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Items for discussion and decision: transformative agenda for official statistics

Transformative agenda for official statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, which was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2015/216 and past practices, provides an overview of progress in the implementation of the transformative agenda for official statistics and related activities. The main focus of the report is centred on the organization of regional conferences aligned with the outcome of the global conference on the transformative agenda held in January 2015. The report describes the organization of two recent regional conferences, for Africa and for Arab States, and outlines plans to organize further conferences in other regions.

The Statistical Commission is requested to provide advice on the practical modalities for advancing the transformative agenda for official statistics at the country, regional and global levels in an internationally collaborative way and the future course of action to promote the integration, modernization and transformation of official statistics.

Points for discussion by the Statistical Commission are set out in section IV, paragraph 36, of this report.

* Reissued for technical reasons on 25 January 2016.

** [E/CN.3/2016/1](#).



I. Introduction and background

1. The objective of the transformative agenda is to modernize and strengthen the global, regional and national statistical systems, irrespective of the level of statistical development. It aims at increasing the capacity of statistical systems to respond more effectively and efficiently to the new policy requirements and become more flexible in addressing the challenges confronting their operations for producing statistics.

2. For a number of years, statistical organizations, under the leadership of the Statistical Commission, have been discussing at its sessions, either in special-topic forums or as part of work under the formal agenda, how to come up with innovative solutions to ever increasing demands and challenges associated with official statistics.

3. In order to synthesize the ideas emerging from those discussions, and in response to decision 45/103 (i), adopted by the Statistical Commission at its forty-fifth session in 2014 (see [E/2014/24](#), chap. I.B), a concept note for the transformative agenda for official statistics has been developed (see http://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/workshops/2015/NewYork/NY_D2.pdf). A high-level global conference was organized by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat) in January 2015 in New York as a brainstorming forum at which chief statisticians could articulate the major issues surrounding the transformative agenda and establish a common understanding thereon.

4. At its forty-sixth session, in 2015, the Statistical Commission considered the report of the Secretary-General on the Global Conference on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics ([E/CN.3/2015/5](#)), including a background document on the outcome of the Conference, including its recommendations.

5. The conclusions of the Global Conference focus on the strategic direction for moving forward the transformation of statistical systems. The transformative agenda considers it a necessity to move away from the traditional stovepipe approach to producing statistics and advocates creating a new architecture for data collection, processing and dissemination through a standards-based production process and the adoption of an integrated statistics approach. The transformation process requires extensive capacity-building activities on technical and managerial issues, better coordination among global and regional organizations providing support and training, and better communication on the value, cost and impact of official statistics.

6. The transformative agenda builds on the experience of existing initiatives at the global, regional and national levels on advancing the modernization and integration of official statistics. The existence of complementarity between the various initiatives and the transformative agenda enables mutual reinforcement and support of efforts directed towards the collective delivery of priority activities aimed at facilitating the efficient functioning of statistical systems.

7. The valuable contribution of the High-level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), reflecting one such initiative, is widely acknowledged. The High-level Group plays a distinctive role in establishing standards for supporting the modernization programme at the global level and provides an opportunity for members of the Group to share their experiences and outputs. The report of the High-level Group for the Modernization

of Official Statistics (E/CN.3/2016/5) is submitted to the Statistical Commission for information.

8. Other initiatives also focus on innovation, integration and transformation in official statistics, including the activities under the European Statistical System Vision 2020, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Strategic Advisory Body for the Modernization of Statistical Production and Services in Asia and the Pacific, and the Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa as part of Agenda 2063. Further bilateral, regional and multilateral initiatives and programmes are engaged in activities that support various objectives of the transformative agenda, including the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21); the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics; the “value for money” project undertaken by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics coordinated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); the Open Data for Development partnership; the International Statistical Fellowship Program of Statistics Canada; and collaboration under the memorandum of understanding on cooperation in statistical activities signed by the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and multilateral development banks.

9. Reports on other initiatives centred on the modernization and integration of official statistics are also part of the background document to be provided to the Statistical Commission.

II. Implementation of the transformative agenda for official statistics at the regional and national levels

10. Since the holding of the forty-sixth session of the Statistical Commission in 2015, the focus of work on the transformative agenda has shifted to regional strategic consultations on strengthening the functioning of national and regional statistical systems, working with regional partners and building on existing forums and initiatives in the regions.

11. To this end, the Statistics Division and Eurostat developed a concept note, entitled “Regional/subregional Conferences on the Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics in support of the Post-2015 Development Agenda”, through which to put in place a regional consultation process for assessing regional, subregional and national priorities and the specific needs of each region for modernizing the statistical system (see http://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/workshops/2015/gabon/Info/CN_TA_Gabon_EN.pdf). The concept note laid out an approach to ensuring the continuation of this initiative on the global transformative agenda for official statistics at the regional level. It proposed the organization of a series of regional conferences whose aim would be to uncover synergies between the global transformative agenda and regional programmes and to formulate a regional strategy for strengthening national statistical systems.

12. The regional conferences intend to bring together senior managers of statistical agencies to enable them to exchange views and share best practices related to their efforts to transform national statistics and raise awareness concerning existing initiatives within and beyond the region. The conferences will

provide high-level forums within which chief statisticians can identify thematic areas that reflect regional priorities for taking action towards transforming their statistical systems. The thematic areas conceptualized in the global transformative agenda serve as the basis for the discussions organized at regional conferences.

13. Those thematic areas serving as the basis for the regional consultations are structured around the five components of the transformative agenda identified by the Global Conference.

Coordination among global, regional and national statistical systems

14. Strengthening and modernizing the global, regional and national statistical systems require improved coordination between the international and regional levels in the formulation of coherent global and regional work programmes on statistics. Coordination in the development and revision of methodological recommendations facilitate the mainstreaming of statistical principles and standards and the application of common innovative tools, techniques and methods based on a common business architecture. Better coordination contributes to the reduction of the response burden on countries in international data collection and dissemination. There is a clear need for coordination in improving the alignment of international and regional technical cooperation and training activities in countries and avoiding duplication of efforts. Since geospatial information plays an increasingly important role in the modern statistical information system, it is crucial for the statistical community to collaborate closely and coordinate work with the geospatial information community. Coordination is also essential within the national statistical systems for the integration of statistics into national planning. Effective coordination at the institutional level facilitates the creation of mechanisms and cooperation in national statistical systems necessary for the implementation of common statistical standards and is an enabling factor in the national implementation of an integrated statistical system.

Communication and advocacy

15. The statistical work programmes of statistical organizations rely on communication and advocacy to promote official statistics. The branding of official statistics sets it apart from other data providers and effective communication of the added value and comparative advantages of official statistics is essential in mobilizing resources and support. Modern communication tools including social media make statistical information accessible for wider use and complement more traditional approaches to dissemination. Advocacy and outreach contribute to the building of partnerships and mutual trust across different entities and stakeholders.

Integrated statistical systems for data collection, processing and dissemination

16. The need for transformation and modernization of official statistics drives countries towards creating an integrated national statistical system. The transformation process requires a shift from the traditional “silo” approach whereby the collection and production of statistics is carried out in organizational units

responsible for a single set of statistics. The creation of an integrated statistical system calls for the transformation of institutional and governance arrangements. The integrated production process relies on integrated organization and management of specialized corporate-level services units for methodology, data collection and information technology. Integrated systems benefit from effective national coordination mechanisms promoting the use of standards-based methods, tools and technologies which are shared across the national statistical system. The integrated production process benefits from the integrated household and business statistics programmes which mainstream the use of harmonized survey questionnaires, centralized population and business registers, centralized metadata catalogues for household and business statistics, the use of administrative data and innovative incorporation of non-traditional data sources.

Innovation and modernization through standards-based statistical business architecture

17. The standardization of statistical production processes within and across national statistical systems through utilization of a standards-based statistical production architecture is perceived as constituting a modular approach to enabling statistical systems to adapt to applying modern and innovative technology and tools to data collection, production and dissemination. Through the progressive introduction of generic standards for integrated business processes and structures and by harnessing the innovative and transformational power of information and communications technologies (ICT), a robust and flexible statistical system is better able to face new demands for information. The establishment of common national data and metadata portals, mainstreaming Statistical Data and Metadata eXchange (SDMX) standards, application of mobile devices for data collection, data visualization tools, introduction of the open data concept and exploring practices of cloud computing for official statistics purposes are some of the components of innovation in and modernization of the statistical production process.

Training and capacity-building

18. Strengthening and modernizing the national statistical system require continuous investment in enhancing statistical capacity to adapt and respond appropriately to the rapidly evolving demands for high-quality statistics and the fast-changing technological environment. Capacity-building covers managerial courses on change and project management, and technical courses for statistical staff which include e-learning opportunities. The broadening of technical skills and the knowledge base enables both managers and technical staff to reorganize and re-engineer production processes. Management skills training contributes to a successful adjustment of the institutional and organizational framework of official statistics needed to create a modern statistical system. Improving the efficiency of international training programmes for statistical capacity-building requires better coordination of bilateral and multilateral partner organizations in terms of the support they provide.

19. There are numerous drivers motivating the global statistical community to confront challenges and emerging issues in a novel way and move away from

conducting business as usual. The report of the Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development, entitled “A world that counts: mobilising the data revolution for sustainable development” (November 2014), set the stage for the pursuit of consensus on a coordinated strategy for empowering statistical services to undertake the transformation and modernization of their statistical systems. The report emphasizes that statistical offices will need to change more rapidly than in the past and adapt continuously to new demands by replacing expensive and cumbersome production processes with cost-saving and integrated statistical production processes, incorporating new data sources, relying to a greater degree on administrative data from other government departments, and focusing on provision of data that are human- and machine-readable, compatible with geospatial information systems and available quickly enough to ensure that the data cycle matches the decision cycle.

20. A broad objective of the transformative agenda for official statistics is to strengthen national, regional and global statistical systems so as to ensure that they have adequate capacity to respond more effectively and more efficiently to increasing demands for relevant, high-quality and timely statistics. The modernization of official statistics, within this broad objective, is considered essential for creating a robust and well-functioning reporting and monitoring system for the Sustainable Development Goals indicators. It will ensure that statistical services become better equipped to produce data for use in the evaluation of progress towards realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly resolution 70/1). The transformative initiatives will benefit from the guidance provided by the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for post-2015 monitoring, which is tasked with providing strategic leadership for the process of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, formulating a global action plan for sustainable development data monitoring and reporting and contributing to the establishment of a United Nations world data forum.

21. Not only are statistical organizations faced with increasing demands for more detailed, high-quality and timely geo-referenced data but they are affected at the same time by decreasing budget allocations and declining rates of response to their traditional collection instruments. The statistical services have to find solutions to the problem of reconciling increasing data demands with existing — or even shrinking — resources.

22. The realities of an increasingly competitive market of information providers pose a challenge to the providers of official statistics and add a new dimension to innovation and modernization. Easily available and fast-spreading new data sources are competing with official sources to generate statistics more rapidly and ensure that they are nearer to real time. This calls for the utilization of new and non-traditional data sources, such as *ig* data, for official statistics purposes and a greater reliance on administrative data sources.

23. Meanwhile, with the rapid emergence and spread of innovative technologies, their use in collection, processing and dissemination of data is inescapable. A range of new information and communications technologies present possibilities for producing statistics through the use, for example, of mobile devices in data capture, advanced visualization tools in dissemination and statistical clouds in data storage and data access.

24. In order to successfully address the challenges, statistical organizations therefore need to develop strategic programmatic responses and innovations and rethink their business architecture. Regional statistical conferences on the transformative agenda are expected to formulate a road map on how to advance the modernization and transformation of statistical systems into the ones that will work best in the specific regional context.

III. Progress in organizing regional conferences

25. The regional conferences on the transformative agenda have been conceived as high-level forums targeting the heads of statistical agencies. The plan is for the conferences to be held, to the extent possible, back to back with other regional statistical events and meetings.

26. Planning and preparation for the organization of regional conferences have begun through contacting the directors of the regional statistical commissions by letter. The letter outlines the proposal for the launching of a series of regional conferences, and presents the concept note, with the commissions being requested to provide feedback on and cooperation in carrying out the initiative and with support being sought from their respective statistical committees.

27. The work programmes of the regional conferences are based on the main components of the global transformative agenda, which are complemented by regional thematic priorities and build on initiatives that have already emerged in the region. The conferences serve the objective of promoting and advancing the implementation of the transformation and modernization of regional and national statistical systems in alignment with the global transformation agenda. The intent of the conferences is to address priority issues within the regional context as centred around strengthening the statistical system through discussing how to improve coordination among international, regional and national statistical programmes, adopt a common vision, business goals, a statistical business architecture and information technology tools based on internationally agreed principles and standards, enable international and regional cooperation in capacity-building and improve communication and advocacy.

28. It is planned that the conferences will be held between November 2015 and October 2016. At the time of the preparation of this report, the African Conference on the Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics was held in Libreville on 21 and 22 November 2015 and the Arab Conference on the Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics was tentatively scheduled to be held from 10 to 12 February 2016, its venue to be confirmed. Planning and preparatory consultations have begun with regard to the organization of a conference in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, with a proposed date in May 2016; a conference in the region of Asia and the Pacific, with a proposed date in June 2016; and a conference for countries in the region of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, proposed for September 2016.

The African Conference on the Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics

29. The African Conference on the Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics was held in Libreville on 21 and 22 November 2015 and was co-organized by the African Development Bank, Statistics Canada and the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, with the support of the African Union, the African Centre for Statistics and Eurostat. The Conference was held back to back with the eleventh Africa Symposium on Statistical Development and the joint session of the Statistical Commission for Africa and the Committee of Directors General of National Statistics Offices. Heads of national statistical offices of 49 countries in Africa participated in the conference. Chief statisticians and senior managers of international and regional organizations, multilateral and bilateral partners and other stakeholders were also invited to attend. In total, more than 80 participants attended the Conference.

30. The African Conference addressed the emerging demands for high-quality statistics, discussed the need for modernization of national, regional and international statistical systems in Africa and sought to take stock of various international, regional, subregional and national initiatives for integrating and modernizing statistical systems. The consultation on the transformative agenda in the African context is expected to shape the global implementation of the road map for a transformative agenda.

31. Under the agenda of the Conference, four substantive sessions covering the five thematic areas of the transformative agenda were organized, structured around plenary meetings and group discussions. Presentations were made by heads of national statistical offices of African countries; and facilitators drawn from those offices steered the interventions and moderated the discussions. The Conference also allowed for the presentation of the outcome and achievements of the concluding International Statistical Fellowship Programme for Africa, implemented by Statistics Canada, to enable the sharing of knowledge and good practices among statisticians on institutional arrangements, organizational structure and management of national statistical offices.

32. The conclusions of the Conference will be provided to the Statistical Commission in a background document.

Arab Conference on the Transformative Agenda

33. Preparatory efforts are under way to organize the Arab Conference on the Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics. It is proposed that the Conference be held in Amman from 10 to 12 February 2016. The meeting is being organized jointly by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the Statistics Division, with potential support from regional organizations and statistical institutions. The heads of national statistical offices of 22 countries are expected to participate. Chief statisticians of international organizations and other multilateral partners engaged in statistical development in Arab countries will be invited.

34. It is planned that this Conference will be organized in five sessions, including a plenary and group discussions. Chief statisticians and experts from Arab countries will be asked to make presentations and moderate discussions.

35. The conclusions of the Conference will be provided to the Statistical Commission in a background document.

IV. Points for discussion

36. The Commission is requested to express its views on the following:

(a) Developments in implementing the transformative agenda to advance the modernization and integration of official statistics;

(b) The approach of organizing regional conferences on the transformative agenda as a means of enabling the formulation of regional road maps for transforming and modernizing national statistical systems which feed into and support the development of a global strategy and action plan for the transformative agenda;

(c) The outcome and conclusions of the two recent regional Conferences on the Transformative Agenda, held for African and Arab countries;

(d) Plans to organize similar conferences in other regions;

(e) Broadening partnerships to generate support and mobilize funding for activities designed to enable the implementation of the transformative agenda in national statistical offices and regional and subregional statistical organizations.
