



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
13 December 2022

Original: English

Statistical Commission

Fifty-fourth session

28 February–3 March 2023

Item 3 (i) of the provisional agenda*

Items for discussion and decision: Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, which was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2022/324 and past practices, presents an overview of the process in preparation for the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics by the Statistical Commission and the tenth anniversary of their endorsement by the General Assembly, including options for review by the Commission. It also highlights possible tools to be considered to enhance the applicability of the Principles and to prevent their violation.

The Statistical Commission is invited: (a) to comment and express its views on the proposed work plan for the 2024 commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles by the Commission and the tenth anniversary of their endorsement by the General Assembly and approve specific actions it deems appropriate; and (b) to entrust the Bureau of the Commission to oversee the planning of the commemoration and the follow up to and the implementation of the proposals contained in the present report.

* E/CN.3/2023/1.



I. Introduction

1. The need for a set of principles governing official statistics became apparent and urgent at the end of the 1980s, when countries in Eastern and Central Europe began the transition from centrally planned economies to market-oriented democracies. It was essential to ensure that national statistical systems in those countries would be able to produce appropriate and reliable data that adhered to specific professional and scientific standards. Towards this end, in 1991 the Conference of European Statisticians developed and adopted the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (CES/702), which were subsequently adopted in 1992 at the ministerial level by the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) as decision C (47). Statisticians in other parts of the world soon realized that the Principles were of much broader, global significance. Following an international consultation process, a milestone in the history of international statistics was reached when the Statistical Commission, at its special session held from 11 to 15 April 1994, adopted the very same set of principles – with a revised preamble – as the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

2. At its forty-second session, in 2011, the Statistical Commission discussed the Fundamental Principles. It acknowledged that the Principles were still as relevant as they had been in the past and that no revision of the 10 Principles themselves was necessary. However, the Commission recommended that a Friends of the Chair group revise and update the preamble of the Principles to take into consideration new developments since their initial formulation. The Commission adopted the revised preamble at its forty-fourth session, in 2013.

3. At the same session, the Statistical Commission recommended to the Economic and Social Council the adoption of a draft resolution on the Fundamental Principles. Following that recommendation, the Council endorsed the Principles in its resolution [2013/21](#) of 24 July 2013. In the same resolution, the Council recommended the Principles to the General Assembly for endorsement. Pursuant to the recommendation of the Council, the representative of Hungary and 48 co-sponsors introduced a draft resolution on the matter at the sixty-eighth session of the Assembly. After a short informal consultation process, the Assembly endorsed the Principles in its resolution [68/261](#) of 29 January 2014.

II. The content and focus of the Fundamental Principles

4. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics contain 10 basic principles and rules – “10 commandments” as they were sometimes initially referred to – regarding operations and conduct related to official statistics. The Principles and their preamble are available on the website of the Statistics Division.¹ They may be summarized as follows:

- (a) Principle 1: Serving the entire society, relevance, impartiality and equal access;
- (b) Principle 2: Professionalism and professional independence;
- (c) Principle 3: Transparency on sources and methods, and accountability;
- (d) Principle 4: Prevention of misuse;
- (e) Principle 5: Cost-effectiveness and freedom to select data sources;

¹ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx>.

- (f) Principle 6: Confidentiality of individual data;
- (g) Principle 7: Laws, rules and regulations (transparency);
- (h) Principle 8: Need for national coordination (consistency and efficiency);
- (i) Principle 9: Need for international coordination (concepts, standards and methods);
- (j) Principle 10: International statistical cooperation.

5. The Fundamental Principles are a potent tool, owing to their applicability, directness and brevity, and provide guidance for everyday statistical work. They are a decisive and concise system of rules which can constantly be applied in dealings with government authorities, data providers and users. The Principles contain messages for four different parties:

- (a) Authorities, as the Principles contain stipulations on the basis and working conditions for official statistical activities;
- (b) Statisticians and statistical staff, as the Principles give effective and decisive guidance on professionalism and impartiality in statistical work;
- (c) Respondents and data providers, as the Principles stipulate that data are collected and utilized only for good statistical purposes;
- (d) Users of official statistics, as the Principles form a helpful regulatory framework for assessing official statistical activities and their outputs (quality, purpose, practices and other issues).

III. Principles governing international statistical activities

6. Following the adoption of the Fundamental Principles in 1994, it became apparent that similar principles needed to be agreed on for international statistical activities. In 2005, an agreement was reached between the United Nations and other international and multinational statistical agencies that are members of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities on principles governing international statistical activities. Ten principles were drafted on the basis of the Principles, establishing obligations on the part of international statistical agencies similar to those stipulated in the Principles. These principles are spelled out and explained by examples of good practice,² making this document a code of practice for international statistical agencies.

IV. Actions by the Statistical Commission regarding the Fundamental Principles

7. At its thirty-fourth session, in 2003, the Statistical Commission requested the Statistics Division to review and report on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles, and submit the report to the Commission at its thirty-fifth session, in 2004. The report contained the findings of a survey among Member States of the extent to which the individual Principles had been implemented in each country. The response rate to the survey was disappointing, as only 58 per cent of countries responded. Nevertheless, the evaluation was found to be useful, showing considerable progress in implementing the Principles while revealing the barriers to their fuller implementation in several instances. The Commission agreed that it was important to

² See https://unstats.un.org/unsd/cesa/principles_stat_activities.

obtain information on countries that had not responded to the survey and to study the implementation issue more closely. It also considered that a review of the implementation of the Principles by producers of official statistics other than national statistical offices would be useful.

8. At its forty-second session, in 2011, the Statistical Commission asked the Statistics Division to conduct a global review of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles and to prepare a report to be discussed at the Commission's forty-fourth session, in 2013. The aim of this global review was to build on the evaluation conducted in 2003. It was part of a work programme under the leadership of the Friends of the Chair group leading up to the twentieth anniversary in 2014 of the adoption of the Principles by the Commission. A revision of the preamble of the Principles was also part of this work programme. The revised preamble and the report on the implementation survey were submitted to the Commission at its forty-fourth session. At the same session, the revised preamble was adopted and it was decided to recommend to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly the endorsement of the Principles, together with the revised preamble. The Commission requested the Friends of the Chair group to work towards strengthening the implementation of the Principles by formulating guidelines on how to ensure the full independence of national statistical systems.

9. The first draft of such guidelines was submitted to the Statistical Commission in 2014. It was decided that the completed guidelines should be made available on an improved website dedicated to their implementation. The website should also contain relevant and up-to-date country documents such as statistical laws and examples of regional good practice, including codes of practice. At the same session, the Commission also considered a report of the Friends of the Chair group on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles.

10. The Statistical Commission discussed the Fundamental Principles at its forty-sixth session, in 2015. The Commission welcomed the work done by the Friends of the Chair group on the implementation guidelines and the development of a dedicated website for posting country practices. It also requested the Statistics Division to provide technical assistance to countries for the implementation of the Principles and to report back to the Commission in 2017 on progress in that field in the context of the twenty-fifth anniversary, in 2019, of the adoption of the Principles. With this session, the work of the Friends of the Chair group, established in 2011, was concluded.

11. A new Friends of the Chair group on the Fundamental Principles was established by the Statistical Commission at its forty-eighth session, in 2017. The new group was encouraged to focus on implementation and to examine a potentially widened scope of the Principles with respect to non-official and non-traditional data sources. The group was also encouraged to consider current discussions on open data, big data and quality assurance. At the same time, the Commission cautioned against changing the Principles at that point.

12. At its fiftieth session, in 2019, the Statistical Commission discussed the report of the Friends of the Chair group on the Fundamental Principles and open data and took note of the 2018 global survey on implementation. This survey was based on self-assessment of the implementation of the Principles and also included specific topics relating to open data practices. The new updated version was prepared with the contribution of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century and aimed at modernizing and improving previous versions while still maintaining core questions similar to those in the 2012 questionnaire to allow for a review of progress. The Commission noted that while overall progress had been made by countries in the implementation of the Principles, more work was needed by national statistical offices

and systems to achieve compliance. The Commission agreed that the Friends of the Chair group should continue its work for another year and that the work on the Principles should be resumed in time for the next appraisal, in 2024.

13. At its fifty-first session, in 2020, the Statistical Commission discussed and welcomed the work of the Friends of the Chair group on developing two additional chapters for the implementation guide for the Fundamental Principles. The chapters focused on a compliance and maturity framework for implementation of the Principles and guidance for the application of the Principles when using new data sources to produce official statistics. The Commission noted that the Principles website had been redesigned to allow improved updating and maintenance of country profiles and documentation of good practices in national statistical systems. Finally, the Commission agreed that the work of the Friends of the Chair group had been concluded for the current round of reviews and that further work on the Principles would be resumed in time for the next appraisal, in 2024.

V. Implementation and impact of the Fundamental Principles

14. Following the adoption of the Fundamental Principles by the Conference of European Statisticians in 1991, several new democracies emerging in Europe around that time started to apply the Principles. This was done in various ways: by embedding them in statistical acts and regulations, in internal guidelines and manuals, in proclamations and in information material distributed by national statistical agencies to survey respondents and the general public. While compiled initially for the benefit of the new democracies, essentially to restore trust in official statistics, the Principles very soon came to be used by other statistical authorities in Western Europe, both to inform statistical producers and users of the ground rules of official statistics and to guide the activities of statistical agencies and their staff. The implementation of the Principles soon extended to other parts of the world in the adapted version adopted by the Statistical Commission in 1994.

15. With the development of websites by national statistical offices starting around 1995, in many cases the Fundamental Principles were one of the first documents to be posted. The Principles soon found their way into the legal frameworks on official statistics of many countries, in particular when statistical laws and regulations were revised or compiled anew. Many of these revisions involved adopting the Principles, wholly or partly, often by direct inclusion in laws and regulations and/or indirectly by making specific reference to them in the relevant texts.

16. The Fundamental Principles not only guided national statistical offices and similar central statistical agencies, but also came to be observed by other producers of official statistics within the national statistical systems. This was not least the effect of advocacy by the national statistical offices, which found it practical to ensure that the entire statistical system observed the Principles. This was found particularly relevant as regards the principles of professional autonomy (Principle 2), transparency (Principle 3), freedom to utilize various data sources (Principle 5), confidentiality (Principle 6) and national coordination of statistical activities (Principle 8).

17. The Fundamental Principles had a substantial impact on the compilation of various standards and codes of practice. Council of the European Union Regulation No. 322/97 of 17 February 1997 on Community Statistics is partly based on the Principles, and the European Statistics Code of Practice (2005) uses and extends some of the main Principles. The Dissemination Standards of the International Monetary Fund, established in 1996 and 1997, are based on some of the main Principles, such as those on equal access (Principle 1), professional autonomy (Principle 2) and

transparency (Principle 3). The same applies to various data quality assessment frameworks established internationally or regionally. Codes of practice incorporating the Principles have also been adopted in some regions and countries. Examples are the African Charter on Statistics (2009) and codes of practice for official statistics for Arab countries, Latin American countries and others. The Generic Law on Official Statistics for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, issued in 2016, is based entirely on the Principles. The Generic Law was developed after 2010 by the United Nations and European agencies to assist the legislative efforts of new democracies, mainly in Central Asia. It was issued in 2016 in English, French and Russian and adapted by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in Arabic and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in Spanish and English to fit the generic model to situations in these regions.

18. The Fundamental Principles have proved to be very applicable to the statistical operations carried out to compile Sustainable Development Goal indicators. This concerns several of the Principles, such as those on professional autonomy (Principle 2), freedom to use various data sources (Principle 5) and national and international coordination of statistical activities (Principles 8 and 9).

VI. Current challenges related to the Fundamental Principles

19. The past discussions and the actions taken by the Statistical Commission, as well as activities by various regional agencies and countries, have had considerable impact in extending and strengthening the implementation and observance of the Fundamental Principles. However, there is still scope for further work towards the independence of statistical agencies and the observance of the Principles in several countries. At present, some main challenges still need to be addressed in this respect:

(a) The Principles have yet to be implemented in several countries. There is an urgent need to identify the countries where the Principles have not been or have only been partially implemented and propose measures to encourage and support implementation;

(b) In some countries, the Principles may have been introduced in law or regulatory frameworks but are not or are only partially complied with, or are being breached. Such instances must be identified and counteracted through discussions and advocacy with respective Governments;

(c) Following recent actions taken by the Friends of the Chair group, the feasibility of applying the Principles in situations where official statistics seek to utilize non-traditional data sources should be further pursued. In this respect, the focus should be placed on the importance of the Principles as the foundation for the compilation of Sustainable Development Goal indicators;

(d) The suitability and feasibility of extending the application of some of the Principles to non-official statistics might be further examined.

VII. Proposed activities in 2023–2024 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles and the tenth anniversary of their endorsement by the General Assembly

20. During the nearly 30-year period since the adoption of the Fundamental Principles, the Statistics Division has undertaken three global surveys on behalf of the Statistical Commission to assess the implementation of the Principles by Member

States. These surveys have all been based on country self-assessments of the degree to which the Principles have been implemented. The earliest survey only achieved a response rate of 58 per cent. The 2012 survey was more successful, with 65 per cent, whereas the most recent one, conducted in 2018, achieved an even lower response rate of 48 per cent.

21. During its deliberations in 2019, the Statistical Commission discussed the opportunity to conduct implementation surveys every five years using the recently revised questionnaire. However, no decision was taken. Instead, it was agreed that the Friends of the Chair group might be brought back to work on that issue or other matters in 2024, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fundamental Principles' adoption. Reviewing the experience of the global self-assessment implementation surveys carried out so far, it is suggested that such surveys might not be the most efficient instrument to gauge implementation or to encourage their application. This suggestion is based on the relatively low response rates and the self-assessment nature of the surveys. Hence, it is recommended that some more impactful initiatives and activities be proposed to enhance knowledge of the Principles, explain their importance in the context of the public's rights to impartial information and advocate their implementation.

A. Activities to be undertaken to map and support implementation and compliance

22. On the basis of these considerations, it is suggested that, on the occasion of the 2024 celebration, the self-assessment implementation surveys be replaced by a set of specific actions focused on strengthening the implementation of the Fundamental Principles and compliance by national statistical agencies and Governments. This proposal envisages that the Statistics Division, jointly with regional commissions and, when relevant, other partner organizations, embark on an overall effort to strengthen the implementation and the impact of the Principles. This proposal is based on the fact that the statistics divisions of the regional commissions keep continuous and close contact with producers of official statistics, mainly national statistical offices, in the countries of their regions. Hence, they already have considerable knowledge of the state of implementation and compliance in the countries.

23. The actions envisaged are as follows:

(a) First, the Statistics Division, jointly with regional commissions, takes stock of the situation regarding the implementation of the Fundamental Principles, including by documenting national good practices and challenges, taking into consideration specific regional contexts. This may include collecting country-level information on rules and practices deviating from the Principles and existing reports of non-compliance and breaches;

(b) Second, this information is collected and discussed at region-specific events, and other initiatives would increase the awareness of the Principles at the regional level and allow advocacy for their implementation. This could include conducting seminars and workshops on the relevance and applicability of the Principles, their translations into regional codes of practice and other aspects of the Principles;

(c) Third, the Statistics Division, together with regional commissions and other multilateral and bilateral partner organizations, will be encouraged to prepare and organize country-specific actions, where applicable and feasible, to promote full implementation and compliance.

24. It is suggested that the findings and outcomes of such initiatives be reported to the Statistical Commission, first at its fifty-fifth session, in 2024. The Statistics Division, together with regional commissions and other multilateral and bilateral partner organizations, would also be invited to report on their plans for regional road maps and country-specific actions to be taken as a follow-up to their stocktaking efforts.

B. Activities proposed to increase awareness and strengthen implementation of the Fundamental Principles

25. In 2022, on the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles by ECE, the Conference of European Statisticians organized a series of webinars and similar activities on each of the Principles, their applicability and relevance. These activities were aimed at strengthening the implementation of and compliance with the Principles in ECE countries. It is therefore proposed that the Statistics Division reflect jointly with ECE and other regional commissions on which of the webinars and workshops organized in 2022 by the Conference of European Statisticians might be replicated globally in 2024.

26. The Division might also identify international and regional conferences in the field of statistics in 2023 and 2024 where the issue of the Fundamental Principles might be put on the agenda, highlighted and discussed. In addition to raising awareness of the Principles in general, discussions at professional statistical conferences might focus on the applicability and importance of the Principles, in their entirety or in part, in different settings or processes of statistical production. Examples of such conferences and meetings are the International Statistical Institute World Statistics Congress in 2023, meetings of the various associations of the International Statistical Institute and meetings of the regional statistical commissions of the United Nations.

27. From 2013 onwards, considerable work has been devoted to developing the implementation guidelines for the Fundamental Principles. The guidelines have now become quite bulky, in part because they have been extended to cover specific aspects of the application of the Principles in different contexts, such as open data, the use of non-traditional data sources and quality assurance. Also, the guidelines are essentially compiled by statisticians for statisticians. It is now proposed that the Statistics Division undertake or arrange for a review and revision of the guidelines to make them more accessible, relevant and focused on the core issues of the Principles and their implementation. As part of this, a shorter and much more compact version of the guidelines might be compiled to allow easier access and encourage direct use by national statistical offices and other producers of official statistics, such as for the training of statistical staff. An abridged version might also prove helpful for advocating the importance of the Principles and informing respondents, data providers and main users of the ground values and rules of official statistics.

C. Advisory board on implementation and compliance

28. The issue of lack of compliance with the Fundamental Principles, or even their infringement, has long been a subject of discussion in statistical forums. Over the years, several ideas and proposals have been aired regarding the need for global institutional arrangements and mechanisms for monitoring the implementation and infringement of the Principles and reacting to violations by statistical or political authorities when needed. However, no such arrangements have been put in place globally or regionally.

29. It is now proposed that the Statistical Commission discuss and decide whether to establish a board of advisers to address the non-implementation of and non-compliance with the Fundamental Principles in Member States and to counteract violations of the Principles. Ideally, the board should be independent but cooperate with the Statistics Division and the regional commissions and regularly report to the Commission. The board should be mandated to investigate and take supportive measures.

D. Programme to commemorate the anniversaries in 2024

30. Following tradition, it is suggested that the Statistical Commission organize a special programme in 2024 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles by the Commission and the tenth anniversary of their endorsement by the General Assembly. It is proposed that the commemorative programme consist of the following activities:

(a) Before the opening of the fifty-fifth session of the Statistical Commission, in March 2024, an international seminar would be held with the participation of producers and users of official statistics, including data providers and other actors of national data ecosystems. There could be a limited number of workshops to discuss different aspects of the Principles, such as:

- (i) The experience of applying the Principles by national statistical offices and other producers of official statistics at varying levels of maturity of the national statistical system;
- (ii) The applicability of the Principles in various contexts and settings, such as in using different data sources, including administrative data, non-traditional data and the compilation of the Sustainable Development Goal indicators;
- (iii) Issues related to implementation and compliance, by both producers of official statistics and main data providers.

(b) At the fifty-fifth session of the Commission, a special commemorative programme would be held with four or five speeches by the Chair of the Commission and other high-level policymakers, users and representatives of the data community from different regions of the world;

(c) The commemorative programme should also include a special event during the 2024 session of the General Assembly.

VIII. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

31. **The Statistical Commission is invited:**

(a) **To comment and express its views on the proposed work plan for the 2024 commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles by the Commission and the tenth anniversary of their endorsement by the General Assembly and approve specific actions it deems appropriate;**

(b) **To entrust the Bureau of the Commission to oversee the planning of the commemoration and the follow up to and the implementation of the proposals contained in the present report.**