scientifically sound and sustained, transformative effort towards improving how data are produced, analysed and used — is needed to

generate the necessary flow of high-quality, timely and sustainably produced data in support of the post-2015 development agenda.

13. Reliable and timely data that cover all significant aspects of sustainable development as formulated in the 17 goals and 169 targets adopted in the Open Working Group process that concluded in July 2014, are needed to ensure that the decisions by Governments, international and regional agencies, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, academia, the private business sector and even the general public are evidence-based. Integrated statistics are required to address multidimensional phenomena such as poverty, sustainable production and consumption, climate change and globalization and are indispensable for the new post-2015 development agenda.

14. To achieve the goal described above, traditional statistical processes will need to be redesigned to become more integrated and efficient and to yield data that is more timely, and better and differently disaggregated. Administrative records may be improved and adequate legislation put in place at the country level to ensure access to those data and regulate their usage, with the utmost respect for confidentiality, privacy and caution in data storage and dissemination. In addition to the more widespread use of administrative data as the source of regular and consistent statistical information, the thematic coverage of surveys and the range of administrative sources used may be expanded to integrate the new concerns emerging from the current development debate.

15. Efforts may be made to prepare statistical services that are able to collect disaggregated data at the lowest possible level, by sex, age, geography, income (wealth quintiles), disability status, ethnicity, indigenous status and other vulnerable social groups and, if and when the need arises, by other categories and groupings, so that they can be used directly by local communities and actors, and serve as a meaningful vector for change at the grass-roots level.

16. New, non-traditional data sources need to be leveraged and considered for adequacy to enrich the sources of official statistics so that the data needs in new development areas can be satisfied and timely, detailed and spatially disaggregated data can be produced and made available to decision makers (these issues are discussed in greater detail in the report of the global working group on big data for official statistics ([E/CN.3/2015/4](#)). This implies that the innovative and transformative power of information technology may be harnessed: from the collection stage (through, for example, the use of computer-assisted collections through mobile devices), to the dissemination stage (through advanced visualization tools, such as data on maps).

17. Data liberation and transparency about their production are part of the data revolution. Open access to data, metadata and underlying methodologies will not only promote transparency and ensure accountability, but also unleash the analytical creativity of users. In this process, official statisticians may develop new approaches to educate their data users, be it politicians, academics, the corporate sector or the general public, to assist them to understand and interpret statistical data correctly.

18. All aspects of data revolution are discussed in more detail in the report of the Secretary-General on emerging issues: the data revolution ([E/CN.3/2015/3](#)).

Theme 2: Modern statistical production processes based on common statistical business architecture

19. The second theme focuses on the modernization of statistical production processes. The business case is increasingly made for why and how national statistical offices and their statistical systems need to transform their statistical production processes to meet the emerging multi-dimensional and integrated data demands of the post-2015 development agenda; how this transformation process can be financially assisted; and what other institutional and management implications at the national, regional and global levels exist or should be addressed.

20. The transformative agenda is taking shape in the form of a concrete programme with short, medium and long-term actions by statistical services. The programmatic actions are to be agreed gradually and should contribute to closing the data gaps, strengthening national statistical capacities and improving regional and international coordination in delivery of capacity-building and mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the sustainable development goals.

21. The transformative agenda for official statistics requires a considerable, concerted and sustained investment in national statistical capacity-building based on the technical and institutional aspects of the integrated statistics approach. It is through these sustained investments in a modern integrated statistical production architecture that a comprehensive and effective monitoring and reporting of social, economic, and environmental perspectives of the universal and transformative post-2015 development agenda can be established.

22. Work on the design of an integrated statistical production architecture is already ongoing in Europe and Asia, and needs to be mainstreamed to the other regions. However, it can only be implemented progressively over time, based on country-determined priorities and in such a way as to meet immediate country needs through quick wins. Such efforts have to be innovative and indicate how traditional and domain-specific statistical production processes should be redesigned to become more integrated and cost-effective, contribute to reducing response burden and yield timelier, higher quality and better/differently disaggregated data. Household and business surveys will need to be designed and redesigned in national integrated survey systems against a backdrop of central business and civil registers supported by and linked to administrative data sources, population, housing, agriculture and other censuses.

23. With the intention of fully exploiting administrative sources for statistical purposes, access to administrative records may be significantly improved in many parts of the world to provide more immediate, regular and consistent statistical information for official statistics purposes. Regarding business and household surveys, their thematic coverage may be expanded to integrate the new socioeconomic and environmental concerns emerging from the current state of our world and its people and the ongoing development debate. Efforts may be made to collect disaggregated data at the lowest possible level by a range of different disaggregations. The new integrated statistical production architecture could be a flexible system to allow the integration of the statistical measurement of future new emerging issues without the need for costly modifications to the system.

24. In addition, it would be beneficial to incorporate the new opportunities in statistics linked to innovation, technological progress and the surge of new public

and private data providers outside the conventional data production by national statistical systems of countries and also through effective public-private partnerships that strengthen accountability at the global, regional and national level. The public-private partnerships with business, civil society, academia and other relevant actors should be mobilized through existing and new networks.

Theme 3: Innovations in data collection, data dissemination, data access and data analytics

25. The new integrated production architecture will also introduce innovations to incorporate non-traditional sources of data, including big data that thus far have either not been used or have been underutilized in producing official statistics. Notwithstanding their potential benefits, the suitability of new, non-traditional data sources for official statistical purposes needs to be thoroughly examined and evaluated. Ways should be found to exploit their potential benefits by creating links between the traditional and non-traditional data sources and incorporating them into official statistics while maintaining the existing strict quality and other requirements followed by official statistics. Therefore, the use of non-traditional sources should follow the professional standards of official statistics laid down in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and not compromise the public trust in official statistics at either the country or international level.

26. The innovative and transformative power of information and communication technologies may also be harnessed, in view of the ubiquitous availability of communication networks: from the collection stage (e.g., multi-mode through the use of mobile devices and satellites), through the analysis stage to the dissemination stage (e.g., open data portals and advanced visualization tools using geolocation data and maps). The innovations should also extend to facilitate the access, interpretation, analysis and use of data effectively in the daily work of all categories of data users.

27. Innovations also have to be introduced in promoting metadata-driven production, data and metadata exchange and information technology processes, which will allow further standardization of statistical processes, analytics and applications. To achieve these innovations, close and enhanced national, regional and international collaboration will be necessary in building and implementing common and standards-driven statistical products and services.

28. This innovation drive will extend to open access to data, respectful of national and international data confidentiality, right to privacy policies and right to access information, to promote transparency and ensure accountability, at the same time unleashing the analytical creativity of users.

Theme 4: Means of implementation

29. The way in which the transition can be made from the existing situation to a modern national statistical system which meets the data-reporting requirements of the post-2015 development agenda should be explored. These data should support evidence-based decision-making for sustainable development policies with

interlinked social, economic and environmental components at the national, regional and world levels.

30. An advocacy strategy may be articulated that maintains the political momentum of high interest in the availability of better data worldwide and mobilizes domestic and external resources to make considerable and sustained investments in the human, technical and institutional aspects of a modern national statistical production architecture for creating and maintaining sustainably managed and constantly evolving national statistical systems responsive to the new challenges faced by societies individually and collectively at present and anticipating changes affecting future generations.

31. This strategy should reach out to national policymakers for domestic resource mobilization and to regional and international funding agencies, including the donor community, for regional and global resource mobilization. In this context, the strategy should also address the coordination of statistical capacity-building efforts at the country level for the most efficient use of domestically and internationally available resources, particularly for critical areas of institution-building, including the legal and regulatory environment, upgrading statistical staff skills, register and frame-setting (i.e., census-taking), integrated system of household and business surveys, use of administrative data, maintenance and updating of statistical classifications.

32. The transformative agenda should encompass flagship initiatives in various statistical domains, including basic population and social statistics (e.g., civil registration and vital statistics programmes, migration statistics, labour statistics, poverty statistics) basic economic and environment statistics (e.g., energy, agriculture, environment, merchandise trade, trade in services and globalization statistics), national, international and environmental-economic accounting (including satellite accounting of health, tourism, etc.) and statistics of cross-cutting issues, such as governance, security, or climate change, giving careful consideration to the domains where existing concepts, methodologies may need to be updated or new ones developed.

33. The international statistical community is aware of the magnitude of this task, the urgency of delivering results and the professional responsibility to do a good job. It is also aware of constantly shrinking financial resources for statistical work at the country and international levels, and therefore the exchange of ideas on resource mobilization at this Global Conference is considered essential.

VI. Points for discussion

34. The Commission may wish to express its view on the following:

(a) The recommendations and the transformative agenda for official statistics formulated by the Global Conference in general and the specific priorities as expected to be expressed for the four themes of the Conference, namely:

- (i) New requirements from policy demands for the global statistical system;
- (ii) Modernization of the statistical production processes based on common statistical business architecture;

(iii) Innovations in data collection, data dissemination, data access and data analysis;

(iv) Means of implementation, including a strategy to mobilize adequate resources for implementation of the transformative agenda and to establish the inclusive partnership;

(b) The role of the individual collaborating agencies (national statistical offices, regional and international statistical organizations within and outside the United Nations system) in carrying the recommendations and transformative agenda forward;

(c) Ways to expand the consultative process on the topic of the Conference beyond official statistics circles and the possible modalities of such initiatives.
