

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

UN/ECE Work Session on Statistical Metadata
(Washington, D.C., United States, 28-30 November 2000)

Study Topic (iii)

Needs and Responsibilities of international organisations for metadata.

Issues for Discussion¹

Notes

- There is evidently overlap between the four topics covered in the Work Session and hence in the issues that may be discussed in connection with each topic. Although the following issues arise from the papers submitted for topic (iii), they relate to national as well as international organisations and they could equally well be discussed in connection with other topics.
- Standards are the starting point for harmonisation and sharing of data and metadata. Hence this list of issues starts with standards.
- The issues are deliberately phrased to focus on potential outcomes or deliverables rather than on concepts.
- The issues are interrelated to one another. They are separately identified only to make them easier to address.

Issue #1 How to create and promote an international standard glossary, in English, for use describing statistical data and metadata related subjects

There is a need for commonly understood terminology. This is the starting point for standards. However, even within the papers presented in this session, a variety of different terms are used for the same concepts, or for concepts that are different in ways that are not explained. For example, are “metadata”, “metainformation”, “methodological information”, “methodological elements”, and “components of methodological information” all synonyms or are they different? What about “indicator”, “series”, “data element”, and “variable”? Given that there already several glossaries prepared by international organisations, the practical issue is how to identify, or construct, and promote an international standard. What materials are already available that could be used? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play?

Issue #2 How to ensure that an international standard glossary developed in English is appropriately translated into other languages

To be fully used within a country, a standard glossary has to be translated into the local language. The translated terms are the basis for translation of international standards. In general terms, how can this be best achieved? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play?

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Issue #3 How to ensure that existing international statistical data standards are recognised and used.

Statistical data standards are the basis for data sharing. They are not metadata per se (they can exist without data), but they are (or should be) frequently referenced by metadata. There are many international standards. Which can be considered as current and should be promoted? Which are out of date and should not be promoted without being revised? Several lists of standards exist. How can a definitive, near complete list best be compiled and promulgated? How can the standards best be classified? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play?

Issue #4 How to ensure that existing international statistical metadata standards are recognised and used.

There are a few international metadata standards. Which can be considered as current and should be promoted? Which are out of date and should not be promoted without being revised? How can a definitive, near complete list of such standards best be compiled and promulgated? How can such standards best be classified? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play?

Issue #5. How to develop and promote an international standard for the metadata that accompany statistical indicators and that are aimed at indicating quality.

Use of an international standard metadata template for any given indicator (eg employment) is the starting point for harmonisation and sharing of such metadata. What should be the contents of such templates? How many templates, each one corresponding to a particular type of indicator (e.g., one for employment related data elements, another for trade related data elements, etc.) are needed? How can such templates best be developed? Should the templates be designed to reflect more than one level of detail in order to facilitate a layered presentation? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play in developing such templates? Do the IMF SDDS “prompt points” constitute the best starting point?

Issue #6. How to further develop and promote a website design standard for statistical data.

Given that a provisional website design standard has been developed, what specific roles should international and national organisations play in its further development and promulgation as internationally recognised standards.

Issue #7. How can international organisations best exploit modern technology in data and metadata access and sharing

Data exchange using XML will reduce programming effort. What standard definitions and data structures can be developed to underpin data exchange using XML? What specific roles should international and national organisations play in their development and promulgation?

Issue #8. How to ensure new international statistical metadata standards are developed where needed.

In what other areas are additional metadata standards required and likely to be effective? How could they be most efficiently developed and promoted? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play in identifying the needs and developing new standards?

Issue #9. How to ensure that the metadata required to satisfy users needs are gathered.

Do national and international organisations understand their users needs in sufficient detail to be able to design standard metadata templates? What authoritative material regarding user needs presently exists? What additional material should be gathered? Who and how should this be gathered? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play?

Issue #10. How to reduce the reporting load on NSOs in the short term

What additional actions should international organisations take to ensure that they impose minimum overall reporting burden on national statistical organisations, in particular by sharing data and metadata? The OECD paper refers to notification, sharing, and updating of metadata. Are there other actions? How can these actions be implemented?

Issue #11. How to remove need for international organisations to collect additional metadata from national statistical offices.

How can national statistical offices be assisted in collecting and publishing sufficient metadata to satisfy users needs so that international organisations do not need to ask them for additional metadata? Development of standard templates is one step. Are there others?

Issue #12. How to ensure that metadata are well presented

How can metadata dissemination procedures best satisfy diverse user needs? Evidently different users/uses require different amounts and types of metadata. Given a comprehensive pool of detailed metadata from which to draw, how can the diversity of requirements best be addressed by the dissemination systems? Is there anything better than the “layered” (“drill down”) approach? What practical examples can be cited of systems that enable users to extract the metadata they need and no more?

Issue #13. How can users best be made aware of data quality issues, in particular cross country data comparability limitations

Whilst satisfaction of user needs is the starting point for measurement of quality, that does not invalidate the objective of shaping user needs by educating users in the use of metadata. What should be done to educate data users regarding their use of (and hence need for) metadata to improve analysis and interpretation of data? What specific roles should international and national statistical organisations play in identifying the needs and developing new standards?