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Implementation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Statistical Programme 2019

Note by the secretariat

Addendum

Report of the Third Expert Meeting on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals

Summary

The document presents the key outcomes of the Third Expert Meeting on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals, which took place from 15 to 16 April 2019 in Geneva. The meeting was organized following a decision of the Conference of European Statisticians in June 2018.

The report of the Expert Meeting is submitted to the Conference of European Statisticians for information.



I. Attendance

1. The Third Expert Meeting attended by Albania, Angola, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, and Uzbekistan.
2. The meeting was also attended by representatives from the European Commission, represented by Eurostat, Eurasian Economic Commission, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), Interstate Statistical Committee of the CIS (CIS-STAT), Statistical Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD), UN Women, and World Health Organization (WHO). Representatives from African Development Bank, Bharathiar University, Expertise France, Sustainable Development Investment Finance Partnership and independent expert from UN-Habitat also attended.

II. Organization of the meeting

3. Ms. Renata Bielak (Poland) and Ms. Sara Frankl (Sweden) chaired the meeting.
4. The participants adopted the provisional agenda of the meeting.
5. The following substantive topics were discussed:
 - a) Coordination of data flows for global SDG statistics;
 - b) Effective communication of SDG statistics;
 - c) Statistical capacity development for SDGs and beyond;
 - d) National SDG indicators;
 - e) Second edition of the *Road Map on statistics for SDGs*.
6. All documents for the meeting are available at: <https://www.unece.org/index.php?id=48570>.

III. Decisions and recommendations for further work

7. The Steering Group on statistics for SDGs together with the UNECE secretariat and other interested countries and organizations will prepare a second edition of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) *Road Map on statistics for SDGs*, taking into account input received from the Expert Meeting. The proposed general timeline for the preparation is as follows:
 - (a) First draft to be discussed at the Steering Group meeting in September 2019;
 - (b) An updated draft to be sent for electronic consultation to countries participating in the work of Conference of European Statisticians in spring 2020 and considered at the next Expert Meeting on statistics for SDGs in April 2020;
 - (c) The UN World Data Forum in Bern in October 2020 will be used as an opportunity for promoting the Road Map and obtaining input;
 - (d) The final draft to be consulted with the CES Bureau in October 2020;

(e) The final text of the 2nd edition to be submitted to CES for endorsement in 2021.

8. Countries and organizations are encouraged to express interest in contributing to the preparation of the 2nd edition of the Road Map. Those wishing to contribute should contact Tiina Luige (tiina.luige@un.org) indicating the Section of the Road Map where they would like contribute. A draft outline for the 2nd edition is available at: <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/SFSDG/Statistics+for+SDGs+Home>.

9. The UN Economic Commission for Europe in April 2019 requested the UNECE Secretariat to prepare annual regional reports on progress towards SDGs to inform the UNECE Regional Fora on Sustainable Development. These reports should be based on existing statistics and data. The CES Bureau in February 2019 supported the preparation of the report using national data drawn from the national reporting platforms, as much as possible. Given the limited timeframe and resources, the Secretariat will discuss with selected countries how to prepare the statistical part of this report. Denmark has volunteered to lead a small task team to work together with the UNECE Secretariat on this issue.

10. There are currently three task teams working under the Steering Group on statistics for SDGs: on (i) data transmission, (ii) communication, and (iii) capacity development. Below is a summary of actions for the task teams resulting from the Expert Meeting. The actions should take into account ongoing activities of other international organizations, Working Groups and Task Forces, and avoid duplication.

11. The Task Team on Data Transmission will:

- (a) develop its work plan and coordinate activities with other relevant actors;
- (b) focus on producing practical output and solutions regarding data transmission and communication between Custodian Agencies responsible for SDG indicators and countries.

12. The Task Team on Communication will:

- (a) produce examples of different types of analyses based on the results of the survey on communication;
- (b) map user profiles to examples of good communication of statistics;
- (c) look for examples of using open source code in presenting geospatial data for SDGs;
- (d) add a section on visualisations and story-telling with data to wiki;
- (e) publish guidance on statistics for VNRs.

13. Participants were encouraged to provide examples and success stories about communicating SDG statistics.

14. The Task Team on Capacity Development will:

- (a) finalise the matrix on capacity development, taking into account the Expert Meeting discussion. The draft matrix is shared on public wiki for wide consultation;
- (b) pilot the matrix in a few countries;
- (c) prepare the guidelines for the use of the matrix.

15. The meeting highlighted the need for maintaining up-to-date information on and mapping the capacity development initiatives. The Steering Group will explore possibilities for joint efforts on this topic with other involved agencies (e.g. Paris21, Eurostat) building on the current capacity development surveys.

16. The next Expert Meeting and workshop on statistics for SDGs will take place during 21-24 April 2020 in Budapest, Hungary, kindly hosted by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office.

17. The Secretariat informed about the upcoming renovation of the UN building in Geneva which will substantially reduce the availability of meeting rooms during the next several years, and asked countries to express interest in hosting meetings. Russian Federation and France offered to host one of the Expert Meetings on statistics for SDGs after 2020.

IV. Adoption of the report of the meeting

18. The decisions and recommendations for further work were adopted by the participants at the end of the meeting. A summary of the discussion was prepared after the meeting and is available in the Annex.

Annex

Summary of discussions

A. Coordination of data flows for global Sustainable Development Goals statistics

1. The session was organized by M. Blumers (Germany) and A. Corp (UK) – co-chairs of the Task Team on Data Transmission. Germany, France, Switzerland and UK presented their country experiences from the perspectives of data flow coordination and governance of national statistical systems for SDGs. FAO presented an overview on the issues related to data collection and transmission for indicators under their custodianship.

2. The UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) Criteria for the Implementation of the Guidelines on Data Flows and Global Data Reporting for SDGs were presented focusing on the roles and commitments of national statistical offices, national statistical systems, international and supranational organisations and Custodian Agencies. There are now clear recommendations, guidelines and criteria for data flows. However, it is not always clear who is responsible for their implementation.

3. There is a need for more transparency in communication and information on data sources, indicator calculation methodologies and metadata. The following issues were raised concerning data flows for SDG indicators:

(a) The procedures for validation of adjusted and estimated country data are not clear. The approaches should be coordinated and harmonised between custodian agencies and different indicators. Some organizations keep countries well informed while some others are a ‘black box’. Currently the validation process results in a proliferation of e-mail correspondence, numerous questionnaires and parallel requests;

(b) Many requests to countries for validation come within a very short timeframe (especially in January as the deadline for data for the UN Secretary General’s report is in February). Validation can be complicated, time-consuming and difficult to carry out with the limited resources available. On the other hand, distributing the validation over the year reduces the timeliness of data. Maintaining a calendar of planned validation requests would be useful;

(c) Different options were proposed to reduce the burden of validation: that countries could validate the data source or methodology rather than the data or validate the estimates only the first time when they are calculated and use a light validation process afterwards. If such an approach would be used, there should be agreement between countries and custodian agencies to use it in a harmonised way;

(d) Some contact lists of persons responsible for SDG indicators are available but this is not sufficient, contacts for each indicator (e.g. a network of national experts) are needed. It is sometimes still difficult to track who has sent the data and who are the experts to contact on both sides;

(e) Data must be accompanied by sufficient metadata on sources and methodologies to make the validation for countries possible. Availability of metadata in languages other than English is needed but it would be difficult to keep this up-to-date as metadata may be revised. Indicating in metadata what and when has been updated would be useful.;

(f) The differences between national and Custodian Agency data can appear because of the use of denominators (population or GDP). These data have to be retrieved from international databases, otherwise all Custodian Agencies should ask for these data from all countries which will create duplicate data requests;

(g) Participants proposed that Custodian Agencies should retrieve country data from the National Reporting Platforms (NRPs) instead of sending out questionnaires. For this purpose, NRPs should include the exact indicator, accompanied by the relevant metadata, and not a proxy, and make a clear distinction between global and national indicators. To an online survey question on this topic, 63% of the meeting participants who

responded are currently transmitting SDG data via questionnaires and 29% through an NRP;

(h) There is a need to develop systematic validation mechanisms at national level. Communication between NSO and other data producers may be an issue: some producers may be slow to react, some indicators may not be produced in the country, or it is difficult to find which agency is (could be) responsible for them. NSOs are often not aware of already existing data flows, especially for the non-statistical indicators;

(i) More guidance is needed on how to deal with the different types of SDG indicators, such as those that are 100% achieved or indicators that are not relevant for the country. In some cases, the achievement of the so-called '100%-indicators' is based on legal requirements but it is difficult to provide factual evidence (e.g. 4.a.1 Proportion of schools with access to drinking water and sanitation facilities). In some cases, a regional approach could be used (e.g. indicators not relevant for EU countries). However, the relevance can be decided by policy makers, not statisticians.

4. Various types of data transmission were discussed as well as the automatization efforts based on NRPs. Currently, many countries use or plan to use API (Application Programming Interface) or SDMX (Statistical Data and Metadata eXchange) standard for data transmission. Automatization would require meeting specific standards and criteria from all parties involved, NSOs or other NSS institutions and Custodian Agencies. Many countries have not yet decided which means to use to automate the data transmission, and quite a number of countries have not yet considered it.

5. The SDMX Data Structure Definitions (DSDs) for the SDG indicators have been developed. This provides the technical tool to make automated data transmission possible. To implement it in practice, agreements between the sending and receiving sides are needed. The process has to be clarified: who can and should use SDMX to send data to whom (national producers to NSOs? NSOs to Custodian Agencies? NSOs directly to UN database? Use it for validation or for final data?).

6. It is challenging to reduce the burden of all involved in the data provision and validation. Ideally there should be one platform (for example, a database maintained by UNSD) to maintain the data under validation, and information and correspondence about the process.

7. Participants stressed the need to find pragmatic solutions as the validation is a resource demanding exercise for both countries and Custodian Agencies, and to maintain an open dialogue. At the same time, work on data validation allows to improve data quality, and provides an opportunity to find solutions to the decades old problem of having different data for the same indicators available in countries and in databases of international organizations.

B. Effective communication of Sustainable Development Goals statistics

8. The session was organized by N. Ignatova (Russian Federation) and J. Evans (UK) – co-chairs of the Task Team on Communication of Statistics for SDGs. Ireland, Belarus, Austria and WHO presented examples on communication and use of modern visualization and presentation tools for SDGs and beyond.

9. The results of a survey of NSOs on communication of SDGs were presented. Majority of NSOs have a task to communicate SDG data and metadata, and about one quarter have a communication strategy. Some examples of the ways of grouping users according to their needs were presented, including use of 'personas' to represent specific user groups. Nearly all NSOs communicate with policy makers and international agencies. About one quarter would like to communicate with new groups, such as academia, citizens, local governments and businesses. Websites, NRPs, conferences and publications were used as preferred communication methods, with the role of media and Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) to the High-level Political Forum highlighted as powerful ways ensuring communication to a wide audience.

10. The difficulty of communicating with and involving the private sector in monitoring of SDGs was raised. Successful examples from countries would be appreciated.

11. Ireland presented an example of cooperating with the private sector in using geospatial data and story maps to communicate statistics for SDGs. It is based on an innovative public-private partnership project using the ESRI commercial software. ESRI provides its software for communicating SDG data free of charge (for three years) to a number of developing countries around the world forming a Federated Information System for SDGs. A concern was raised how to maintain the system after the free trial period is over and in countries who do not qualify for the free support from ESRI. It is possible to use open-source software to produce similar story maps independent of the ESRI environment and tutorials are being prepared for this purpose. Good cooperation with the geospatial community is also needed.

12. A number of countries from the region have built NRPs as an authoritative source of country data on SDG indicators. It would be good to know about the use of these platforms: who are the users, what information they are looking for, etc.

13. Having different data for the same indicators in countries and databases of international organizations presents also a communication challenge. If the data are to be used for decision making, policy makers may question the reliability of data, and will not act if they do not find the data reliable.

14. Communication is a common thread through all stages of production and provision of statistics for SDGs. It is important to keep the users in mind from the outset, as well as consider who are not using the data and why. It will be useful to present success stories as an inspiration on how to deal with the problems.

C. Statistical capacity development for Sustainable Development Goals and beyond

15. The session was organised by M. Gandolfo (Italy) and J. Markovic (Montenegro) – co-chairs of the Task Team on Statistical Capacity Development (TTCAP). The session was based on presentations by TTCAP, UNECE, Serbia and Kyrgyzstan.

16. The Task Team on Capacity Development presented a matrix combining the organisational structure of a national statistical office with the capacity development needs (based on the UNECE Statistical Capacity Development Strategy and the Paris21/HLG-PCCB questionnaire). The aim of the matrix is to provide a harmonised way of identifying and prioritising the needs for capacity development. This should be helpful for countries when discussing with donors, and with other stakeholders in the country to explain the NSO needs. The draft matrix is available on the UNECE public wiki on statistics for SDGs for wider consultation. It was proposed to pilot the matrix in a few countries.

17. Coordination of capacity development is a strategic issue to move beyond an ad-hoc approach. In some cases, donors are putting coordination as a prerequisite for agreeing to provide funds. How to carry out the coordination in practice has been discussed for a long time. In countries, NSO may be best placed to coordinate statistical capacity building due to their role as a coordinator of the statistical system. Some countries (e.g., Armenia, Kyrgyzstan) have set up special committees to coordinate the statistical capacity development in the country. The second edition of the Road Map should provide guidance to help countries in doing this in practice, demonstrating both strategic and realistic approaches and good country experience.

18. Currently the information on capacity development is collected through annual surveys to countries and donors (by Paris21, Eurostat/UNECE, World Bank). A challenge is to maintain comprehensive up-to-date information on who is providing what kind of capacity development and where. This should go beyond information sharing to allow donors to better coordinate their activities already in the planning phase.

19. Ideally a platform would be needed for this purpose. However, it is difficult to find resources to maintain such a platform. For the system to work, there should be some incentive for countries and donors to provide this information. The meeting called for developing concrete tools to coordinate the capacity development, taking the current annual surveys as the starting point.

20. Coordination of capacity development is linked with the coordinating role of NSO. In some countries, this is still not well established and other agencies working on official statistics may not be aware that they are part of the statistical system. Especially in statistical units in policy departments, the division between statistical and policy-oriented tasks should be clarified before embarking on capacity development. As a coordinator, NSO has a task also to increase the statistical capacity of the other parts of the system. Work on SDGs can be used as an opportunity to strengthen the coordinating role of NSO.

21. From country perspective the first step is to analyse what capacities are needed and prioritise the needs so that the capacity development would be country not donor driven. The approach demonstrated by Serbia (together with a consortium led by ISTAT, Italy) was a good example how to transform from a recipient organisation into a regional centre of knowledge and experience sharing. Cooperating across borders, sharing tools and experiences, working jointly to solve problems allows to use the limited resources more efficiently.

22. Building strategic partnerships can be one way to increase capacities and build awareness of national statistics. Serbia brought an example of partnerships with chamber of commerce and influential private companies that allowed to get better data from private companies.

D. National Sustainable Development Goals indicators

23. The Session was organised by C. Williams (Canada). Finland, Portugal and Romania presented their experiences in establishing national SDG indicators.

24. Most (but not all) countries have decided to set up national SDG indicator sets in addition to the global indicators. Country approaches are different, depending on policy interest, legislative framework, structure of the national statistical system and the available resources. National SDG indicators can be a separate process from the global indicators and are not always under the responsibility of NSO. In some cases, initiative to set up national indicators came from policy side to monitor the national SDG strategies and priorities that may be different from the global ones. In other cases, setting up national indicators was the initiative of NSO to meet user demand for data.

25. Countries are at different stages. Some have already established national indicators, others are in the process, and others are considering whether to have them. Mapping the global SDG indicators to determine their relevance for the country can be a good starting point. Governance of the process: having a mandate, setting up clear roles and responsibilities, is key to a successful outcome. The second edition of the Road Map should emphasise and provide guidance on this. Communication and transparency are very important throughout the process.

26. Involvement of all stakeholders (private sector, civil society, academia, other government agencies) is needed. A big challenge is coordinating and collaborating with other national institutions to identify which indicators would be relevant, what information is available, and who can produce the indicators. Establishing the national indicators, as well as producing data on them requires time and resources. Explaining the basics of statistics and indicators, metadata, global indicators, etc. may require a lot of effort. NSO should clearly communicate the need for statistically robust and transparent indicators free from political bias.

27. Good inter-institutional cooperation can be built up through the process if the other agencies feel ownership and the indicators meet their information needs. Having clear responsibilities for all actors in the process and collaboration protocols with each institution will help.

28. In addition to officially established national indicator sets, other indicators may be used to measure progress towards SDGs. Countries are using proxy indicators while the term 'proxy' may mean different things depending on the context (for example, when the desired SDG indicator is not available and is replaced by another, similar indicator). In some cases, countries have used in VNRs indicators that are not in the global SDG set but

are not necessarily national SDG indicators. Countries may also establish a separate indicator set for a group of population (e.g. indigenous people in Canada). There is often high interest in measuring sustainability from municipalities and local governments, and they may set up their own indicators.

29. Countries may also use non-official statistics in SDG reporting to provide context (for example, civil society data on vulnerable groups). This has to be clearly indicated for users and a certain quality level has to be established. In some cases, the civil society produces so-called ‘shadow indicators’ (and a ‘shadow report’ for HLPF). These indicators have both advantages and disadvantages. For example, in UK and Canada the civil society data are used, recognising their value to shed light on areas where official data may not be available but clearly indicating the source and that this is not official data.

30. For users, it is important to make a clear difference between the different indicator sets and types of indicators: global, national, ‘proxy’, non-official, etc. This presents a communication challenge. Guidance in the Road Map how to deal with this challenge is needed.

E. Second edition of the *Road Map on statistics for SDGs*

31. The Session was organized and chaired by Tiina Luige (UNECE), based on an updated outline of the second edition of the Road Map on SDGs prepared by the Steering Group.

32. Many countries have implemented the recommendations of the first edition of the Road Map and gained considerable experience. At the same time, the processes for providing statistics for SDGs have evolved at global, regional and national levels. Many challenges still remain and new ones emerge which require new solutions and approaches. These developments should be reflected in the updated Road Map to continue to provide vision and guidance.

33. It was proposed to widen the target audience of the 2nd edition, and to bring the key messages, challenges and needs of national statistical systems in producing statistics for SDGs to the attention of policy makers, academia, civil society and general public. The 2nd edition should preserve the valid parts from the 1st edition and push the boundaries exploring how to meet the new challenges.

34. The proposed structure of the second edition comprises updated chapters from the first edition, and new parts, such as use of statistics for SDGs, involvement of private sector and civil society, use of non-traditional sources (geospatial data, big data). A whole new chapter will be dedicated to ‘leaving no-one behind’ to provide guidance how to do this in practice taking into account the opportunities and limitations. The issues are intended to be discussed both from the content perspective and the process management and organisational perspective.

35. The draft outline of the second edition is posted on Statistics for SDGs wiki for wider consultation. It is planned to be discussed at the next Expert Meeting on statistics for SDGs in April 2020, and be submitted for endorsement to the Conference of European Statisticians in June 2021.

F. The way forward and adoption of decisions of the meeting

36. The closing session was organized by the Steering Group co-chairs – R. Bielak (Poland) and S. Frankl (Sweden). All session chairs presented the summary of their sessions as well as the conclusions and further actions.