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Items for discussion and decision: working methods of the Statistical Commission

Report of the Bureau on working methods: towards more coordinated and coherent structure and functions of groups

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2019/210 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Bureau on working methods, with a focus on more coordinated and coherent structure and functions of groups operating under the Statistical Commission. The report contains updates on all existing groups, as well as the results of the consultation with the Chairs of the groups currently active, as requested by the Commission in its decision 50/122. In the report, the Bureau builds on the previous year's report, analyses the consultation returns and, on the basis of that analysis, presents the current state of affairs, as well as areas of specific potential collaboration, overall cooperation opportunities and best practices that could be replicated. The Bureau also puts forward a simple operational framework that could serve as a guide to achieving improved coherence and coordination for existing and forthcoming groups.

Points for discussion by the Commission are contained in paragraph 79.

* E/CN.3/2020/1.



I. Introduction

1. The Statistical Commission discussed its working methods at its forty-ninth and fiftieth sessions (see [E/CN.3/2018/20](#) and [E/CN.3/2019/22](#), respectively), focusing first on the city groups mechanism and second on a comprehensive review of the structure and functions of all statistical groups. The Commission recognized the need to streamline the current arrangements in order to achieve more coordinated and coherent working methods. Subsequently, in its decision 50/122, the Commission requested the Bureau to work, in consultation with the Chairs of the groups currently active, on streamlining governance, including reporting lines and cross-participation, with a view to reducing duplication of efforts, and on streamlining naming conventions and guidelines for new and existing groups, according to the mandates of individual groups, and to develop and submit the resulting conventions and guidelines to the Commission for its consideration.

2. As the Bureau noted in a previous report ([E/CN.3/2018/20](#)), the global statistical system¹ is characterized by a voluntary cooperation between Member States in the development and adoption of international statistical standards and guidelines and the accompanying implementation manuals. Owing to the high calibre of outputs produced by the numerous groups established under its auspices, the Statistical Commission and the official statistics community at large have been able keep up with the increasing pace in users' exigencies. As the highest body of the global statistical system, and part of the Economic and Social Council, the Commission has examined topics of methodological interest, developed normative documents and coordinated the work of several actors both in classic and emerging areas of statistics.

3. However, over the years, the organic growth and fluid functioning of these groups has led to a certain degree of overlapping of efforts and obstacles in terms of clearly communicating the interlinkages among groups. Mindful of this, in its decision 49/119, the Commission encouraged all groups to cooperate and create more synergy in their work, and, in its decision 50/122, advised as preferred practices transparency in terms of interlinkages and reporting lines to other groups, specific timelines, maintenance of updated web pages, specific expected products and tangible outcomes.

4. Currently, 46 groups operate under the Statistical Commission. In the present report, the Bureau offers an updated overview of the various types of groups that are currently operating and identifies areas of specific potential collaboration, overall cooperation opportunities and best practices. In order to attain more coordinated working methods, the Bureau has developed an operational reference framework to guide existing and forthcoming groups when drafting their terms of reference (see paras. 71–78 and annex II below).

5. The present report is based on substantive discussions held by the Bureau, an updated review of groups² and the responses of the Chairs of groups to the consultations on governance, which were carried out by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat on behalf of the Bureau. The Chairs of the groups in the environmental and social pillars and those of cross-cutting nature were contacted. In turn, in order to avoid duplication of efforts and confusion, the groups in the economic pillar were not contacted directly, owing to the work being done under the guidance of the Friends of the Chair group on Economic

¹ In the present document, the global statistical system is loosely understood as the set of national, regional and international statistics offices collaborating within the framework of the Statistical Commission.

² An updated detailed table and a summary table will be available as background documents.

Statistics. Thus, only the Chair of that group was consulted to obtain information on the group's plans with regard to governance.

6. The aim of the consultation was to gauge interlinkages, reporting lines among groups and cross-participation, as well as Chairs' views on how best to streamline governance and achieve more coherent working methods.³ In total, the Chairs of 33 groups were invited to participate. The consultation ran from 3 to 16 September 2019, and responses were received from 27 Chairs of groups.

7. The present report is intended to continue the discussion on the current working methods, while the Commission has expressed its support for strengthening oversight and for aligning groups' purposes, scopes, priorities and outcomes with Member States' limited resources.

II. Brief update and developments in the sphere of group governance since the discussion held at the fiftieth session of the Commission

A. Actions taken in response to decision 50/122

8. The Secretariat has capitalized on the work done for the comprehensive review of groups conducted in 2019 and, while updating information for each new and existing group in 2020, created a dedicated web page containing an intuitive presentation of all active groups by pillar and type of group (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/groups>). The Secretariat and the Chairs of the groups have made every effort to ensure that each group has a web page with a minimum content, including a description of the group's mandate, its terms of reference, the year it was established, its Chair and membership, information on its meetings, its reports and its points of contact. The web page will be developed based on guidance given by the Commission, and work will continue with Chairs of groups with a view to increasing transparency by means of creating up-to-date web pages for all current groups.

9. The groups have also made plans to respond to the call by the Commission to create synergies. For instance, the Chair of the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting reported its intention to evaluate the terms of reference of the groups in the environmental accounting cluster to improve coordination with related groups. The Chair also reported that efforts were under way to improve coordination between that Committee of Experts and the Advisory Expert Group on National Accounts, given the close connection of their statistical domains.

10. It was also reported by the Chair of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Food Security, Agricultural and Rural Statistics that, given that the implementation of the first phase of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics is about to end, and considering the governance streamlining possibilities for the second phase, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is planning to disband the Global Strategy Steering Committee on the Improvement of Agricultural and Rural Statistics and report to the Statistical Commission through the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Food Security, Agricultural and Rural Statistics. This plan takes into account decision 50/122 and consolidates Secretariat services and the Chairs of both the Global Strategy Steering Committee and the Inter-Agency and

³ In the consultation letter, respondents were asked to describe the current interlinkages, reporting lines and cross-participation across groups, as well as any plans, for streamlining governance among the groups in the relevant pillar, and the reasoning behind those plans and decisions.

Expert Group on Agricultural and Rural Statistics into the Office of the Chief Statistician of FAO.⁴

11. Finally, the Chair of the Delhi Group on Informal Sector Statistics approached the Secretariat and the Bureau in order to explore the optimal way to avoid duplication, in view of the newly created group to work towards new standards related to the informal sector, under the aegis of the International Conference of Labour Statisticians. In consultation with the Department of Statistics of the International Labour Organization, it was concluded that the Delhi Group had fulfilled its original mandate established by the Commission at its twenty-ninth session and was primed to be dissolved.

B. Developments in the economic pillar

12. As mentioned above, a different approach was taken with groups in the economic pillar, given that, at its fiftieth session, the Commission had mandated the Friends of the Chair group on Economic Statistics to lead its own consultation process among the groups in this pillar. It is worth noting that, according to its mandate, that Friends of the Chair group is assessing the cost-effectiveness and responsiveness of statistical groups and their governance arrangements through a broad-based consultation.

13. This consultation includes selected groups operating under the Statistical Commission, as well as similar groups working under the purview of Eurostat, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Given the new user demands to update the system of economic statistics, including broader measures of economic progress with links to people and the environment, the groups included in the Friends of the Chair group on Economic Statistics consultation extended to those in the environment and social pillar. An analysis of the responses was presented and discussed at the second meeting of the Friends of the Chair group, held during the first week of December 2019.

14. The Chair of the group expected the consultation process to produce a holistic analysis of the groups related to the system of economic statistics, and the results of both the consultation and the meeting will be made available to the Commission in the report of the Friends of the Chair group on Economic Statistics ([E/CN.3/2020/7](#)).

C. Updates in group nomenclature and lifespan

15. The nomenclature of groups continues to be as follows: city groups, Friends of the Chair groups, task forces, working groups, expert groups, committees, inter-agency and expert groups, partnerships, the high-level group and networks (see annex I below). The table below displays a breakdown of the types of groups by each of the sustainable development pillars, namely, economic, environmental and social. In addition to the three pillars, a fourth category is used to cluster groups whose work cuts across the three substantive pillars.⁵

16. Six new groups were established by the Commission at its fiftieth session, namely, the Friends of the Chair group on Economic Statistics, the Inter-Agency

⁴ See report of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations on new developments in agricultural and rural statistics ([E/CN.3/2020/13](#)).

⁵ It is worth noting that certain groups, in particular those related to energy, agricultural and environmental accounting statistics, could be classified in more than one pillar.

Working Group on Debt Statistics,⁶ the Expert Group on City Prosperity Index, the Expert Group on Identifying Slum and Non-slum Enumeration Areas, the Advisory Expert Group on Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics and the Working Group on Open Data. The creation of these new groups did not affect the nomenclature, with 10 distinct types of groups that address the abundance and breadth of official statistics.

Number of active groups under the Statistical Commission, by type of group and pillar (October 2019)

Type of group/pillar	Economic	Environmental	Social	Cross-cutting	Number of groups in type
City groups	4	2	3	–	9
Friends of the Chair groups	1	–	–	1	2
Task forces	2	–	–	1	3
Working groups	4	2	2	2	10
Expert groups	2	1	5	3	11
Partnerships	–	–	–	1	1
Committees	1	2	–	2	5
Inter-agency and expert groups	–	1	1	1	3
Other ^a	–	–	–	2	2
Total number of groups	14	8	11	13	46

^a Other includes the high-level group and networks.

17. Almost half of the active groups (20) are long-term, having been established by the Commission before 2011, while 12 active groups are medium-term (established between 2011 and 2015) and 14 groups are fairly young (established in or since 2016). Compared with 2019, the proportion of long-, medium- and short-term groups has not changed significantly.

D. Updates in mandates and functions

18. Substantively, it can be seen that, in 2019, the work of the groups working under the Statistical Commission remains concentrated in the economic statistics pillar (14 out of 46 groups) and the fourth category, labelled “cross-cutting”, which comprises 13 groups. Of the six newly established groups, three have mandates in the social pillar, two in the economic pillar and one has a cross-cutting statistical mandate. No new groups were established in the environmental pillar.

19. As laid out in the Bureau’s 2019 report (E/CN.3/2019/22), the technical focus of the groups can be classified into one or more of the areas under the purview of the

⁶ This group was created as part of a new simplified structure of the programme on finance statistics on a trial basis (see decision 50/109). As such, it might be modified. Developments in that area are contained in the report of the Friends of the Chair Group on economic statistics (see E/CN.3/2020/7).

Commission,⁷ based on their mandate. These areas are: methodology, coordination, capacity development and data.⁸

20. Reflecting the technical work of the Statistical Commission, the majority of the mandates, almost regardless of the type of group, remains geared towards methodology.⁹ Indeed, 35 out of the 46 active groups are working on developing or improving statistical standards, which is about the same proportion of groups working on methodological issues as in 2019. Notably, all city groups perform methodological work, as are all expert groups and all inter-agency and expert groups.

21. The Commission has also given a coordination mandate to a number of groups in order to achieve harmonization and avoid duplication of effort, which mirrors the spirit of inclusiveness and collective ownership of the global statistical system. In total, 19 groups have been established with this purpose in mind, which is one more than in 2019. Moreover, one of the newly established groups, namely, the Friends of the Chair group on Economic Statistics, also has a coordination mandate.

22. It is not uncommon for the Commission to give the groups rather broad mandates so they may perform a combination of activities and have a multi-pronged technical focus.¹⁰ However, none of the groups established by the Commission at its fiftieth session is in this situation. Thus, the same 12 groups as in 2019 have a multi-pronged mandate.

23. The most common mandate combination is methodology and coordination. Examples of that combination include the Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics, the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information and the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts. There are other two-fold mandate combinations, such as methodology and data (applied by the sponsors of the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange initiative), methodology and capacity development (the Washington Group on Disability Statistics) and capacity development and coordination (the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training), and there is even a three-fold mandate combination of capacity development, coordination and data (applied by the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics).

24. Data-related work and capacity development remain areas of work that are typically covered by the Secretariat, meaning that the groups operating under the Commission are less active in these spheres.

⁷ See Economic and Social Council resolutions [E/RES/8 \(II\)](#) and [E/RES/1566 \(L\)](#) for details on the terms of reference of the Statistical Commission.

⁸ Methodology: The group is tasked primarily with developing a statistical standard or normative document, including its revisions and accompanying manuals and handbooks.

Coordination: The group is tasked with coordinating statistical activities among several stakeholders.

Capacity development: The group is tasked with conducting capacity development activities, including training, skills development and technical assistance.

Data: The group is tasked with developing technical research and development on data.

⁹ See background document, containing detailed information on the distribution of the active groups by technical focus and type of group.

¹⁰ The choice of technical focus (methodology, coordination, capacity development or data) was determined on the basis of the analysis of the mandate and information available publicly. In some cases, the Bureau consulted the Secretariat in order to better understand the activities performed by the groups.

III. Current interlinkages and cross-participation: formal means of engagement

25. The Bureau has identified “families” or “clusters” of groups based on statistical domains.¹¹ These clusters remain more prominent in the economic statistics and environmental statistics pillars, and less so in the social pillar or the cross-cutting domain.

26. The updated clusters (ordered by pillar and size), with the newly established groups, are as follows:¹²

- (a) Business and trade (seven groups), no change;
- (b) National accounts (four groups), the Inter-Agency Working Group on Debt Statistics was added in the most recent session;
- (c) Prices (two groups), no change;
- (d) Environment (two groups), no change;
- (e) Energy (two groups), no change;
- (f) Environmental accounts (two groups), no change;
- (g) Agriculture and rural (two groups), no change;
- (h) Migration (two groups), no change;
- (i) Human settlements (two groups), new cluster formed by the Expert Group on City Prosperity Index and the Expert Group on Identifying Slum and Non-slum Enumeration Areas, established in the most recent session;
- (j) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (three groups), no change;
- (k) Overall coordination (two groups), no change.

27. With the consultation replies and Secretariat knowledge, the Bureau identified the following formal interlinkages between groups, which currently exist to varying degrees: overlap of memberships; common work streams or programmes; outputs feeding into another group’s work; umbrella operation; and ad hoc interaction. These working relations are described briefly below. In addition, formal interactions were also identified with groups outside of the scope, such as those under the aegis of United Nations regional mechanisms or non-United Nations mechanisms).

A. Overlap of members, chairs or secretariat

28. Of the 27 responses received, 17 groups reported having at least one formal link with other groups. While there is substantive overlap in terms of the groups’ membership, this is no guarantee that there has been substantive joint work.

29. Evidence of actual joint work may more likely be found in overlaps of Chairs of groups and leaders of subgroups, examples of which are given below.

30. There are two pairs of groups that have the same Chair: the first is the Working Group on Open Data and Friends of the Chair group on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (New Zealand); and the second is the Committee of the Chief

¹¹ Based on the Classification of International Statistical Activities, available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/iiss/Classification-of-International-Statistical-Activities.ashx>.

¹² This is better observed in the graphic presentation of all active groups (see annex I and background document).

Statisticians of the United Nations System and the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (led by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime).

31. There are some instances where the Chair of a group leads a subgroup within another group, or forms part of its bureau/advisory group. For example, a Co-Chair of the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a member of the Advisory Group of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training; the Chair of London Group on Environmental Economic Accounting is an observer of the Bureau of the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting; the Chairs of technical committees of that Committee of Experts are members of the London Group Bureau; the Chair of the Partnership on Measuring Information and Communications Technology for Development is the Chair of a task team within the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics; and the Chair of one of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics advisory groups also leads a task force in the Expert Group on Migration Statistics.

32. In addition, a shared secretariat, mainly held by the Statistics Division, ensures that groups in the same cluster are kept abreast of recent developments. About half of the active groups are serviced by the Statistics Division.

B. Common work streams or programmes

33. Beyond overlaps in membership, it was discovered that some groups have common workstreams with other groups within or outside their pillar. This consists of distinct interlinkages whereby groups establish joint work plans on specific topics with other groups (or subgroups within other groups).

34. This formal mechanism among groups is used to draw expertise and knowledge from one another, to ensure consistency and avoid duplication of work. According to responses from the Chairs, there are currently common work streams in the following statistical domains: big data and geospatial information (methodology); capacity-building on big data, mobile telephone data and information and communications technology (ICT) indicators measurement (methodology); environmental accounting (methodology, data and capacity-building); capacity-building on environment statistics and refugee statistics (methodology); household surveys (methodology and data integration); data disaggregation and nexus of migration and gender statistics (methodology); and geospatial information and the Sustainable Development Goals.

35. A case in point is the joint subgroup of the High-level Group and the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators, which has worked on issues of statistical capacity-building for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal indicators framework. In turn, the Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics and the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys have common work programmes on developing guidance on data integration using household survey data and on sampling strategies for small population groups. Another example is the collaboration on water and waste questionnaires by the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics and the Expert Group on Environment Statistics.

C. Outputs feeding into another group's work

36. Some groups have taken on tasks with the ultimate objective of producing outputs that will be submitted formally to other groups. This mechanism not only fulfils the group's own mandate but also contributes towards that of another group.

This interlinkage helps to attain coherence in outputs, if the processes and expectations on the delivering and receiving ends are transparent.

37. This kind of interlinkage occurs mostly in the context of methodological development of the Sustainable Development Goal indicators, whereby groups – in particular in statistical domains – work on thematic lists of indicators to be fed into the work of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators. Often, groups conduct in-depth work on indicators, for example, in the domains of ICT, ageing, refugees, migration, gender and household surveys, among others, which in turn is considered by the above-mentioned Inter-Agency and Expert Group in its regular meetings and analyses.

38. This interaction also takes place outside of the context of Sustainable Development Goal indicators. Indeed, the two groups in the cluster of environment statistics, i.e. the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics and the Expert Group on Environment Statistics, have a virtuous feedback loop that is used to shape their activities programme.

D. Umbrella operation

39. Some groups have been purposefully designed to coordinate and provide an overall vision in a particular statistical domain. In these groups, there is an emphasis on coordination, prioritization and direction in their relevant fields in order to ensure that the groups and subgroups under that umbrella work in complementary fashion. Examples include the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting and the Global Strategy Steering Committee on the implementation of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics.

E. Formal and gated interaction

40. There is a specific case of a formal interlinkage where the nature of the group warrants ad hoc rather than continuous engagement, albeit formal. This is the case of the Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications, which effectively acts as a gatekeeper for any revised or new statistical classification. Groups working on revisions of existing statistical classifications or developing new ones engage with that Expert Group at different stages of development of the classification. The level of collaboration intensifies as the classification reaches enough maturity and is reviewed prior to be submitted to the Commission.

IV. Current interlinkages and cross-participation: informal means of collaboration

41. Chairs of groups reported numerous instances of informal collaborations between the members of different groups. In all 27 responses, collaborations with at least one other group were reported, even where there was no formal link. Furthermore, interactions were reported with groups outside the consultation scope, such as those under the aegis of United Nations regional mechanisms or non-United Nations mechanisms. In total, 31 groups were reported as having informal collaborations with other groups.

42. Although useful, these kinds of informal interlinkages carry a significant risk of unsustainable collaboration. In fact, the consultation revealed that, in most instances, these collaborations had not been followed by formalized approaches for ensuring concrete exchanges of information and coherence of work.

43. One of the most common forms of informal collaboration is the sporadic or incidental attendance of other groups' meetings with the purpose of sharing general information and discussing topics of common interest. For example, some groups have presented their objectives and work plans or the latest developments in their work programmes. The Chairs of the High-level Group, the London Group, the Washington Group and the Titchfield Group on ageing-related statistics reported that a member of their group had informally participated in other group's meetings, typically motivated by mutual interest. In another example, a representative of the High-level Group attended meetings of the Committee of Chief Statisticians of the United Nations system to discuss the coordination of statistical activities in the context of the 2030 Agenda.

44. Substantive or procedural information is also exchanged informally outside of meetings, often at the request of one of the groups. Such informal arrangements were mentioned by Chairs in the environmental pillar (the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting, the Expert Group on Environment Statistics, the Oslo Group on Energy Statistics and the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics). Furthermore, the informal sharing of information has succeeded in creating links across statistical domains that are often considered siloed. Those exchanges occur primarily in the context of discussing the measurability of progress in the 2030 Agenda and involve the members of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators in one way or another.

45. Chairs also reported that they had conducted ad hoc joint activities with other groups, such as organizing and hosting events, developing manuals (or chapters within manuals) or approaching other groups for contributions during relevant broad consultations on outputs. Examples include the Symposium on Data Science and Official Statistics, organized jointly by the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics and the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training; and cooperation between the Oslo Group and the London Group on the development of the energy statistics manual.

V. Persistent challenges

Complexity

46. Despite the welcome developments described in section II above and the current formal and informal interlinkages identified among the groups, there is still a considerable degree of governance entanglement and complexity.

47. As the present governance arrangements have developed organically and not by design, the differences between the groups in terms of membership, mandates and types of outputs and activities are not easily distinguished. As a result, there is a need for a general framework that guides both internal and external stakeholders to understand and navigate the present constellation of groups.

Insufficient transparency

48. Information on formal interlinkages, reporting lines or common workstreams among groups is not available to the public. That information can and should be described in the annual programme of work and terms of reference and be presented on the groups' website.

Different reporting arrangements

49. An additional persistent challenge stems from the fact that the practices for reporting to the Commission are not uniform or consistent, particularly in the case of

city groups. Some of them have traditionally reported through reports for information (the Ottawa, Delhi and Voorburg Groups), while other city groups have submitted documentation for both information and decision, when the group was seeking explicit endorsement for a concrete output (e.g., the Wiesbaden, Oslo, Washington and Praia Groups). Yet another group has decided to report only indirectly via another group in the same family (the London Group). As the Bureau noted in its previous report, the Commission would benefit from establishing clearer guidelines in this respect (see [E/CN.3/2019/22](#), para. 32).

50. In recent years, the Bureau has strived to consolidate reports and agenda items by domain rather than by actor, which has strengthened the coherence of submissions, discussions and decisions. Discussions during the forty-ninth session of the Statistical Commission highlighted the importance of ensuring transparency in the work and activities of the city groups while preserving their flexibility. Thus, care must be taken to ensure that the outputs of city groups are integrated appropriately into the international statistical system of norms then implemented effectively. In that sense, the Secretariat and groups, including city groups, should be encouraged to consolidate their activities where appropriate and to report in a consolidated manner. More consolidated activities and reporting to the Commission will enable a comprehensive understanding of developments, in particular in the statistical domains, which is expected to enhance the Commission's effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness towards achieving the sustainable development agenda.

VI. Where we go from here: potential interlinkages, opportunities, best practices and reference framework

A. Opportunities of a general nature for improved coherence and coordination

51. The richness of contributions submitted by Chairs allowed the Bureau to identify, on a general level, the available opportunities for improving coherence and coordination. Acting on those opportunities could help Member States to manage the limited resources they allocate to the groups working under the auspices of the Statistical Commission, given that it is often difficult to secure financing to undertake the mandated work and/or attendance of countries at the related meetings. Further consolidation between the statistical groups could potentially be explored for the purposes of efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness of the statistics system. The ultimate objective is to reduce duplication of efforts and improve the joint delivery of statistical products in support of measurements on the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Collaboration mechanism

52. A common theme mentioned by many Chairs relates to the suggestion of a mechanism where they could meet to discuss overlapping activities and plan and undertake joint activities across groups, as one powerful tool for achieving greater coordination. Such a mechanism would include structured online discussions throughout the year (using email, telephone calls, webinars or other virtual means), coupled with one in-person meeting in the margin of the Statistical Commission's session. A first step has already been taken with the identification of distinct potential interlinkages with other groups.¹³ As a second step, joint meetings of group Chairs

¹³ Presented as background document.

could solidify collaboration, coordination and possibly the consolidation of activities, functions and mandates.¹⁴

53. Furthermore, those meetings could include an agenda item on international statistical classifications. The Bureau sees a complementary opportunity here, particularly for methodological work in terms of classifications. Given that the Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications already monitors activity to anticipate potential developments, the proposed structure of online discussions and in-person meetings would be an ideal opportunity for groups officially to inform the relevant actors of their intentions and to provide a tentative schedule for submitting outputs to the Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications. This would allow all groups and the Commission at large to improve their medium-term planning and would also encourage interaction with the relevant groups that may wish to contribute.

Reporting joint activities

54. Several Chairs also put forward the idea that each group include, in their reports to the Statistical Commission, a description of the joint activities undertaken with other groups (or lack thereof). This would enable the Commission to provide guidance on the focus and extent of the collaborations described in the relevant reports. It would also allow the Commission to assess whether there has been a decrease in the duplication of work and to reveal streamlining opportunities in terms of both scope and outcomes of groups.

Inclusion of groups in global consultations

55. Chairs recognized that there are many opportunities where greater collaboration and coordination would enhance the achievement of group objectives. For instance, if a group is planning a global consultation on a particular output (e.g. a standard, manual, definition, etc.), it could invite contributions from other relevant groups in addition to the traditional entities consulted (most commonly individual countries). This type of global consultation would allow countries to respond individually, as well as coordinate and consolidate their contributions as members of a particular group. This in turn would result in increased efficiency in the consultation process and, most importantly, in stronger ownership of the output being reviewed by the extended statistics community.

Back-to-back group meetings

56. Another key suggestion from Chairs as a means of increasing the level of collaboration and communication was to conduct back-to-back group meetings and joint sessions, either in-person or by electronic means. This would boost opportunities for cross participation of Chairs and members of groups, for sharing information on a regular basis and for the design and follow-up of joint activities. Of course, the degree and nature of collaborations across groups would depend on their different mandates.

¹⁴ Similar collaboration mechanisms are envisaged across the subdomains of economic statistics, such as macroeconomic, business, trade and price statistics. It is expected that these mechanisms would advance the joint drafting of guidance notes for the experimentation and testing of the updated system of economic statistics. Concrete projects could be formulated for joint activities in the areas of globalization and digitalization and the measurement of the links between the economy, people and the environment (see [E/CN.3/2020/7](#)).

Scanning the horizon

57. Chairs also pointed out that there was frequent duplication of effort between the groups that fall under the umbrella of the Statistical Commission, as well as other groups, such as regional or international agencies such as OECD, IMF, the International Labour Organization, etc. Recognizing that there was no official reporting line with those groups, the Bureau suggested that, before embarking in any endeavour, Chairs could scan the environment and reach out to other groups, regardless of their affiliation, in order to collaborate and communicate effectively.

B. Concrete potential interlinkages

58. Chairs also took the opportunity during the Bureau's consultation to examine their groups' current work areas vis à vis other groups, and identified specific potential links that could be pursued, given the groups' mandates. Many highlighted the critical importance of collaboration, awareness and cooperation in developing and sharing knowledge, expertise and experiences at the global level. Moreover, Chairs reiterated that the long-term relevance of their own groups hinged upon external linkages not only with other groups under the Statistical Commission, but also with other groups, including non-traditional United Nations partners.

59. A background document under the agenda item captures the specific potential linkages identified by the Chairs of the groups working under the Statistical Commission. In most cases, the Chairs are quite specific about the latent common workstreams with other groups, which shows that almost immediate action is possible.

60. The Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks is a case in point: it noted that the results of the Working Group on Open Data could be integrated into its programme. In turn, given that refugees and internally displaced persons are a particularly vulnerable group and relevant to many of the indicators that measure progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 16, the Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics would like to collaborate with the Praia Group on Governance Statistics on developing questions for household surveys on topics such as safety, human trafficking and homicides. Furthermore, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics could offer expertise on the gender dimensions of crime statistics and on measuring femicide and other forms of violence against women, including intimate partner violence, to the Advisory Expert Group on Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics.

61. In view of these fertile areas of collaboration, the Bureau encourages Chairs to reach out to one another and realize and/or advance these natural synergies, given that, as noted in its report to the Commission at its fiftieth session, statistics and data have become more central to national and international decision-making as well as more interrelated and integrated, especially in the context of the 2030 Agenda (see [E/CN.3/2019/22](#), para. 34). Chairs are invited actively to explore and formalize the terms of cooperation on these common areas of work.

C. Best practices to be fostered and replicated

62. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, where statistics and data have become more interrelated and integrated, the success of any group greatly depends on the contributions, linkages and cross-participation from other relevant groups. The effectiveness of groups is increasingly defined by their ability to contribute to the multidimensional integration of statistics and data. The Bureau noted a number of

best practices in certain groups or clusters of groups where coherence and collaboration were being pursued. The paragraphs below highlight several such best practices currently in place and reported by the Chairs through the consultation. These practices are in line with the requests of the Commission and can be extrapolated to other groups with relative ease.

Programme review by pillar

63. The Bureau would like to highlight the efforts being carried out in the economic pillar, spearheaded by the Friends of the Chair Group on Economic Statistics, with the assistance of the Secretariat. At their own initiative, the groups in the economic pillar have conducted a self-assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of their programmes of work, both in terms of substance and governance. In its report to the Commission at its fifty-first session ([E/CN.3/2020/7](#)), the Friends of the Chair Group presents a holistic analysis of the groups related to the economic statistics pillar. In the view of the Bureau, this practice should be emulated in other pillars.

64. The Commission has repeatedly encouraged all groups to cooperate and create more synergy in their work, which is why the Bureau is commending the groups in the economic statistics pillar. In turn, the Commission may wish to reiterate its request to the Chairs of each active group in the other pillars, including the cross-cutting pillar, to discuss with other Chairs within the same pillar the potential interlinkages and streamlining opportunities and report back to the Commission. For instance, a review exercise could be planned, starting with the social pillar in 2021, the cross-cutting groups in 2023 and the environmental pillar in 2025.

Twin arrangement

65. In its previous report, the Bureau identified “twin” arrangements in a particular statistical domain as an area of potential cooperation. In such an arrangement, one technical group focuses on methodological issues and one managerial group concentrates on coordination and strategic issues.

66. Twin arrangements have been particularly successful in the environmental pillar. In the case of the environmental accounting cluster (the London Group and the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting), thanks to a well-established mechanism for cooperation, these groups and their subgroups ensure that their work is complementary, which has led to more output in recent years. In the case of environment statistics, the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics keeps the Expert Group on Environment Statistics informed of its activities in the regular meetings between the two groups. Other examples of twin arrangements can be found in the agricultural and rural statistics pillar (the Inter-Agency and Expert Group and the Global Strategy Steering Committee), the price statistics pillar (the Ottawa Group and the Intersecretariat Working Group on Price Statistics), the national accounts pillar (the Advisory Expert Group on National Accounts and the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts) and the statistical work on the 2030 Agenda (the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and the High-level Group).

Periodical review of groups’ mandate and terms of reference

67. Another best practice is the periodic review of mandates, ongoing modalities and the organization of work, and the update of terms of reference. That practice has been adopted by the Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications and the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information. In addition, combining the terms of reference and workplan with a timeline is a highly desirable

practice; the Titchfield Group has adopted a so-called “sunset clause” that includes a comprehensive group review to assess whether it has delivered on its mandate and can be dissolved.

Peer support

68. As a new group, and in the spirit of establishing good practices, the Titchfield Group decided to reach out to other city groups and welcomed presentations from them. This best practice allowed it to learn lessons from peers and take those into account when drafting its own terms of reference.

Role of the Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications

69. One practice that should be preserved, as it is critical for ensuring the consistency, coherence and harmonization of statistical concepts, is the role played by the Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications. The established procedure, whereby all statistical classifications presented to the Statistical Commission for its endorsement must first be submitted to this Expert Group for validation and assessment of suitability for the international family of statistical classifications, was recognized by group Chairs as a treasured tool underpinning the global statistical system.

Utilization of information and communication technology

70. The Bureau encourages the effective use of information and communications technology to arrange meetings and share knowledge. This practice is engrained in the functioning of several groups. For example, the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information reported that careful planning and full utilization of technology had allowed it to build engagement and contribution and to maintain work programme momentum.

D. Reference framework to enhance coherence and coordination, and thus improve the Commission’s oversight and guidance

71. The Statistical Commission needs to increase the focus on the coordination of its overall outputs and functioning, particularly in a resource-constrained global atmosphere. Where once the statistics community may have operated largely in isolation, the situation has now changed. The increasing interest of partners that produce non-official data, as well as the desire of data users to participate in the work of some groups, is also a factor for improving coherence and coordination, if the Commission wishes to forge trusted and strong partnerships.

72. Indeed, the wide range of statistical areas covered by the Commission’s groups is impressive. At the same time, it is evident that the structure of groups operating under the Commission would benefit from more orderly arrangements, with a view to producing more coherent and coordinated outputs. This could also go a long way in terms of outreach to the broader international community.

73. Therefore, the Bureau is putting forward an operational reference framework for consideration by the Commission.¹⁵ With a view to streamlining the architecture, improving the oversight function of the Commission and encouraging greater synergies among groups and pillars, the reference framework is a simple and light matrix that offers clear guidance for group naming, duration and timelines, periodic

¹⁵ Contained in annex II to the present report and included as a background document under the agenda item.

reporting to the Commission and key elements to include in web pages, according to the nature, expected outcome and mandate of the group.

74. The reference framework, if endorsed by the Commission, will offer guidelines to existing and future groups in terms of core technical focus, outputs and activities, and membership. It will establish distinctions between the different types of groups, which might create internal discussion and self-reflection, and aims to help existing groups to better align their terms of reference with their titles.

75. For example, given that city groups were designed to be flexible and agile in the development and adoption of international statistical standards (see [E/CN.3/2018/20](#)), the reference framework maintains that such groups should focus on methodological work. In cases where they wish to carry out capacity development activities, coordinate full programmes of work or perform data-related work, it is proposed that city groups seek the advice of the Commission with respect to transitioning into a more structured setting, such as a working group or a committee, or to determining if there is another domain-related group with such a mandate.

76. Although it is recognized that all groups have an inherent coordination functionality, it is proposed in the reference framework that such coordination, as a core focus, be performed primarily by those groups whose membership is at the managerial level, namely committees (which are effectively equated to high-level groups) and Friends of the Chair groups. As an exception, inter-agency and expert groups, though technical, are also given a coordination function, together with their core technical focus on methodology.

77. It is proposed that expert groups focus solely on methodological work, while working groups (which are effectively equated to partnerships) and task forces could, in addition to methodology, occasionally include data-related work and capacity development. However, in general, both data-related work and capacity development should be left to the Secretariat.

78. In terms of the duration of the Friends of the Chair groups (managerial level) and task forces (technical level), it is proposed that these have short lifespans. Expert groups are conceived as medium-term, as they should be tied to the production of a specified output, and the remaining group categories are seen as long-term.

VII. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

79. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To request the Chairs of each active group in the environmental, social and cross-cutting pillars to replicate the best practice identified by the Bureau in the economic pillar and initiate a review in the social pillar in 2021, the cross-cutting groups in 2023 and the environmental pillar in 2025;**

(b) **To endorse the operational reference framework, including overall naming conventions and guidelines for new and existing groups on the basis of their nature, expected outcomes and mandate;**

(c) **To request the Chairs of each active group to benchmark against the reference framework and encourage them to make the relevant modifications;**

(d) **To allocate an explicit a time frame to each group it establishes from now on, as described in the framework;**

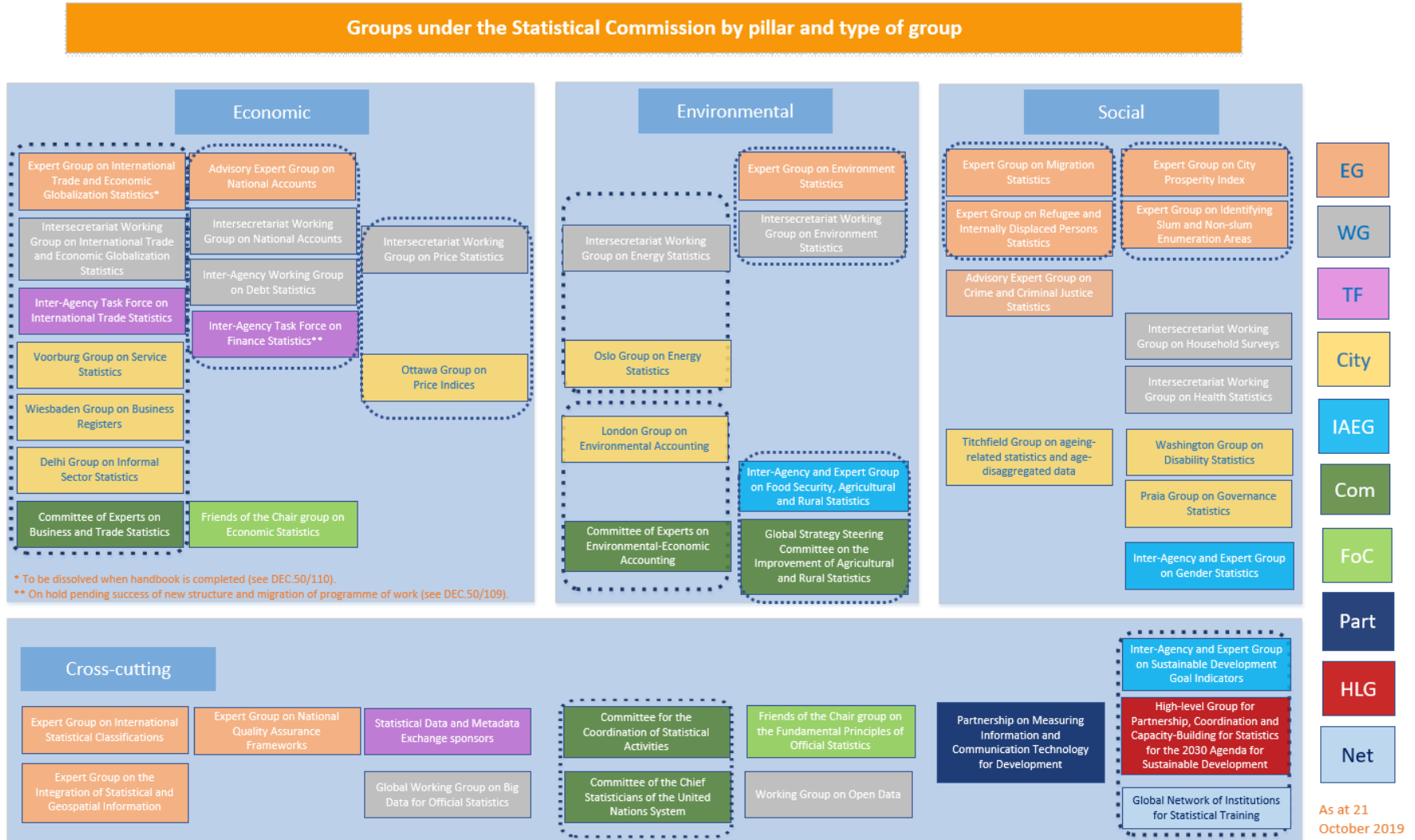
(e) **To request the Chairs of each active group to maintain an updated web page containing at least the group's mandate and terms of reference, the year it**

was established, information concerning its secretariat, members and Chair(s) and meetings, its reports to the Commission and its points of contact;

(f) To thank the Delhi Group and dissolve it, as it has fulfilled the original mandate given to it by the Commission at its twenty-ninth session.

Annex I

Graphic presentation of active groups operating under the auspices of the Statistical Commission, October 2019



Abbreviations: City, city group; Com, committee; EG, expert group; FoC, Friends of the Chair; HLG, high-level group; IAEG, inter-agency expert group; Net, network; Part, partnership; TF, task force; WG, working group.

Annex II

Proposed operational reference framework for groups under the Statistical Commission

All groups

Pillar	All types of groups are expected to work in one of the three pillars of sustainable development (Economic, Social and Environmental) or carry out work that cuts across the three substantive pillars.
Statistical domain	All types of groups are expected to base their work on the Classification of International Statistical Activities, to the extent possible.
Communication and outreach	All types of groups are expected to maintain an updated web page, containing at least: mandate and terms of reference, year established, secretariat, members and Chair(s), meetings, reports to the Commission, and points of contact.

City groups

Core technical focus	City groups focus on methodology in an emerging statistical domain, which primarily involves contributing to advancing methodologies towards the development of statistical standards (or normative document), including its revisions and accompanying manuals and handbooks.
Chair(s)	City groups are chaired by a Member State
Members and observers	City groups are composed of Member States (mandatory), United Nations agencies, non-United Nations agencies, academic institutions and civil society organizations.
Membership level	City groups work at the technical level and are composed of experts in the relevant statistical domain.
Time frame	City groups are long-term and do not have a set duration. However, they are expected to transition into a more structured setting if they wish to carry out activities outside the methodological focus, i.e. capacity development, coordination and data after determining that no other group within the domain can take on these activities.
Mandate and outputs	Mandates of city groups are formulated to address the issues of conceptualization, methodology and instruments in an emerging statistical domain. Their outputs typically feed into standardized tools, methods, measures, frameworks or any other methodological work. Their outputs are expected to be inputs to other groups' work.
Periodicity of reporting to the Commission	City groups are expected to report to the Commission at least every five years, and should do so jointly with other actors working in the same statistical domain.
Subgroups	City groups complement existing processes for the development and adoption of international statistical standards by adapting more nimbly to changing conditions, thus it is preferable that they do not have a heavy substructure.
Meeting frequency	All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually).

Friends of the Chair groups

Core technical focus	Friends of the Chair groups focus on coordination, which entails liaising among multiple stakeholders in order to coordinate statistical activities in the relevant domain. Occasionally, Friends of the Chair groups might also work on methodology, primarily the early stage in the development of a statistical standard or definition, including its revisions and accompanying manuals and handbooks.
Chair(s)	Friends of the Chair groups are chaired by a Member State.
Members and observers	Friends of the Chair groups are composed of Member States (mandatory). Observers can include United Nations agencies and non-United Nations agencies.
Membership level	Friends of the Chair groups work at the managerial (strategic) level and are primarily composed of Chief Statisticians.
Time frame	Friends of the Chair groups are short-term and must have a maximum duration of three years. If deemed necessary, they can transition into a more structured setting (either at managerial level – Committee, or at technical level – expert group).
Mandate and outputs	Mandates of Friends of the Chair groups are strategic, particularly if formulated to address coordination issues, but also if focused on methodology. In the latter case, Friends of the Chair groups are generally tasked to conceptualize a road map for methodological development in the relevant statistical domain. Their outputs typically lay the groundwork for further methodological work. Friends of the Chair groups whose mandates focus on coordination, are expected to produce concrete strategies and road maps.
Periodicity of reporting to the Commission	Friends of the Chair groups are expected to report to the Commission at least every two years.
Subgroups	Friends of the Chair groups jump-start methodological development or conceive strategies to be put in place, thus it is preferable that they do not have a heavy substructure.
Meeting frequency	All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually). Friends of the Chair groups should meet more often, given their short-term nature.

Task forces

Core technical focus	Task forces focus on methodology, which primarily involves the development of a statistical standard (or normative document), including its revisions and accompanying manuals and handbooks. Occasionally, Task forces might also perform data work, which relates to carrying out technical research and development regarding data. Although less encouraged, Task forces might be engaged on capacity development, which involves conducting capacity development activities, including training, skills development and technical assistance.
Chair(s)	Task forces are chaired by an agency (United Nations or non-United Nations)
Members and observers	Task forces are composed of United Nations agencies and non-United Nations agencies.

Membership level	Task forces work at the technical level and are composed of experts in the relevant statistical domain.
Time frame	Task forces are short-term and must have a set duration of three years at most. If deemed necessary, they can transition into a longer-term, technical-level setting in order to continue their work.
Mandate and outputs	Mandates of Task forces are detailed and scope-specific, focused on methodology. Task Forces are generally tasked to develop a particular aspect of a statistical standard. Their outputs are typically concrete standards, definitions or norms. Occasionally, their mandate requests to carry out technical work within a limited data universe and to deliver specific data-related documents. Less frequently, Task forces are asked to conduct specific assistance or training in the relevant statistical domain.
Periodicity of reporting to the Commission	Task forces are expected to report to the Commission at least every two years.
Subgroups	Task forces deliver specific methodological developments, capacity development activities or data. Depending on the scope of the task, they may have a substructure.
Meeting frequency	All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually). Task forces should meet more often, given their short-term nature.

Working group (including partnership)

Core technical focus	Working groups focus on methodology, which primarily involves the development of a statistical standard (or normative document), including its revisions and accompanying manuals and handbooks. Occasionally, working groups might also perform data work, which relates to carrying out technical research and development regarding data. Although less encouraged, working groups might be engaged on capacity development, which involves conducting capacity development activities, including training, skills development and technical assistance.
Chair(s)	Working groups are chaired by a Member State or an agency (United Nations or non-United Nations).
Members and observers	Working groups can be composed of Member States, United Nations agencies and non-United Nations agencies.
Membership level	Working groups work at the technical level and are composed of experts in the relevant statistical domain.
Time frame	Working groups are long-term. If deemed necessary, they may request their disbandment in order to discontinue their work.
Mandate and outputs	Mandates of working groups have a broad related to methodology. Working groups are generally tasked to develop all aspects of a statistical standard. Their outputs are typically standards, or systems of standards, classifications or norms. Occasionally, their mandate requests to carry out technical work on the full spectrum of a data universe and to deliver data management programmes. Less frequently, working groups are asked to conduct capacity development or training in the relevant statistical domain.
Periodicity of reporting to the Commission	Working groups are expected to report to the Commission at least every three years.

Subgroups Working groups deliver full methodological developments, capacity development programmes or data programmes. Due to the broad scope of the task, they often have a substructure.

Meeting frequency All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually).

Expert groups

Core technical focus Expert groups focus on methodology, which primarily involves the development of a statistical standard (or normative document), including its revisions and accompanying manuals and handbooks.

Chair(s) Expert groups are chaired by a Member State.

Members and observers Expert groups are composed of Member States (mandatory). Observers can include United Nations agencies and non-United Nations agencies.

Membership level Expert groups work at the technical level and are composed of experts in the relevant statistical domain.

Time frame Expert groups are medium-term and must have a set duration of five years at most. If deemed necessary, they can transition into a longer-term, technical-level setting in order to continue their work.

Mandate and outputs Mandates of Expert groups are formulated to address the issues of conceptualization and revision of methodology, frameworks, standards and instruments in the relevant statistical domain. Their outputs are typically manuals, handbooks, recommendations and guidelines, and often make use of methodological outputs produced by other groups.

Periodicity of reporting to the Commission Expert groups are expected to report to the Commission at least every three years.

Subgroups Expert groups deliver full methodological developments or products. Due to the depth of the task, they often have a substructure.

Meeting frequency All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually).

Committees (including high-level groups)

Core technical focus Committees focus on coordination and strategic vision, which entails liaising among multiple stakeholders in order to coordinate statistical activities in the relevant domain.

Chair(s) Committees are chaired by a Member State or an agency (United Nations or non-United Nations).

Members and observers Committees are composed of Member States, United Nations agencies and non-United Nations agencies.

Membership level Committees work at the managerial level and are often composed of Chief Statisticians.

Time frame Committees are long-term. If deemed necessary, they may request their disbandment in order to discontinue their work.

Mandate and outputs	Mandates of Committees are formulated to provide overall vision, coordination, guidance, prioritization and direction in the relevant statistical domain. Their expected outputs are typically concrete strategies and road maps with a view to achieve coherent and integrated programmes of work. Committees' roles may include monitoring progress and finding resources.
Periodicity of reporting to the Commission	Committees are expected to report to the Commission at least every two years.
Subgroups	Committees oversee and coordinate full work programmes. Due to the broad scope of the task, they often have a substructure.
Meeting frequency	All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually). Committees should meet more often, given their strategic nature.

Inter-agency and expert groups

Core technical focus	Inter-agency and expert groups have a twin focus: methodology and coordination. Thus, their work primarily involves the development of a statistical standard (or normative document), including its revisions and accompanying manuals and handbooks, and they liaise among multiple stakeholders in order to coordinate statistical activities in the relevant domain.
Chair(s)	Inter-agency and expert groups are chaired by a Member State or a United Nations agency.
Members and observers	Inter-agency and expert groups are composed of Member States and United Nations agencies. Non-United Nations agencies can join as observers.
Membership level	Inter-agency and expert groups work at the technical level and are composed of experts in the relevant statistical domain.
Time frame	Inter-agency and expert groups are long-term. If deemed necessary, they may request their disbandment in order to discontinue their work.
Mandate and outputs	Mandates of Inter-agency and expert groups are formulated to address the issues of conceptualization and revision of methodology, frameworks, standards and instruments in a broad statistical domain, coordinating statistical developments among multiple stakeholders. Their outputs are typically high-level methodological documents, recommendations and guidelines, and often make use of methodological outputs produced by other groups.
Periodicity of reporting to the Commission	Inter-agency and Expert groups are expected to report to the Commission at least every three years.
Subgroups	Inter-agency and Expert groups deliver full methodological developments and coordinate full work programmes. Due to the depth and reach of the task, they often have a substructure.
Meeting frequency	All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually).

Networks

Core technical focus	Networks focus on capacity development, which involves conducting capacity development activities, including training, skills development and technical assistance; and on data, which relates to carrying out technical research and development regarding data.
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Chair(s)	Networks can be chaired by Member States, United Nations agencies, non-United Nations agencies or academic institutions.
Members and observers	Networks are composed of Member States, United Nations agencies, non-United Nations agencies, academic institutions and civil society organizations.
Membership level	Networks work at the technical level and are composed of experts in the relevant statistical domain.
Time frame	Networks are long-term and do not have a set duration. However, they are expected to transition into a more structured setting if they wish to carry out activities outside their core technical focus, e.g. methodology.
Mandate and outputs	Mandates of networks are focused on the implementation of capacity development or data programmes. Activities of networks are complementary to existing learning and data processes, and expand their reach. Their outputs are typically capacity development activities, or data-related documents.
Periodicity of reporting to the Commission	Networks are expected to report to the Commission at least every five years, and should do so jointly with other actors working in the same statistical domain.
Subgroups	Networks adapt more nimbly to changing conditions, thus, it is preferable that they do not have a heavy substructure.
Meeting frequency	All types of groups are expected to meet at least annually (in person or virtually).
