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Items for discussion and decision

Coordination of statistical activities in the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted to the Statistical Commission in compliance with its request at its forty-second session (see E/2011/24, chap. I.B, decision 42/110 (k)). The report establishes the background for current statistical coordination arrangements within the United Nations, examines concerns raised about shortcomings in those arrangements, and proposes a process for exploring how they can be strengthened, especially with regard to quality assurance mechanisms. The report concludes with a brief list of issues for discussion by the Commission.

* E/CN.3/2012/1.

I. Introduction

1. The Statistical Commission, at its forty-second session, held from 22 to 25 February 2011, adopted decision 42/110 (see E/2011/24, chap. I.B) in which it, inter alia, urged the Statistics Division to take a central role in assisting Member States in addressing issues of data discrepancies and consistency with international organizations, paying special attention to issues of consistency of data disseminated by United Nations agencies; stressed the need in that context for an authoritative agency in the United Nations system to coordinate statistical activities; asked relevant United Nations authorities to review the situation; and requested the Statistics Division to report to the Commission on that issue at its forty-third session (para. (k)).

2. This decision was taken in the context of discussions at the Statistical Commission held in response to concerns raised by Member States regarding the statistical content of the 2010 *Human Development Report*¹ prepared by the Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

3. Since the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) has completed its independent programme evaluation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (E/AC.51/2011/2), including a specific evaluation of the Statistics Division. In that evaluation, OIOS made observations regarding coordination of statistical activity among United Nations system partners that are similar to the views expressed by Member States.

4. The present report provides the background regarding the establishment and roles of the Statistical Commission and the Statistics Division and describes developments following the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission that are relevant to the issue of statistical coordination. It is proposed that a Friends of the Chair group be formed to give further consideration to the issues and to propose recommendations for consideration by the Commission at its forty-fourth session.

II. Background

5. Statistical matters have been a priority of Member States ever since the establishment of the League of Nations. The International Statistical Commission was convened as an advisory body in October 1920 to make recommendations on the League's role in the area of statistics. The terms of reference of the Statistical Commission and the statistical office of the Secretariat were established by resolution 8 (I) adopted by the Economic and Social Council at its first session on 16 February 1946. The Commission's current mandate is to assist the Council in (a) promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability; (b) the coordination of the statistical work of the specialized agencies; (c) the development of the central statistical services of the Secretariat; (d) advising the organs of the United Nations on general questions relating to the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistical information; and (e) promoting the improvement of statistics and statistical methods generally.

¹ Basingstoke, United Kingdom, 2010.

6. The Statistical Commission has accorded high priority to its role in assisting the Economic and Social Council in the coordination of statistical activities of the United Nations system. In its resolution 1566 (L) of 3 May 1971, the Council recommended that the ultimate goal of the work of the predecessor of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs should be an integrated system of collection, data processing and dissemination of international statistics by the United Nations system and requested the Secretary-General to undertake, in cooperation with the specialized agencies, concerted action to assist developing countries in strengthening their statistical systems.

7. The Statistics Division of the United Nations Secretariat was first established within the Department of Economic Affairs in 1946 and plays the role of secretariat of the Statistical Commission. Its objective is to advance the global statistical system in order to produce high-quality, easily accessible comparable national statistics for policymakers and other users at the national and international levels. To realize this objective its strategy is to: (a) expand the normative role of the subprogramme and the coordination of international statistical activities; (b) help countries through technical cooperation with national statistical systems; (c) develop norms and standards; (d) compile and disseminate global statistical information; (e) develop statistical capacity; (f) promote the use of mapping and geographical information systems; and (g) coordinate international statistical activities by cooperating closely with other international organizations so as to enhance coherence in the statistical data work of the United Nations system.

8. The Statistics Division has implemented some coordinated activities mainly on a project basis. It organizes a periodic data managers meeting to facilitate the improvement in data dissemination among United Nations organizations; has organized an informal forum for the discussion of emerging issues among United Nations entities engaging in statistical work; and participates in the coordination mechanism within the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs.

III. Developments since the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission

9. As mentioned, since the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission, the Office of Internal Oversight Services has completed its independent programme evaluation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, including the Statistics Division. In its report to the fifty-first session of the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC), OIOS commended the Statistics Division for its uniqueness and centrality in supporting the Statistical Commission and thereby the global statistical system, together with its effectiveness in discharging that role. An extract from that report on the role of the Statistics Division is presented in annex I.

10. While being strongly positive on the subject of the role and performance of the Statistics Division, OIOS found that statistical coordination could be improved within the United Nations system. This finding was reflected in a supporting OIOS document, relevant extracts of which are presented in annex II.

11. OIOS concluded by making the following specific recommendation, among others:

“Re-examine the channels of communication between the Division and the statistics units of its United Nations system partners, including the regional commissions, and develop an action plan in order to achieve better coordination of activity and better use of resources.”

12. The Statistics Division advised OIOS that it intended to raise the general issue of statistical coordination within the United Nations system for discussion, under an agenda item, at the forty-third session of the Commission, as the Member States had raised similar issues. OIOS was informed that careful consideration of the many elements involved should be undertaken through an intergovernmental mechanism.

IV. Current situation

13. The United Nations statistical system, which can be loosely described as the set of all statistical units and programmes within the United Nations system, has grown significantly, reflecting the increasing complexity of the development phenomena with which the United Nations is concerned and demonstrating that solid and high-quality statistical information is an indispensable prerequisite for global development. The institutional complexity of the United Nations statistical system of course mirrors the institutional complexity of the organization itself. Various layers can be roughly distinguished: the so-called secretariat units, including the Statistics Division, the regional commissions, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) operate under the same administrative, budgetary and programming procedures. The funds and programmes (for example, UNDP, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)) have their own funding and therefore their own administrative and programming procedures. Finally, the specialized agencies (such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO)) enjoy a high degree of budgetary and programmatic independence. In essence, all statistical units in United Nations entities operate in an independent, decentralized manner, with varying degree of programmatic supervision by Member States.

14. In the field of statistical information management, this decentralized approach has enabled the various statistical units to develop a high degree of technical specialization, thereby allowing them to serve their specific constituencies and users well. On the other hand, this decentralization has created a need for a functioning coordination mechanism, in order to ensure coherent data outputs and effective utilization of scarce resources. This has been recognized historically. Organizationally, the formal agreement between the United Nations and specialized agencies as well as funds and programmes has specified (as stated, for example, in the Agreement between the United Nations and ILO) that: “The United Nations shall develop administrative instruments and procedures through which effective

statistical cooperation may be secured between the United Nations and the agencies brought into relationship with it.”²

15. The United Nations system has a long tradition of coordination and cooperation, which are to a large extent based on a shared vision of professional ethics. The Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Statistical Activities was active from 1966 to 2001. It operated under the umbrella of ACC, which was an internal high-level United Nations mechanism for programme coordination. Recognizing that, in the statistical area, there were important players in the international domain outside the United Nations system, the Subcommittee had early on invited organizations such as Eurostat and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to be regular observers. When ACC and its Subcommittees were abolished in 2002, the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities was established to continue coordination on statistical matters among international bodies. According to its terms of reference, the Committee focuses its work on the following six main activities:

- Efficient functioning of the statistical system
- Common standards and platforms
- Development of methodologies
- Inter-institutional support
- Outreach
- Advocacy for statistics

16. The members of the Committee are international and supranational organizations whose mandates include the provision of international official statistics in the context of the principles governing international statistical activities (E/CN.3/2006/13, annex), and which have a permanent embedded statistical service in their organization and regular contacts with countries. Of the now 38 members of the Committee, about half are part of the United Nations system while the others represent other regional and global organizations. The Committee meets twice a year at the level of the directors of statistical offices and functions practically mainly through a number of ad hoc task teams. An annual report on ongoing Committee activities is made available to the Statistical Commission.

17. The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, as a global coordination mechanism established to include all international organizations that are active in the field of official statistics, has served the statistical community well, as many major international statistical programmes on, for example, data dissemination, methodological work and capacity-building, are now conducted in collaboration between two or more actors. However, the Committee may not be the appropriate platform for the coordination by United Nations entities of their statistical programmes and outputs, which may involve discussion of United Nations-specific issues. In an important new development over the past three years, the Statistics Division has invited directors of statistical programmes of the United Nations system to an informal meeting on the side of the Committee’s sessions.

² See para. 4 of article XII, “Statistical services”, of the Agreement between the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation. Available from <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/leg/agreements/nu.htm>.

During this meeting, internal United Nations-specific topics, such as the development of UNdata or initiatives of the Secretary-General, have been addressed. It should be noted that this meeting does not have a formal mandate or standing, although there is a provision in this regard in the Agreements between the United Nations and United Nations entities (see para. 14 above).

18. As the most immediately visible consequences of lack of coordination in statistical production are discrepancies in the country data released by international organizations, Member States have a major stake in ensuring proper coordination. The Statistical Commission has taken up this topic on several occasions and a variety of effective mechanisms have been put in place as a consequence: the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators, which reports regularly to the Statistical Commission is one example. Furthermore, there have been a number of initiatives at sectoral levels (for example, the Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimations). However, what could be useful in the context of ensuring data coherence and consistent levels of data quality is the development of an explicit United Nations quality assurance framework.

V. Proposed next steps

19. Coordination of statistical activities could cover many areas. While data collection and data dissemination are clearly a central focus of coordination efforts, there are other dimensions to statistical coordination that could also be considered, namely,

- (a) Current organizational arrangements;
- (b) Professional principles and practices;
- (c) Work programming and budgeting among the statistical cells within the United Nations system;
- (d) Human resource management matters;
- (e) Statistical standards development and implementation;
- (f) Technical cooperation;
- (g) Statistical software and information technology issues more generally.

20. It is important to emphasize that the agenda of the Statistical Commission covers issues that touch on all of the general themes set out directly above and in this regard the Commission plays a critical role in identifying any instances of (real or perceived) lack of coordination among the United Nations system entities.

21. Given the fact that the Statistical Commission has identified “coordination in statistical activities” as an important issue, it is appropriate for the Commission to provide further guidance on this matter pursuant to thoroughgoing deliberations. It is therefore proposed that a Friends of the Chair group be established, composed of representatives of Member States, to further deliberate on the issue of statistical coordination within the United Nations system. Recognizing the complexity of the institutional arrangements, in particular the accountability of the various statistical units towards different governing structures, the group may wish to invite representatives of other governing bodies into its deliberations. The Friends of the

Chair group shall report back to the Commission at its forty-fourth session. Proposed terms of reference for the group are presented in annex III.

22. The Friends of the Chair could consider the following questions:

- (a) Which aspects of work programme and institutional arrangements should be coordinated? which are the priority areas and what are the desired outcomes?
- (b) How should coordination be effected?
- (c) Who should implement the coordination?

VI. Issues for discussion

23. **The Commission is requested to:**

- (a) **Express its views on the issue of coordination of statistical activities within the United Nations system;**
- (b) **Identify those areas where coordination needs to be enhanced;**
- (c) **In light of (a) and (b) above, consider whether a Friends of the Chair group, with terms of reference as proposed in annex III to the present report, is an appropriate mechanism for giving further consideration to the issues;**
- (d) **Express willingness to participate in the group.**

Annex I

Extract from the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the programme evaluation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (E/AC.51/2011/2)

“IV.

B. The Department was particularly effective in its support of the global statistical system

“28. After support to intergovernmental bodies, the second function of the Department most appreciated by stakeholders was its support to the global statistical system. Like its support for intergovernmental processes, support of the global statistical system is one of the longest-standing, most clearly defined and least controversial functions of the Department. This function is carried out largely by the Statistics Division through its support of the United Nations Statistical Commission. The Population Division was also seen by many stakeholders as supporting the global statistical system by providing official population estimates and projections.

“29. The uniqueness and centrality of the Department’s role in supporting the Statistical Commission, and thereby the global statistical system, together with its effectiveness in discharging that role, were major achievements. The increase in the number of least-developed countries participating in the Commission’s sessions, workshops, expert group meetings and seminars has been a major support to the global statistical system, and many stakeholders attributed much of this increase to the efforts of the Statistics Division. The number of least developed countries represented at the meetings of the Statistical Commission increased from 9 in 2005 to 25 in 2010.

“30. Most stakeholder survey respondents (76 per cent) rated the Department’s performance in supporting the system as effective or very effective. Staff of the Department also rated this function highly, with 95 per cent of survey respondents saying that it was effective or very effective in that role.

Annex II

Extract from the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the United Nations Statistics Division

“There was general consensus among staff and stakeholders of the Statistics Division about its role. Most external stakeholders interviewed believed it to be the de facto chief statistical office of the United Nations, and its director effectively the Chief Statistician of the Organization. This was despite the fact that the Division is by no means the only statistical entity in the United Nations system, and is not the only United Nations or statistical entity approaching Member States for statistics. The recognition appeared to reflect both the Division’s role as the secretariat of the Statistical Commission and respect for its achievements.”

- “The efforts to avoid duplication of statistical collection activities and disparities in statistical series that have been successful with non-United Nations entities appeared to have been less successful within the United Nations system itself. Despite the coordinating activities of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA), publications were occasionally released that contained conflicting data on apparently similar topics. The most recent such example related to the 2010 Human Development Report, which included data on poverty and child mortality that was not shared with the Statistics Division prior to publication and differed from that contained in Statistics Division collections. The report also contained indicators that had not been approved or endorsed by the Statistical Commission. Other disparities in statistics released by other United Nations entities were also reported to OIOS, including in relation to MDG indicators, although these were believed to have improved over time as a result of proactive collaboration among the entities involved. Other disparities were the result of the adoption of different definitions by different entities and could be readily resolved by referring to those definitions.”
- “... stakeholders were concerned by the appearance of disagreement among United Nations entities about the appropriate value of particular statistics and felt it was undesirable for different versions of ‘official’ statistical data to be disseminated. The existence of UNdata as a single data portal for many United Nations statistical compilations has made it easier for users to identify instances of disparity or duplication in particular statistics and so should provide a greater incentive to resolve them. However, as long as individual United Nations entities retain the right to release data independently, overall accountability for statistical matters within the United Nations remains ill defined.”
- “Collaboration with the regional commissions appeared suboptimal. Statistical units within the commissions are charged with the collection of statistics from Member States in their regions and with statistical advice and capacity-building, among other things. When interviewed for this evaluation, each appeared to have different resources, strengths and traditional roles. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), for example, deals with Member States with advanced statistical infrastructure and is able to undertake statistical research and compilations to support and complement

the work of SD (the Statistics Division). The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), on the other hand, would like to develop more services in the region but needs additional support to do so. Others, including the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), had substantial statistical resources but reported some inconsistency in the way their roles were viewed. In all cases, the statistical groups within the regional commissions lacked staff-level links with the Division and many of their staff reported feeling isolated from their New York colleagues.”

- “Regional commission staff and other stakeholders also suspected duplication and lost opportunities to build on the respective strengths in headquarters and the regions. Regional staff believed that their close knowledge of country conditions, statistics and infrastructure and their language skills could contribute more to Statistics Division activities in their regions and felt the lost potential keenly. Some sought stronger links with the Division, including, in one case, formal establishment as a regional arm of the Division, under its direct supervision. Another simply said ‘together we can do more’. The Division reported that attempts were being made to address the concerns expressed, although structural and administrative arrangements presented some constraints.”
- “... the dispersal of accountability for statistical collections and standards in the United Nations, as a result of which statistics are released by different United Nations entities with no necessary reference to each other. As long as this persists, it will prevent the United Nations from ‘delivering as one’ in the field of statistics. The situation is beyond the current authority of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs or the Division to resolve but warrants attention, as it represents a risk to the continuing credibility of data disseminated by the United Nations. The Statistical Commission has recognized this risk and stressed the need for an authoritative agency in the United Nations system to coordinate statistical activities. It requested that the situation be reviewed and a report prepared for submission to its forty-third session. The desire among stakeholders of the Statistics Division for a central statistical office to provide leadership and coordination across the United Nations system and act as a single reference point for users of statistics was also apparent in this evaluation. The positioning of the Statistics Division in relation to the Statistical Commission, its credibility and its close links with national and international statistical organizations would seem to make it a strong candidate for such an office.”

Annex III

Proposed terms of reference for a Friends of the Chair group on enhanced coordination of statistical activities within the United Nations system

It is proposed that a Friends of the Chair group be established, composed of representatives of Member States and, possibly, selected observers, to further consider the issue of coordination of statistical activities within the United Nations system.

The following matters should be specifically considered, without limiting thereby the scope of the remit of the Friends of the Chair group:

- (a) The priority areas that require coordination and the outcomes desired by Member States;
- (b) Options for implementation of coordination within these areas and the mechanism;
- (c) Reporting back to the Statistical Commission at its forty-fourth session in 2013 on these matters.

It is envisaged that the Friends of the Chair group would take into account in its deliberations the various layers of the United Nations system, focusing in the first instance on those statistical entities that fall within the purview of the United Nations Secretariat and the United Nations funds and programmes. However, if it becomes clear that significant coordination issues have arisen whose scope extends beyond the purview, then the Friends of the Chair group should report on these matters as well.