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Items for discussion and decision: Management and modernization of statistical systems

Management and modernization of statistical systems

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2020/211 and past practices. In Decision 51/120, the Commission agreed on the name change of the Handbook and its availability as a living document on the web, and endorsed its proposed structure, priorities and content. The present report informs the Commission of the work of the advisory group and of the latest progress in drafting the next edition of the *Handbook*. It also highlights how the first thematic conferences have contributed to inform and enrich the fourth edition with regional initiatives and national good practices. The report elaborates further on the functionality and specifications of the user-friendly web solution which will host the next edition of the *Handbook*, and proposes flexible and on-going update mechanisms supported by the advisory group and the outcomes of regular regional and subregional thematic conferences. The background document to this report provides links to the 16 final chapters of the Handbook as endorsed by the advisory group.

The action to be taken by the Commission is contained in paragraph 26 of the report.

* [E/CN.3/2021/1](#).

I. Introduction

1. In order to monitor the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the related regional and national development plans, it is necessary for national statistical systems to produce many additional statistics and indicators, at a detailed level of granularity, and in a timely and punctual manner. That implies a need for statistical offices to review their institutional, organizational and technical processes in conformity with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, endorsed by the General Assembly in 2014. This need for statistical organizations to adapt and develop was stressed in the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data¹. More recently, the 74th session of the UN General Assembly in Resolution² 74/306, recognized that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic was one of the greatest global challenges in the history of the United Nations, endorsed a comprehensive and coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic and invited Member States to build and sustain resilient, inclusive and integrated data and statistical systems, under the leadership of national statistical offices, that can respond to the increased and urgent data demands in times of disaster and ensure a path towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

2. The Statistical Commission agreed, at its forty-eighth session, back in 2018, that a revision of the current *Handbook of Statistical Organization*, the third edition of which was issued in 2003, was needed. The following year, the Commission approved the Chapter outline for the next edition of the *Handbook* that included detailed annotations on each proposed chapter and its underlying sections. The outline consisted of sixteen chapters: an introduction, an overview and fourteen substantive topic orientated chapters with several annexes. This outline was informed by a full review of the current edition of the *Handbook*, a survey conducted on the needs of current chief statisticians as well as other consultations. Eventually, at its fifty-first session the Commission acknowledged the progress achieved in drafting the next edition of the *Handbook* and agreed with the proposed updated structure of the next edition of the *Handbook*, subject to further adaptations and refinements, to be duly considered during the editorial phase of preparation of the document. The Commission supported the name change of the *Handbook* from *Handbook of Statistical Organization* to *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*.

3. Since 1954³, the primary objective of the *Handbook* has been to guide chief statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations in developing and maintaining statistical capacity that is fit for purpose. Like previous editions, the revised *Handbook*, is not intended to be followed in a prescriptive manner, as the situation in each country is unique and the usefulness of the guidance therefore depends on local circumstances. Instead, it provides descriptive information to guide and inform statistical organizations on critical issues and topics, including those that are new and emerging such as measuring and cushioning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. On several occasions, the Commission insisted on the next edition of the *Handbook* being a living document, which will be updated at regular intervals to address common challenges and grasp innovative solutions in a rapidly changing data ecosystem but acknowledged the need for the overview chapter to be available in a hard copy version in all United Nations official languages, to reach the widest audience possible.

4. The purpose of the present report is to provide the Statistical Commission with information on

(a) The overall governance and working modalities set in place to support the drafting process of the next edition of the *Handbook*, including the responsibility and tasks of the advisory group, the role of the regional thematic conferences and the consultation process through the United Nations Statistics Division Wiki platform (see section II below).

(b) The drafting status of the *Handbook* and the proposed immediate next steps, such as the incorporation of comments received from the Statistical Commission and the inclusion of initiatives and national good practices identified during the first series of Thematic Conferences, and eventually the transfer of the next edition of the *Handbook* from the actual Wiki platform to a final user-friendly web solution (see section III below).

(c) The proposed mechanisms based on guidance received at the previous session of the Commission to continuously keep the *Handbook* relevant and up to date in the future (see section IV below).

¹ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/hlg/Cape-Town-Global-Action-Plan/>.

² GA resolution on Comprehensive and coordinated response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (A/RES/74/306)

³ The 1954 edition was followed by the 1980 (2nd edition) and most recent publication in 2003 (3rd edition).

5. The background document under the agenda item provides weblinks to all final draft chapters of the complete Handbook on the wiki platform of the Statistics Division and contains more information on a few changes in the structure and extended coverage of the submitted version of the Handbook compared to the version discussed at the fifty-first session .

6. The Statistics Division wishes to take this opportunity to thank the members of the advisory group⁴ for their valuable comments and guidance, as well as the multilateral development banks and other regional organizations⁵ that gave their support in organizing the regional thematic conferences.

II. Governance and working modalities

7. The process of updating the chapters of the next edition of the Handbook started early in 2018 with the establishment of a core drafting team managed by the Statistics Division. That team was complemented by a pool of individuals mobilized on an ad hoc basis to contribute to more technical sections of the Handbook in their respective areas of knowledge and expertise.

8. In terms of governance, the Commission proposed to set up an advisory group to guide the drafting process and ensure that an inclusive approach is taken to account for the various regional and national contexts, good practices, remaining challenges and recent initiatives. The Commission also suggested that the process be complemented by a series of thematic conferences at the regional and subregional levels that would allow best practices and challenges to be identified to inform the next edition of the Handbook.

9. The members of the advisory group were selected in such a way as to take advantage of existing statistical networks and initiatives at the regional and global levels such as the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the High-level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics; the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics; the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information; and the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks. The next edition of the *Handbook* will, to the extent possible, rely on the relevant global, regional and subregional initiatives emanating from those groups, as well as their deliverables and recommendations.

10. The starting point for each chapter was to create an inventory of innovative initiatives, reference material and guidelines, and country experiences available at the national, regional and global levels on topics relevant to that chapter. An initial draft of the chapter was then prepared and made available to all members of the drafting team, which reviewed the initial draft to ensure completeness, consistency and alignment with international standards and good practices. The draft chapter was then shared with the advisory group for it to provide overall guidance, comments and feedback; to provide country-specific examples and good practices; and to suggest additional links to regional and global initiatives. Inputs received from the advisory group were incorporated and the updated draft chapter submitted to the advisory group for a second review. Eventually, after the second round of consultation, the advanced draft chapter was posted on the dedicated site space of the Statistics Division wiki platform⁶ for further public comments. The wiki platform was monitored regularly, and feedback and comments received were processed and eventually incorporated to improve the quality of available drafts.

11. To make the consultation process more inclusive, a series of regional thematic conferences on managing a statistical organization in times of change is being organized to share the purpose and contents of the next edition of the *Handbook* to a wider audience of chief statisticians, senior managers of statistical organizations and policymakers. The

⁴ The members of the advisory group are Brazil, Ghana, Kenya, Mongolia, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Suriname, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the State of Palestine, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Asian Development Bank, Eurostat, Open Data Watch, PARIS21, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries and the five regional commissions of the United Nations.

⁵ Particular thanks are given to the European Free Trade Association for contributing one full chapter of the Handbook, and to Eurostat for its substantial financial support to the overall drafting and editorial process.

⁶ The Statistics Division wiki platform, established and maintained by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, is a website that allows collaborative editing of its content and structure by its users. Users can consult the platform either using registered credentials to gain access to more functionality, or without registration to only view, download or print content.

conferences are being organized at the regional and subregional levels for participants to consider recent institutional, organizational and technical developments addressing prospective challenges and opportunities. They are also conducted to better understand and prioritize emerging needs of statistical organizations to adapt and develop, as well as to exchange experiences and recent initiatives.

12. The thematic conferences are structured around four main themes covering all substantive chapters of the upcoming Handbook, as follows:

- (a) Strengthening the institutional and organizational frameworks of national statistical systems (linked to Strategic Area 1 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters III to V of the Handbook);
- (b) Securing the quality of statistical information and improving data coherence through statistical analysis and analytical frameworks (linked to Strategic Areas 2 and 3 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters VI, VII and IX of the Handbook);
- (c) Supporting the transformation of statistical production processes, from data collection to dissemination, in the context of the digital and technological revolution (linked to Strategic Area 4 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters VIII, X, XI, XIII and XIV of the Handbook);
- (d) Mobilizing and securing adequate resources and infrastructure and promoting regional and global cooperation for the development of national statistical capacity (linked to Strategic Areas 5 and 6 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters XII, XV and XVI of the Handbook).

13. In total, a series of eight regional thematic conferences were scheduled between October 2019 and December 2020: two conferences for Africa, one in English and one in French; one conference for Asia (not including Central Asia); one for the Pacific region; two conferences for the Americas (one for the Caribbean and another for Latin America); one conference for the Arab States; and one for South-East and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

III. Status and immediate next steps

14. At the time of submitting the present report, all 16 draft chapters of the Handbook have been reviewed by the Advisory Group according to the well-established procedure mentioned earlier and made available on the dedicated site space of the Statistics Division wiki platform.

15. The drafting team in close consultation with the advisory group was about to conclude editorial work with an in-depth review of the structure and advanced draft chapters to streamline the Handbook into one consolidated document. In the framework of this review, some chapters were restructured, and a few sections were moved from their initial location and realigned to fit with other chapters to improve the consistency, coherence and cross-referencing between chapters. Further overlaps and gaps were identified, and these were addressed by either merging repetitions or including texts and cross-references. One such gap identified was in the area of register-based statistics. An entire section was drafted on this topic and included in Chapter XI – *Common Statistical Infrastructure* of the upcoming edition of the *Handbook*. Consequently, the section on administrative sources in Chapter VIII – *Data Sources, Collection and Processing* was updated and realigned. Chapter VII – *Quality Management* was thoroughly revised and aligned with the recently adopted United Nations National Quality Assurance Frameworks Manual for Official Statistics (UN NQAF Manual). As suggested by the Advisory Group the level of technicality and detail of some of the chapters were also reviewed to make them more strategic and thus informative for its expected target audience.

16. The background document under this agenda item contains detailed information in relation to paragraph 15 above on a few changes in the structure and the coverage the submitted version of the Handbook compared with the chapters submitted and discussed at last-year's session, and provides weblinks to all chapters of the upcoming Handbook on the wiki platform of the United Nations Statistics Division.

17. Due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, only three of eight regional thematic conferences on managing a statistical organization during times of change were completed so far. The Africa conference for English speaking countries, held in October 2019 in South-Africa, was organized jointly by the Economic Commission for Africa, Statistics South Africa and the Statistics Division whereas the conference for the Caribbean, organized jointly by the Inter-American Development Bank, the Caribbean Community Secretariat, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, the United Nations Children's Fund and the Statistics Division, was held in November 2019 in Barbados. In February 2020,

the thematic conference held in the Philippines and co-organised by the Asian Development Bank, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and the Statistics Division, gathered Chief Statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations from 19 Asian countries and allowed the organizers to identify regional initiatives, as well as national good practices and challenges to inform the upcoming edition of the Handbook.

18. The current series of thematic conferences is ensuring that the Handbook provides relevant and sufficiently detailed advice that is illustrated by a variety of good practice examples. It also allows for the identification of challenges and opportunities that are specific to a group of countries such as Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and fragile states. Therefore, the Advisory Group suggested that this first round of thematic conferences be completed as soon as possible, and the outcome of these events be incorporated without delay in the Handbook. The format of these events not allowing for them to be held virtually, and without prejudice to the future development of the global health crisis, at the time of the submission of this report the remaining thematic conferences have been tentatively planned as follows: the conference for Arab State in May 2021 in the State of Palestine, the conference for South-East Asia and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia in June 2021 in Uzbekistan. For the corresponding events covering respectively Latin America, Francophone Africa, and the Pacific more information will hopefully be available at the time of the fifty-second session of the Statistical Commission but it is expected that these events are still to be held in 2021.

19. At its fifty-first session, the Statistical Commission insisted on the Handbook to be continuously updated in a sustainable manner and therefore to be available as a “living” document” through an appropriate interactive Internet platform. However, it became increasingly evident that the wiki solution used at the moment to disseminate the Handbook is lacking some core functionalities. At the time of the submission of the report, the Statistics Division was testing various web solutions that could host the Handbook with possibly the following features:

- (a) To generate a printer-friendly version of the whole handbook, specific chapter or section;
- (b) The text to be in, or at least able to be easily converted to, machine-readable format to support automatic translation software;
- (c) The content to be in a format that will allow it to be accessed via tablet and mobile phone browsers;
- (d) To permit a download of the whole handbook in a readable-friendly pdf format;
- (e) To allow the public to engage in providing feedback, suggestions and comments.

The objective is that the web solution used for the Handbook should eventually be deployed overall across the Statistics Division and become a standard solution for future online publications.

20. The migration of the Handbook from its present wiki platform to the user-friendly web solution is expected to take place during the summer 2021. This would allow, in the meantime and under the guidance of the Advisory Group, to i) duly incorporate feedback and suggestions received at the fifty-second session of the Statistical Commission; ii) consider comments shared on the wiki platform received from the broad statistical community; and iii) integrate challenges, success stories and initiatives identified in the thematic conferences to conclude this series of regional consultations.

21. Chapter II - *Overview* will be the only chapter of the Handbook to be available in hard copy version in all United Nations official languages, to reach the widest audience possible. The Advisory Group has suggested this chapter, designed as an advocacy and statistical literacy document, be supplemented and illustrated with graphs, pictures, and other graphic elements alongside the already existing interesting text. This will be done in consultation with the Advisory Group.

IV. Mechanisms for future updates and revisions

22. At its fifty-first session, the Statistical Commission emphasized that in order to avoid average intervals of about 22 years between 2 editions of the Handbook, it was primordial to establish a sustainable mechanism for the regular update of the Handbook conceived as a “living document” on the web. Ideally, this mechanism should ensure a capacity for regular and, when needed, swift revision of the Handbook while ensuring general oversight from Members States.

23. Feedback received by some members of the Advisory Group as well as the outcome of discussions conducted in the framework of the thematic conferences suggested to make a distinction between updates and revisions. Updates would be defined as non-substantive and non-controversial modifications such as updating weblinks and other factual information, inserting a success story, and informing about a new initiative, whereas a revision would be defined as more substantial modification and alterations impacting significantly the content and the structure of the Handbook.

24. It was proposed that the Statistics Division carries out itself updates at regular intervals. However, for revisions the Statistics Division would seek detailed guidance from the Advisory Group with one or two consultation rounds before any alteration of the text of the online Handbook, and once cleared by the Advisory Group, the revised text would be eventually labelled as provisional and brought every second year to the attention of the Statistical Commission for endorsement. This mechanism would secure the necessary flexibility by a delegation of authority to the Advisory Group while ensuring that the Statistical Commission has the ultimate responsibility for more significant alteration of the Handbook.

25. Updates and revisions can be informed through many different channels, including feedback, suggestions and comments posted on the web platform hosting the online Handbook. It was also suggested to complement these alerts and awareness mechanisms by a rotating system of thematic conferences to be organized in every region at two-year intervals. These thematic conferences would not have to cover all chapters and topics of the Handbook but could, after consultation with the national statistical office in the respective regions, focus on a set of specific chapters or topics of significant relevance for that region.

V. Actions to be taken by the Commission

26. The Commission is invited:

- (a) To endorse the revision process and the work of the advisory group, and to support the new edition of the Handbook;**
- (b) To support the delivery of the Handbook as a web-based solution with the suggested features and functional requirements;**
- (c) To support the publication of Chapter 2 in hard copy with translation in all official United Nations languages; and**
- (d) To endorse the proposed update and revision mechanisms, including tasks and responsibilities of the Advisory Group and the organization of rotating thematic conferences, to keep the Handbook relevant and at the state of the art.**