

**Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA)**  
**DRAFT NOTE - March 2017**

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**Principles and practices of global data reporting and data sharing for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

**PREAMBLE**

This document is meant to provide a contribution to the development of the guidelines for global reporting of Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) indicators, as requested of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDG) by the UN Statistical Commission at its forty-eighth session<sup>1</sup>. The document, in particular, proposes some key principles and practices to improve two-way data flows between national and international statistical agencies and the sharing of data among international organizations and with the public.

It is widely accepted that International and Supranational Statistical Agencies (ISSAs) have a crucial role to play in global SDG reporting and indicator development. The latest report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDG) delineates the multiple functions to be carried out by ISSAs for each of the SDG indicators under their responsibility as custodian agencies: “The main responsibilities of these international agencies are to collect data from countries under existing mandates and through reporting mechanisms, to compile internationally comparable data in the different statistical domains, to support increased adoption and compliance with internationally agreed standards and to strengthen national statistical capacity”<sup>2</sup>.

At the same time, concerns have been expressed by some National Statistical Offices (NSOs)<sup>3</sup> about the discrepancies that may arise between international and national estimates of similar indicators, including the reputational risk for NSOs to have their data contradicted by those published by ISSAs. These concerns hinder efforts to collaboratively define the global reporting mechanism for the review of progress towards the SDGs<sup>4</sup>.

While the considerations presented in this document focus on the SDG indicators process, the principles espoused are not limited to the SDGs and could be applied to other statistics produced at the international level. Issues raised about the global reporting of SDG indicators are common to other social, economic or environmental indicators. The current emphasis on the global SDG

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<sup>1</sup> The Statistical Commission “requested the IAEG-SDG to develop guidelines of how custodian agencies and countries can work together to contribute to the data flows necessary to have harmonized statistics”, draft decisions of the Economic and Social Council proposed by the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Statistical Commission, Decision 1 (I): Data and indicators for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Item 3a).

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators to the Forty-eighth session of the UN Statistical Commission, 15 December 2016, paragraph. 25 (E/CN.3/2017/2).

<sup>3</sup> The term “National Statistical Office”, which is used throughout this document for convenience, is not meant to be restrictive, since national practices vary. In the context here, it refers to the national statistical institution(s) authorized to report estimates of SDG indicators.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, paragraphs, 28-31

indicators, identified by the IAEG-SDG and agreed by the UN Statistical Commission, derives from the high visibility of this internationally agreed statistical framework and the need for a voluntary and country-led follow-up and review process at all levels, including the assessment of progress towards the achievement of SDG targets. Moreover, as pointed out by the IAEG-SDG, global reporting for the 2030 Agenda provides a good opportunity to improve the coordination amongst the international statistical community more broadly<sup>5</sup>.

The collaboration between ISSAs and NSOs is thus essential for ensuring an effective flow of internationally comparable data that meet the highest international standards, and such collaboration can be strengthened by an agreement on common principles and novel arrangements for managing the global reporting of SDG indicators. These principles and arrangements should be based on open communication and common trust, and build on the lessons learned from global reporting in the MDG era. The experience with the MDG indicators demonstrated that certain practices — improving reporting mechanisms from the national to the international statistical systems, strengthening the coordination role of NSOs, providing tailored capacity development support and technical assistance and ensuring close collaboration between ISSAs and NSOs — can improve the overall availability of data and the consistency between national and international datasets<sup>6</sup>.

In reaffirming the importance of adhering to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in the development and reporting of SDG indicators, this document emphasizes that the statistical work undertaken by ISSAs is to be guided by the same key principles applicable to national statistics, aspiring to highest standards of relevance, accuracy, reliability, transparency and accessibility. Additionally, ISSAs shall ensure cross-country comparability and work to minimize countries' response burden, in line with UN Statistical Commission decisions 47/101 (l) and (m).

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, paragraph. 30.

<sup>6</sup> UN, March 2013, Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring From A Statistical Perspective: Report of the Task Team on Lessons learned from MDG Monitoring of the IAEG-MDG

## I. THE DISTINCT AND COMPLEMENTARY ROLES OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL AGENCIES IN GLOBAL MONITORING

Both NSOs and ISSAs play a fundamental role in the global statistical system, informing the public debate and the policy decisions at the national, regional, and international level. The NSO is the main source of data for informing policy analyses and decision-making at country level. Within each country, NSOs are also often mandated to provide quality assurance for the data produced by other national data producing entities, although practice varies considerably across countries.

The modalities of data reporting vary across the ISSAs. In a few cases, ISSAs run internationally sponsored surveys in countries, often with the full involvement of national authorities.<sup>7</sup> Usually, however, ISSAs do not collect data directly by surveying individual households, businesses and institutions in individual countries; rather, they usually obtain data from NSOs and other national authorities that are responsible for collecting the primary data. ISSAs typically add value to country data by verifying compliance with global statistical standards, ensuring comparability by harmonizing data using standard conversions and methodologies, and producing regional and global estimates. Ensuring that national data use harmonized concepts/definitions/classifications and are therefore internationally comparable is vital in assessing a country's progress against SDG targets as well as in benchmarking one country's performance against another.

In some instances, ISSAs may use non-official data to construct international data series in fields that are not covered by existing official sources, or where a single source (e.g. satellite imagery on land cover) may provide more consistent and lower cost data to measure a global or transnational phenomenon than what would result from the amalgamation of multiple individual country datasets. Non-official sources may also be used by ISSAs to estimate country-specific values of SDG indicators when national official data do not exist, are incomplete, or are of poor quality, or to impute missing values within a national official time series or to extrapolate official time series.

ISSAs have been assigned their global monitoring role by Member States through ISSAs' intergovernmental bodies. Some of these bodies involve NSOs (e.g. the UN Statistical Commission) but the majority do not, as national representatives in ISSAs' governing bodies typically represent either the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the national institution governing the policy issue intrinsic to the ISSA's specialized work. Nonetheless, the responsibility of collecting, validating and disseminating statistics is inscribed in the mandate of many ISSAs, and governed through arrangements which are often under the oversight of Member States. In addition, the statistical programme of most of these agencies is adopted, funded and monitored by intergovernmental bodies composed of country representatives.

Most ISSAs make use of various quality frameworks to guide the collection, analysis and dissemination of global statistics. These include the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics,

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) or UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities (developed by the CCSA in 2005), and other quality assurance frameworks (QAF)<sup>8</sup>.

When country data are produced using internationally agreed standards and reported using comparable measurement units, international data series can be simply a collation of country data, with minor adjustments to allow for full comparability. It may happen, however, that when applying their quality standards, ISSAs produce estimates of indicators that differ from those published by national authorities. Both experience and formal assessments indicate that these discrepancies occur for a variety of reasons. National estimates may not be available or may not be reported in a timely manner to ISSAs; they may be based on concepts, definitions, classifications or methods that are not compliant with internationally agreed standards; they may be subject to certain biases; and they may be inconsistent with national estimates from other official data sources. In some instances, perceived discrepancies arise when ISSAs produce estimates of the same indicators during the same year, but referring to different time periods.

The principles and practices listed below are intended to provide useful guidance to facilitate an effective and durable collaboration between NSOs and ISSAs, particularly in filling data gaps or improving the quality of country data in order for them to adhere to international statistical standards.

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, a number of CCSA members have adopted specific QAF, while the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN system has recently endorsed a common quality framework.

## **II. Proposed principles and practices to guide the production of international estimates for SDG indicators**

1. In order to ensure country ownership, as well as to comply with the explicit mandate contained in the 2030 Agenda, estimates of the SDG indicators produced by ISSAs shall be based, in all cases where NSOs produce and publish national estimates and provided they are consistent with the indicator definitions, on national data.
2. ISSAs shall only publish data that are not known to be classified as restricted or confidential by the relevant national authority.
3. If ISSAs need to adjust<sup>9</sup> or estimate country data in order to meet quality standards (in the specific cases mentioned above), they shall:
  - a. Select the most appropriate statistical methods and data sources exclusively on the basis of professional statistical considerations;
  - b. Invite concerned countries to participate in a joint technical consultation, either electronically or through other means, with a view to improving and validating the methodologies used to calculate country estimates;
  - c. Provide an opportunity for NSOs to review country-specific estimates prior to their release within a reasonable timeframe;
  - d. In cases where an agreement cannot be reached on the estimate of a specific indicator within a reasonable timeframe, publish national official estimates (where they exist) alongside international estimates, accompanied by a proper explanation of the reasons for the discrepancy;
  - e. Document fully and make publicly available the estimation methods and data sources used, in a manner that ensures the transparency of the methodology and the replicability of the estimates.
4. Within existing mandates, ISSAs shall provide technical assistance to countries in areas where data are not available or of low quality, in order to enable them to produce their own data in the long run.

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<sup>9</sup> This would not normally apply to standard practices of conversion to common measurement units or other simple methods of ensuring that data are internationally comparable.

### **III. Proposed principles and practices to guide global data reporting and data sharing for SDG indicators**

1. ISSAs are committed to reduce national and international reporting burdens for the SDGs by:
  - a. Using already existing reporting mechanisms to organize data flows from national to international agencies wherever possible;
  - b. Promoting the use of appropriate data transmission standards, such as Statistical Data and Metadata eXchange (SDMX), for the collection and exchange of SDG data;
  - c. Using national SDG indicator reporting platforms when available, and provided that they adhere to international statistical standards; and
  - d. Coordinating their data collection work and establishing effective and efficient data sharing arrangements among ISSAs to avoid duplication of efforts.
2. In order to enhance the coordinating role of the NSO within the national statistical system, ensure the quality of country-specific data and avoid the delivery of non-official data, ISSAs will always copy the NSO in their SDG data requests and provide the NSO with the list of all national data providers and the data collection calendar.
3. ISSAs will only address data requests to countries regarding a specific SDG indicator if they are the designated custodian agency. In cases where more than one ISSA is designated as custodian agency, data shall be collected through common means, such as joint questionnaires. The data collected by the custodian agencies shall be released publically and shared in a timely manner and at no cost with the UN Statistics Division and other ISSAs that may be interested in the same data for other reasons, such as for thematic reporting.
4. ISSAs shall aim to ensure that their published estimates of SDG indicators (as defined in the global indicator framework agreed by the General Assembly) are consistent with the estimates reported in the UN SDG global database. Where discrepancies exist between estimates of the same indicator published by different ISSAs, the source of the discrepancy shall be thoroughly and clearly documented.
5. Estimates of SDG indicators published in databases maintained by ISSAs shall be properly documented and sourced, with the provision of clear and comprehensive metadata.