

Statistical Commission
Fifty-fourth session
28 February – 3 March 2023
Item 3 (i) of the provisional agenda

Background document
Available in English only

Items for discussion and decision: Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

The Journey of the UNFPOS - From Conception to Implementation

Minutes of the Pre-Session High-Level Webinar

Wednesday, 14 December 2022

Prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division



PRE-SESSION HIGH-LEVEL WEBINAR

The Journey of the UNFPOS: From Conception to Implementation

Wednesday, 14 December 2022
7:00 – 8:30 am (Eastern) | Virtual

unstats.un.org | [@UNStats](https://twitter.com/UNStats) | [#UN54SC](https://twitter.com/UNStats)



Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Minutes of the Webinar¹

1. The UN Statistics Division is organizing a series of webinars on the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS or the Principles), which will pave the way to the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Principles by the UN Statistical Commission and the 10th anniversary of their endorsement by the UN General Assembly. This Webinar was also the first in a series of high-level side events convened under the auspices of the Statistical Commission on the "Road to the Commission".

2. The Webinar on the FPOS was an interactive event with the participation of selected panellists, aiming to recall the journey of the FPOS from their adoption by the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in 1991 to their acknowledgement and endorsement at the global level. The panellists were asked to reflect on how this set of essential standards has secured official statistics' trust, transparency, accountability and relevance. The Webinar should also discuss challenges in implementing the Principles as well as consider specific regional and national contexts and touch upon their possible extension to the entire national data ecosystem, concluding with an early reflection on possible global and regional mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the FPOS and follow up on non-compliance.

3. The Webinar was opened and moderated by Gabriel Gamez, Inter-regional Advisor at UNSD and invited high-level panellists were:

- Laura Ahtime, Chief Executive Officer, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Seychelles
- Misha Belkindas, President of the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS)
- Pádraig Dalton, Director General of the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Ireland
- Marco Lavagna, Director General of the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC), Argentina
- Stefan Schweinfest, Director of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD)
- Ola Awad Shakhshir, President of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS)
- Hallgrimur Snorrason, former Chief Statistician of Iceland and UNSD senior consultant

¹ The recording of the High-Level Webinar can be found here: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/54th-session/side-events/14122022-M-Journey-of-the-UNFPOS/>

4. At the outset, the UNSD Director welcomed the participants and discussed the role of the Webinar leading up to the SC sessions of 2023 and 2024. He found it appropriate that the FPOS were discussed first in a series of seminars preparing the sessions. He reminded the audience that the FPOS, initially compiled and adopted by the CES in 1991, had been adopted by the SC in 1994. They were recommended to the Economic and Social Council in 2013 and endorsed by the General Assembly (GA) in 2014 and thus brought from the level of professional statistics to the level of government. Hence, the year 2024 marks both the 30th anniversary of the adoption by the SC and the 10th anniversary of the endorsement by the GA. The Director asked the Webinar to discuss the various topics in this connection, such as how we are doing with respect to the FPOS, current implementation challenges, the challenges and success stories in implementing the FPOS, and their possible applicability and relevance outside the realm of official statistics.

5. The Webinar recollected the origins of the FPOS, how they came about in the late 1980s and early 1990s through the efforts of European statisticians to compile a set of rules to help build trust in official statistics in emerging democracies and market economies, replacing the collapsing centrally planned economies of the Soviet system. These efforts, mainly carried out under the auspices of the CES, resulted in the FPOS or the ten commandments as they were often referred to owing to their number and brevity. Initially, the FPOS were adopted by the transition countries in various ways, such as embedded into statistical legislation and in various proclamations and explanatory material setting out the rules and approaches of official statistics, aiming at building trust by data providers, users and the general public of the integrity of official statistics. Very soon, the FPOS came to be proclaimed and eventually applied by NSOs of western European countries. Following their adoption by the SC in 1994, they came to be acknowledged by NSOs worldwide.

6. The Webinar discussed the difference between the FPOS and codes of ethics often drawn up for various disciplines and subjects, including statistics. An example at hand was the Declaration of Professional Ethics issued by the International Statistical Institute (ISI), which lays down ethical principles for professional statisticians, whereas the FPOS contain principles and guidance for governments, data providers, users of statistics and professionals working on official statistics. The panellists agreed that the FPOS were still entirely relevant and indeed timeless.

7. Discussing the importance of the FPOS in different regions, their relevance and applicability were found to be universal. It was emphasized that laws and regulations on official statistics in many countries had either incorporated the FPOS or made reference to them. Furthermore, in many regions and sub-regions, they have been translated into operational codes of practice. It was also observed that they were equally applicable to small countries as large ones and relevant and important irrespective of the country's level of development. Discussing whether it was sufficient to have the FPOS embedded in legislation, codes and regulations to retain trust, it was found that this was not the case. On the contrary, panellists insisted that it was necessary to live with the FPOS and the legislation which embraces them. Living with them also meant that they had to be proclaimed to the broad audience, be communicated, explained and preached.

8. Turning to implementation issues, the seminar discussed whether implementation and compliance could be monitored and, if so, through which mechanisms. Panellists pointed out that the ISI, IAOS and possibly other professional non-governmental organizations had the freedom to step up in case of violations and address inappropriate statistical practices and mistreatment of statisticians. This practice had indeed taken place, but it was also mentioned that these mechanisms could be complemented by the ongoing and intensive cooperation in statistics at the regional and global levels to cross-fertilize and exchange good practices and challenges in implementing the FPOS. Monitoring was acknowledged as a helpful tool providing incentives for corrective measures and behaviours. But monitoring and highlighting issues may not systematically have an impact since it is rarely the statisticians that need to be reminded and corrected for lack of compliance or violations of the FPOS, but rather line authorities. Panellists stressed that monitoring was not one of blaming but instead of identifying where support might be needed to ensure compliance.

9. Different views were heard on the possible extension of the FPOS to the entire data ecosystem. Panellists pointed out that principles and codes of ethics should guide professional data collection and statistical activities. Thus the question might be how different are the principles of non-official, privately produced data and statistics from those of official statistics and to what extent they are compatible. Panellists were asked if the FPOS might be extended with or without adaptations beyond official statistics. Generally, the opinion was that the FPOS had proven their relevance and applicability to official statistics, being our lighthouse and reflecting our core values with the ultimate aim of building up and maintaining trust. The importance of coordination was emphasized. It was argued that NSOs and other official statistics producers were already coordinating beyond the realm of official statistics, across subjects, disciplines and public services. Such coordination had been essential for the work on the SDG indicators. It was acknowledged that the compilation of the SDG indicators had relied heavily on the FPOS, not least the principles of professional autonomy, freedom to use non-traditional data sources, international cooperation, and domestic coordination. However, panellists did not feel comfortable monitoring the implementation of an extension of the FPOS beyond the NSS. They thought that the legal mandate and the resources were missing and could eventually create confusion among users, data providers and other stakeholders about the core values of official statistics.

10. Finally, the Webinar discussed possible activities that might be undertaken to sharpen the focus on the FPOS, meet the challenges of implementation, and increase the awareness of their importance and applicability. It was recalled that the SC and UNSD had, in the past, conducted surveys among the member states on the implementation of the FPOS. While these surveys had undoubtedly helped remind the national statistical authorities of the FPOS, it was recognized that their weaknesses were that they were conceived as self-assessment surveys and the response rates had been low. It was proposed to consider more objective and robust mechanisms to assess compliance with the FPOS and possible measures to strengthen their implementation. One such proposal is for the UNSD, jointly with regional commissions, to take stock of the implementation of and compliance with the FPOS by country, taking into account specific regional contexts. This stock-taking initiative should not aim to produce a shame list but rather to provide bases for global and regional initiatives to support countries to align themselves with the FPOS. Panellists also reflected on the feasibility of establishing a Board of Advisers on the implementation of and compliance with the FPOS. The Board would function under the auspices of the UNSC but be independent of it. It would work, among others, with the information collected from the stock-taking initiatives conducted at regional and sub-regional levels. It was also mentioned that the newly established UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) system could also alert the Board of severe infringements to the FPOS. However, this mechanism would need dedicated staff in each RC Office (RCO) to be trained. It was also recalled that Implementation Guidelines for the FPOS posted on the UNSD website had been developed quite some time ago. With later additions and extensions, these had become somehow bulky and ungainly. Thus, it has been suggested to edit, simplify and streamline the existing guidelines and use them as communication, awareness raising and advocacy material in the context of a special commemorative programme of the FPOS around the 2024 UNSC session.

11. At the end of the Webinar, the UNSD Director expressed his satisfaction with the interventions, their broadness, depth and the passion with which the FPOS had been discussed. He thanked the panellists for their participation and the moderator and his team for organizing and facilitating the event. He emphasized that it was indeed the intention to use the anniversaries to celebrate the FPOS, to make noise and make ourselves be heard to increase awareness and advocacy. This was an ongoing journey to meet ongoing challenges.