

Foreword

The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs is privileged to have served as the permanent secretariat of the United Nations Statistical Commission for the last 60 years. The Statistics Division, or affectionately and more popularly known as UNSD has, over the years, diligently facilitated the functioning of the Commission and dutifully implemented the tasks assigned. For the 60th anniversary session of the Commission held in February, 2007, we staged a number of special events to provide an opportunity for national statisticians to discuss topical issues of special interest in a less formal setting than the Commission. One such event was the Seminar on the Evolution of National Statistical Systems. The collection of papers in this Journal issue reflects the presentations and discussion at the Seminar.

In the past 60 years, we have seen real progress in the establishment of the global statistical system, of which the Commission has firmly established itself as the apex entity. It is indeed a truly global professional body in which all member states are represented by their highest-ranking official statisticians and all statistical subject matters are discussed. We have prepared a brochure which highlights the considerable accomplishments of the Commission since 1947. This brochure is available on the UNSD web site. We have widely disseminated this brochure to inform a broad audience about the importance of the work of the Commission.

When the Commission first met in 1947, there was great concern on the need for professionalism and integrity in the national and international statistical services and the urgent requirements of statistical standards and methods. Whilst these concerns are still valid today, a strong foundation has been laid by the Commission in the ensuing years. In 1994, the Commission formally codified the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics after many years of discussion. Today, this set of principles, together with the Principles Governing international Statistical Activities, provide a globally accepted code of conduct for our work in official statistics. We have seen many examples around the world on how the principles are being used to guide the development of national statistical systems or to shield official statistics from undesirable interventions. The Commission's work on statistical methodology expressed in the form of standards and guidelines have greatly improved the quality and comparability of official statistics. There are many substantive areas that the Commission has engaged itself, from the system of national accounts to trade statistics, from population census to household surveys, from tourism statistics to resource accounting. The Commission's authority and credibility is based on the fact that it is able to harness the support of all member states in arriving at methodological consensus.

As the Commission enters its seventh decade, it can be proud of its achievements, and be very confident that its work is more relevant than ever before, as the demand for reliable, comparable, and high-quality statistical data continues to rise. The impact of the Commission's work is clearly felt at the national level. There is no question that national statistical systems place great deal of importance on the decisions reached by the Commission. As a result, we have seen rising support from the member states to the Commission. At the 2007 session of the Commission, over 130 countries, represented by their professional statisticians, were there to join the deliberations.

When deciding to organize the Seminar on the Evolution of National Statistical Systems, we had in mind the challenges that confront the national statistical offices, as they try to meet global methodological standards on one hand and increasing demands from users on the other.

Much of the Seminar focused on the future, building on the considerable achievements of the past, and how to manage risks and uncertainties. It is interesting to note that a number of countries are going through a significant redesign of their statistical systems so that they can better meet new demands. Some are represented in this volume. I recommend this collection of papers to you.

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