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Items for discussion and decision: national quality assurance frameworks

Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2022/324 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks. In the report, the Group presents its activities in support of the implementation of the *United Nations National Quality Assurance Frameworks Manual for Official Statistics*, which contains recommendations on quality assurance and an updated national quality assurance framework. The Group also presents the results of a global survey of countries on the implementation of quality assurance; information on the development of a road map for the implementation of a national quality assurance framework for official statistics; and information on the Group's work on the issue of quality assurance for new and administrative data sources. In addition, the report contains the proposed programme of work of the Group for the next two years to support countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework.

The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the work carried out and to comment on the progress of the work and the proposed programme of work. Action to be taken by the Commission is set out in paragraph 21 of the present report.

* E/CN.3/2023/1.



Report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

I. Introduction

1. In its decision 50/106, the Statistical Commission adopted the *United Nations National Quality Assurance Frameworks Manual for Official Statistics* and the recommendations contained therein. It welcomed the *Manual* as an important contribution in guiding countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework, including for new data sources, new data providers and for data and statistics for the Sustainable Development Goal indicators. In its decision 52/117, the Statistical Commission took note of the report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks (E/CN.3/2021/26), including its programme of work for 2021 and 2022 and updated terms of reference in support of the development and implementation of a national quality assurance framework in countries.

II. Work of the Expert Group over the past two years

2. The following 22 countries are currently members of the Expert Group: Botswana, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Niger, Norway, Philippines, Russian Federation, South Africa, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Viet Nam. The following nine international and regional organizations joined the Expert Group: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Eurostat, the World Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic Commission for Europe, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

3. At its meeting in May 2021, the Expert Group identified four priorities for its work: (a) the development of a road map for the implementation of a national quality assurance framework, as countries in the early stages of the development and implementation of such a framework would benefit from clearer guidance on the order in which to proceed; (b) the development of customized quality checklists for specific purposes, to complement the Group's general self-assessment checklist; (c) quality assurance when new data sources are used for the production of official statistics, as there appears to be a need for further guidance in this area; and (d) the role of quality assurance in data stewardship. Subsequently, the Group focused first on the development of a road map for the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks and additional checklists. The preliminary results of this work, including a first draft of the road map, were discussed at an internal seminar in December 2021 and presented at a side event at the fifty-third session of the Statistical Commission, in February 2022.

4. At its meeting in May 2022, the Expert Group agreed to make the draft road map for the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks available for wider review and testing and to finalize it by the end of the year. On the issue of additional checklists and quality assurance in the use of administrative and new data sources, the Group decided to collect and review national practices and experiences in this area. On the issue of data stewardship and quality assurance, the Group agreed to follow the discussion in other groups in order to avoid duplication. The Group also discussed and agreed to conduct a survey on the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in 2022, as a follow-up to its first survey in 2017. As part of

the survey, countries would be invited to share their national practices, including their experiences and practices in quality assurance in the use of administrative and new data sources.

5. The Expert Group met five times in 2021 and four times in 2022. During its meetings, the Group noted that the biggest challenge in quality assurance is implementation, while also acknowledging the remarkable progress that members of the Group have achieved in this area.

6. The Expert Group and the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat conducted multiple activities to support the implementation of quality assurance, including the development of additional tools. In February 2021, the Group conducted a side event during the fifty-second session of the Statistical Commission on the theme “Quality assurance and new data sources”, in response to the difficulties experienced in continuing with regular surveys under the conditions imposed by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.¹ In February 2022, the Group organized a side event during the fifty-third session of the Commission on its work on the road map for the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks and additional checklists.² In July 2022, the Group hosted a virtual global seminar on building a culture of quality in national statistical offices. At the event, participants discussed the importance of a shared culture and common understanding across national statistical offices to effectively manage quality, the main challenges in building a culture of quality and lessons learned in specific country contexts. Presenters included the United Kingdom Office for National Statistics, the National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia (DANE) and Statistics Canada.

7. The Statistics Division conducted multiple workshops and webinars to support the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks. A webinar on statistical quality assurance was held for members of the national statistical system of Qatar at the invitation of the Planning and Statistics Authority of Qatar, in March 2021. An international workshop on the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks and the Generic Statistical Business Process Model was organized by the Division, in collaboration with the Government of China through the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS), and with the support of the Economic Commission for Europe.³ In November 2022, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), in collaboration with the Division and the Economic Commission for Europe, organized a webinar on the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks and the use of the Generic Statistical Business Process Model,⁴ as part of its webinar series on statistical experience sharing. In addition, the Division conducted a webinar on the road map for the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks for the Global Network of Data Officers and Statisticians, in November 2022.⁵ In December 2022, the Division organized a workshop on the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks for official statistics in countries of the African region, in cooperation with the African Centre for Statistics of the Economic Commission for Africa, with a special emphasis on quality assurance in the use of administrative and other data sources.⁶

¹ See <https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/side-events/52>.

² See <https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/side-events/53>.

³ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality/meetings/Workshop-on-the-implementation-of-NQAF-and-GSBPM>.

⁴ See <https://www.sesric.org/event-detail.php?id=2690>.

⁵ The recording and presentation slides are available on the website of the Global Network.

⁶ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality/meetings/nqafws-addis-2022/>.

8. Member States, international and regional organizations and partners have supported the translation of the *Manual* into the official languages of the United Nations. The French version of the *Manual* has been made available with the support of the National Institute of Statistics of Cameroon (INS).⁷ The Spanish version of the *Manual* is expected to be released in early 2023, thanks to the efforts of DANE in Colombia and the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) of Mexico, supported by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. A Russian translation of the *Manual* was provided by the National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan, with financial support from the World Bank and the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, facilitated by the Economic Commission for Europe.

III. Results of the survey on the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks

9. In August 2022, countries were invited to participate in the survey on the implementation of quality assurance frameworks that was developed by the Expert Group. Countries were also asked to collect and provide information about their national practices.⁸ A previous survey was conducted in 2017.⁹ The questionnaire was made available in English, French and Spanish. By mid-November, more than 100 countries had replied. A final round of follow-up with countries that had not yet responded was conducted in November 2022 with the support of the regional commissions. Countries were given until the end of December to respond.

10. Some initial results based on the responses received by mid-November are presented below. A report with the full results of the survey will be provided to the Commission as a background document.

11. According to the preliminary results based on the responses received, the percentage of countries that have a national quality assurance framework for official statistics increased from 60 per cent in the 2017 survey to about 70 per cent in 2022. Countries cited the lack of financial and/or human resources, subject matter support and training resources as main reasons for not having a national quality assurance framework. When asked what assistance would be needed to develop and implement such a framework, respondents most frequently cited: (a) workshops or specific advisory services according to the country's needs; (b) hands-on technical material and guidance on quality assurance and its implementation; and (c) technical assistance to design quality assurance instruments and support to implement the instruments designed. The need for additional financial and human resources was also reported, although by fewer countries.

12. Many countries that have a framework considered the United Nations national quality assurance framework when creating their own. The frameworks most widely used as a basis for the national quality assurance framework are the European Statistics Code of Practice and the United Nations national quality assurance framework. The frameworks that are used as a basis for a country's national quality assurance framework are adapted to national conditions (as opposed to being adopted as is) in the majority of countries. According to the preliminary results, the national quality assurance framework covers the entire national statistical system in about three quarters of the countries that responded to this question.

⁷ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality/un-nqaf-manual>.

⁸ Available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NQAF2022>.

⁹ The results of the previous survey are available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/50th-session/documents/BG-Item3d-NQAF-E.pdf>.

13. Countries that have a national quality assurance framework were asked additional questions about their implementation. The results are very encouraging as they indicate that certain good practices are widely followed. According to the preliminary results, 90 per cent of countries responded that they included quality principles or a reference to quality in their national statistical legislation and/or other legislation mandating the production of statistics for official use. An equally high number of countries have a publicly available quality policy or statement of the national statistical office's commitment to quality. About 95 per cent of countries have conducted a comprehensive quality assessment of their national statistical office since 2018. Most countries (over 80 per cent) conducted a self-assessment. Fewer countries, though a significant number nonetheless, did an external peer review or internal audit. In some countries external audits were conducted. In about a third of the countries, other producers of official statistics have conducted a comprehensive assessment of the system to produce and disseminate official statistics since 2018. The survey confirmed that the Generic Statistical Business Process Model is now widely used by countries, with more than 80 per cent of countries having implemented it in their national statistical offices.

14. Countries were also asked to provide information about their quality assurance practices when administrative data or data from other data sources are being used to produce official statistics. Many countries use special guidelines and special quality indicators, along with special methods and tools and even a special quality assurance framework when using such data or data sources to produce official statistics. The responses and experiences shared by countries will be further analysed and the results are presented in the background document.

15. Many respondents also provided information on what issues should be addressed or further elaborated on by the Expert Group. Many of the comments focused on capacity-building and support for implementation.

IV. Road map for implementation and other tools for implementation

16. The *Manual* contains the United Nations recommendations on statistical quality assurance, the updated United Nations national quality assurance framework and practical guidance for its implementation. Those materials notwithstanding, it was found that countries that have not yet developed or fully implemented such a framework would benefit from a road map that would guide them through the process in a step-by-step approach. The development of such a road map started in 2021 and benefited greatly from the contributions of members of the Expert Group as well as the work of a consultant. In August 2022, a draft of the road map for the implementation of a national quality assurance framework was released for testing¹⁰ and countries were informed of its availability. Since then, it has been introduced during multiple training events and was reviewed at the workshop for countries of the African region in December 2022. The updated draft version of the road map will be provided to the Commission as a background document.

17. The road map guides countries through the development and implementation of a national quality assurance framework in a multi-step process that would typically start with an initial workshop for management. Subsequently, the purpose, scope and responsibility for developing the framework would need to be clarified and a review of national circumstances and existing work should be conducted before engaging in the process of developing such a framework. Implementation steps entail the setting

¹⁰ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality/roadmap/>.

up of appropriate organizational arrangements, a self-assessment, the use of other tools for quality assessment, including the use of the Generic Statistical Business Process Model, and the development of an improvement plan. The road map identifies who is responsible for each of the steps.

18. In 2019, together with the *Manual*, the Expert Group also issued a self-assessment checklist based on the United Nations national quality assurance framework. The checklist is intended for conducting regular and rigorous quality assessments of statistical systems with the objective of identifying improvement actions. It can also be used to provide an initial assessment for learning purposes or to introduce staff to quality assurance. The self-assessment checklist has been used in multiple training workshops and has been found to be useful and popular. An online version is expected to be available in early 2023, along with an interactive online version of the *Manual*. In August 2022, countries were also informed of the availability of an introductory e-learning module for quality assurance.¹¹

V. Focus of work and programme of work of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks for 2023–2024

19. The objective of the Expert Group is to support countries in the development and implementation of their national quality assurance frameworks. The *Manual* is the anchor of its efforts. The Group aims to provide additional materials and conduct additional activities that promote quality assurance and support implementation. It welcomes similar efforts by others and the sharing of information and practices. One focus of its efforts over the next two years will be the promotion of the *Manual* and associated tools for quality assurance, such as the self-assessment checklist and road map. A thematic focus of its work will be the issue of quality assurance when administrative and other sources of data are used to produce official statistics. The Group will review national practices in this area in order to identify best practices and possible guidelines. It will cooperate and coordinate with other groups as required to build on existing efforts and avoid duplication.

20. It is suggested that the Expert Group carry out the following activities over the next two years (2023 and 2024) in support of the development and implementation of a national quality assurance framework in countries:

- (a) Promote the *Manual*;
- (b) Support countries in the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks throughout national statistical systems, considering specific needs such as assuring the quality of new data sources;
- (c) Maintain and further update the website on quality assurance of the Statistics Division;
- (d) Conduct a programme of activities and events on quality assurance to further build the community of experts and share best practices;
- (e) Report to the Statistical Commission in March 2025.

¹¹ See https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/dataquality/e_learning/.

VI. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

21. The Commission is invited:

- (a) To express its views on the work of the Expert Group over the past two years;**
- (b) To express its views on the results of the 2022 global survey on the implementation of quality assurance;**
- (c) To endorse the proposed road map for implementation;**
- (d) To review and approve the proposed programme of work and updated terms of reference of the Group (see annex).**

Annex

Updated terms of reference of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

1. The Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks will:

(a) Promote the *United Nations National Quality Assurance Frameworks Manual for Official Statistics*;

(b) Support countries in the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks throughout national statistical systems, considering specific needs such as assuring the quality of new data sources;

(c) Maintain and further update the website on quality assurance of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat;

(d) Conduct a programme of activities and events on quality assurance to further build the community of experts and share best practices;

(e) Report to the Statistical Commission in March 2025.

2. The Expert Group consists of its current members and observers and is open to a limited number of additional countries and organizations that wish to join its work, while ensuring balanced regional representation. Member States will elect two Co-Chairs. The Statistics Division will act as the secretariat of the Expert Group.

3. The Expert Group will conduct its work electronically but will meet face-to-face should the possibility and need arise. Participation in the Expert Group is self-funded.
