



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 December 2022

Original: English

Statistical Commission

Fifty-fourth session

28 February–3 March 2023

Item 5 (i) of the provisional agenda*

Items for information

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 2022/324 and past practices. The *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems* was endorsed by the Statistical Commission at its fifty-second session, in March 2021, as a non-prescriptive web compendium to be regularly updated and revised under the guidance of an advisory group. Targeting chief statisticians, senior managers and staff members of statistical organizations, the *Handbook* provides guidance on developing and maintaining national statistical capacity that is fit for purpose and takes into account critical issues and topics, including those that are new and emerging. In the report, the Secretary-General informs the Commission of achievements, recent developments and updates and proposes topics and chapters to be further elaborated on or streamlined.

* E/CN.3/2023/1.



I. Introduction

1. The *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*, the fourth edition of a series of publications on the management of statistical organizations, is a comprehensive compendium addressing some of the most pressing challenges in leading and managing the transformation and modernization of national statistical systems in times of change. The first issue was circulated in 1954, and nearly three decades later, the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat published a second edition, followed in 2003 by a third one. The *Handbook* was not meant to be prescriptive, but rather to guide chief statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations in maintaining and developing a statistical capacity fit for purpose and in creating a broad and vibrant evidence-based culture within and beyond national statistical systems.

2. At its fifty-second session, in March 2021, the Statistical Commission endorsed the present version of the *Handbook* as a non-prescriptive compendium targeting chief statisticians, senior managers and staff members of statistical organizations. The *Handbook* provides guidance on managing and organizing national statistical systems in times of change and takes into account critical issues and topics, including integrating innovative data sources and technologies in producing statistics and indicators. To remain relevant in a rapidly changing data ecosystem, the *Handbook* has been designed as a “living document” to be regularly updated and revised under the guidance of an advisory group composed of national and international chief and senior statisticians. The *Handbook*, comprising 16 illustrated chapters, informative annexes and a glossary, was made available on the Division’s website in October 2022 in a format optimized for desktop browsers and mobile devices, and a printer-friendly version was uploaded in November 2022.

3. The purpose of the present report is to provide the Commission with information on the trigger and context of the fourth edition of the *Handbook*, as well as the mechanisms and modalities set in place for updates and revisions of the compendium. The report includes a suggestion to add a chapter on national data ecosystems to the *Handbook* and to streamline a few chapters to reflect better the needs of the target audience, to be submitted to the Commission at its fifty-sixth session, in 2025.

II. Trigger and context

4. In the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, it is acknowledged that monitoring the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related regional and national development plans requires national statistical systems to produce an extensive range of additional high-quality, granular and timely statistics and indicators. To address the emerging needs for data and statistics while complying with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics as endorsed by the General Assembly in 2014, producers of statistics need to modernize and transform their institutional and organizational frameworks, as well as revisit their data sources and production processes. Amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the General Assembly, at its seventy-fourth session, urged the Member States to build and sustain resilient, inclusive and integrated data and statistical systems, under the leadership of national statistical offices, to respond to the increased and urgent data demands in times of health crises and disaster and ensure a path towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

5. At its forty-eighth session, in 2017, the Statistical Commission, taking into account the changing circumstances in the data ecosystem, recommended updating the third edition of the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*, issued in 2003.

A drafting team composed of eminent experts led by the Division began work to update the *Handbook*, surveying chief statisticians and other managers of statistical organizations on how the upcoming *Handbook* could best meet their needs. In terms of governance, an advisory group composed of representatives from 12 national statistical offices, 8 international organizations and all the regional commissions was established to guide the drafting team at regular intervals or upon request.

6. In 2018, the Commission approved the outline and structure of the upcoming *Handbook*, including detailed annotations on each proposed chapter and underlying sections. The Commission also suggested that the updating process be complemented, at the regional and subregional levels, by a series of thematic conferences on managing a statistical organization in times of change. The objective of the conferences, which targeted chief statisticians and senior managers of statistical organizations, was to allow national best practices and challenges to be identified and eventually inform the fourth edition of the *Handbook*. However, owing to public health measures and travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, only the African, Caribbean and Asian thematic conferences were held.

7. The process of updating the chapters of the *Handbook* began in early 2018. 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. The 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, propose 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 was submitted to the advisory group for a second review. A final draft version of the *Handbook* was released on the Division's wiki platform in January 2021 for the last round of broad consultations. The same year, the Commission, at its fifty-second session, enacted the final version of the *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems* and stressed the need for the swift transfer of the fourth edition to an interactive and user-friendly web solution.

8. The *Handbook* benefited from the Programme on Statistics and Data under the tenth tranche of the United Nations Development Account, an innovative programme implemented jointly by 10 Secretariat entities capitalizing on their technical capacities and comparative advantages. The Division also thanks Eurostat for its generous financial contributions and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research for its support in converting the *Handbook* into a user-friendly web publication. The Division expresses its appreciation to the European Free Trade Association, multilateral development banks and other regional organizations for their sponsorship in drafting specific chapters of the *Handbook* and organizing thematic conferences.

III. Update and revision modalities and mechanisms

9. At its fifty-first session, the Commission emphasized that, 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. It was therefore suggested to distinguish 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 changes and alterations having a significant impact on the content and structure of the *Handbook*.

10. At its fifty-second session, the Commission endorsed the modalities and mechanisms for keeping the *Handbook* up to date while clarifying the following:

(a) Updates comprise reviewing and adding new success stories or regional initiatives, correcting Internet links and adjusting some factual and non-controversial information. They shall be conducted and documented at regular intervals by the Division without systematically involving the advisory group;

(b) Revisions involve in-depth modifications of chapters' coverage, substance or structure. They shall be carried out at longer intervals, such as every second or third year, under the guidance of the advisory group and eventually submitted to the Commission for discussion.

11. To inform the revision and alteration of specific chapters of the *Handbook*, it was suggested to organize additional regional thematic conferences or, when appropriate, extend or complement existing regional events with sessions on topics and issues pertaining to chapters under revision. Revised chapters and sections of the *Handbook* would be labelled as provisional until submitted to the Commission.

IV. Proposal for upcoming revisions

12. With the exponential growth of data and the rise of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and edge computing, Governments, the business community, researchers, civil society and other stakeholders are acknowledging the importance of data in decision-making and the monitoring of policies. In this context, it becomes increasingly important to set the governance foundations that enable data access and sharing while protecting the privacy of individuals and ensuring that data are used ethically. Statistical offices operate in an increasingly interconnected, dynamic and digitalized world that brings new demands and opportunities. Data have become strategic assets, and many organizations outside the system of official statistics generate statistical output using new data sources, tools and techniques.

13. The COVID-19 pandemic, which impeded the regular production of official statistics and led to emerging requests for additional data and statistics to measure its impact and inform recovery policies, has highlighted the urgent need for national statistical offices to harness the potential of innovative data sources and technologies and improve the resilience and agility of national statistical systems. The abundance of data and the possibilities to derive new information by linking these data sets raise questions about governance of national data ecosystems that goes beyond the gradual harmonization of concepts, formats and technologies to also cover issues of ethics, privacy, data protection and accessibility.

14. The Commission requires that the *Handbook* reflect methods, guidelines and solutions confirmed and validated through practical implementation and that, as much as possible, proposing solutions still in the testing or piloting phase be avoided. For that reason, a chapter on data stewardship and leadership of national statistical offices in the governance of national data ecosystems was put on hold. The present version of the *Handbook* extensively covers the use of new technologies and innovative data sources for the collection of data and the production and dissemination of statistics, but recent feedback from the advisory group and other comments received through the Division's wiki platform nevertheless suggested that adding a dedicated chapter on national data ecosystems and data stewardship was timely. Another recommendation was to simplify a few chapters or sections of the *Handbook* that were too detailed and technical for the targeted audience, particularly some sections of chapter 8, Data sources, collection and

processing; chapter 9, Analysis and analytical frameworks; and chapter 11, Common statistical infrastructure.

15. The drafting team therefore proposes, under the guidance of the advisory group, to submit an additional chapter on national data ecosystems and streamlined sections of the chapters mentioned above to the Commission at its fifty-sixth session, in 2025. In the meantime, the drafting team will continue to update the *Handbook* regularly, add new success stories or regional initiatives, review and correct Internet links and adjust some factual and non-controversial information.

V. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

16. **The Commission is invited to take note of the present report.**
