

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

Muscat, 26 September 2017

10:00 – 1:00

CCSA's Contribution to the Guidelines on Global SDG Reporting

Prepared by FAO

I. Background

1. At the twenty-eighth session of the CCSA, held in Paris on 29-30 September 2016, FAO introduced document SA/2016/11, entitled “Communicating the Value of International Statistics”, which suggested a few initiatives for an awareness campaign to sensitize national statisticians on the topic.
2. The starting point of the document was the recognition that the important role played by international organizations, particularly with reference to the global monitoring of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, was not always fully recognized and valued by member countries. With the emphasis of the 2030 Agenda placed on accountability and ownership at national level, some countries viewed reporting through international organizations as an unnecessary additional layer and would prefer to report directly to the United Nations Statistical Division.
3. FAO therefore proposed that the CCSA engaged in an awareness-raising campaign to highlight the benefits of International Statistics, through a series of initiatives having this as a focus, including the traditional special sessions organized at the ISI World Statistics Congress and at the European Conference on Quality in Official Statistics, as well as a signature event to be held during the 48th Session of the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2017.
4. During the ensuing discussion, it was proposed that this signature event could debate in a constructive and non-confrontational way the issue of global data reporting for the SDGs. The CCSA agreed with the proposal and welcomed the offer by UNSD to use the High Level Forum, organized back-to-back to the 48th session of the Statistical Commission, as a suitable opportunity to engage with countries on the “value of international statistics”.
5. At the same session of the CCSA, UNSD introduced a document on “Elements of guidelines/principles of data reporting/data sharing for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda” (SA/2016/12), based on discussions held at the meeting of the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN System. A task team, consisting of UNSD, UIS, UNODC UNESCAP, UNCTAD and the WB, was established to finalize the document and then form the basis for the discussion at the High Level Forum.
6. A first version of the document entitled “Principles and practices of global data reporting and data sharing for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda”

(UNSYSTEM/2017/2 and SA/2017/2), prepared by FAO and the joint CSS-UN/CCSA task team, was circulated to CCSA members at the end of February and then discussed during the March meetings of the CSS-UN and the CCSA. The document proposed a set of principles and practices to discipline the data flows between national statistical systems and international organizations regarding the global SDG indicators. The Committee agreed with the conclusion reached by CSS-UN that - while still a draft - the document reflected common ground and thus formed a suitable basis of the CCSA co-chairs' (FAO and OECD) and members' (UIS, UNICEF and ECA) participation in the High Level Forum on 6 March 2017. The Committee also agreed to present an improved version of the document to the 5th meeting of the IAEG-SDG to be held in Ottawa at the end of March.

7. In preparation for the IAEG-SDGs' meeting, a second on-line consultation was held among CCSA members in March 2017. On the basis of the comments received, the document was further amended and submitted informally to the IAEG-SDGs as an initial contribution to support its deliberations. This was considered a timely input given that the IAEG-SDGs was mandated by the 48th session of the UN Statistical Commission "to develop guidelines of how custodian agencies and countries can work together to contribute to the data flows necessary to have harmonized statistics".

8. The CCSA co-Chair (FAO) had the opportunity to present the document also to the Expert Meeting on Statistics for the Sustainable Development Goals, organized by the UN ECE in Geneva in April 2017. The reactions from the countries participating in this meeting highlighted the importance of the document and the need for International Organizations to demonstrate their commitment to improve global data reporting for the SDGs and to adhere in this work to the highest standards of data quality.

9. A third on-line consultation among CCSA members was carried out between the end of July and the beginning of September 2017 in order to finalize the document and submit it officially to the IAEG-SDGs as the consensus position of the CCSA. The pressure to submit a final document in advance of the 6th meeting of the IAEG-SDGs derives from the importance of ensuring that the point of view of International Organizations is taken into account in the preparation of the guidelines on global SDG reporting.

10. Unfortunately, it was not possible to reach a general consensus via electronic communication, and the document's finalization was deferred to the upcoming thirtieth session of the CCSA in Oman.

II. Key issues under discussion

11. At the outset, it may be useful to clarify that the document in the annex defines the ideal features of the global SDG reporting system, which currently may not be fully met by all International Organizations, but to which all should commit to comply with at some stage of the SDG monitoring process. This means that each organization will have to develop an action plan and timeline with related milestones whose implementation will require some additional resources. The precise amount will depend on the effort needed by each organization to align the current practices to the desired ones. By now it should be clear to all parties, however, that implementing the 2030 Agenda will have resource implications for both countries and International Organizations.

12. It should also be noted that this is meant to be an initial version of the document (version 1) that may be modified over time in accordance to changes in the external environment and the emergence of new priorities.

13. Some additional preliminary considerations are necessary. The document focuses only on global SDG reporting. In particular, the document reiterates in various sections that the

application of the “Principles & Practices” is limited solely to the production and dissemination of the SDG indicators. Reference to other statistical domains is included simply as a reminder that the problems encountered in organizing a smooth process of global data reporting is common to all other domains for which international statistics are produced.

14. Finally, given the objectives of the document, the issue of statistical capacity development is not addressed in detail. However, one of the principles that is meant to guide the production of global estimates of SDG indicators clearly states that ISSAs “are committed to provide technical assistance to countries in areas where data are not available or not compliant with international standards, with the goal of enabling them to produce their own data in the long run”. In this regard, the document also makes explicit reference to ECOSOC Resolution 2006/6 “Strengthening statistical capacity” and to the more recent U.N. General Assembly Resolution A/RES/71/313 “Work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

15. Bearing in mind the above, it is encouraging to note that most of the issues raised during the three electronic consultations have already been addressed and that the current version of the document provided in the annex represents the outcome of a very rich and intense discussion which has involved, at various stages, a large number of CCSA members.

16. There are however two main issues on which discordant opinions have been voiced.

17. The first issue concerns what to do in cases where international data differ from national official data and agreement cannot be reached on the value of a specific indicator within a reasonable timeframe.

18. It is important to note that many countries and regional organizations have already expressed the view that, in these cases, ISSAs should not publish any country data. What is more, in their view ISSAs should not publish country data even if national official data do not exist. This represent a severe limitation to the autonomy and independence of International Organizations, which have received a mandate from member countries to collect and disseminate statistics in their relevant domains. It can also be argued that the publication of independent international assessments of the development status of a country is an essential element in the effort to improve transparency and accountability worldwide and is in line with the Fundamental Principle of Official Statistics. There are numerous country examples where National Statistical Offices are not independent from political influence and national official statistics are politically biased, especially in some sensitive domains. If ISSAs are not allowed to publish their estimates, the international community will have no other instrument to ascertain the “limitations” of the estimates produced by national institutions or to evaluate a country’s situation in an objective way. Moreover, if ISSAs’ estimates are denied publication, the interest of the international community for ISSAs’ statistical work will be significantly diminished. The purpose of the document contained in the annex is precisely to reaffirm this ISSAs’ prerogative and to encourage its acceptance by countries.

19. In order to ensure the acceptance of this principle and prerogative, FAO proposed that ISSAs should commit to also publish national official data on the same indicator whenever these exist, accompanied by an explanation of the reasons for the discrepancies. In so doing, ISSA would demonstrate their own commitment to clarity and transparency as well as to the improvement of the statistical capacity of countries.

20. The intended purpose of Section II para 3 of the document, therefore, is exactly to safeguard ISSAs’ ability to publish international estimates of country values in a context of growing pressure from countries to limit this ability. Without any ISSAs’ commitment to abide to a set of agreed standard practices, countries will find easy arguments to rebuke

ISSAs and demand that international estimates are not published. This is reflected in the two clauses of the document under para 3. The first clause allows ISSAs to publish country values when national official estimates on the same indicator are not available; the second clause, allows ISSAs to publish country-level estimates even if there are different national official estimates, conditional on publishing both values and providing an explanation for the discrepancy. This provision is only relevant, of course, for ISSAs that wish to publish country-level estimates. Moreover, this is a measure of last resort, to be applied only in those cases where the procedure outlined in para 2 a), b) and c) has not borne fruit.

21. Some Agencies, however, have expressed the opinion that double publication and provision of explanations for eventual discrepancies is unnecessary and/or not desirable. According to them, this would create pressure on ISSAs to discontinue the publication of country-specific estimates and to release data only at the regional and global level, which in turn would diminish the transparency of ISSAs' regional and global estimates. Another argument put forward is that this commitment goes beyond the requests of Member States, as contained in the resolution recently adopted by the U.N. General Assembly (A/RES/71/313, paragraph 7). A possible counterargument would be that the resolution does not (and cannot) enter into the particular modalities of the global SDG reporting mechanism and it is for this reason that this document on principles and practices, and the inclusion in it of the ISSAs' prerogatives, is needed in the first place.

22. A second point of disagreement concerns the emphasis given to the resource implications that the adherence to the proposed principles would have. Some agencies are concerned that the commitments contained in the document are too cumbersome, and therefore insist on underlining that the implementation of certain "Principles and Practices" is subject to the availability of the necessary resources.

23. From a conceptual point of view, making the implementation of the principles and practices contingent on the availability of resources may be interpreted by countries as meaning that ISSAs do not really commit to the principles and are not truly willing to change the way in which international estimates are produced.

24. FAO's opinion is that the availability of resources and how they are prioritized is an internal matter of each organization and that it should not be used as a negotiation tool. The objective of the document is to improve the communication with countries and help build a partnership with them to monitor the SDGs. It cannot be expected that countries, which may have much tighter resource constraints, invest in the production of national SDG data according to international standards, when ISSAs appear unwilling to do the same.

25. From a practical point of view, various modalities to implement the principles are available, some of which should not entail a large amount of additional resources. The majority of ISSAs already collect national data and validate them to disseminate international statistics. The fact that their databases do not currently publish national indicators alongside international ones is arguably a limitation that can be easily overcome.

Annex:
PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF GLOBAL DATA REPORTING AND DATA SHARING
FOR THE REVIEW OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
VERSION 1

Preamble

1. The forty-eighth session of the UN Statistical Commission “... requested the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators to develop guidelines of how custodian agencies and countries can work together to contribute to the data flows necessary to have harmonized statistics”¹. This document is meant to serve as a contribution by the CCSA to the development of guidelines for the global reporting of Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) indicators. The document proposes some key principles and practices to improve two-way data flows between national and international statistical agencies and the sharing of data among international organizations and with the public.

2. It is widely accepted that international and supranational statistical agencies (ISSAs) have a crucial role to play in global SDG monitoring and indicator development. The latest report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDGs), submitted to the 48th Session of the UN Statistical Commission, delineates the multiple functions to be carried out by ISSAs for each of the SDG indicators under their responsibility as 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”².

3. Some concerns have been expressed by some national statistical offices (NSOs)³ about the discrepancies that may arise between international and national estimates of the same indicators, including the reputational risk for countries to have their data contradicted by those published by international organizations. These concerns must be addressed through efforts to define in a collaborative manner the global reporting mechanism for the review of progress towards the SDGs.

4. The collaboration between ISSAs and NSOs is essential for ensuring an effective flow of internationally comparable data that meet the highest international standards, and such collaboration can be strengthened by an agreement on common principles and novel arrangements for managing the global reporting of SDG indicators. These principles and arrangements should be based on open communication and common trust, and build on the lessons learned from global reporting in the MDG era. The experience with the MDG indicators demonstrated that certain practices — improving the reporting mechanisms from national to international statistical systems, strengthening the in-country coordination role of NSOs, providing tailored support to countries for capacity development and technical assistance, and

¹ Economic and Social Council. Statistical Commission. Report of the forty-eighth session. Decisions brought to the attention of the Council, 48/101 (I). (E/2017/24-E/CN.3/2017/35)

² Report of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators to the forty-eighth session of the UN Statistical Commission, 15 December 2016, paragraph. 25 (E/CN.3/2017/2).

³ The term “national statistical office”, used throughout this document for convenience, is not meant to be prescriptive, since national practices vary. In the context here, it refers to the national statistical institution(s) authorized to report estimates of SDG indicators.

ensuring a close collaboration between ISSAs and NSOs — can improve the overall availability of data and the consistency between national and international data sets⁴.

5. In reaffirming the importance of adhering to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in the development and reporting of SDG indicators, this document emphasizes the commitment by ISSAs to adhere to the same key principles applicable to national official statistics, aspiring to the highest standards of relevance, accuracy, reliability, transparency and accessibility. Additionally, ISSAs shall ensure cross-country comparability of their estimates and make efforts to minimize the response burden on countries, in line with UN Statistical Commission decisions 47/101 (l) and (m). Crucially, ISSAs shall support national efforts in building and strengthening national statistical capacity in order to produce reliable and timely statistics and indicators for the monitoring of both national development policies and strategies and international commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁵.

6. Issues raised about the global reporting of SDG indicators are common to other social, economic or environmental indicators. While the considerations presented in this document focus on processes for the compilation of SDG indicators, the principles espoused may be relevant to other statistics produced at the international level. The focus in this document on the global indicator framework for the SDGs, developed by the IAEG-SDGs and recently adopted by the UN General Assembly⁶, derives from its high visibility and from the mandated requirement for follow-up and review of the Goals and targets at the global, regional and national levels that is contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁷. Given the strong political commitment expressed by Member States to global reporting on the SDG indicators, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda provides a good opportunity to improve the coordination amongst the international statistical community more broadly, as pointed out by the IAEG-SDGs⁸.

⁴ UN, March 2013, *Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring From A Statistical Perspective: Report of the Task Team on Lessons learned from MDG Monitoring of the IAEG-MDG*

⁵ See [ECOSOC Resolution 2006/6, Strengthening statistical capacity](#)

⁶ A/RES/71/313

⁷ Paragraph 75 of the UN General Assembly Resolution on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (document A/RES/70/1) states that “The Goals and targets will be followed up and reviewed using a set of global indicators. These will be complemented by indicators at the regional and national levels which will be developed by Member States [...]”.

⁸ Global reporting for the 2030 Agenda provides a good opportunity to improve the coordination among the international statistical community, as pointed out by the IAEG-SDGs in paragraph 33 of its report to the forty-eighth session of the UN Statistical Commission (E/CN.3/2017/2).

I. The Distinct and Complementary Roles of National and International Statistical Agencies in Global Monitoring

1. Both NSOs and ISSAs play a fundamental role in the global statistical system, informing the public debate and policy decisions at the national, regional, and international level.
2. NSOs are the main source of data for informing policy analyses and decision-making at the country level. Within a country, the NSO is often mandated also to provide quality assurance for the data produced by other national data-producing entities, although practices vary considerably across countries.
3. ISSAs, on the other hand, compile regional and global estimates to inform governments and other stakeholders on key areas of global development that require urgent attention. In general, these estimates are produced using national data, but the modalities of data production and reporting vary across the ISSAs. In a few cases, ISSAs⁹ (or government agencies¹⁰) support governments in implementing surveys through international survey programmes. Most ISSAs, however, do not collect data directly by surveying individual households, businesses and institutions within countries; rather, their work relies mostly on data from NSOs and other national authorities responsible for collecting the primary data. This information is often supplemented by information from other sources, especially large survey programmes. The ISSAs typically add value to national official data by verifying compliance with global statistical standards, harmonizing data where necessary using standard conversions and peer-reviewed methodologies, and filling data gaps. Ensuring that country-specific data are based on harmonized concepts/definitions/classifications and, therefore, are internationally comparable is essential for assessing global and regional progress toward specific SDG targets and for comparing levels of achievement and progress made across countries.
4. In some instances, ISSAs choose between different national official sources of data where the country has multiple different data points for the same indicator, or even use non-official data to construct international data series in fields that are not covered by existing official sources, or where a single source (e.g. satellite imagery on land cover) may provide more consistent and lower-cost data to measure a global or transnational phenomenon than what would result from the amalgamation of multiple national data sets. Alternative sources are used by ISSAs also to estimate country-specific values of SDG indicators when national official data do not exist, are incomplete, or do not comply with international standards, or to impute missing values within a national official time series or to extrapolate such time series.
5. Responsibility for collecting, validating, producing and disseminating statistics is inscribed in the mandates of many ISSAs¹¹, and governed through arrangements that are often under the oversight of Member States. In addition, the statistical programmes of most of these

⁹ For instance, the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) or UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

¹⁰ For example, the Demographic and Health Surveys sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

¹¹ The mandate of UN agencies and other IOs member of the CCSA is reported at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/unsystem/unsystem.htm>; <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/acsub-public/members.htm>. For example, Art. 1 of FAO Constitution state that: "The Organization shall collect, analyse, interpret and disseminate information relating to food, nutrition and agriculture" (<http://www.fao.org/3/a-mp046e.pdf>)

agencies are adopted, funded and monitored by intergovernmental bodies composed of country representatives. Some of these bodies are comprised of NSOs (e.g. the UN Statistical Commission) but the majority are not, as national representatives in the governing bodies of ISSAs typically represent either the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the national institution governing the policy issue intrinsic to the ISSA's specialized work.

6. Most ISSAs make use of various quality frameworks to guide their work on 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 (QAF)¹². In addition, the production of global data sets of country-specific and aggregated indicators, whether for SDG monitoring or for other purposes, provides an important mechanism of quality control, as the imperfections of data for a country often become visible through a side-by-side comparison to similar information for other countries.

7. When national data are produced using internationally agreed standards and reported using comparable measurement units, international data series for individual indicators can sometimes be simply a collation of national data, with minor adjustments to allow for full comparability. Sometimes, however, because of their commitment to produce data that are comparable across countries and can therefore be aggregated to provide regional and global values, ISSAs produce estimates of country-specific indicators that differ from those published by national authorities. Both past experiences with the MDGs and formal assessments have indicated that these discrepancies occur for a variety of reasons. National estimates may not be available or may not be reported in a timely manner to ISSAs; they may be based on concepts, definitions, classifications or methods that are not compliant with internationally agreed standards; they may contain certain biases; and they may even be inconsistent with national data from other official sources. In some instances, perceived discrepancies arise when ISSAs and NSOs produce estimates of indicators during the same year but referring to different time periods.

8. In more complex situations, the simple approach of collating national data to produce global estimates is impractical and inconsistent with best practices. For example, population data are characterized by dependencies among multiple variables. Changes over time in the ensemble of population indicators for a country are constrained by precise mathematical relationships, and some changes are subject to constraints that depend on values for other countries as well (for example, total net migration for the world must equal zero). Ensuring that these relationships hold true is a cornerstone of quality assurance for such data. Maintaining comparability over space and time in global population data series requires the construction of internally consistent international data sets, even if the resulting estimates for individual countries differ in some cases from national data for reasons that may be unknown or difficult to document in a comprehensive manner.

9. With these various considerations in mind, the principles and practices listed below are intended to provide guidance to facilitate an effective and durable collaboration between NSOs and ISSAs, which will be useful for filling gaps in the available data and improving the quality of national data so that they adhere more closely to international statistical standards. It should

¹² For instance, a number of CCSA members have adopted specific QAFs, while the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN system has recently endorsed a United Nations Statistics Quality Assurance Framework (UN-SQAF, see <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/48th-session/documents/BG-4j-QAF-E.pdf>)

be noted, however, that the implementation of the proposed principles and practices may have financial implications for entities involved in reporting on SDG indicators.

II. Proposed principles and practices to guide the production of global estimates of SDG indicators

1. To ensure country ownership and to comply with the explicit mandate contained in the 2030 Agenda, estimates of SDG indicators produced by ISSAs shall be primarily based on national official data sources in all cases where NSOs produce and publish national estimates, provided that these are consistent with the indicator definitions and in line with international statistical standards.
2. If ISSAs see a need to adjust¹³ or estimate country-specific values of SDG indicators, they shall:
 - a. Document fully their estimation methods and data sources, in a manner that ensures the transparency of the methodology and the replicability of the estimates.
 - b. Engage in appropriate technical consultations with concerned countries, with a view to validating and possibly improving the methodologies used to derive country-specific estimates;
 - c. Provide an opportunity for NSOs to review country-specific estimates of SDG indicators prior to their release within a reasonable timeframe;
3. After having implemented the above steps, ISSAs shall disseminate global estimates of SDG indicators according to the following practices:
 - a. In cases where national official data do not exist, publish country-specific international data together with a description of their sources and methods;
 - b. In cases where international data differ from national official data and agreement cannot be reached on the value of a specific indicator within a reasonable timeframe, publish country-specific international data alongside national official data together with an explanation of any known reason for the discrepancy.
4. Within existing mandates, ISSAs shall offer technical assistance to countries in areas where data are not available or not compliant with international standards, with the goal of enabling them to produce their own data in the long run.

¹³ This would not normally apply to standard practices of conversion to common measurement units or other simple methods of ensuring that data are internationally comparable.

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

1. ISSAs are committed to reduce national and international reporting burdens for SDG indicators by:
 - a. Using existing reporting mechanisms or national SDG indicator reporting platforms whenever possible to organize data flows from national to international agencies;
 - b. Promoting the use of appropriate data transmission standards and tools, such as Statistical Data and Metadata eXchange (SDMX) and web Application Program Interfaces (APIs), for the collection and exchange of SDG data;
 - c. Coordinating their data collection work and establishing effective and efficient data sharing arrangements among ISSAs to avoid duplication of efforts.
2. In order to enhance the coordinating role of the NSO within the national statistical system and ensure the quality of country-specific data, ISSAs will copy the NSO in their SDG data requests and provide the NSO with a list of all national data providers and the data collection calendar.
3. ISSAs will only address data requests to countries regarding a specific SDG indicator if they are the designated custodian agency. In cases where more than one ISSA is designated as custodian agency, data shall be collected through common means, such as joint questionnaires.
4. The data collected by the custodian agencies shall be released publically and shared in a timely manner and at no cost with the UN Statistics Division and other ISSAs that may be interested in the same data for other reasons, such as for thematic reporting.
5. Estimates of SDG indicators published in databases maintained by ISSAs shall be properly documented and sourced, with the provision of clear and comprehensive metadata.