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Expert Group on Some Best Practices for Official Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Statistical Commission the report of the Expert Group on Some Best Practices for Official Statistics (Convener: Czech Republic), which is contained in annex I. The report is transmitted to the Commission in accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its twenty-ninth session,[1] and a request of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its nineteenth session (see E/CN.3/1999/20, para. 13 (b)).

A cover letter prepared by the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division, dated 8 July 1998, which was used to transmit the report of the Expert Group to the heads of all statistical agencies, is contained in annex II. This letter requested that the directors of statistics in the regional commissions place this item on the agenda of the next regional statistics commission meeting. In addition, the letter noted that further progress required testing the conclusions of the Prague meeting, refining and expanding them by meeting in the near future with a group of peers from parts of the world that were not well represented at Prague. The plans for this follow-up are now firm. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations Statistics Division are making arrangements, in association with the IMF-Singapore Regional Training Institute and the Singapore Department of Statistics, to host a working session in Singapore during January 1999. The working session will have three objectives. The first is to seek views on the results of the Prague meeting from those who were unable to be there, and to validate and expand the ideas resulting from the Prague meeting. The second is to review examples of case studies of good practices to refine the ideas, and to consider in some detail what an analytical collection of case studies should contain and what it should not contain. Finally, if a consensus is obtained on the first two steps, consideration will be given on how to complete the collection of case studies.

The Statistical Commission will receive an oral report of the outcome of the Singapore meeting and proposed next steps. The Commission is requested to review the progress made and make suggestions on the plans for the next steps.

Notes

[1] *Official records of the Economic and Social Council, 1997, Supplement No. 4* (E/1997/24), para. 13 (a).

* E/CN.3/1999/1.

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Annex I

Report by the Expert Group on Some Best Practices for Official Statistics

Contents

I. Introduction

1. The Statistical Commission, at its twenty-ninth session, discussed the need to supplement the fundamental principles of official statistics[a] by a code of good practices, which would serve as a handbook for heads of national statistical offices (NSOs) and statistical offices in other parts of the public sector, so as to assist situations where the principles afford insufficient guidance or indeed are in apparent contradiction with each other.

2. Edvard Outrata, President of the Czech Statistical Office, offered to launch the process of drafting such a guide by hosting a brainstorming meeting of a small number of volunteers, and to report on progress to the Commission at its thirtieth session.

3. The brainstorming meeting took place at Prague on 23 and 24 March 1998 (for a list of participants, see appendix II); it reached a number of conclusions designed to ensure the success of the process, provide it with some initial direction and encourage a broader participation of countries in its eventual conclusion. Below are some general observations and a few more detailed results selected to give a flavour of the meeting.

II. General observations

4. The end product of the exercise should be an intelligent guide to the head of a statistical office or statistical organization producing official statistics within the public sector.

5. The guide should not be prescriptive or normative but rather a systematic collection of annotated experiences designed to shed light on problems and ambiguities with which heads of NSOs are confronted in their day-to-day activities managing their respective organizations.

6. For a collection of such experiences to be accessible and easily communicable, it should fit into a framework that can be explained for both contributors to and eventual users of the handbook.

7. There is a very wide range of circumstances with which NSOs are faced, reflecting profound differences in mandate, technical capacity, social priorities, legal and institutional environment and user sophistication. Moreover, the history and traditions of NSOs are equally varied, not only among but also within different regions.

8. For the guide to be legitimate and have the required generality, the country participation in its drafting should be as broad as possible.

9. Such participation could be ensured by a variety of means, including a second working session attended by a larger and more varied set of participants, by multilateral and bilateral consultations with heads of statistical offices through United Nations regional commissions and so on.

10. The kinds of subjects to be discussed in the guide mostly concern relations — relations between statistical offices and their providers of raw information, relations between statistical offices and their users, governmental and private, and relations between statistical offices and official authorities in general. A more complete enumeration of the subjects discussed for inclusion in the guide is contained in appendix I.

11. Although the experiences to be described and analysed are operational in nature, there was a firm belief expressed in the need to relate them to the fundamental principles of official statistics. This would emphasize the need to concentrate on autonomy, objectivity, impartiality, professional integrity and the other features made explicit in the principles.

III. Selected findings

12. There should be a collection of case studies dealing with relations — between an NSO and its suppliers of information, an NSO and its clients, an NSO and the national authorities and an NSO and international and supranational authorities, as well as internal relations that are of consequence to the head of the NSO in the day-to-day administration of the office.

13. The purpose of the proposed collection is to be analytical and descriptive rather than normative. It should be viewed as an intelligent guide to NSO heads, containing accounts of experiences tried elsewhere, selected according to some general framework, annotated so as to bring out the factors influencing those experiences and by the degree to which they were successful.

14. Although it is recognized that such a collection of experiences cannot by its very nature be succinct, it is nevertheless thought useful to distil a shorter text. Such a text, which could be used to promote clarity in the relations with national authorities, would include those strategic principles that emerge from the more telling (successful or otherwise) case studies.

15. It was accepted that no description of a case study is complete if it does not consider explicitly the context in which the experience took place: the institutional and political culture; the legal and regulatory settings; and the stage of the development of the NSO concerned. As a supplementary distinction, experiences that took place in the context of a major transformation (typically for countries in transition from a socialist command economy to a democratic and free-market setting) should be clearly distinguished from others.

16. It is agreed that no collection of experiences that pretends to international legitimacy can be so considered unless it is broadly based — the experiences included come from developed and developing countries, from large and small offices, from well-established and relatively young NSOs.

17. One of the more attractive features of such a collection of studies is that its contents could be periodically updated to reflect changes in major institutional, technological or managerial trends. Accordingly, breadth of representation could be achieved as part of a process through which the collection of cases became more inclusive and more reflective of NSO management concerns.

IV. General agreements on relations with suppliers

18. In collecting relevant experiences, one should be mindful that action takes place in order to change substance and perceptions. For example, action to persuade suppliers to answer truthfully and promptly includes elements designed to change suppliers perception of the relevance and importance of the NSO.

19. In describing experiences relevant to the improvement of respondent relations and to the quality of response, a description should be made of management systems of such relations, systems that include planning and monitoring of the state of respondent relations.

20. In addition to the need for accuracy, respondents must be struck by the need for timeliness, in terms of both the activities of the NSO and the implications of that requirement for their own compliance with questionnaire requirements.

21. The control of paper burden should proceed at two levels: by reducing it objectively and by persuading respondents that there are contexts in which such a burden is inevitable. The provision of a minimum amount of essential information is one such instance.

22. Legal provisions by themselves are insufficient descriptions of how relations with information suppliers are managed. It is essential to complement legal texts by descriptions of how sanctions are applied; whether their role is mostly to deter; whether penalties have ever been applied, and if so with which reaction, and so on.

V. Selected observations on autonomy

23. Autonomy is thought to be the expression that best captures the status that statistical offices in the public sector should seek: recognizing the absolute need for objectivity and freedom from interference, while at the same time being financed and resourced through the general infrastructure of the public sector.

24. There are instances where autonomy may be compromised by undue political interference, where balance may be distorted by direct transfer of resources to statistical offices, and where means to prevent loss of credibility and damage to substance must be listed, analysed and disseminated.

25. There is a concern that statistical data are increasingly used for administrative and fiscal ends, and that although that process increases relevance and visibility, it creates rigidities that are to be deplored and provides pretexts for interference that ought to be resisted. The opinion of participants about the gravity of this development is mixed. All recognize it as a threat, but some believe that accommodation can be found without danger to any of the fundamental principles.

26. The range of agencies that have statistical responsibilities and work in the public sector and that can benefit from a guide extends well beyond the official statistical office or institute. For example, a great number of central banks have very broad statistical responsibilities, particularly in the domain of macroeconomic information. Sectoral ministries in many countries have highly developed statistical offices or divisions. The problems that they experience are similar to those experienced by NSOs.

Notes

[a] For the text of the principles as adopted by the Statistical Commission, see *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 29* (E/1994/29), para. 59.

Appendix I

Enumeration of headings for policies and practices

1.	Relations with respondents
1.1	Relations with respondents: burden minimization
1.1.1	Legal basis for questionnaires: compulsory, voluntary and mixed systems
1.1.2	Questionnaires and public relations
1.1.3	Questionnaires and return of information
1.1.4	Questionnaires and technology
1.1.5	Questionnaires and supporting measures
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2.1.1	Transparency
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2.2.1	Privileged and general access
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2.2.4	Analytical commentary
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2.2.6 Commissioned work

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2.3.1 Dealing with other data producers vis-à-vis users

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3. Relations with governmental structures: professional autonomy

3.1 Threats affecting professional autonomy

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3.1.2 Extending NSO role and missions to political analysis or political work

3.1.3 Disproportionate cutting of budgetary resources

3.1.4 Pressures to suppress statistical fields or statistical series

3.1.5 Political appointment of NSO staff members

3.1.6 Political pressures on methods, concepts and classifications

3.1.7 Using classifications for non-statistical uses without NSO acceptance

3.1.8 Censoring or altering data

3.1.9 Deliberate inexact use of statistical data

3.1.10 Exaggerated use of statistically driven formulas for making political decisions

3.1.11 Threatening data confidentiality

3.1.12 Active campaign to discredit statistical service, outputs, methods or staff

3.2 Positive reactions to threats and/or misleading practices: factors maintaining statistical integrity in the face of political pressures

3.2.1 Factors beyond NSO control

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3.2.1.3 Uncensored and active media

3.2.2 Factors that NSOs may promote (in partnership with political decision makers)

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3.2.2.3 Location of NSOs within governmental structures

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3.2.3.2 International support (club of friends)

3.2.3.3 "Social" proximity with political decision makers (without compromising)

3.2.3.4 Better understanding of politicians' role and missions

3.2.3.5 Dealing with the General Auditor

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4.1 Threats affecting professional autonomy

4.1.1 Accepting without precaution to work for private interests

4.1.2 Dealing without precaution with researchers' demands

4.1.3 Pressures to suppress statistical fields or statistical series

4.1.4 Lobbies' pressure on methods, concepts, classifications

4.1.5 Deliberately misleading use of statistical data

4.1.6 Media campaign to discredit statistical service, outputs, methods or staff

4.2 Positive reactions to threats and/or misleading practices: factors maintaining statistical integrity in the face of lobbies' pressures

4.2.1 Listening to the media and users' needs

4.2.2 Training the media and the users

4.2.3 Being active in professional statistical societies

4.2.4 "Social" proximity with "lobbies" and private decision makers (without compromising)

Appendix II

List of participants

International agencies

Christian Engelage (Statistical office of the European Communities)

Jean-Louis Bodin (International Statistical Institute (ISI))

Marcel Van den Broecke (ISI)

Charles Louis Kincannon (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development)

Carol S. Carson (International Monetary Fund)

Igor Chernyshev (International Labour Organization)

National statistical agencies

Jacob Ryten (Canada)

Jean-Pierre Puig (France)

Waltraude Moore (Germany)

Frederick Wing Huen Ho (Hong Kong, China)

Hallgrimur Snorrason (Iceland)

Enrique Ordaz (Mexico)

Willem de Vries (Netherlands)

Heinrich Brungger (Switzerland)

Nigel Edison (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

Edvard Outrata (Czech Republic)

Jan Fischer (Czech Republic)

Annex II

Transmittal letter dated 8 July 1998 by the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division

At its twenty-eighth session, the Statistical Commission discussed the requirement to supplement the fundamental principles of official statistics with a code of good practices, the main purpose of which would be to assist heads of national statistical offices (NSOs) in their day-to-day managerial activities. The Commission accepted the offer by Edvard Outrata, President of the Czech Statistical Office, to host an initial brainstorming meeting out of which should arise concrete proposals on ways of producing such a code. This meeting was to be the first step in a three-step process. The second step was intended to seek wider views on the results of the first step, and to ensure that NSOs agree with the proposed code. The last step would be the adoption by the Statistical Commission of a code of good practices.

The initial meeting was held at Prague on 23 and 24 March 1998, and I am pleased to report that it was very successful. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the participants for this important step, in particular the Czech Statistical Office for hosting the meeting.

The list of the participants in the Prague meeting and the report of the meeting are attached. The following conclusions were reached:

(a) A desirable end product is not so much a code of behaviour as an analytical collection of case studies relevant to the relations that an NSO entertains with providers of basic data, users of statistical information and governmental authorities at large. Case studies should bring out those factors — environmental, legal, professional and managerial — that affected the outcome;

(b) The reasons for adopting this approach have much to do with the difficulty of being prescriptive (issuing additional principles, standards or guidelines), recognizing that NSOs differ immensely in terms of mandate, tradition, capacity and influence on government and citizenry. Accordingly, any attempt at general prescription will run the danger of being either vacuous or inapplicable to a great number of its constituents;

(c) the virtues of a collection of well-analysed examples and case studies are, among others, that it can be continually updated in the light of new solutions to all kinds of problems and new contexts in which crises or problems occur, and that it can be expanded as more and more NSOs join the process of using the experience of others and contributing their own;

(d) A collection must include the experiences of NSOs at different stages of development operating in different regional environments, and to be regarded as satisfactory, should be complemented by the experience and views of a wide range of multilateral organizations and other government agencies that produce official statistics;

(e) A collection, to be useful, needs to be framed in a readily understandable classification of relationships, activities and problems engaged in and experienced by statistical agencies;

The participants were of the firm opinion that further progress required testing the conclusions of the Prague meeting, refining and expanding them by meeting in the near future with a group of their peers from parts of the world that were not well represented at Prague. Such an encounter would provide the necessary legitimacy to a future report to the Statistical Commission, and would of course serve to expand the range of interesting and valuable case studies.

In addition to such a meeting, the participants agreed that in parallel a number of actions could take place all designed to serve the same set of objectives. For example, chairmen of regional conferences of heads of statistical offices could employ all means of communication at their disposal to sensitize their constituents about the need to take part in this exercise. We have requested that the directors of statistics in the regional commissions to place this item on the agenda of the next regional statistics commission meeting.

In all likelihood, the form and the scope of such case studies will be a matter of discussion at these forthcoming meetings. I am confident that we will reach an agreement on how contributions should be channelled for their possible inclusion in the collection of practices.

The participants agreed that their constituents were to be found not only in NSOs but in any part of the public sector where there are considerable ongoing statistical activities, and referred explicitly to the statistical role of central banks.

There is no question that the necessary experience to write up useful case studies lies with national offices. They are the ones who have scored successes and have had to deal with failures. So it is from them that we expect the bulk of the contributions to the collection of cases. Therefore, the United Nations, in cooperation with other international organizations, such as the ILO, IMF, OECD and the World Bank, is planning a meeting with broad country participation that will serve to validate and expand the ideas mentioned. IMF is making arrangements for a meeting to be held in January 1999 in

South-East Asia, and is seeking funding to ensure that those who are keenly interested in this matter but cannot find the means to take part in a general meeting are not automatically excluded from the process. Naturally, the numbers covered will not be as large as hoped for, but all care will be exercised to ensure that the meeting is balanced and representative.

This subject will be placed on the agenda of the Statistical Commission for its March 1999 meeting, and we expect to formally adopt the code in 2000.

I expect to provide you with more news on this matter as the preparations for the meeting get under way.

(*Signed*) Hermann **Habermann**
Director
United Nations Statistics Division