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Item 3 (j) of the provisional agenda*

Items for discussion and decision: principles governing international statistical activities**Principles governing international statistical activities****Report of the Secretary-General***Summary*

The present report is submitted to the Statistical Commission in accordance with a request of the Commission at its thirty-sixth session.¹ The report presents to the Commission a set of principles and related good practices for international organizations and describes the process that led to the endorsement of these principles by the chief statisticians of international organizations in the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities. The Commission is invited to review and endorse the principles and to discuss possible steps towards their implementation.

¹ See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2005, Supplement No. 4 (E/2005/24)*, chap. VI, sect. G, para. 37 (a).

* E/CN.3/2006/1.

1. The global statistical system consists both of national statistical agencies and of international organizations active in the field of statistics. While the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, adopted by the Statistical Commission at its special session held from 11 to 15 April 1994,¹ had been designed as a framework for guiding professional statistical work at the national level, no such framework was immediately available to guide the statistical activities of international statistical organizations.

2. Recognizing the importance of having such a set of principles, the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities agreed at its second meeting (Geneva, 8-10 September 2003) that it would be useful to explicitly formulate common principles for conducting statistical activities in international organizations.² The ultimate objective was to provide a basis for improved relations between countries and international organizations as well as among international organizations in order to better serve the users of international statistics.

3. The Committee agreed specifically that important issues to be covered in the principles included the use of transparent, professional and scientific methods; the public's right to information about mandates of international organizations; the involvement of national statistical agencies in the development of international standards; the confidentiality of individual data records; and the promotion of the correct use and interpretation of statistics. It mandated a drafting group³ to develop proposals for a set of principles and good practices, and to use the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics as a reference framework.

4. At its sixth session (Rome, 12-14 September 2005) the Committee endorsed the set of principles and practices contained in the annex to this report.⁴ The Committee recognized that the mandate and governance of individual international organizations might be such that all of these principles and practices would not necessarily be applicable under current circumstances, even though they could be used for future improvements. The members of the Committee in their professional capacity appreciated, however, the value of implementing these principles and practices within their organizations, to the extent possible.

5. In recognition of the potential of these principles to improve the quality of international statistics, and in line with the United Nations Statistics Division's mandate to initiate and promote a coordinated system of international statistical programmes and activities, the Director of the Statistics Division, in a letter dated 25 October 2005 to the chief statisticians (or equivalent) of international organizations, expressed his professional commitment to applying these principles and practices in the work of the Statistics Division. He also invited the partner organizations to express their commitment. As of 9 December 2005, the following 22 organizations had responded positively:

- Asian Development Bank
- African Development Bank Group
- Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)
- Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the Pacific (ESCWA)
- Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
- Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)
- Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

- Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat)
- European Central Bank (ECB)
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
- International Labour Office
- International Statistical Institute (ISI)
- International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
Institute for Statistics (UIS)
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
- World Health Organization (WHO)
- World Tourism Organization
- World Trade Organization

See also http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/Principles_stat_activities/endorse.htm.

6. All international organizations, whether members of the Committee or not, are encouraged to review their current practices in relation to these principles and practices within their legal, institutional and organizational frameworks. The Statistics Division will continue its efforts to promote the adoption of the principles and related practices. In particular, the international organizations are encouraged to lodge on their websites a statement setting out the practices they follow in their particular organizations for the information of other members, and for the international statistical community more generally. The Committee is expected to discuss implementation issues in due course.

7. The Commission is invited to review and endorse the principles governing international statistical activities and to discuss possible steps towards their implementation.

Notes

¹ See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 9 (E/1994/29)*, chap. V, para. 59.

² See document E/CN.3/2004/29, part two, para. 15.

³ The members of the drafting group included representatives from the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Tourism Organization, the World Trade Organization, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Statistics Division (Chair).

⁴ See document E/CN.3/2006/30, para. 3.

Annex

Principles governing international statistical activities

Bearing in mind that statistics are essential for sustainable economic, environmental and social development and that public trust in official statistics is anchored in professional independence and impartiality of statisticians, their use of scientific and transparent methods, and equal access for all to official statistical information, the chief statisticians or coordinators of statistical activities of United Nations organizations and related organizations agree that implementation of the following principles will enhance the functioning of the international statistical system. In doing so, they note the endorsement of these principles by the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities on 14 September 2005; they further recall the adoption by the United Nations Statistical Commission of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics at its special session held from 11 to 15 April 1994, and the endorsement by the Commission of the Practical Guidelines for Good Practices in Technical Cooperation for Statistics at its thirtieth session held from 1 to 5 March 1999.

1. High-quality international statistics, accessible to all, are a fundamental element of global information systems.

Good practices include:

- Having regular consultations with key users both inside and outside the relevant organization to ascertain that their needs are met
- Periodic review of statistical programmes to ensure their relevance
- Compiling and disseminating international statistics based on impartiality
- Providing equal access to statistics for all users
- Ensuring free public accessibility of key statistics

2. To maintain the trust in international statistics, their production is to be impartial and strictly based on the highest professional standards.

Good practices include:

- Using strictly professional considerations for decisions on methodology, terminology and data presentation
- Developing and using professional codes of conduct
- Making a clear distinction, in statistical publications, between statistical and analytical comments on the one hand and policy-prescriptive and advocacy comments on the other

3. The public has a right to be informed about the mandates for the statistical work of the organizations.

Good practices include:

- Making decisions about statistical work programmes publicly available
- Making documents for and reports of statistical meetings publicly available

4. Concepts, definitions, classifications, sources, methods and procedures employed in the production of international statistics are chosen to meet professional scientific standards and are made transparent for the users.

Good practices include:

- Aiming continuously to introduce methodological improvements and systems to manage and improve the quality and transparency of statistics
- Enhancing the professional level of staff by encouraging them to attend training courses, to carry out analytical work, to publish scientific papers and to participate in seminars and conferences
- Documenting the concepts, definitions and classifications as well as the data-collection and processing procedures used and the quality assessments carried out and making this information publicly accessible
- Documenting how data are collected, processed and disseminated, including information about editing mechanisms applied to country data
- Giving credit, in the dissemination of international statistics, to the original source and using agreed quotation standards when reusing statistics originally collected by others
- Making officially agreed standards publicly available

5. Sources and methods for data collection are appropriately chosen to ensure timeliness and other aspects of quality, to be cost-efficient and to minimize the reporting burden for data providers.

Good practices include:

- Facilitating the provision of data by countries
- Working systematically on the improvement of the timeliness of international statistics
- Periodic review of statistical programmes to minimize the burden on data providers
- Sharing collected data with other organizations and collecting data jointly where appropriate
- Contributing to an integrated presentation of statistical programmes, including data-collection plans, thereby making gaps or overlaps clearly visible
- Ensuring that national statistical offices and other national organizations for official statistics are duly involved and advocating that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics be applied when data are collected in countries

6. Individual data collected about natural persons and legal entities, or about small aggregates that are subject to national confidentiality rules, are to be kept strictly confidential and are to be used exclusively for statistical purposes or for purposes mandated by legislation.

Good practices include:

- Putting measures in place to prevent the direct or indirect disclosure of data on persons, households, businesses and other individual respondents
- Developing a framework describing methods and procedures for providing sets of anonymous microdata for further analysis by bona fide researchers, maintaining the requirements of confidentiality

7. Erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics are to be immediately and appropriately addressed.

Good practices include:

- Responding to perceived erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics
- Enhancing the use of statistics by developing educational material for important user groups

8. Standards for national and international statistics are to be developed on the basis of sound professional criteria, while also meeting the test of practical utility and feasibility.

Good practices include:

- Systematically involving national statistical offices and other national organizations for official statistics in the development of international statistical programmes, including the development and promulgation of methods, standards and good practices
- Ensuring that decisions on such standards are free from conflicts of interest, and are perceived to be so
- Advising countries on implementation issues concerning international standards
- Monitoring the implementation of agreed standards

9. Coordination of international statistical programmes is essential to strengthening the quality, coherence and governance of international statistics, and avoiding duplication of work.

Good practices include:

- Designating one or more statistical units to implement statistical programmes, including one unit that coordinates the statistical work of the organization and represents the organization in international statistical meetings
- Participating in international statistical meetings and bilateral and multilateral consultations whenever necessary
- Working systematically towards agreements about common concepts, classifications, standards and methods
- Working systematically towards agreement on which series to consider as authoritative for each important set of statistics
- Coordinating technical cooperation activities with countries so as to avoid duplication of effort and to encourage complementarities and synergy between donors and between different organizations in the national statistical system

10. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the professional growth of the statisticians involved and to the improvement of statistics in the organizations and in countries.

Good practices include:

- Cooperating and sharing knowledge among international organizations and with countries and regions to further develop national and regional statistical systems
 - Basing cooperation projects on user requirements, promoting full participation of the main stakeholders, and taking account of local circumstances and the stage of statistical development
 - Empowering recipient national statistical systems and Governments to take the lead
 - Advocating the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in countries
 - Setting cooperation projects within a balanced overall strategic framework for national development of official statistics
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