

Meeting of the Chief Statisticians of the UN System

New York, 1 March 2015
United Nations Headquarters, DC-1684
15:00 – 17:00

A Generic United Nations Quality Assurance Framework

Prepared by UNCTAD

1. Introduction

At the meeting of the Chief Statisticians of the UN System (September 10, 2014 at FAO in Rome) it was agreed that a Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for United Nations (UN) organisations. This QAF would be generic in nature, hence the acronym UNGQAF.

The relevant section of the minutes from that meeting is presented:

Quality assurance frameworks for UN system entities

6. The topic was introduced by UNSD without documentation. In a tour de table, members shared the status of their quality assurance work. The possibility of a Generic Quality Assurance Framework for the UN (UNGQAF) was discussed.

7. Conclusions:

(6) Members with an existing quality assurance framework (or other similar documents) agreed to send their documents to the secretariat for posting on the new website.

(7) A task team consisting of UNSD, UNIDO, ODC, FAO and OCHA will look into the possibility of creating a UNGQAF. Other members are welcome to join at any stage.

(8) UNSD will look into the possibility of supporting this work with a consultant.

Source - <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/unsystem/Documents/Minutes-Sept2014.pdf>

Since the meeting notes were posted there have been a few minor changes to the composition of the team tasked with taking this project forward. As things stand, the proposal is that the team will be comprised of members from UNIDO, ODC, FAO, OCHA, ESCAP, UNSD, ITU and will be led by UNCTAD.

The arguments why a UNGQAF is logical/desirable/necessary are not rehearsed here - that is taken as understood. This document is comprised of 5 sections. Section 2 provides some background information on QAFs, section 3 includes a first tentative outline of project scope (including some questions that will need to be considered), section 4 describes the methodology for delivering the UNGQAF and section 5 concludes by outlining proposed key timelines.

2. Existing QAFs

A number of international organisations have already developed and published some type of QAF and will provide some useful guidance and background material, notably (but not exhaustively):

- CCSA (2006) - Principles Governing International Statistical Activities
- IMF (2006) - Data Quality Assessment Framework
- ECB (2008) - European Central Bank Statistics Quality Framework
- UNIDO (2008) - A quality assurance framework for UNIDO statistical activities
- ESS (2011) - European Statistics Code of Practice (ESCoP)
- OECD (2011) - Quality Framework and Guidelines for OECD Statistical Activities
- ITU (2014) - Data Quality Assessment Framework for ITU
- FAO (2014) - The FAO Statistics Quality Assurance Framework

A number of international organisations also have a QAF in draft:

- OHCA - Humanitarian Data Exchange Quality Assurance Framework
- UNODC - UNODC Data Quality Assurance
- UNCTAD - UNCTAD Statistical Quality Framework

Although the emphasis differs here and there, not surprisingly, there is a high degree of overlap or agreement in these documents. Broadly speaking, the QAFs tend to cover not only statistical infrastructure/processes and statistical outputs but the institutional environment, and thus tend to be a combination of quality frameworks and codes of practice or conduct.

Figure 1 summarises the principles identified by different international organisations in their QAFs. This is perhaps simplistic, as organisations bundle principles in different ways, and in some cases principles are clearly implied (or are the logical implications of other principles) although not stated explicitly. Nevertheless, Figure 1 is useful in illustrating the high degree of consensus across organisations as to what constitutes the key factors necessary to safeguard the quality of international official statistics.

Figure 1: Key Principles of Quality identified by International Organisations¹

¹ I have not included OHCA and UNODC here as they are still in draft. UNCTAD QAF is also only at draft stage but is not embargoed.

Principles	CCSA 2005	ECB 2008	UNIDO 2008	ESS CoP 2011	OECD 2011	FAO 2014	ITU 2014	UNCTAD 2015
Relevance								
Accuracy & reliability								
Timeliness & Punctuality								
Coherence & Comparability								
Accessibility & Clarity								
Sound methodology								
Sound systems								
Cost-effectiveness								
Minimise Respondent Burden								
Professional Independence/impartiality								
Statistical Confidentiality								
Commitment to Quality								
Adopt/Development of international standards								
Cooperation with Data providers								
Coordination with international organisations								
Address erroneous interpretation								
Credibility								
Completeness								
Transparency								
Feasible international standards								

There are also a number of other QAF or Principles that are useful reference material:

- ISI (2010) - Declaration on Professional Ethics
- UNSD (2013) - UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

There are also some national QAFs or Codes of Practice that also provide some interesting ideas:

- Canada (2002) - Statistics Canada Quality Assurance Framework
- Finland (2007) - Quality Guidelines for Official Statistics
- Australia (2009) - ABS Data Quality Framework
- UK (2009) - UK Statistics Authority Code of Practice for Official Statistics
- Ireland (2013) - Irish Statistical System Code of Practice

3. Project Scope

Despite the high degree of apparent consensus regarding what constitutes quality, there are a number of issues to be determined with regard to setting the scope of the project. Some of the main issues are outlined here, but this is not exhaustive, and will need to be discussed and finalized by the task team.

The purpose of this project is to design a generic QAF for UN statistical agencies that compile statistics. The purpose of this generic template is to act as a road map, but is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive - individual UN agencies will have the freedom to develop their own QAF to suit their own particular circumstances.

The UNGQAF will use a broad concept of quality, and so, like many other QAFs already in place in the institutional environment, statistical infrastructure/processes and statistical outputs are all considered as within scope. Many of the existing QAFs include a lot of ancillary or supporting material - should the

UNGQAF be concise (along the lines of say the ESS CoP) with separate supporting materials or should the UNGQAF include all the materials (Principles, implementation, audit...)?

The UNGQAF will address both best practices for adoption and tools for implementation (i.e. recommendations for peer review or audit). Some questions to be considered here are the transparency of the process - will be audit findings be published? Do we envisage accreditation - the use of a UN Statistical System quality mark?

4. Working methodology

It is envisaged that the Task Team (TT) outlined above will work over the next 12 months (or longer if necessary) to finalise the UNGQAF. Once all scope and concept questions have been addressed, a consultant will be hired to do the actual drafting. The broad ToR for the consultant will be discussed and agreed by the TT (i.e. the TT will specify project objectives in broad terms, expected content and length of UNGQAF).

Thereafter the TT will review drafts of the UNGQAF and may be required to participate in face-to-face or teleconference meetings with the consultant to clarify issues, assist in deliberations or make suggestions for additions/changes/deletions. But in as far as is reasonable and practicable, the team leader (UNCTAD) and UNSD will act as the conduit between the TT and the consultant to try and keep costs and burden on TT to a minimum.

5. Proposed Timelines

March 2015 - First plenary discussion (NY)

October 2015 - Presentation of 1st draft to UN System Meeting

March 2016 - Adoption of UNGQAF (NY)