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**Items for discussion and decision: Data and indicators for the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development**

**The Statistics Division and UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (UNSD-FCDO) project on Monitoring the SDGs**

# The UN Statistics Division and UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (UNSD-FCDO) project on

## SDG Monitoring

### 1. Overview

In December 2016, Statistics Division (UNSD) signed an agreement with the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID; now part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)), to carry out a project on Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals, working with 20 countries across Africa and Asia, which ran from January 2017 to December 2022.

The overall objective of this project was to make Sustainable Development Goals data open and available to the widest possible audience. The project helped improve the availability of national indicators both in terms of support to increase the number of indicators available and by making them more accessible through national data and metadata platforms for the dissemination of the SDGs. The project also included activities to improve cooperation at national level and promote the use of statistics in evidence-based decision making.

Despite facing numerous challenges, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and an accompanying reduction in the budget, the project was a considerable success, with all output indicator targets exceeded and the targets for the outcome measures all also met, with many exceeded by a significant margin.

This background document has two main objectives:

- i) It provides an overview of the achievements of the project countries.
- ii) It provides details of the guidance, learning materials and other resources which were developed by the project, to make them available to national statistical offices and other organisations who wish to emulate the achievements of the project countries.

Information on the project, including details of country achievements, recordings of webinars and links to many of the resources mentioned below, can be found on the project page of the UNSD website: <https://unstats.un.org/capacity-development/UNSD-FCDO/>

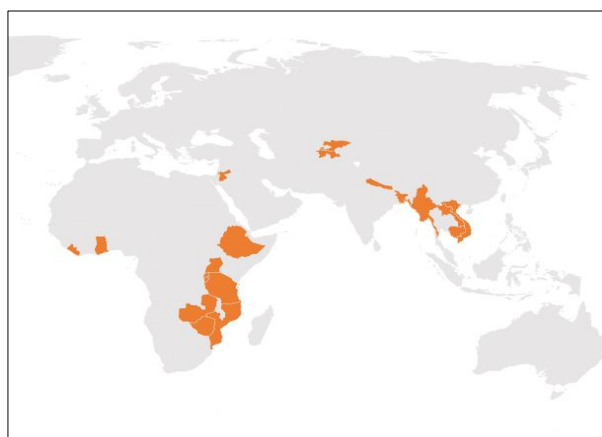
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## 2. Background

The UNSD-FCDO project provided countries with direct technical assistance, training and capacity development, local and international consultancies, and other forms of support to achieve the overall goal of effective monitoring of SDGs and improved evidence-based policy making. In addition, those countries which did not participate in a previous DFID-funded project relating to the MDGs received grants to fund specific activities in country.

The project worked with 20 countries across Africa and Asia, highlighted on this map. These were selected based on their involvement in the previous MDG project, expected appetite to participate, and whether they were an FCDO focus country



Driven by the needs of the individual countries, the project supported a wide range of areas including:

- Capacity gap assessments and facilitating the development of SDG monitoring and implementation plans
- the development of data sharing agreements for the SDGs
- SDG data modelling and SDMX
- SDG metadata compilation
- the development of national reporting and dissemination platforms
- user engagement
- data visualization and dissemination.

In April 2020, the scope of the project was expanded to include an additional objective relating to supporting the project countries in their COVID-19 data response. The support provided varied across countries according to national circumstances and priorities and has included facilitating the establishment of national COVID-19 datahubs, support to COVID-19 impact survey implementation and dissemination, readjusting to data collection challenges through the use of administrative data and other non-survey sources, and helping make relevant data available, accessible and engaging.

In July 2021, the project scope was further expanded to focus on the piloting of new approaches and activities in with a small number of countries, with the ambition to expand and build upon these with a wider group in future. In particular, UNSD supported pilot countries in using new and existing sources, methods and technologies to increase the availability, timeliness and granularity of SDG data, guided by the approach of the [Data for Now initiative](#). Further information on this initiative is contained in the separate background paper on Data for Now, also available under agenda item 3a.

Linked to this, the project also supported the pilot countries in testing and implementing the [SDG Geospatial Roadmap](#), which has adopted by the 53<sup>rd</sup> Statistical Commission. This roadmap builds on the recommendations of the IAEG-SDG's Working Group on Geospatial Information (WGGI) through delivering practical guidance that seeks to build and strengthen links between statistical and geospatial experts working on the SDGs in order to address data gaps and increase the use of geospatial information in statistical production and dissemination. This support was provided in collaboration with the secretariat and other members of the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM).

### 3. Project achievements & resources

#### 3.1 Gap assessments

As a first step in the project, detailed assessment missions were conducted to assess the capacity of national statistical offices, as well as the broader statistical systems in project countries with respect to SDG monitoring. The missions, carried out between 2017-2019, produced reports detailing each global indicator's availability within the country, its feasibility of production, any additional resource requirements, and dependency on external assistance to produce the indicator. Some project countries carried out similar assessments on their own or in partnership with other actors (without project funding), resulting in all 20 countries having SDG gap assessments available.

In many countries, the assessments were used to inform the development of national SDG indicator frameworks and SDG monitoring strategies. The vast majority of countries established an SDG governance structure with the national statistical office, in most cases, having an established coordinating role in compiling and reporting on SDG data. Furthermore, most countries integrated the SDG monitoring requirements into their National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) or equivalent documents.

Details of national SDG frameworks and reporting arrangements for each project country are included on the individual country pages of the [project website](#).

### 3.2 Data sharing

Collaboration and data exchange between members of the NSS are both essential for comprehensive SDG monitoring. Data sharing can be a challenge in many countries, both in terms of actually agreeing to share and in terms of the format the data are being shared. While there was an expectation at the beginning of the project that countries would need a formal agreement or MoU to facilitate the exchange of data and metadata, many project countries have specified that formal agreements between Government agencies are not necessary, since data sharing is already regulated at a higher level by a statistics act or other legal frameworks. What is needed in most countries, however, are operational guidelines addressing the specification of which data or indicators should be shared, how often and in what format. To this end, to answer requests from countries, UNSD developed guidelines for developing data sharing arrangements, which were disseminated to countries in the Fall of 2019.

To this end, to answer requests from countries, UNSD developed [guidelines and a template for developing data sharing arrangements](#), which were disseminated to countries in the Fall of 2019. These guidelines have recently been updated and expanded upon as part of the work on MoUs under the [Collaborative on the Use of Administrative Data for Statistics](#).

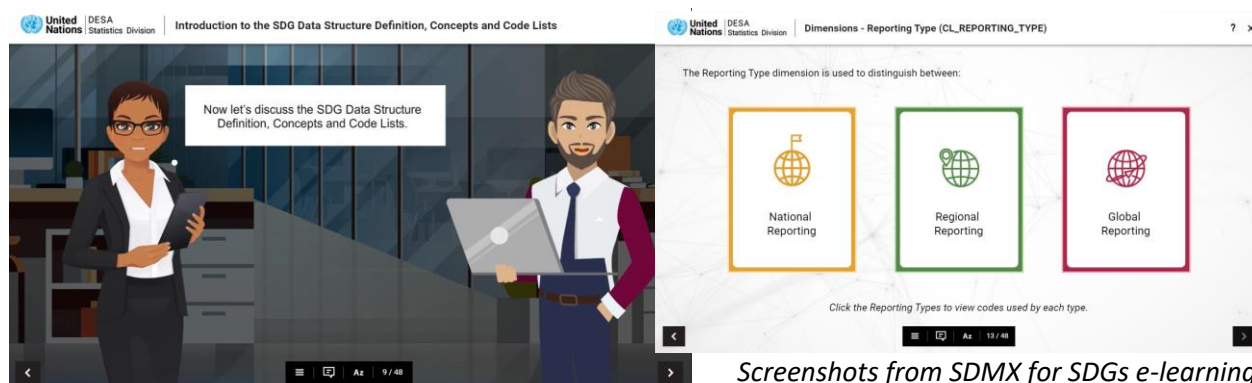
Also available are the materials from [training sessions on developing data sharing agreements](#) delivered by the UNSD-FCDO project.

### 3.3 SDMX data modelling

Standardizing SDG data is key for both more flexibility within countries and for efficient data sharing with international organisations. The SDMX standard is a good tool for this, and the project has provided training workshops to countries in how to model their data using this standard.

Through the customization of data structure definitions, it is possible to also use SDMX for national indicators not covered by the global framework, as well as for subnational and other disaggregations. Having all data, for both global and national indicators, modelled in SDMX is advantageous in that it allows for standardization and easier exchange between databases, and makes countries less dependent on a specific solution.

National data modelling and SDMX workshops were held with the project countries, following which 18 countries modelled their currently available SDG data to the SDMX standard and shared them with UNSD using this format.



Screenshots from SDMX for SDGs e-learning

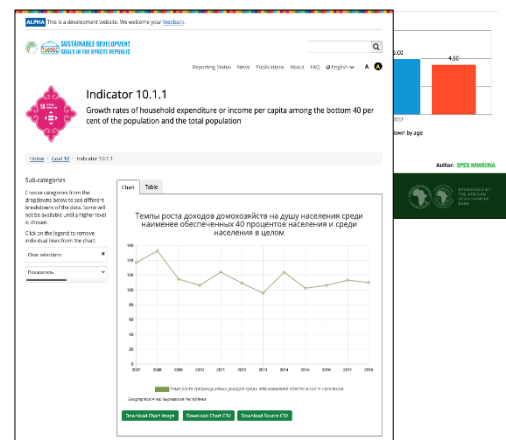
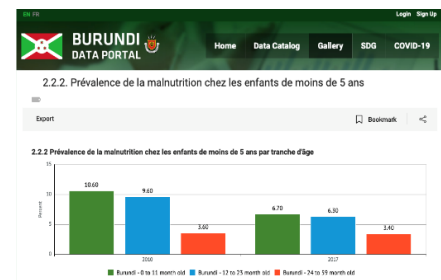
An e-learning course on the use of [SDMX for the Sustainable Development Goals](#), based on the materials and exercises from these workshops, was developed through the project. This course has two sections covering the global SDG Data Structure Definition (DSD) and the customization of the global SDG DSD for national use. It is designed to enable participants to familiarize themselves with the various aspects of the complex SDG DSD; mapping national data and disaggregation to the global SDG DSD; and customizing the global SDG DSD for use with national SDG frameworks including national indicators and disaggregation. It is designed for use both by new countries wishing to model and share their SDG data through SDMX, and as a refresher for those with existing experience.

### 3.4 National reporting and dissemination platforms.

In the planning process of the project, the expectation was that countries would continue using Devinfo, the most common reporting platform for the MDGs. Following a decision to discontinue support for Devinfo, UNSD and partners worked to find alternative solutions. A [Conference on National Reporting and Dissemination Platforms](#), hosted by UNSD, led to much useful exchange of experiences. Partially based on the principles and guidelines agreed at the conference and further assessments, UNSD developed a strategy for the implementation of national platforms, which was shared with countries. The recommended approach was to determine the technical solutions separately for the front-end and the back-end of the platform:

- *Front-end* is what the user sees and what to a large extent defines the user experience. The usability of national platforms, as well as user engagement, would greatly benefit from a customized SDG interface rather than a generic data warehouse. A modern front end is typically a Web application driven by an Application Programming Interface (API).
- *Back-end* is a system that supplies the API and data, and includes data entry, processing and validation modules over, typically, a relational database (or another type of storage).

The project countries chose different solutions depending on their specific circumstances, needs and preferences. Many countries selected off-the-shelf front-end and/or back-end solutions, such as [Open SDG](#), [AfDB's ODP](#), [ArcGIS](#), [Stat](#) and [PxWeb](#), though others have chosen to develop home-grown platforms. UNSD has worked closely with partner organisations to support the development and maintenance of the national platforms. By the time the project concluded, virtually all the project countries had established SDG data and metadata platforms, something that was considered incredibly challenging early in the project when DevInfo was discontinued. Furthermore, these platforms are being used extensively, both as the primary source of information on SDG indicators for Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and also for other national SDG reports, where these exist. For many countries, these platforms are well established in their business-as-usual processes, with strong mechanisms in place to compile and update the data.



Links to all the platforms are available from the [country pages of the project website](#). UNSD also hosted a webinar targeted towards non-project countries which provided [guidance on developing national platforms](#), including sharing the experiences of some of the project countries.

### 3.5 Compiling SDG metadata

Metadata are key to understanding the SDG indicators and the underlying data. The most important level of reporting on progress towards the 2030 Agenda is at the national level, from nationally compiled indicators. This requires that countries not only compile national SDG indicators but also produce the relevant national metadata, distinct from the global SDG metadata, which specifies the sources, concepts, data producer ministries or agencies, release calendar, contact information and other elements of metadata specific to the national context. For those indicators that are part of the global indicator framework as well as national indicator frameworks, only small adjustments may be needed to the globally agreed metadata to reflect the national specificities. For national indicators not in the global SDG indicator framework, however, the full set of metadata information needs to be drafted.

The project trained countries in the use of the internationally agreed SDG [Metadata Authoring Tool Template](#), which was developed by the SDG SDMX Working Group of the IAEG-SDGs and is designed for use both by countries and international organisations. To support countries in using this template for the compilation of their metadata, the project also developed some [additional guidance for national reporting](#), which can be used in conjunction with the template. Countries can use the template to report their metadata for both global indicators (those agreed by IAEG-SDGs) and additional national indicators (additional indicators contained in national SDG indicator frameworks).

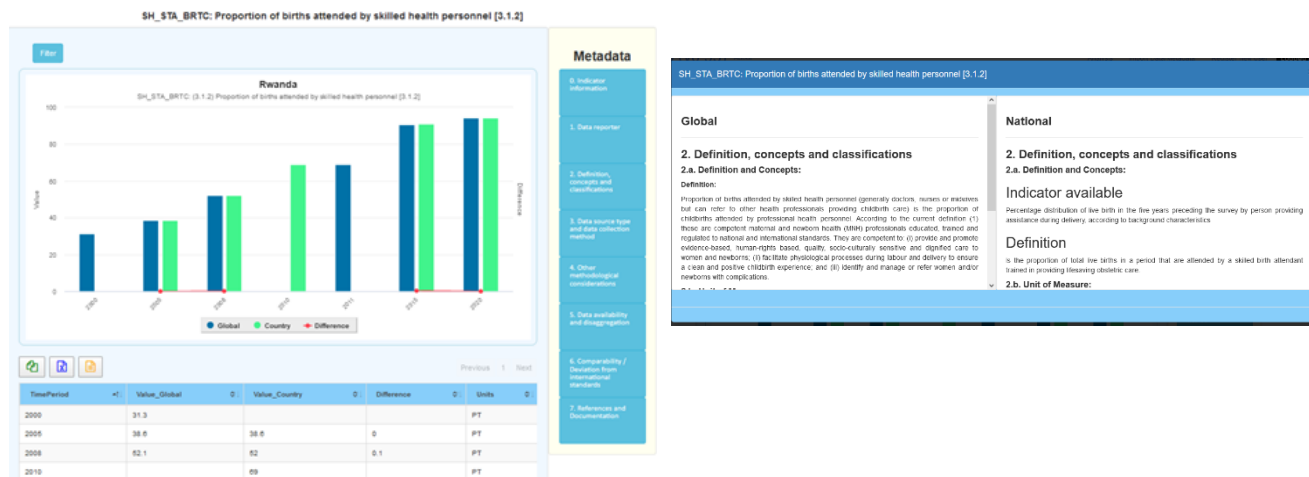
The project supported the development of an easy to use [web tool for converting metadata](#) contained in the Word-based authoring tool template into SDMX. This tool also provides a pdf version of the metadata which can be used for proof-reading and/or publishing. Thanks to this support, the vast majority of project countries have now compiled comprehensive metadata for their SDG indicators and have shared it in SDMX, as well as published it alongside their data on their national platforms.

UNSD developed and launched an e-Learning course on “Compiling metadata for Sustainable Development Goals”, which can be found here: <https://elearning-cms.unstats.un.org/course/detail/24>. The course is based on materials originally designed for the in-person workshops, modified for online self-paced study. Like the in-person training, it is geared toward technical staff working in national statistical systems tasked with compiling SDG indicators and metadata. Also available from the project is a micro-learning video on [authoring SDG metadata for SDMX conversion](#).

The screenshot displays the user interface for the e-learning course. On the left, a banner features a colorful grid of SDG icons and the text 'SELF-PACED E-LEARNING National metadata for SDGs UNITED NATIONS STATISTICS DIVISION'. The United Nations logo and 'Department of Economic Statistics' are also visible. On the right, a 'Module navigation' section includes instructions: 'Please select your module! Each module takes 20-30 minutes to complete. Modules can be completed in multiple sessions.' Below this are six colored buttons for modules: 'Module 1: Introduction to SDG Monitoring' (green), 'Module 2: Introduction to SDG Metadata' (dark green), 'Module 3: Common Terminology' (orange), 'Module 4: Introduction to SDG metadata template' (yellow), 'Module 5: Drafting Guidance' (light blue), and 'Module 6: Voluntary National Reviews' (dark blue). At the bottom, a video player shows a thumbnail for 'Introduction to authoring SDG metadata' with a play button and a progress indicator at 0:07 / 3:44.

### 3.6 Comparing global and national data and metadata

Through the project, UNSD developed an online tool called SDG Lab, which brings national data and metadata shared by countries together with global data and metadata produced by custodian agencies, to facilitate a comparison of the two sets and explain any discrepancies between national and international data. As global and national datasets are matched thanks to the common data model provided by SDMX, SDG Lab offers a side-by-side visual comparison of the global and national data and metadata for any given indicator to NSOs identify and understand any potential differences (see screenshots below). This helps increasing data transparency, improving international comparability and data availability.



The [SDG Lab](#) is available to both project and non-project countries. It offers a secure environment in which national users can only view the data and metadata they are responsible for, in addition to the corresponding global information. So far, eight project countries have uploaded their national data and metadata into SDG Lab through SDMX, in addition to an increasing number of non-project countries.

A [training webinar](#) in using SDG Lab is also available through the project website.

### 3.7 User engagement and dissemination

The evaluation of the MDG project clearly stated the need to put more emphasis on engaging users in the project outputs, and more broadly in how their countries are progressing towards specified national SDG goals and targets. A key aim of this project has therefore been to support countries in the development and implementation of user engagement strategies; prior to the pandemic, a series of in-country workshops were therefore held for this purpose. At the workshop, key elements of communication and user engagement were discussed, and different user groups were brought in to highlight their needs and give positive and negative feedback. This was an eye opener for many of the participants and led to good quality user engagement strategies and more targeted user engagement activities. The [materials from these workshops](#) are available on the project website.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a particular challenge for user engagement activities by countries, with many of the mechanisms traditionally used for engaging with users of SDG data not feasible in the current situation. For this reason, the project has continued to provide tailored support to countries to



adjust their approach as necessary and reengage with users of SDG data. This has included support in conducting launch events/webinars for the SDG data platforms, holding online focus groups or round tables with key users, developing engagement via social media with the general public, developing user surveys, holding trainings in statistical literacy for policy makers related to the SDGs, and developing new SDG outputs/brochures utilising engaging data visualisations/infographics. As a result, virtually all countries were able to implement their strategies, increasing engagement with SDG data users and gaining new insights which have been used to help to develop their priorities and outputs. Overall, many countries have changed their mindsets around user engagement are taking a more active role overall in engaging various stakeholders around data and statistics.

In partnership with the UN Statistical Institute for Asia & the Pacific (SIAP), UNSD used these materials to develop an engaging, interactive [e-learning course on user engagement and dissemination](#). In the course, you work as part of a team in the NSO of the fictional country of Esdeegia to help ensure user needs are met and maximise the impact of their statistics on decision making and public debate.

Each module includes a combination of storytelling, video interviews with NSS members and other case studies, as well as practical exercises and other interactive elements. Links to relevant additional resources are also included for those learners who wish to explore a particular topic or method in more depth.

*Screenshots from Increasing engagement around data and statistics e-learning*



Complementing the e-learning are several microlearning videos also set in Esdeegia, developed jointly with UNITAR. National Superheroes Office ([episode one](#) & [episode two](#)) describes issues around trust in statistics and the role of the National Statistical Office in ensuring that data provided quality, reliable, confidential, and based on human rights among other key characteristics of official statistics. [NSO Data Concierge](#) highlights the

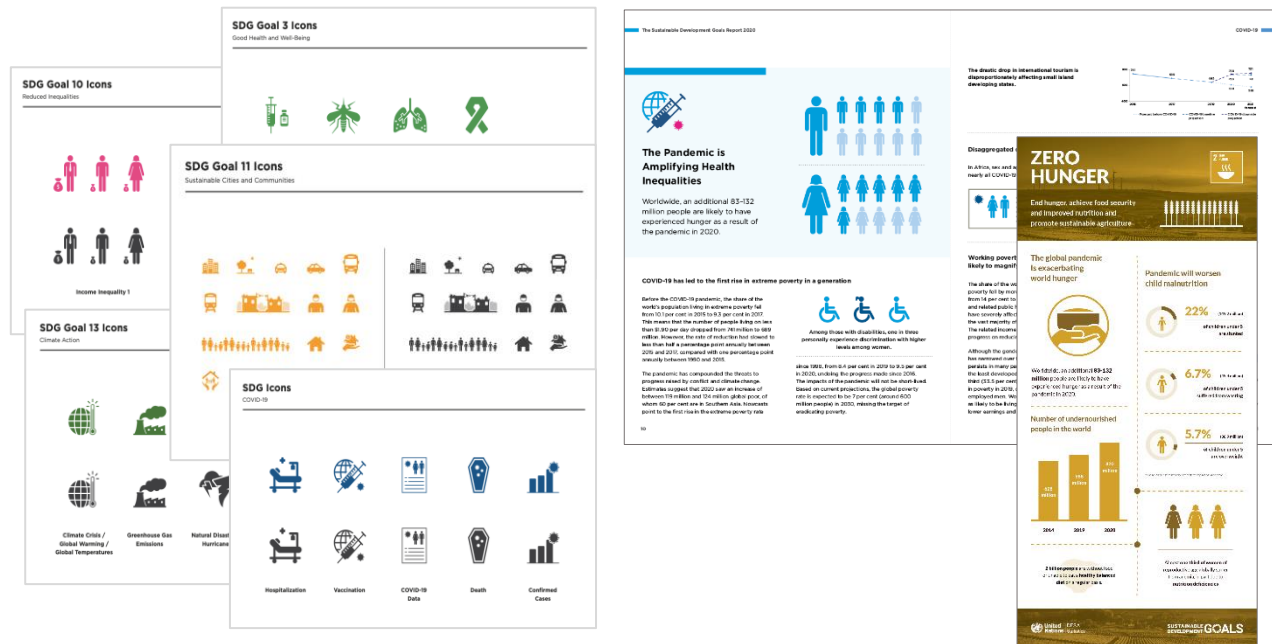
importance of being available to users and responding to their needs, as well as the role the NSO plays in ensuring data quality. All these microlearning videos are suitable for government statisticians but can also be usefully shared with national users of data, to highlight the value that trusted official statistics can bring.

Given that social media is becoming an increasingly important tool for reaching users of data and statistics, the project also developed a short online course on [engaging with users through social media](#), based on materials developed for the user engagement workshops, combining some short videos with a practical exercise to apply the skills that are covered.

### 3.8 Data visualization and dissemination

One of the key priority areas identified by countries during the pandemic was around the dissemination of information relating to COVID-19, in particular presenting data in an engaging way through reports, infographics, flyers, and other media. However, many countries felt they lacked both the skills and resources (software, royalty-free icons etc.) to do so. UNSD therefore supported the development of a data visualisation toolkit, containing a set of open-source SDG and COVID-19 related icons, along with a set of templates for a range of outputs, including reports, infographics, social media images and flyers. The toolkit has been designed to be usable with whatever software countries have available for creating the visualisations, whether relatively more advanced tools such as Adobe Illustrator, or more basic ones such as PowerPoint. Examples of the icons and some of the templates are provided below.

The [SDG and COVID-19 data visualization toolkit](#) is available on the project website, along with the recording of a [training workshop](#) delivered alongside its launch.



In addition to the Data Visualisation Toolkit, other resources have been developed to support data dissemination. Together with UNITAR and SIAP, UNSD developed [Data Visualisation Contest](#), another microlearning set in Esdeegia. This video addresses the importance of statistical literacy among the general public as well as the communication of data and statistics to a broad audience.

Two short courses focused on specific aspects of data dissemination for the SDGs have also been developed. Again, these are based on the materials developed for the workshops with countries. The first provides guidance, practice and resources on [preparing a media release](#) in order to help increase the impact of official statistics in informing decision making and public debate. The second, provides support in [developing and holding a successful webinar](#).

#### 4. Project website

All the materials highlighted above and many others are accessible from the [UNSD-FCDO project website](#).

In addition to the main resource pages, the [country pages](#) of the site provide specific information on SDG monitoring activities in each of the countries, including links to national SDG data platforms. The [meetings section](#) of the site provides details of the main in-person workshops and events held prior to

COVID-19, including copies of presentations and resources, as well as recordings from many webinars and similar events held over the last two years. The website also contains copies of all the [project newsletters](#), which were produced 2-3 times a year, and provided a summary of key activities and achievements, as well as highlighting new resources.