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#### **Strategic directions in the work of statistical offices and geospatial agencies**

## **Strategic directions of the work of the Conference of European Statisticians**

**Prepared by the Secretariat**

### *Summary*

This paper presents the strategic directions of the work of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES), its Bureau and subsidiary groups, as of June 2024. It is prepared by the Secretariat drawing on discussions of the CES and its Bureau in 2023 and 2024 as well as the CES programme of work and lists of topics identified for future discussions.

It is a contribution to the session on “Strategic Directions in official Statistics and Geospatial Work” at the joint plenary session of CES and the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for Europe (UN-GGIM: Europe). The joint plenary session is invited to discuss the contents of this paper and the strategic directions in the work of the geospatial agencies, and identify areas where the two converge. The aim of this discussion is to identify common areas where the statistical and geospatial communities can work together in the coming years.



## I. Introduction

1. Official statistics is evolving rapidly, with the pace increasing constantly. Change can be observed in all areas of work of national statistical offices (NSOs), from the underlying legal frameworks and organizational structures to the use of new data sources, the modernization and standardization of tools and methods, and the development of new dissemination and communication approaches.

2. With all this change, the need for a strategic discussion to help guide official statisticians as they try to navigate conflicting demands and priorities, is greater than ever. This paper sets out the areas that the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) and its Bureau have identified as strategic priorities. It takes inspiration from:

- The Report of the seventy-first plenary session of the Conference (June 2023) (ECE/CES/105)
- The reports of the CES Bureau meetings in October 2022 and 2023, and February 2024 (ECE/CES/2023/14/Add.6, ECE/CES/2024/14/Add.5 and ECE/CES/2024/14/Add.12)
- The CES Statistical Programme for 2024 (ECE/CES/2024/15)
- The Draft Programme of Work of the UNECE Statistics Subprogramme for 2025 (ECE/CES/2024/16)
- The 2024 Work Programme of the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics (ECE/CES/2024/10).

## II. Strategic directions

3. The strategic directions of the work of the Conference of European Statisticians can be divided into two broad areas, those that are cross-cutting in nature, and those that are related to the development of individual statistical subject-matter domains.

### A. Cross-cutting areas

4. **Principles, values and ethics.** In 2022, CES celebrated 30 years of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. In 2023, CES defined the core values of official statistics and the behaviours that demonstrate how the Fundamental Principles and core values are implemented in practice, so that the Principles would be applied in a consistent way to meet the new challenges facing the statistical community.

5. In this context an important issue is **data ethics**, which is not a new issue but is getting a new meaning and importance due to the use of new data sources and the changing role of national statistical offices (NSOs). Communicating statistics as a public good based on high ethical standards is crucial to maintain trust and social acceptability of official statistics. Countries have called for the development of a broad framework covering the data ethics issues that NSOs need to consider, so that ethics could be embedded in their everyday work.

6. **The role of official statistics in the new digital world.** Data is a strategic asset and the competition with other data providers (from private sector, government, academia, etc.) is increasing. National statistical systems (NSS) no longer have the monopoly for data and should find the right niche in the changing world, becoming providers of services rather than data. Many NSOs are discussing how best to position themselves and are taking on new responsibilities in the expanding data ecosystem to protect the integrity and relevance of official statistics and contribute to the treatment of data as a long-term asset that benefits society.

7. NSOs can offer competencies and capabilities to contribute to better governance of data in the public sector and beyond, while bearing in mind the legal, organizational and technical aspects that shape the role of NSOs in this area. In a number of countries, NSOs are

already taking on this data stewardship role. CES is continuing work on the changing role of NSOs focusing on practical implementation of the data stewardship.

8. **Timely data with sufficient granularity** is needed. NSOs are working in a highly competitive environment. If official statistics do not provide timely and relevant data, other data providers may fill the gaps with lesser quality and provide insight even if the data are not fit for this purpose. For NSOs, it is of critical importance to get agility and speed without sacrificing quality. There is a place for both core statistics where quality cannot be compromised, and the more experimental statistics where the results can be ‘good enough’ and still give useful insights. The quick reaction of many NSOs to the COVID-19 pandemic showed that statistical production can be speeded up considerably if needed. Increasing granularity of data brings up also new questions concerning confidentiality and statistical disclosure control.

9. **Foresight.** New global trends and challenges have a profound influence on what should be measured and how to ‘provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society’, as stated in the first Fundamental Principle of Official Statistics. Some statistical offices have started to look into how today’s megatrends reshape official statistics, building on the current momentum of foresight approaches and tools. The topic is taken up by the Executive Board of the HLG-MOS.

10. **Partnership with academia and the researchers.** NSOs cannot advance without partnerships and collaboration. The issue is strategically important for official statistics and requires finding the right partners and maintaining good collaboration arrangements with them. Continuing the close cooperation and partnership with the academia is imperative, to create a win-win situation considering what statistics can offer to the academia, and how academia can be more involved in statistical work.

11. **Innovation and modernization.** This includes many of the activities that come under the remit of the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics, and the need to sustain innovations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as new ways of working. It includes, for example, exploration of new areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), data science, data governance, open source, cloud computing etc. Innovation is not just a technological but a corporate-wide issue. Leadership, strategy, clear communication to staff, cultural change and new working practices, are as important as the technical aspects. CES sees it as a strategic priority to continue efforts in this area, and to identify new opportunities to innovate and modernize official statistics work.

12. An important new topic is the rapid expansion of use of **AI and large language models** and their implications for official statistics. The entry barrier to use AI has significantly lowered in the last few years, and anyone – data users as well as staff within statistical organizations – can use it for their daily tasks through various services and tools created based on LLMs. LLMs have transformative potential to boost the productivity of staff by assisting their daily tasks (e.g., generating draft analysis based on a table of numbers), and greatly improve the service to the users (e.g., language-based dissemination tools). However, LLMs could also change the way the society obtains knowledge. This raises a question of how to ensure that official statistics would be an authoritative data source for AI and stay relevant when citizens obtain information through chat services that may not provide latest information or give wrong information in the worst case.

13. **New data sources.** Using data from multiple and diverse sources is becoming increasingly important for the production of official statistics and constitutes a paradigm change. Ensuring access to data is key, including to new types of private data sources. CES recognizes the importance of continuing to develop access to, and use of, administrative data, including in the context of the move towards register-based censuses across the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region. Going to mixed data sources requires a change in methodologies, models and standards used in official statistics.

14. **Data linking and integration.** Issues at the top of global and national policy agendas, such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate emergency, illustrate the interconnectivity of the economy, society and the environment. As a result, policymakers are taking a more holistic view of issues to address the interlinkages across domains. This is driving the demand for NSOs to provide statistical insights across multiple domains. Data

linking plays a key role in the repositioning of NSOs from data providers to producers of relevant statistical insights in response to the increasing need for multidimensional statistical information. Data linking is not new but the type and number of data sets that can be linked make a transformative change possible. Data linking is also closely related to data sharing, which should be addressed at the same level of importance, as it is often a key impediment.

15. A systematic approach and change of mindset is needed. It will remain a strategically important issue for years to come, and it requires a cultural change, including from the holders of administrative and other data sources. This can be a competitive advantage for official statistics as NSOs are in a good position to integrate data from different subject areas and different sources. Data linkage can mitigate challenges related to declining response rates, missing data, and data quality. Secondly, linked data are used as opportunity-driven solutions to improve the efficiency of national statistical systems (NSSs) through reducing survey costs, response burden, and data redundancy in NSSs. Thirdly, linked data are a cost-effective means for generating data that is more frequent and responsive, disaggregated at subpopulation and geographic levels, and has the capacity to detect multidimensional social and economic phenomena that are invisible in single sources of data.

16. A very promising topic is **georeferencing of statistical data, and integrating statistical and geospatial data**. This calls for strengthening of partnerships with the geospatial community, and the development of new types of geostatistical outputs. CES and its Bureau will continue to identify new needs and opportunities regarding new data sources. Many initiatives are currently in place to advance this aspect of modernization of official statistics.

17. **Maintaining public trust** is a challenge when accessing, linking and integrating data from different sources (including data held by private data holders). It is important that the public knows that statistical offices act in the public interest and in an ethical manner. The general trust in government and political climate can have an impact on public trust in official statistics, linked with social acceptability, statistical literacy, engaging citizens, and effective communications. This is linked also with **decreasing response rates and difficulties to reach respondents**. Engaging citizens and effective communication is crucial to enhance societal participation in the national statistical system.

18. **Communication**. It is important to allocate enough resources in NSOs to communication. There is a lot of goodwill and ideas how to communicate better but these need resources for implementation. Communication towards the general public is also important for the social acceptability and trust, getting community engagement and improving the response rates.

19. **Legislation**. As the statistical community faces great changes, the underpinning statistical legislation can either be a hindrance or an enabler. CES recognizes that the exchange of ideas and good practices is necessary to ensure that developments in official statistics are facilitated by sound and forward-looking legislation. A growing challenge is a growing complexity of other data-related legislation in the country, for instance, privacy and data protection frameworks or a data acts. The CES Steering Group on Statistical Legislation is supporting countries as they face these challenges and modernize their legislation to address emerging issues.

20. **Sustainable Development Goals**. As we get closer to the deadline for SDGs in 2030, the need for data to assess progress will become more acute. This will impact on many areas of statistics, and will also require many NSOs to step up their activities in coordinating national data, in line with their evolving data stewardship role. CES will continue to support countries in their endeavours through its Roadmap on Statistics for SDGs, supporting tools, regular expert meetings and workshops. As we are past the halfway point towards 2030, it will be a good moment to consider lessons learned from different dimensions of the SDG process: global, regional, national and local. The data gaps would merit a closer look to identify those that can be filled by statisticians and focus on the ones that matter the most during the remaining years until 2030.

21. **Capacity development and sharing of good practices**. As NSOs face unprecedented pressures to develop in new directions, the importance of communication and exchange of ideas and experiences cannot be overstated. Sharing ideas and solutions to common problems

is much more efficient than each country trying to tackle these problems on their own. CES will continue to provide platforms to support effective communication on new challenges, as well as to ensure the flow of information reaches all members. This will facilitate the development of capacities in all countries and organizations, but particularly in those with less developed statistical systems.

22. **Resources.** NSOs are constantly asked to do more with the same (or less) budget, and many offices are currently undergoing or have recently had budget cuts. It is challenging to ensure that this does not result in compromising the requirements of quality, ethics, inclusivity and protection of privacy. The cuts can also lead to widening the gap between developed and less developed countries in the statistical world. Strategic communication is crucial to ensure that the decision makers (including those who decide on the budget) acknowledge the role of official statistics and what it can offer to the society.

23. At the same time there is a lot of funding for data initiatives outside official statistics. Partnerships for data products (e.g. with research community) may help to tap into that resource.

24. Collaboration at international level can help to pool resources and work collectively (co-invest) on issues of common interest, e.g. developing internationally agreed standards, common tools and approaches. Being part of international statistical community adds value and can help in dealing with the continuous challenges.

25. **Human resources management.** High turnover of staff, talent management and retention of staff are a challenge. The new generation has different expectations for their career and working conditions. Maintaining work culture and engagement in the new conditions, including the blended working environment, requires attention and new approaches. Skills of staff are crucial for implementing new technologies, such as AI, machine learning, and data science. At the same time we should not forget traditional statistics and ensure that there will be enough people with the right conventional skills that are required for, e.g. System of National Accounts (SNA) update, review of the International Comparison Program, etc.

## B. Statistical subject-matter domains

26. **Environment and climate change.** This is one of the fastest growing areas of official statistics, spurred by the large number of indicators required to measure and monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. CES will continue to develop tools to support coherent and comparable statistics on climate change, circular economy, and related areas such as measuring the impact of hazardous events and disasters.

27. Climate change-related statistics is an increasingly important area due to the urgent policy needs and a large information system being built around achieving climate goals. Although many statistical frameworks and indicator sets are already in place, at the moment, the statistical system does not yet play the role it has for other societal issues. However, NSOs can respond to many of the new data needs through cooperation, communication, capacity development and exercising a leadership role as data stewards. In the broad field of climate change-related data, no one agency can do it all. It is rather about establishing collaborations, sharing the work and playing a role according to the institutions' expertise. Critically important in this domain is improving availability of granular, localized and geospatially enabled statistical data needs, e.g., through georeferencing all available micro and aggregated data for territorial analysis and adding different layers of information depending on the statistical domain.

28. **Economy.** A major development in official statistics in the coming years will be the implementation of the new version of the System of National Accounts (SNA) and the Balance of Payments Manuals, which is expected to be adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in spring 2025. The proposed changes aim to keep the SNA relevant to new developments in globalization and digitalization. They also introduce new datasets and indicators that can be linked to standard macroeconomic measures to shed light on issues affecting well-being and sustainability. The aim is to inform various policy goals, including

the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the call, in the context of accounting for people's well-being, to complement the measurement of economic performance (beyond GDP). While the enhanced framework of the 2025 SNA will increase the analytical usefulness of the accounts to meet different policy needs, its implementation will require significant efforts and resources from countries. International cooperation will be important to support countries in this process and maintain the quality and international comparability of their national accounts.

29. Other key issues include the renewed interest in the consumer price index (CPI) and the role of the CPI in measuring the impact of inflation on households' standard of living due to price increases on goods and services over the last couple of years, as well as measuring new forms of employment such as employment in the "gig" economy, "platform" work and "teleworking". CES will support its members in all these areas through the provision of guidance and by organizing expert meetings and capacity-development activities.

30. **Population and society.** As the 2020 round of population and housing censuses is closing, preparations for the 2030 round are getting underway with the Census Recommendations planned to be ready in 2025. The 2030 round is likely to see an unprecedented use of administrative registers, combined censuses, and moves towards online data collection and continuous integrated data systems to produce more frequent census estimates.

31. Data on population is one of the cornerstones of official statistics. But the concepts, timeliness, coverage and granularity of these data are often not meeting the needs and the official definitions (e.g. resident population, migration) may not reflect the reality. Census data would be required much more frequently than currently available. In addition, countries may wish to produce additional population counts using other bases. For many purposes it may be more useful to know about movement and dynamics than to try to assign people to one place. The most policy-relevant information about the spatial distribution of people is where they usually spend the night, since it corresponds to where people have their homes, pay taxes and consume domestic goods and services. However, the allocation of resources for health services, electricity, waste collection or communications infrastructure might be better based on information about where people are during the day, while information about commuting routes and times would help inform transport planning and the provision of new homes.

32. The need to further develop migration statistics is also an area for attention. The importance of geographical data as a means to link different sources will increase. CES will continue to be at the forefront of the global statistical community in providing support and guidance as countries adapt to these new ways of working.

33. As population data are used for sampling frames it affects the quality of all social statistics. Use of administrative data could help. However, in many countries the administrative registers may not exist or their quality may be not sufficient. Especially difficult is getting data on vulnerable groups and administrative sources often do not provide such data. There is also a risk that these data are not used for statistical purposes raising ethical issues.

34. The policy interest in ensuring inclusiveness of all subgroups of society is also increasing across the UNECE region. CES will continue to work on topics related to social inclusion, including subjective and multidimensional poverty measurement and identifying hard-to-reach groups.