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## Statistical Commission

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Item 3 (k) of the provisional agenda\*

### Items for discussion and decision: publications of the United Nations Statistics Division

## Publications of the Statistics Division

### Report of the Secretary-General

#### *Summary*

The present report, prepared in accordance with chapter V, paragraph 4, of the report of the Statistical Commission on its forty-fourth session, provides an overview of the publications programme of the Statistics Division. The report discusses the challenges being faced by the Division in continuing to provide its publications, in the most efficient and cost-effective manner, to its national and international statistical agency stakeholders in the formats and languages they need and prefer. The Commission is invited to provide initial guidance for a proposed comprehensive review of the publications programme.

Points for discussion by the Commission are contained in paragraph 23.

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\* E/CN.3/2014/1.



## I. Introduction

1. The Statistics Division has been releasing statistical publications since 1947, when the then-named United Nations Statistical Office in New York continued the statistical work of the League of Nations in Geneva and began issuing the *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, which the League had been preparing and releasing since 1919. The Division now produces publications that can be categorized as either recurrent data publications that regularly report statistics in yearbooks and/or other compendiums released subannually, or non-recurrent methodological publications, i.e. handbooks, manuals and guidelines that describe the characteristics, concepts, definitions, classifications, recommendations and/or methods and other metadata associated with or underpinning the data or the collection and management of the data.

2. The publications have been disseminated traditionally in printed format, although over the years access to the content of the paper publications has steadily increased as the Statistics Division has started pursuing a mixed strategy of disseminating its publications in print and electronic formats. Currently all of the latest data publications issued by the Division in print can also be accessed electronically (in PDF) and free of charge from the Division's website. Moreover, data are increasingly being disseminated to an ever-growing user community through Internet databases. The latest methodological publications and their translations are also available in PDF on the Division website. Many of the older, historical publications (some from more than 50 years ago) have been scanned and are also available for free on the web. To ensure availability of its outputs in countries where Internet access may be limited or unpredictable, the Division has continued to produce paper publications while encouraging multi-channel outputs, both electronic and print, to bridge the digital divide. The Division continues its efforts to diversify its outputs and to build and enhance its portal ([data.un.org](http://data.un.org)), its online databases, and the web pages of its publications and statistical domains, where the PDF files of the publications can be found. It has also made available its first mobile application for iPhone and iPad.

3. The present report describes the publications programme of the Statistics Division and raises several issues about satisfying the changing needs of users and operating in a production environment in which increased costs and reduced budgets for publishing and the need and commitment to reduce the carbon footprint of the United Nations have led the Statistics Division to examine critically the effectiveness and sustainability of its practices with regard to printing, translating and distributing its publications, especially the printed versions.

4. A list of all of the publications that are planned for release by the Statistics Division in the 2014-2015 biennium is presented in annex I. These titles are contained in the biennial publications programme and have been submitted to and endorsed by the Statistical Commission and subsequently the Publications Board, which establishes the publishing policies and standards of the Secretariat. For reference, the methodological publications from the 2012-2013 publications programme are also listed.

## **II. Long-standing publications policies, processes and practices**

### **A. Legislative mandates for publications**

5. The dissemination of the publications of the Statistics Division is guided by publishing policies established for the Secretariat as a whole by the Publications Board. As determined by the Board, a title is mandated when it is requested by a principal organ of the United Nations, by an intergovernmental body or by an expert body (see Secretary-General's bulletin on the Publications Board ([ST/SGB/2012/2](#), para. 2.4a)).

6. The intergovernmental mandates for the dissemination of statistics are set by the Statistical Commission. The majority of the Statistics Division's recurrent data publications (yearbooks, for example) were originally mandated many years ago under the assumption and expectation that once the need for the compilation of particular data series had been established and the publications in which they were presented were recognized as being relevant and of value to users, they would continue to be produced year after year. The non-recurrent methodological publications carry more recent departmental mandates. The mandates are derived in general terms from the methodological discussions at the sessions of the Commission and, more specifically, are approved by the Commission as part of the biennial list of outputs to be produced by the Statistics Division.

### **B. Printing**

7. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management of the Secretariat is the department responsible for the various editing, typesetting, copy preparation, printing, translation and mailing activities associated with releasing a United Nations publication, either internally or externally. It has traditionally provided printing and all other production services free of charge to the Statistics Division for its mandated publications. In-house printing services have been used to the extent possible, except for publications that have had to be produced externally because of formats or other features that could not be handled internally, such as laminated soft covers and hardcover binding.

### **C. Translation into the official languages of the United Nations**

8. The original language of all publications produced by the Statistics Division is English. With the needs and interests of its key stakeholders in mind, especially national statistical offices in all countries of the world, the Statistics Division typically has all of its methodological publications translated from English into some or all of the other five official languages of the United Nations (i.e., Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish). Several of the data publications have traditionally been issued as bilingual editions (English/French). This practice is consistent with the Division's commitment to providing tools to support countries' efforts to strengthen their national statistical systems and with its goal of reaching a wide audience when releasing its publications, in particular those that are methodological ones. The practice also responds to the Secretariat's policy on multilingualism.

## **D. Free distribution of printed publications**

9. According to the established dissemination policy, copies of all Statistics Division print publications are provided (by mail or for pick-up) free of charge by the Organization to the permanent missions of Member States in New York,<sup>1</sup> the Statistics Division's partners in the global statistical system (i.e., national and international statistical services), libraries of specialized agencies and, until recently, United Nations information centres and United Nations depository libraries. The distribution of the complimentary printed copies to the end users<sup>2</sup> has been carried out by the staff of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management at United Nations Headquarters.

## **III. Recent policy changes and new resource constraints**

10. As part of the United Nations change management initiative (available from [www.un.org/sg/pdf/the-change-plan.pdf](http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/the-change-plan.pdf)), departments have been instructed to adhere to the decision of the Secretary-General's Policy Committee calling for a reduction in the distribution of publications in hard copy by 50 per cent (2010 baseline) and a reduction in the number of titles produced by at least 30 per cent in order to cut costs, improve the use of staff resources and reduce the carbon footprint of the Organization. The Statistics Division, by carefully reviewing its outputs and dissemination modes, has so far been able to meet those requirements in its publications programme for 2014-2015.

11. Nonetheless, as internal budget pressures persist or even increase, it is foreseeable that with respect to the 2014-2015 publication programme further streamlining will be necessary. To help focus the allocation of the Organization's publication resources, a general Secretariat-wide internal mandate review was conducted in 2013, whereby rather restrictive criteria were used, and only those publications that have been specifically requested by the General Assembly or by the Economic and Social Council were identified as fully mandated. While a final decision on the provision of internal publication services has not yet been taken, the Statistics Division will have to be prepared to make appropriate adjustments to its publication and dissemination programme in the light of those resource constraints.

## **IV. Estimated production costs for publications**

12. Apart from staff costs, various other expenses are involved in the production and distribution of a paper publication, some of which can be roughly estimated as follows: the cost of printing the Statistics Division's yearbooks externally ranges from approximately \$13 to \$20 for publications of between 600 and 900 pages, with text in black and white, and print runs of about 300 copies. When printing can be carried out in-house, costs are about 30 per cent lower than those charged by external commercial printers. The print-on-demand option is more cost-effective,

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<sup>1</sup> The total number of copies per publication allocated to all of the New York-based missions is currently 260.

<sup>2</sup> The sale of the Statistics Division's publications to paying clients is the responsibility of the Sales and Marketing Section of the Department of Public Information. Statistical products continue to be among the largest revenue earners for the Section.

but at this point does not allow for the production of the traditional laminated covers for statistical yearbooks.

13. The estimated cost of translating text from English to another official language of the United Nations when using contractual translation services is about \$230 per 1,000 words of English text, or about \$0.23 per word. The pages in many printed publications may contain 400 to 500 words per page.

14. Estimates of distribution costs are not readily available, but it is not uncommon that for the international mailing of a publication, the cost of postage is higher than what it costs to produce the publication itself.

## V. Statistics Division publications survey for 2013

15. In an effort to better understand the needs of its users, the Statistics Division recently reviewed its mailing lists and undertook a survey of a sample of the current clients who receive complimentary copies of its publications by mail. The Division maintains 13 different mailing lists for its publications (one for each of the 11 recurrent data publications that are distributed by mail<sup>3</sup> and two for various handbooks and manuals), with a total of over 650 contacts. The objectives of the survey were to learn about the habits of known users<sup>4</sup> and their preferred mode (print versus electronic) of utilizing the Statistics Division's publications, and to gather information to ultimately be able to rationally reduce the number of publications being printed and distributed, while continuing to provide the same content or more in electronic format. The targeted recipients were mainly the Statistics Division's counterparts in national and international statistical offices at the working level, i.e. those with actual official needs for publications for reference purposes.

16. The survey was sent to several subsets of recipients. The results for the largest subset, the approximately 200 contacts who receive every Statistics Division publication by mail, confirmed that their habits for accessing data had been changing. Many have shifted from using paper copies to using the online versions on the Internet, and this was the case for at least 40 per cent of the respondents. This trend had also been seen in 2012, when the Statistics Division discontinued printing the *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics* for its mailing list recipients and encouraged them to consult the online version. In that case, there were only a few special requests that a print copy be supplied.

17. About 20 per cent of the respondents to the survey replied that they still did in fact need, depend upon, or prefer receiving each of the titles in print format, and another 40 per cent wanted some, but not all, of the publications to continue to be mailed to them. The most common reason respondents gave for wanting printed copies was that they were needed for their statistical libraries. They mentioned that a good deal of the library users and colleagues found paper publications more convenient to use and that they often needed to refer to several volumes simultaneously. Others noted the benefit of having actual books on display to

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<sup>3</sup> One of the data publications, the *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, is no longer mailed to recipients.

<sup>4</sup> Since some of the Division's publications are sold through commercial wholesalers or provided through intermediaries, such as librarians, it has not always been possible to identify the actual paying customers.

showcase and create awareness of the important work done, one example being the work on international recommendations and standards. Some were concerned that historical developments and revisions often get lost when print versions are replaced with electronic versions, and others mentioned that technical support for Internet users in some of the libraries was unavailable. Some were of the opinion that the preservation of digital files was currently less secure or reliable. Issues that were mentioned to a lesser extent, but still fairly often, were poor Internet connectivity, difficulty downloading large files, and the scarcity of workstations in their libraries or offices to accommodate online users.

18. The most emphatic comments had to do with the need for printed copies of the methodological publications. Respondents said that they were essential to have since they are constantly referred to, not just occasionally, and were therefore in full use for many years, often for at least 10 years, if not longer (the case of the *System of National Accounts*, which was issued in 1953 and updated in 1968, 1993 and 2008, is such an example). One respondent from a national statistical office noted that the existence of an officially published, printed copy of a standard is necessary to get the approval to start an implementation process. While the survey did not explicitly ask about the different language versions of the publications, those respondents that stressed the importance of having the methodological publications in print were almost exclusively from countries in which English was not the native language. They were, therefore, obviously referring to the translated versions of the methodological publications.

19. On the basis of the results of the publications survey so far, the Statistics Division will be able to eliminate the provision of some 1,000 volumes of publications to those individuals and organizations on its mailing lists who replied to the survey. The Division is grateful to those who responded to the survey and would appreciate hearing from others who may not have yet been reached or who have not yet replied.<sup>5</sup>

## **VI. The way forward: continuity versus change**

20. Given the current environment, it is apparent that the Statistics Division will be expected to do more with less with respect to delivering its publications programme in the future. Its users around the world will no doubt continue to want more data and metadata, with some perhaps still preferring the traditional mode of delivery, i.e., print publications, while a growing percentage will have a demand for content that can be delivered in more environmentally friendly and sophisticated ways. Users around the world will also continue to expect that key United Nations publications will also be issued in languages other than English.

21. One question to consider is whether there still is a place or need for data publications that basically present table after table of data with a limited amount of text. Some may argue that they should be replaced by publications with a more analytical focus and/or different presentation, or discontinued completely, but instead includes the data in Internet databases. It is worth noting, nevertheless, that

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<sup>5</sup> Current recipients of Statistics Division publications are invited to send an e-mail to [statistics@un.org](mailto:statistics@un.org) and indicate those publications that they would prefer to no longer receive by mail.

several of the Statistics Division's yearbooks that are offered for sale have, over the years, consistently been at or near the top of the Sales and Marketing Section's list of bestsellers.

22. The Statistics Division is planning to conduct a comprehensive review of its publications programme with a view to modernizing the delivery of its products to the various user groups. Taking advantage of new developments in digital technology, the Division plans to provide users with increasingly interactive and less static modes of delivery. In this context, the Commission is invited to provide initial guidance on the priorities to be taken into account during this general review of publications. The Division is also looking forward to learning from national statistical offices and partners in international organizations how they have streamlined and modernized their publications and dissemination programmes.

## **VII. Points for discussion**

23. **The Statistical Commission may wish:**

(a) **To discuss the extent to which the publications programme of the Statistics Division should be reoriented towards electronic dissemination only or if some publications should still be printed and mailed free of charge, resources permitting;**

(b) **To share experiences from partners at the national and international levels on how their statistical publications programmes have been streamlined and modernized;**

(c) **To express its views regarding the need to have methodological publications translated from English into the other official languages of the United Nations and explore options for having the translations done in a more cost-effective manner.**

## Annex I

### **Statistics Division publications planned for 2014-2015**

#### **Recurrent data publications planned for release in 2014-2015**

*Demographic Yearbook* (annual)

*Electricity Profiles* (annual)

*Energy Balances* (annual)

*Energy Statistics Yearbook* (annual)

*Industrial Commodity Statistics Yearbook, Volume II: Monetary Value Data* (annual)

*Industrial Commodity Statistics Yearbook, Volume I: Physical Quantity Data*  
(annual)

*International Trade Statistics Yearbook, Volume I: Trade by Country* (annual)

*International Trade Statistics Yearbook, Volume II: Trade by Commodity* (annual)

*Millennium Development Goals Report and Progress Chart* (annual)

*Monthly Bulletin of Statistics* (monthly; no longer issued in print by the Statistics Division)

*National Accounts Statistics: Analysis of Main Aggregates* (annual)

*National Accounts Statistics: Main Aggregates and Detailed Tables (Parts I-V)*  
five volumes (annual)

*Population and Vital Statistics Report* (annual)

*Statistical Yearbook* (annual)

*World Statistics Pocketbook* (annual)

#### **Non-recurrent methodological publications planned for release in 2014-2015 and proposed for translation from English into all official languages**

*Guidelines for the Compilation of Energy Accounts* (provisional title)

*Handbook of Short-term Economic Indicators: Business Cycle Composite Indicators*

*Handbook of Short-term Economic Indicators: Rapid Estimates*

*Handbook of Short-term Economic Indicators: Tendency surveys*

*Handbook on Linking Trade and Business Statistics: Compilation and Analysis*

*Handbook on the Measurement of International Economics: Framework and Statistics*

*Manual on Environment Statistics*

*Methodological Guidelines for the Compilation of the Core Set of Environment Statistics*

*Short-term Economic Indicators: Statistical Guide for the Internationally Accepted Data Template and Metadata Structure*



*The System of Environmental-Economic Accounting Experimental Ecosystem Accounts*

*The System of Environmental-Economic Accounting Extensions and Applications*

*World's Women* (quinquennial)

**Non-recurrent methodological publications released or planned for release in 2012-2013**

*Central Product Classification, Ver.2.1*

*Compilation Guide for the International Recommendation for Tourism Statistics 2008*

*Energy Statistics Compilers Manual*

*Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence against Women*

*Guidelines on Gender Statistics*

*Handbook on Compilation of External Trade Indices*

*Handbook on Economic Statistics (2013)*

*Handbook on National Accounts (2012)*

*System of Environmental and Economic Accounting*

*System of Environmental and Economic Accounting* (glossy report 2012)

*System of Environmental and Economic Accounting* (glossy report 2013)

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