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Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe regional platform on statistics for Sustainable Development Goals

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

This note presents a proposal for a United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) regional approach to collecting and disseminating indicators and other information on measuring Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The note is prepared in consultation with a task team composed of Denmark (lead), Poland, Russian Federation, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The note proposes the establishment of a regional platform on statistics for SDGs to consist of (1) a knowledge hub, (2) a dashboard of indicators, and (3) a database. The approach for selecting and disseminating indicators is based on sub-regional indicator lists and databases (Eurostat, CIS-Stat and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)), UNECE experience with Millennium Development Goals (MDG) indicators and the existing UNECE statistical database. It is proposed to provide national data on SDG indicators alongside with the data from custodian agencies. The work of the Secretariat will be supported by a task team on developing the UNECE regional platform on statistics for SDGs. The planned work will be adjusted depending on how it evolves.



I. Background

A. UNECE initiatives in statistics for SDGs

1. Since the inception of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNECE countries have joined forces to support statistical work for measuring SDGs. Following the 2015 Conference of European Statisticians Declaration on the role of national statistical offices in measuring SDGs, the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs launched work on the Road Map to guide countries on how to set up a system for providing statistics and indicators for SDGs. The Road Map was published in 2017,¹ followed in 2018 by a Practical Guide on establishing national reporting platforms² and other guidance materials to support countries – members of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) – in implementing the Road Map. Under the UNECE Steering Group, task teams work on developing guidance on data transmission, communication, and capacity development. Many countries in the region are setting up national reporting platforms providing an authoritative source of country data on global SDG indicators.

2. A UNECE regional platform on statistics for SDGs would enhance the visibility and accessibility of the results of all this work. Furthermore, it will provide information on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region for decision-makers and stakeholders as well as for the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

B. Mandate

1. Reform of the United Nations development system

3. At regional fora throughout the world, countries have called for strengthening the regional dimension of work on SDGs. Data availability and needs for measuring SDGs vary greatly among the world regions, and a single global database would not suffice as one international source; regional needs and indicators are being considered. Some United Nations regional commissions, such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) are moving in this direction.

4. In his report to the May 2019 session of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Secretary-General provides recommendations on how to ensure that the United Nations development system delivers “a more cohesive, impactful, transparent and efficient regional response to SDGs”.³ One of the recommendations is to consolidate the existing capacities in each region with regard to data and statistics as well as other relevant analytical functions. The recommendation on a unified coordination mechanism includes development of coherent regional data ecosystems as well as knowledge management hubs in each region.

5. In the context of its current reform, the United Nations development system established the Task Team on Data, which urges the United Nations regional commissions to establish regional platforms for disseminating data on SDGs. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has already launched such regional platform and the other regional commissions are moving towards this direction, guided by a joint strategy for measuring SDGs that strengthens synergies from the regional commissions’ expertise and networks. In developing its regional platform, UNECE would benefit from the experience of other UN regional commissions.

¹ <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=47510>

² <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/SFSDG>

³ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/110/07/pdf/N1911007.pdf?OpenElement>

2. 68th session of UNECE

6. The 68th session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (Geneva, 9–10 April 2019),⁴ the governing body of UNECE, requested the Secretariat “to publish a yearly report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the UNECE region to support the discussions at the sessions of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals under review by the high-level political forum for sustainable development that year, using existing data sets and statistics”. The proposed regional platform would consolidate data, statistics and knowledge to support such reporting.

3. Conference of European Statisticians

7. At its February 2019 meeting, the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Bureau requested the UNECE Secretariat to consider the following points in planning for the provision of data for the UNECE annual report on progress towards SDGs in the region:

(a) Use national data in the production of the report, drawing it from the national reporting platforms as much as possible and limiting additional reporting burden on countries;

(b) Explain in the report which approach was followed for obtaining the data and why;

(c) Highlight good practices in providing statistics for SDGs in the report;

(d) The report can be an opportunity to highlight the challenges in the global reporting system, particularly from the perspective of countries.

8. The development of the UNECE regional platform described below takes these points into account.

4. UNECE expert meeting on statistics for SDGs

9. The annual UNECE expert meeting on statistics for SDGs held in April 2019 was informed about the decisions of the 68th session of UNECE and the February 2019 meeting of the CES Bureau. The meeting agreed that the Secretariat will discuss with selected countries the activities to be carried out under these mandates. Denmark volunteered to lead a small task team to work together with the UNECE Secretariat on this issue.

II. Development of the regional platform

10. It is proposed that the UNECE regional platform on statistics for SDGs consists of:

(a) The UNECE Knowledge Hub on Statistics for SDGs;

(b) The UNECE Dashboard of SDG Indicators;

(c) The UNECE Database of SDG Indicators.

11. The purpose of the platform is to communicate developments on measuring SDGs in the UNECE region, provide easy and quick access to up-to-date indicators on implementing SDGs, and to disseminate both internationally and nationally available data and metadata.

12. The regional platform would serve a broad range of audiences interested in SDGs. The Knowledge Hub and the Database would primarily appeal to statisticians and other professionals interested in methodologies, comparability of indicators, and analyses. The Dashboard would be of interest to the public and to policymakers who would have an easy way to see where their country stands among other countries of the region with respect to the implementation of SDGs.

⁴ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Biennial report (28 April 2017–10 April 2019). E/2019/37. Available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/118/73/pdf/G1911873.pdf>

13. In line with UNECE practice and subject to available resources, the Dashboard and Database interfaces could also be made available in Russian.

A. Knowledge hub

14. UNECE initiatives in statistics for SDGs have generated a wealth of information on regional and national activities, and methodological guidance, all of which is already consolidated at UNECE on the Statistics for SDGs public wiki.⁵ It provides links to country data on SDGs, a summary of progress in implementing the UNECE Road map on statistics for SDGs, and the UNECE tools to support countries in this work.

15. The annual UNECE expert meetings on statistics for SDGs are the place for sharing practical experience, attracting countries also from outside the region and all major international organizations active in this area. The UNECE Statistical Division organized during the last year 6 regional and national workshops to increase countries' capacity to produce data on SDGs. The papers and presentations submitted for the meetings and workshops provide a rich source for understanding countries' activities in measuring SDGs.

16. Furthermore, all statistical expert groups operating under the Conference of European Statisticians – population, migration, poverty, gender, GDP and prices, composite indicators, environment statistics and climate change – devote parts of their activities to SDG indicators.

17. Building on the Statistics for SDGs public wiki, materials from other sources will be consolidated into *the UNECE Knowledge Hub on Statistics for SDGs* where they would be easily accessible and continuously updated. This involves upgrading the design of the current web representations of the wiki, organizing the additional information on the same platform, and establishing routines for updating.

B. Dashboard and database

1. Description

18. A dashboard of up-to-date information on selected SDG indicators would be designed as the main source for quickly accessible information on the UNECE countries' progress in implementing SDGs. It would show the values of selected SDG indicators in UNECE countries using simple graphs and provide summary values for the countries of the region.

19. The data displayed in *the UNECE Dashboard* will be stored and updated in *the UNECE Database of SDG Indicators*, which is dynamically linked to the Dashboard output on the web. The user will have the possibility to build customised tables and graphs and find metadata in the Database.

20. The Dashboard and Database will be developed in stages.

21. *First*, the Dashboard and the Database would be set up on the basis of values for about 40–50 selected indicators obtained from the global SDG database. In the *second* stage, national official values of these indicators will be added, and a user would have the option of choosing the Dashboard to display either the nationally reported values or those reported by the custodian agencies (and recorded in the global database). Such presentation would meet the countries' wish to disseminate broadly the national official values of the indicators. Ideally, the indicator values for national and international reporting would be identical. However, in practice, discrepancies may exist. The approach of showing both internationally and nationally published data would help understand the discrepancies and provide a basis for discussing and resolving related measurement issues.

⁵ <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/SFSDG>

22. At *further* stages, the Dashboard and the Database could also include more global SDG indicators as well as additional UNECE regional indicators not in the global list, if agreement is reached on such additional indicators.

23. The planned work will be adjusted depending on how it evolves.

2. Selection of indicators

24. To determine the substantive scope of the Dashboard and the Database, UNECE would examine the regional SDG activities by Eurostat, CIS-Stat and OECD. Eurostat has compiled its own list of 100 SDG indicators,⁶ 55 of which correspond to the global SDG indicators. To consolidate the SDG measuring needs of member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS-Stat has selected 111 indicators⁷ out of the global indicator list. For its 2019 report “Measuring distance to the SDG targets”,⁸ OECD used 132 indicators from the global list, based on relevance to its member countries and data availability.

25. It is proposed *to select about 40–50 global SDG indicators* that are particularly relevant for the region. A criterion of an indicator’s relevance would be its presence in the above-mentioned lists of SDG indicators of Eurostat and CIS-Stat, and among the indicators considered by OECD. Preference would be given to indicators of tier 1 and 2 in the global list, that is, indicators that are conceptually clear and for which a methodology is available. Indicators would only be chosen if the data availability in the region is good. Indicators currently in tier 3 (no internationally established methodology) would not be included.

26. To select the indicators, the task team and the UNECE Secretariat would conduct an inventory of international and national data sources and the availability of data. A list of selected indicators will be presented for discussion and endorsement to the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs in September 2019.

3. Building on the existing UNECE database

27. UNECE currently provides an open-access statistical database offering key statistics on member countries via free on-line interfaces in English and Russian. Emphasis is placed on providing data on areas of high political importance to governments and to the United Nations system, such as issues relating to migration, globalization, gender equality, population, education, employment, work-life balance, road traffic accidents, inland transport, and forest resources. A large portion of the data is obtained from international sources and for several such sources semi-automatic downloads have been programmed. For the data not available in international sources, UNECE sends periodic data collection questionnaires to national statistical offices.

28. Some SDG indicators are already directly available and regularly collected for the UNECE statistical database, such as 3.7.2 adolescent birth rate, 5.5.1 proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments, 8.1.1 annual growth rate of real GDP per capita, 9.1.2 passenger and freight volumes, by mode of transport, and 15.1.1 forest area as a proportion of total land area (list not exhaustive).

29. The SQL and PC-Axis based platform of the UNECE statistical database would be used for storage and dissemination of the selected SDG indicators. The dynamic link with the Dashboard ensures that the data displayed through the Dashboard and the Database are synchronised.

30. The same database infrastructure was used for the UNECE database of international and national data on MDG indicators.⁹ The international data was downloaded from the global MDG database of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) while national

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/sdi/indicators>

⁷ http://www.cisstat.com/sdgs/cis_sdgs.htm

⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/publications/measuring-distance-to-the-sdg-targets-2019-a8caf3fa-en.htm>

⁹ http://w3.unece.org/PXWeb2015/pxweb/en/STAT/STAT__88-MDG

indicators where sourced from national MDG reports. Extensive metadata was collected and published, and guidance¹⁰ was provided to countries on providing such metadata. This experience is valuable for designing the new SDG Database.

4. Data collection

31. Data collection would be carried out from available international and national sources, avoiding putting burden on countries. International estimates would be sourced from the Global SDG indicators database of UNSD,¹¹ Eurostat's SDG database,¹² and OECD and CIS-Stat databases. Building on UNECE's current practice, semi-automatic downloads will be programmed to the extent possible.

32. It is expected that the SDG national reporting platforms could increasingly serve as the source for national data. While countries are in the process of establishing those platforms, the national data would have to be collected from published national reports and official statistics web sites. This is expected to be a very work-intensive effort that needs to be supported actively by national SDG focal points in statistical offices and members of the UNECE Expert Group on Statistics for SDGs who would facilitate access to their respective national sources and verify the national data uploaded to the Database. While no general and regular data collection questionnaire to statistical offices is envisaged, specific data requests would be made to some countries to complement published sources.

33. The aim is to collect and disseminate metadata to the extent that allows users understand the reasons for the possible discrepancies between the national official estimates and the indicators published by the custodian agencies responsible for global SDG indicators.

C. Resources

34. Work on the web representation of the Knowledge Hub would be carried out by UNECE staff. The staff assigned to the statistical and IT work on the UNECE statistical database would be mobilised to set up the Dashboard and the Database. To programme data downloads and collect the data, and to maintain the Dashboard and the Database, it is indispensable to have at least two professional staff members at UNECE fully dedicated to the statistical work on the Dashboard and Database.

35. Active support and inputs from members of the UNECE Expert Group on Statistics for SDGs and the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs are needed to ensure presentation of up-to-date national material in the Knowledge Hub and national official data in the Dashboard and Database.

D. Work plan

Table 1
Work plan for 2019-2020

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
26-28 June 2019	Discussion of the present note at the CES plenary session
<i>Knowledge Hub</i>	
July-October 2019	Consolidating and structuring the material
November-December 2019	Upgrading the web presentation; establishing update

¹⁰ "Getting the facts right: a guide to presenting metadata", available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=34494>

¹¹ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database>

¹² <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/sdi/indicators>

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
	routines
<i>Dashboard and Database</i>	
July-September 2019	Inventory of data sources and availability; selection of indicators for the Dashboard and the Database
September-December 2019	Designing the Dashboard; setting up the Database
January-February 2020	Data collection from international sources
March 2020	<i>Launch of the first stage</i> of the Dashboard and the Database, based on internationally available data
March-October 2020	Data collection from national sources; establishment of a procedure for update from national sources
March-October 2020	Programming for semi-automatic updates from international sources
June 2020	Report to the CES plenary session on progress
November 2020	<i>Launch of the second stage</i> of the Dashboard and Database, based on both internationally and nationally available data

III. Proposal

36. The Conference is invited to:
- (a) Discuss the present note;
 - (b) Advise on the work to be undertaken for establishing the UNECE regional platform for statistics on SDGs;
 - (c) Approve the work plan on developing the regional platform.