

Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the United Nations System (CCS-UNS)

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Principles and practices of global data reporting and data sharing for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

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Objectives

The objectives of this document are to facilitate a dialogue between the International and Supranational Statistical Agencies (ISSA) and National Statistical Agencies (NSA) on issues related to the global reporting on the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) indicators, and to propose some key principles to improve the data flows between national and international statistical agencies and the sharing of data among international organizations and with the public.

Background

The latest report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group for SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDG) explains the role to be played by the ISSAs in the global reporting and indicator development for each of the SDG indicators under their mandate (custodian agencies): “The main responsibilities of these international agencies are to collect data from countries under existing mandates and through reporting mechanisms, to compile internationally comparable data in the different statistical domains, to support increased adoption and compliance with internationally agreed standards and to strengthen national statistical capacity.”

This role has sometimes been questioned on the basis of concerns about the discrepancies that can arise between international and national estimates of similar indicators. For SDG reporting, some stakeholders have even suggested that country data should be reported directly to a global database, without any intervention of international agencies.

It should be highlighted that the considerations presented in this document apply to all statistics produced at the international level, not just the SDGs. Similar issues in global data reporting are indeed common to other social, economic or environmental indicators. The current emphasis on SDG indicators derives from the high visibility of this internationally agreed statistical framework and the political sensitivities at country level around assessments of

progress towards the achievement of the SDG targets; in addition, there is also the reputational risk for NSAs of having their data contradicted by those published by ISSAs. Principles that apply to SDG indicators, however, should – and might be expected to – apply more broadly to all international statistics.

This highlights the importance of finding an agreement between NSAs and ISSAs on common principles and new arrangements for managing global data reporting of the SDG indicators. These principles and arrangements should be based on open communication and common trust and build on the lessons learnt throughout the global reporting on the MDGs. The experience with the MDG indicators showed that improving reporting mechanisms from the national to the international statistical systems, strengthening the role of national statistical offices, providing capacity development and technical assistance and ensuring close collaboration between international agencies and national statistical authorities largely improved data availability overall and the consistency between national and international data sets.

Different Roles of National and International Statistical Agencies in international monitoring

NSAs of National Statistical Systems (NSS) are the main source of data for informing policy analyses and decision making at country level. Within each NSS, the National Statistical Office (NSO) is often mandated to provide quality assurance to the data produced by other agencies of the NSS, although practice varies considerably across countries.

In general, ISSAs do not collect data directly by surveying individual households, businesses and institutions in individual countries, but they typically obtain data from NSOs and other national agencies which are responsible for collecting the primary data. ISSAs typically add value to country data by verifying their compliance with global statistical standards, analysing raw datasets, harmonizing estimates using standard methodologies, and producing regional and global estimates. In this way, ISSAs play a fundamental role in the global statistical system, informing the public debate and the policy decisions at the international level. They also produce national data that use harmonized concepts/definitions/classifications and that are therefore internationally comparable and can be used to benchmark one country's performance against another.

In some cases, ISSAs may use non-official data to construct international data series in fields which are not covered by existing official sources or where a single source (e.g. satellite imagery on land cover) may provide globally more consistent data at a lower cost than the amalgamation of multiple individual country datasets. Other instances in which non-official sources may be used by ISSAs are to estimate country data when national official data do not exist or are of proven poor quality; to impute missing values within a national official time series or to extend official time series.

This global monitoring role has been assigned to ISSAs by Member States themselves. Indeed, the responsibility of collecting, validating and disseminating statistics is inscribed in the mandate of many ISSAs, and governed through the arrangements specific to the agency concerned –most of the time under the oversight of Member States. In addition, the statistical

programme of most of these agencies is adopted and monitored by intergovernmental bodies composed of country representatives.

International statistical agencies make use of various quality frameworks to guide the collection, analysis and dissemination of global statistics. These include the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities (developed by the CCSA in 2005), and other quality assurance frameworks.

When country data are produced based on internationally agreed standards, the international series are simply a collation of country data, with minor adjustments to allow for full comparability. It may happen, however, that in fulfilling their role, ISSAs produce estimates of indicators which may differ from those published by national authorities.

Past experience and assessments indicate that these discrepancies may occur for a variety of reasons. National estimates may not be available or may not be reported timely to the ISSAs; they may use concepts/definitions/classifications/methods which are not compliant with international standards; they may be subject to political influence or otherwise biased; and they may be inconsistent with national estimates from other official data sources.

In all these instances, international organizations need to fill data gaps or improve the quality of country data in order to ensure their international comparability.

Proposed principles & practices to guide the production of international estimates for the SDG indicators

1. To ensure country ownership and avoid confusion among data users, as well as to comply with the explicit mandate contained in the 2030 Agenda, estimates of SDG indicators produced by ISSAs should be based, to the extent possible, on data produced by NSSs;
2. ISSAs should only publish source data that are not classified as restricted or confidential.
3. When adjusting or estimating country data (for example, in the specific cases mentioned above), ISSAs should respect the following principles:
 - a. Choose the most appropriate statistical methods and data sources exclusively on the basis of professional considerations;
 - b. Establish technical consultation processes with countries, to improve and validate methodologies used to calculate country estimates;
 - c. Provide opportunities for countries to review national estimates prior to their release, if this can be accomplished in a timely manner and not lead to undue delays;
 - d. Publish the national official estimate alongside any international estimate, in cases where there is a dispute that cannot be resolved.
 - e. Fully document and publish the estimation methods and source data used, in a manner which ensures transparency about the methodology and replicability of the estimates;
4. ISSAs should provide technical assistance to countries in areas where data are not available or of low quality, in order to enable them to produce their own data in the long run.

Proposed principles and practices to guide global data reporting and data sharing for the SDG indicators

1. ISSAs are committed to reduce national and international reporting burdens for the SDGs by:
 - a. using primarily current reporting mechanisms to organize the data flows from national to international agencies;
 - b. promoting the use of SDMX as the preferred modality for the collection and exchange of SDG data;
 - c. using national SDG indicator platforms, where they exist; and
 - d. establishing effective and no-cost data sharing arrangements among ISSAs.
2. In the cases where countries have designated a national coordinator for the global reporting of national data, ISSAs should also always copy any SDG data requests to the national coordinator, regardless of the indicator to be monitored;
3. In order to enhance the coordinating role of the NSO within the NSS, to ensure the quality of country data and to avoid the delivery of non-official data, ISSAs should also always copy the NSO in their SDG data requests, regardless of the indicator to be monitored;
4. ISSAs will not address SDG data requests to countries regarding a specific indicator unless they are the designed custodian agency. In cases where more than one ISSA is designated as custodian agency, data should be collected through joint questionnaires. The data collected by the custodian agencies should then be shared timely and at no cost with UNSD and the other ISSAs;
5. For indicators where there are no international agencies explicitly mandated to report globally, at least one ISSA needs to be identified by the UN Statistical Commission or other appropriate intergovernmental bodies and the reporting mechanism defined and agreed with countries;
6. ISSAs should ensure proper coordination in the dissemination of SDG data so that only one value is reported in global databases for each indicator;
7. SDG indicators estimates published in global databases of ISSAs, should be properly documented and sourced, with the provision of clear and comprehensive metadata.