



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
15 December 2020

Original: English

Statistical Commission

Fifty-second session

1–3 and 5 March 2021

Item 3 (i) of the provisional agenda*

Items for discussion and decision: management and modernization of statistical systems

Management and modernization of statistical systems

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2020/211 and past practices. In its decision 51/120, the Statistical Commission supported the name change of the *Handbook*, reiterated the importance of its availability as a living document on the web and agreed with its proposed structure, priorities and content. The present report provides information to the Commission on the work of the advisory group and on recent progress towards drafting the next edition of the *Handbook*. It includes information on how the first thematic conferences have contributed to informing and enriching the fourth edition through regional initiatives and national good practices. The report also contains information on the functionality and specifications of the user-friendly web solution that will host the next edition of the *Handbook*, including proposals for flexible ongoing mechanisms for updates and revision supported by the advisory group, as well as outcomes of regular regional and subregional thematic conferences. The background document under the agenda item provides links to the 16 final chapters of the *Handbook*, as endorsed by the advisory group.

The action to be taken by the Commission is contained in paragraph 26 of the report.

* E/CN.3/2021/1.



I. Introduction

1. In order to monitor the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the related regional and national development plans, it is necessary for national statistical systems to produce many additional statistics and indicators in great detail and in a timely and punctual manner. That implies a need for statistical offices to review their institutional, organizational and technical processes in conformity with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, endorsed by the General Assembly in 2014. The need for statistical organizations to adapt and develop was stressed in the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data.¹ More recently, at its seventy-fourth session, the Assembly, in its resolution 74/306, recognized that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic was one of the greatest global challenges in the history of the United Nations, endorsed a comprehensive and coordinated response to COVID-19 and urged Member States to build and sustain resilient, inclusive and integrated data and statistical systems, under the leadership of national statistical offices, that could respond to the increased and urgent data demands in times of disaster and ensure a path towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

2. The Statistical Commission agreed, at its forty-eighth session, that a revision of the current *Handbook of Statistical Organization*, the third edition of which was issued in 2003, was needed. The following year, the Commission approved the chapter outline for the next edition of the *Handbook* that included detailed annotations on each proposed chapter and its underlying sections. The outline consisted of 16 chapters: an introduction, an overview and 14 substantive topic-oriented chapters with several annexes. That outline was informed by a full review of the current edition of the *Handbook*, a survey conducted on the needs of current chief statisticians as well as other consultations. At its fifty-first session, the Commission acknowledged the progress achieved in drafting the next edition of the *Handbook* and agreed with the proposed updated structure of the next edition of the *Handbook*, subject to further adaptations and refinements, to be duly considered during the editorial phase of preparation of the document. The Commission supported the name change of the *Handbook* from *Handbook of Statistical Organization* to *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*.

3. Since 1954,² the *Handbook* has been aimed primarily at guiding chief statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations in developing and maintaining statistical capacity that is fit for purpose. Like previous editions, the revised *Handbook*, is not intended to be followed in a prescriptive manner, as the situation in each country is unique and the usefulness of the guidance therefore depends on local circumstances. Instead, it provides descriptive information to guide and inform statistical organizations on critical issues and topics, including those that are new and emerging such as measuring and cushioning the impact of the pandemic. On several occasions, the Commission requested that the next edition of the *Handbook* be a living document, which would be updated at regular intervals to address common challenges and grasp innovative solutions in a rapidly changing data ecosystem. However, the Commission acknowledged the need for the overview chapter to be available in a hard-copy version in all United Nations official languages to reach the widest audience possible.

4. The purpose of the present report is to provide the Commission with information on the following:

¹ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/hlg/Cape-Town-Global-Action-Plan/>.

² The first edition of the *Handbook* was published in 1954, the second edition in 1980 and third edition, the most recent, in 2003.

(a) The overall governance and working modalities set in place to support the drafting process of the next edition of the *Handbook*, including the responsibility and tasks of the advisory group, the role of the regional thematic conferences and the consultation process through the wiki platform of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat (see section II below);

(b) The drafting status of the *Handbook* and the proposed immediate next steps, such as the incorporation of comments received from the Commission and the inclusion of initiatives and national good practices identified during the first series of thematic conferences, and eventually the transfer of the next edition of the *Handbook* from the actual wiki platform to a final user-friendly web solution (see section III below);

(c) The proposed mechanisms based on guidance received at the previous session of the Commission to continuously keep the *Handbook* relevant and up to date in the future (see section IV below).

5. The background document under the agenda item provides weblinks to all final draft chapters of the complete *Handbook* on the wiki platform of the Division and contains more information on a few changes in the structure and extended coverage of the submitted version of the *Handbook* compared with the version discussed at the fifty-first session of the Commission.

6. The Division wishes to thank the members of the advisory group³ for their valuable comments and guidance, as well as the multilateral development banks and other regional organizations⁴ that gave their support in organizing the regional thematic conferences.

II. Governance and working modalities

7. The process of updating the chapters of the next edition of the *Handbook* was begun early in 2018 with the establishment of a core drafting team managed by the Division. That team was complemented by a pool of individuals mobilized on an ad hoc basis to contribute to more technical sections of the *Handbook* in their respective areas of knowledge and expertise.

8. In terms of governance, the Commission proposed to set up an advisory group to guide the drafting process and ensure that an inclusive approach would be taken to account for the various regional and national contexts, good practices, remaining challenges and recent initiatives. The Commission also suggested that the process be complemented by a series of thematic conferences at the regional and subregional levels that would allow best practices and challenges to be identified to inform the subsequent edition of the *Handbook*.

9. The members of the advisory group – including the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the High-level Group for the Modernization of Official

³ The members of the advisory group are Brazil, Ghana, Kenya, Mongolia, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Suriname, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the State of Palestine, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Asian Development Bank, Eurostat, Open Data Watch, the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries and the five regional commissions of the United Nations.

⁴ Particular thanks are given to the European Free Trade Association for contributing one full chapter of the *Handbook* and to Eurostat for its substantial financial support for the overall drafting and editorial process.

Statistics; the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics; the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information; and the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks – were selected in such a way as to take advantage of existing statistical networks and initiatives at the regional and global levels. The next edition of the *Handbook* will, to the extent possible, rely on the relevant global, regional and subregional initiatives emanating from those groups, as well as their deliverables and recommendations.

10. The starting point for each chapter was to create an inventory of innovative initiatives, reference material and guidelines and country experiences available at the national, regional and global levels on topics relevant to that chapter. An initial draft of the chapter was then prepared and made available to all members of the drafting team, who reviewed the initial draft to ensure completeness, consistency and alignment with international standards and good practices. The draft chapter was then shared with the advisory group for it to provide overall guidance, comments and feedback; provide country-specific examples and good practices; and suggest additional links to regional and global initiatives. Inputs received from the advisory group were incorporated and the updated draft chapter submitted to the advisory group for a second review. After the second round of consultations, the advanced draft chapter was posted on the dedicated site space of the Division's wiki platform⁵ for further public comments. The wiki platform was monitored regularly, and feedback and comments received were processed and incorporated to improve the quality of available drafts.

11. To make the consultation process more inclusive, a series of regional thematic conferences on managing a statistical organization in times of change is being organized to share the purpose and contents of the next edition of the *Handbook* with a wider audience of chief statisticians, senior managers of statistical organizations and policymakers. The conferences are being organized at the regional and subregional levels for participants to consider recent institutional, organizational and technical developments addressing prospective challenges and opportunities. They are also conducted to better understand and prioritize the emerging needs of statistical organizations to adapt and develop, as well as to exchange experiences and recent initiatives.

12. The thematic conferences are structured around four main themes covering all substantive chapters of the upcoming *Handbook*, as follows:

(a) Strengthening the institutional and organizational frameworks of national statistical systems (linked to strategic area 1 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters III to V);

(b) Securing the quality of statistical information and improving data coherence through statistical analysis and analytical frameworks (linked to strategic areas 2 and 3 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters VI, VII and IX);

(c) Supporting the transformation of statistical production processes, from data collection to dissemination, in the context of the digital and technological revolution (linked to strategic area 4 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters VIII, X, XI, XIII and XIV);

(d) Mobilizing and securing adequate resources and infrastructure and promoting regional and global cooperation for the development of national statistical

⁵ The wiki platform, established and maintained by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, is a website that allows collaborative editing of its content and structure by its users. Users may consult the platform either by using registered credentials to gain access to more functionality or without registering, to only view, download or print content.

capacity (linked to strategic areas 5 and 6 of the Cape Town Global Action Plan and chapters XII, XV and XVI).

13. In total, a series of eight regional thematic conferences were scheduled between October 2019 and December 2020: two conferences for Africa, one in English and one in French; one conference for Asia, not including Central Asia; one conference for the Pacific region; two conferences for the Americas, one for the Caribbean and another for Latin America; one conference for the Arab States; and one conference for South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

III. Status and immediate next steps

14. At the time of submitting the present report, all 16 draft chapters of the *Handbook* had been reviewed by the advisory group according to the well-established procedure mentioned earlier and made available on the dedicated site space of the Division's wiki platform.

15. The drafting team in close consultation with the advisory group was about to conclude its editorial work with an in-depth review of the structure and advanced draft chapters to streamline the *Handbook* into one consolidated document. In the framework of the review, some chapters were restructured, and a few sections were moved from their initial location and realigned to fit with other chapters to improve consistency, coherence and cross-referencing among chapters. Further overlaps and gaps were identified and addressed by either merging repetitions or including texts and cross-references. One such gap identified was in the area of register-based statistics. An entire section was drafted on that topic and included in chapter XI, "Common statistical infrastructure", of the upcoming edition. Consequently, the section on administrative sources in chapter VIII, "Data sources, collection and processing", was updated and realigned. Chapter VII, "Quality management", was thoroughly revised and aligned with the recently adopted United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics. As suggested by the advisory group, the level of technicality and the detail of some of the chapters were reviewed to render them more strategic and thus more informative for the expected target audience.

16. The background document under this agenda item contains detailed information in relation to paragraph 15 above on a few changes in the structure and coverage of the submitted version of the *Handbook*, compared with the chapters submitted and discussed at the 2019 session, and provides weblinks to all the chapters of the upcoming *Handbook* on the Division's wiki platform.

17. Owing to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, only three of eight regional thematic conferences on managing a statistical organization during times of change have been completed thus far. The Africa conference for English-speaking countries, held in South Africa in October 2019, was organized jointly by the Economic Commission for Africa, Statistics South Africa and the Division, whereas the conference for the Caribbean, organized jointly by the Inter-American Development Bank, the Caribbean Community Secretariat, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, the United Nations Children's Fund and the Division, was held in Barbados in November 2019. In February 2020, the thematic conference, held in the Philippines and co-organized by the Asian Development Bank, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Division, gathered together chief statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations from 19 Asian countries, allowing the organizers to identify regional initiatives, as well as national good practices and challenges, to inform the upcoming edition of the *Handbook*.

18. Through the current series of thematic conferences, it is ensured that the *Handbook* will provide relevant and sufficiently detailed advice that is illustrated by a variety of good practices examples. The conferences also allow for the identification of challenges and opportunities that are specific to a group of countries, such as least developed countries, small island developing States, landlocked developing countries and fragile states. Therefore, the advisory group suggested that this first round of thematic conferences be completed as soon as possible and that the outcome of the events be incorporated into the *Handbook* without delay. Given that the format of those events did not allow for them to be held virtually, and without prejudice to the development of the global health crisis, at the time of the submission of the present report, the remaining thematic conferences had tentatively been planned as follows: the conference for Arab States in the State of Palestine in May 2021, and the conference for South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in Uzbekistan in June 2021. For the corresponding events covering, respectively, Latin America, francophone Africa and the Pacific, it is hoped that more information will be available at the time of the fifty-second session of the Commission, but it is expected that those events will still be held in 2021.

19. At its fifty-first session, the Commission requested that the *Handbook* be updated continuously in a sustainable manner and therefore that it be available as a “living document” through an appropriate interactive Internet platform. However, it became evident that the wiki solution currently used to disseminate the *Handbook* is lacking core functionalities. At the time of the submission of the present report, the Division was testing web solutions to host the *Handbook* with the following features:

- (a) A printer-friendly version of the entire *Handbook*, specific chapter or section;
- (b) A machine-readable format, or one easily converted to such a format, to support automatic translation software;
- (c) A format that will allow the content to be accessed through tablet and mobile phone browsers;
- (d) A way to download the entire *Handbook* in PDF format;
- (e) A way in which the public may provide feedback, suggestions and comments.

The objective is that the web solution used for the *Handbook* should eventually be deployed overall across the Division and become a standard solution for future online publications.

20. The migration of the *Handbook* from its present wiki platform to a user-friendly web solution is expected to occur in summer 2021. Such a migration would allow, in the meantime and under the guidance of the advisory group, for (a) the incorporation of feedback and suggestions received at the fifty-second session of the Commission; (b) the consideration of comments received from the broader statistical community and shared on the wiki platform; and (c) the integration of challenges, success stories and initiatives identified into the thematic conferences to conclude the series of regional consultations.

21. Chapter II, “Overview”, will be the only chapter of the *Handbook* to be available in a hard-copy version in all official United Nations languages in order to reach the widest audience possible. The advisory group has suggested that that chapter, designed as an advocacy and statistical literacy document, be supplemented and illustrated with graphs, pictures and other graphic elements next to the already existing text. That will be done in consultation with the advisory group.

IV. Mechanisms for future updates and revisions

22. At its fifty-first session, the Commission emphasized that, in order to avoid average intervals of about 22 years between editions of the *Handbook*, it was primordial to establish a sustainable mechanism for its regular updating, conceived as a “living document” on the web. Ideally, such a mechanism should ensure a capacity for regular and, when needed, swift revision of the *Handbook* while ensuring general oversight from Member States.

23. Through feedback provided to some members of the advisory group, as well as the outcome of discussions conducted in the framework of the thematic conferences, it was suggested that a distinction be made between updates and revisions. Updates would be defined as non-substantive and non-controversial modifications, such as updating weblinks and other factual information, inserting a success story and reporting on a new initiative, whereas revisions would comprise more substantial modifications and alterations having a significant impact on the content and structure of the *Handbook*.

24. It was proposed that the Division itself carry out updates at regular intervals. However, for revisions, the Division would seek detailed guidance from the advisory group with one or two consultation rounds before any alteration of the text of the online *Handbook*, and once cleared by the advisory group, the revised text would be eventually labelled as provisional and brought every second year to the attention of the Commission for endorsement. This mechanism would secure the necessary flexibility by a delegation of authority to the advisory group while ensuring that the Commission has the ultimate responsibility for more significant alteration of the *Handbook*.

25. Updates and revisions can be informed through many different channels, including feedback, suggestions and comments posted on the web platform hosting the online *Handbook*. It was also suggested to complement these alerts and awareness mechanisms by a system of rotating thematic conferences to be organized in every region at two-year intervals. These thematic conferences would not have to cover all chapters and topics of the *Handbook* but could, after consultation with the national statistical office in the respective regions, focus on a set of specific chapters or topics of significant relevance for that region.

V. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

26. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To endorse the revision process and the work of the advisory group and to support the new edition of the *Handbook*;**

(b) **To support the delivery of the *Handbook* as a web-based solution with the suggested features and functional requirements;**

(c) **To support the publication of chapter 2 in hard copy, with translation into all official United Nations languages;**

(d) **To endorse the proposed update and revision mechanisms, including the tasks and responsibilities of the advisory group and the organization of rotating thematic conferences, to keep the *Handbook* relevant and state of the art.**