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## Statistical Commission

### Forty-fifth session

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Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

### Items for discussion and decision: implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

## Report of the Friends of the Chair on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

### Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2013/235, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Friends of the Chair on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which was established at the forty-second session of the Commission. The report contains information on the early work of the group leading to the adoption of a revised preamble of the Fundamental Principles and describes the subsequent process leading to the endorsement of the Principles by the Economic and Social Council in July 2013, ahead of the twentieth anniversary of their adoption. The report also contains information on the consultations conducted by the group in response to the tasks given to it by the Commission at its forty-fourth session. Those tasks include formulating guidelines on how to strengthen implementation of the Principles. Draft guidelines developed by the Friends of the Chair group are presented to the Commission as a background document. The report contains eight recommendations, on which the Commission is invited to comment.

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



## **Report of the Friends of the Chair on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics**

### **I. Background and mandate**

1. The group of Friends of the Chair on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics was established by the Statistical Commission at its forty-second session, in 2011, to revise and update the language of the preamble of the Fundamental Principles in order to take into account new developments since the time when the Principles were first formulated, to assess how they can be re-enforced and to develop a practical guide for the implementation of the Principles to include new developments and good practices by national statistical offices, other producers and users of statistics (decision 42/111). The members of the group are Australia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United Republic of Tanzania and the United States of America. The Statistical Offices of the European Communities and of the Economic Commission for Europe serve as observers. Katherine Wallman (United States) serves as the chair of the group; Sibylle von Oppeln-Bronikowski (Germany) has been serving as interim chair since the end of July 2013.

2. The first task of the Friends of the Chair group, the drafting of a revised preamble of the Fundamental Principles, ended with the adoption of the revised preamble by the Statistical Commission at its forty-fourth session, in 2013 (decision 44/102). The group, together with the United Nation Statistics Division, also carried out a review of the implementation of the Principles by Member States, the results of which were reported to and discussed by the Commission at that session.

3. The remaining tasks of the Friends of the Chair group, as mandated by the Commission at its forty-fourth session, are set out below.

4. In its decision 44/102, the Commission, inter alia, stressed the need to focus on implementation and encouraged the Friends of the Chair group to conclude its work by formulating guidelines on how to strengthen implementation, based on good practices developed at the national and regional levels, and on how to ensure the full independence of national statistical systems.

5. In this context, the Commission also encouraged the Friends of the Chair group to explore ways to effectively address perceived violations of the Fundamental Principles and to reflect upon how the applicability of the Principles could be extended beyond the realm of official statistics, specifically to the private sector.

### **II. Endorsement of the Fundamental Principles by the Economic and Social Council and planned endorsement by the General Assembly**

6. Also in its decision 44/102, the Commission reiterated the importance of the Fundamental Principles being widely known and respected among users and producers of official statistics, and in particular at the political level, both nationally and globally, and therefore decided to recommend to the Economic and Social

Council and the General Assembly the endorsement of the Principles, together with the newly revised preamble.

7. To that end, the Commission recommended to the Economic and Social Council the adoption of a draft resolution on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (E/2013/24, chap. 1.A.). Following that recommendation, on 24 July 2013 the Council endorsed the Fundamental Principles in its resolution 2013/21. In the same resolution, the Council recommended them to the General Assembly for endorsement.

8. In order to make it easier for the General Assembly to take action on this recommendation, Hungary is planning to introduce a draft resolution on the matter to the Assembly. It is expected that the draft resolution will be introduced in informal consultations in mid-December and that, once it has been successfully negotiated, it will be introduced formally to the Assembly early in February 2014. The Commission will be briefed orally on updates in this area.

### **III. Modus operandi of the Friends of the Chair group**

9. A first round of e-mail exchanges took place in June 2013, focusing on reviewing the existing material, namely the “good practices website” (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/searchgp.aspx>) and the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*<sup>1</sup> and making some initial reflections on how best to carry out the remaining mandate of the group. Based on a thorough analysis of all comments received, a second, more specific, round of e-mail consultations was conducted early in September 2013. Work on the guidelines will continue until January 2014. The results of the consultations with regard to each task are described in the paragraphs below and in the background document.

### **IV. Formulating guidelines on how to strengthen implementation of the Principles, based on good practices developed at the national and regional levels**

10. There was general agreement among the members of the group that guidelines on how to strengthen implementation of the Fundamental Principles should be based on existing material, such as the Internet platform of the Statistics Division, including the “good practices website”, and the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*. Implementation guidelines for each principle will be drafted by the group between October 2013 and January 2014 and be presented to the Commission in a background document. The group agreed that the guidelines should be short and manageable. It was also agreed that while the guidelines should be adjustable and flexible, so as to be adaptable to different institutional and regional settings, at the same time efforts should be made to prevent individual countries from applying the Principles solely in accordance with their own interests. The guidelines should also include case studies and best practices covering a wide range of different settings and situations (e.g. centralized and decentralized systems of official statistics). The

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<sup>1</sup> *Handbook of Statistical Organization, Third Edition: The Operation and Organization of a Statistical Agency*, United Nations (New York, 2003), (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.XVII.7). Available from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/hb/default.aspx>.

background document also maps out the relationship between relevant quality assurance frameworks and codes and the Fundamental Principles.

#### **Recommendations**

11. **The Commission is invited to comment on the implementation guidelines presented in the background document. The Friends of the Chair group is requested to integrate comments and make the final guidelines available on the website of the Statistics Division shortly after the conclusion of the forty-fifth session of the Commission.**

12. **The Statistics Division is requested to update the structure and design of the existing web pages. All national statistical offices are invited to contribute good practices. The updated web pages should include new communications channels (e.g. Twitter).**

13. **It is recommended that a survey be conducted every five years in order to explore improvements made by countries in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Proper modalities (e.g. self-assessment, peer review, research institute) and their advantages and disadvantages need to be discussed further.**

### **V. Formulating guidelines on how to ensure the independence of national statistical systems**

14. In order to ensure the independence of national statistical systems given any limitations they may face currently and in the future, it is necessary to differentiate between various forms of independence (e.g. institutional, professional and scientific independence) and to agree on a definition of each form. To this end, the Friends of the Chair group has developed such definitions and an implementation guideline for independence, both of which are included in the background document.

15. In developing the definitions, the group decided to follow a narrow and legal approach. The guideline for ensuring independence includes the different definitions, identifies limitations, weaknesses and strengths of different approaches and includes a collection of the experiences gained concerning the independence of national statistical systems and offices. Regional bodies have been and will continue to be consulted about their experiences.

#### **Recommendations**

16. **The Commission is invited to comment on definitions and the implementation guideline for independence presented in the background document. The Friends of the Chair group is requested to integrate comments and make the final definition guideline available on the website of the Statistics Division shortly after the conclusion of the forty-fifth session of the Commission.**

17. **Legal acts play a prominent role in ensuring independence of any kind. The Statistics Division is requested to increase efforts in updating and completing the collection of statistical laws that are already available on the “good practices website”.**

18. It is recommended that, in the next implementation survey (see the recommendation contained in para. 13 above), a question be included on the status of national statistical systems and offices vis-à-vis their scientific, professional and institutional independence.

## **VI. Exploring ways to effectively address perceived violations of the Fundamental Principles**

19. As requested by the Commission, the Friends of the Chair group explored different ways in which perceived violations of the Fundamental Principles could be addressed. The group did not, however, reach an agreement on a specific proposal for the way forward. The considerations of the group are set out below.

20. The endorsement of the Fundamental Principles by the Economic and Social Council and, possibly, by the General Assembly, are considered to be important further steps having a positive impact on implementation and discouraging violations. To a limited extent, the proposed five-year implementation survey could provide evidence of major gaps and/or violations of the Fundamental Principles, as well as of the principle of independence.

21. One specific suggestion was to take a closer look at other international processes already in place that can and do address violations of similar principles and codes internationally (i.e. the peer reviews of the International Statistical Institute, the International Monetary Fund and the European Statistical System) to see whether they provide a suitable means to address perceived violations of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Another suggestion, according to which regional bodies would function as first ports of call while the Commission acts as coordinator, was also considered. A web-based platform to express concerns regarding adherence to the Fundamental Principles was also suggested.

### **Recommendation**

22. **The Commission may wish to comment and provide guidance on the most effective way to address perceived violations of the Fundamental Principles.**

## **VII. Reflecting upon how the applicability of the Principles could be extended beyond the realm of official statistics, specifically to the private sector**

23. There was general agreement that only a few of the Fundamental Principles could be extended to the private sector, which operates in a different environment that is not always well understood by statisticians working on official statistics. A lack of agreed definitions of “official statistics” and the “private sector” and the unclear status of some entities, such as private contractors contributing to the production of official statistics or central banks, make a possible extension of the Principles difficult.

24. Most national statistical offices seem to rely on good practices and on progressively achieving stronger buy-in from the other players in the national statistical system. Endorsement of the Fundamental Principles by the Economic and

Social Council and, possibly, by the General Assembly is expected to facilitate stronger buy-in.

**Recommendation**

**25. It is suggested that the Commission comment on the above reflections and decide to revisit the extension of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics to the private sector at a future session.**

**VIII. Points for discussion**

**26. The Commission is invited to comment on all aspects of the present report and the background document, in particular the eight specific recommendations.**

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