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Reports on the work of the Conference of European Statisticians, its Bureau and Teams of Specialists

Implementation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Statistical Programme 2020

Addendum

Report of the Workshop on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals
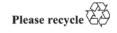
Note by the Secretariat[1]

Summary

The document presents the key outcomes of the Workshop on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals, organized as an online meeting on 29 March - 1 April 2021.

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

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[1] This document was submitted late for document processing as clearances from relevant parties were received late.

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I. Attendance

1.   The Workshop was attended by Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Czechia, Colombia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malta, Montenegro, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Mongolia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and United States of America.

2.   The workshop was also attended by representatives from Eurostat, UN-Women, United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD), UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia, Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), Eurasian Economic Commission, European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-STAT), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC).

3.   In the academic field, the School of Economics in Islamabad, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro also participated, along with independent experts from Research in environmental accounting and statistics and from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS).

II. Organization of the meeting

4.   Taking into account the travel and participation restrictions imposed by COVID-19 pandemics, the Workshop was held online in four virtual sessions, with simultaneous Russian English interpretation.

5.   The sessions discussed the following topics:

        (a)   Capacity development and impact of COVID-19 – 29 March 2021, 10:00-12:00

        (b)   Matrix on capacity development – 30 March, 10:00-12:00

        (c)   Open source data platforms for SDGs – 31 March, 10: 00-12:00

        (d)   Regional reporting and data flows – 1 April, 10:00-12:00.

6.   All documents and video recordings of the sessions are available at: https://unece.org/info/Statistics/events/351549.

A. Session 1 - Capacity development and impact of COVID - 19 – 29 March, 10:00-12:00

7.   The session was organized by Marina Gandolfo (Italy) and Jelena Markovic (Montenegro) co-chairs of Task Team on Capacity Development as a panel discussion bringing together representatives of various stakeholders involved in capacity development for SDG statistics.

8.   A general finding since the beginning of pandemics would be that, although COVID-19 impacted severely all areas of our personal and professional life at all levels, the main purpose of capacity development remained steady – provide technical assistance and guidance to countries in developing national capacities to produce and disseminate statistics for SDGs. The main stages of capacity development – assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation – remained the same, although performed in different conditions and using different methods and tools.

9.   The session focused on capacity development and the need for more data and reliable information. This is particularly relevant in the on-going Covid crisis. It requires stakeholders to think about how to meet emerging needs, use novel data sources, and establish new partnerships. The current moment offers both challenges (scaling IT infrastructure, changing skill requirements, coordination of hybrid working modes, etc.) and opportunities (increased flexibility, involvement of wider range of stakeholders, etc.). The Clearinghouse for Financing Development Data[2], a platform to match supply and demand of financing for statistics, was briefly introduced to participants as a tool to improving financing and put data at the heart of the SDGs. Additionally, the capacity development matrix, developed by the Task Team on Capacity Development, was explained to participants. Anahit Safyan presented Armenia's experience with the capacity development matrix and discussed the benefits it brought to the NSO.

10.   The Task Team on Data Transmission - working to provide support to UNECE member countries to facilitate and standardise SDGs data transmission – set up an information portal on UNECE wiki to share and gather experiences from the relevant data transmission technologies and tools through case studies and user stories.

B.   Session 2 – Open source data platforms for Sustainable Development Goals

11.   The session was organized by Kali Kong (United States) and Sara Frankl (Sweden) and showcased country case studies on the implementation of the Open SDG platform. The history and development of the Open SDG platform in the United States was discussed first. The open-source nature of the platform was highlighted along with some of its advantages such as cost effectiveness, free to reuse, modularity, and more. Next, the UK gave a demonstration of the Open SDG platform and highlighted relevant resource to set-up, maintain, and operate an Open SDG platform. A tutorial on how to set-up a basic platform was provided with the example of Ghana.

12.   Poland presented lessons learned on open-source data platforms for SDGs. Advantages include low cost, user friendliness, ease to implement and a unified layout between countries. Some of the disadvantages mentioned include limited flexibility, technical knowledge requirements and need to hire additional staff. The way forward for Poland includes introducing more disaggregated data, modernizing visualizations, and implementing SDMX.

13.   Armenia also opted for the Open SDG platform. Its main benefits include ease of maintenance, high level of control, and country ownership. Armstat added two customizations, namely a two-column layout and a distinction between national and global indicators. Germany also demonstrated its Open SDG platform and highlighted a case study called "Policy follow up on off-track SDG indicators".

14.   The Republic of Moldova presented its approach to the Open SDG platform. The main reasons for selecting it were the open-source nature of the platform, its detailed user guides and the Open SDG community providing support and regular updates. It was noted that setting up the platform was straightforward and only took a single day. However, populating the platform with data was a more complex exercise and took several months. Some customizations were also added, including a reporting status page, an Excel file with all data, and more design options. Next steps include strengthening cooperation with data providers.

15.   Finally, the Open SDG experience from South Korea was presented. An 'about page' was introduced to explain the SDGs to non-expert users and some of the design features were altered to improve usability. KOSTAT also produced a metadata template based on SDG-MSD. The two main challenges identified were i) eliciting the cooperation of data providers to create, review, and validate metadata and ii) how to avoid duplication and data discrepancies between different platforms not to confuse users.

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[2] https://smartdatafinance.org/

C. Session 3 – Regional Reporting and Data Flows

16.   The session was organized by Claire Plateau (France) and Abdulla Gozalov (UNSD). The United Nations Statistics Division presented the developments in the Standard for Data and Metadata eXchange (SDMX). SDMX provides a global standard Data Structure Definition (DSD) and facilitates comparisons of country data and international harmonized data as well as metadata. It also facilitates the submission of data to the global SDG Data Lab, which is an online platform established by UNSD. Some tools were highlighted that support SDMX reporting, such as Eurostat's SDMX converter and the OECD SDMX Matrix Generator. The SDG Global Platform is open for use by all countries and custodian agencies and the number of reporters continues to grow.

17.   A presentation from the World Bank focused on the SDG metadata translation project. The project is based on an open-source method aligned with SDMX-SDG Working Group. The pilot on tier 1 indicators found that translation time was reduced by 30 to 60 per cent. Next steps include expanding to tier 2 indicators and identifying collaborators for additional languages.

18.   France presented its experience with the SDG Data Lab. The data is provided in a CSV file and translated to an SDMX-XML file, while the metadata is provided in a Word template and converted with the SDMX metadata authoring tool. SDMX not only facilitates data exchanges but also greatly simplifies the comparison, since both the global and national datasets follow the same DSD. To facilitate highest rates of adoption of SDMX exchange among reporters including both countries and international agencies, the SDMX Working Group will develop an information portal with links to the DSD and MSD, technical documents, e-learning courses, tutorials, share good practices, FAQs, etc.

19.   The UK showcased its experience with SDMX implementation. This involved supplementing existing CSV files with additional data columns, standardizing terms across datasets, and joining the SDMX-SDG Working Group. A proof of concept was developed for 5 basic indicators. Lessons learned include: i) standard terms should be used in datasets as early as possible as it can be complicated and time consuming to do it later, ii) need to be careful when mapping data to DSD as terms may not have same semantic meaning – should involve a data expert, and iii) it is much easier to start implementing SDMX if you have already identified global indicators, including awareness of disaggregations that do and do not align to global specification.

20.   UNECE presented on the data and transmission needs for a regional platform based on their experience with the UNECE dashboard of SDG indicators. The dashboard was set up at the beginning of 2020 and draws on existing datasets. To retrieve data on global indicators from various national datasets, automated data transfer/harvesting is needed (using SDMX, API, etc.). However, a limited number of countries are using SDMX, making the process more difficult. Progress is being made, albeit slowly. Standardized solutions, like SDMX, are essential in making this a successful endeavour.

21.   Lastly, the Task Team on Data transmission presented its work. The aim of the Task Team is to analyse user needs and gather experiences from pilots on data transmission with a focus on SDMX (but not limited to). Desired outcomes include an increased awareness of SDMX products, improved understanding of the challenges involved in implementing SDMX, and shared country experiences.