

# Interagency cooperation in official statistics: Past, present and future

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**Abstract.** The article describes the architecture and mechanisms currently in place to ensure coordination of global and globally produced statistics. It also provides a brief overview of how coordination within the UN system has been organized since the founding of the United Nations in 1945.

Keywords: Coordination, cooperation, CCSA, CCS-UN, Statistical Commission, inter-agency, United Nations

*“The relationships to be established between the United Nations and the specialized agencies concerning their statistical activities presented the Commission with an old problem in a new form.”*

*(Statistical Commission Report of the Nuclear Session, 1946, para 21)*

## 1. Introduction

Cooperation between organizations active in the sphere of global statistics is at the same time a natural complement to existing intergovernmental processes, such as the UN Statistical Commission, and of indispensable nature. The need to coordinate between international organizations<sup>2</sup> is as old as the organizations themselves. The above quote confirms that the issue was very much on the mind of the delegates of the nuclear session of the Statistical Commission as early as 1946. It was most likely on the agenda of the League of Nations before that.

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<sup>1</sup>The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

<sup>2</sup>The term “international organizations and agencies” is used in this article to include supranational, regional and subregional organizations as applicable.

Indeed, the nuclear session of the Statistical Commission (1946), held at Hunter College, New York, devoted a significant part of its report to the issue of “coordination of the statistical work of specialized agencies” and the “Statistical relationships of United Nations with specialized agencies” [1]. Indeed, the Commission has considered “Co-ordination of Statistical Activities”<sup>3</sup> regularly over the past 75 years.

This article does not aim to provide a full account and history of interagency coordination over the past century. It rather focuses on describing the architecture and mechanisms currently in place to ensure coordination of global and globally produced statistics and a brief history.

## 2. Interagency coordination in official statistics: The current architecture

The two main bodies currently working on the coordination of activities between the statistical services of international, supranational, regional and subregional organizations are the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) and the Committee of the

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<sup>3</sup>The item was first called “Co-ordination of Statistical Activities between the United Nations and specialized agencies” then “Co-ordination of Statistical Activities of international organizations” and later shortened to “Co-ordination of Statistical Activities”.

Chief Statisticians of the United Nations System (CCS-UN). The chapters below introduce the current working arrangement of these bodies and their relationship with other groups that play a role in the coordination.

### 2.1. *The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA)*

The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) is an inter-agency body that promotes coordination and cooperation across statistical programmes in regional, supranational and international organizations. It was established in September 2002 to continue coordination in the statistical sector, which had been done by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Statistical Activities<sup>4</sup> prior to 2002. Members of the Committee comprise currently 45 international and supranational organizations, whose mandate includes the provision of international official statistics in the context of the *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities* [2], and which have a permanent embedded statistical service in their organization and regular contacts with countries. The CCSA adopted its initial terms of reference during its first session on 3 March 2003 in New York. The current terms of reference are the result of the revision, which was approved by the twelfth meeting of the CCSA held in Tunis in 2008 and in Muscat in 2017.

The Committee operates through a network of task teams and generally holds two formal sessions per year. In the fall of 2022, the Committee will meet for its 40<sup>th</sup> regular session; it also held two extraordinary sessions in May and June 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two co-chairs, currently (as of June 2022) Angela Me (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) and Haishan Fu (World Bank) lead the work of the Committee supported by three vice-chairs: Mariana Kotzeva (Eurostat), Oliver Chinganya (Economic Commission for Africa) and Steve MacFeely (World Health Organization). The United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) has served as the permanent secretariat to the Committee since its inception as well as its predecessor body. An annual report on ongoing Committee activities has been made available to the United Nations Statistical Commission since 2002 and since 2013, the Committee also has delivered joint positions on agenda items

<sup>4</sup>For more detailed information on the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities see chapter 3.1 below.

that are important to its work. When necessary or desirable the report is referred to the High-Level Committee on Programmes of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB).

Other articles in this issue describe in more detail the work and evolving role of CCSA, so this article will only mention two milestones: the development and adoption of the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities and the recent timely publication of three volumes of “How COVID-19 is changing the world: A statistical perspective”.

Inspired by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which countries adopted at the UN Statistical Commission in 1994, CCSA worked on a set of principles to guide the professional work in international statistics. The resulting *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities* were endorsed in 2005 at the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of CCSA (together with related good practices), presented to the Statistical Commission in 2006 and endorsed by individual member organizations of CCSA in the following months. Ten years later, following the adoption of the *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* [3] by the UN General Assembly, several heads of the agencies of CCSA member organizations endorsed the Principles for their respective organizations.

In May 2020 CCSA launched its first joint publication: the first of what would become three volumes of “How COVID-19 is changing the world: A statistical perspective”. Volumes II and III were released in September 2020 and March 2021 [4–6] Throughout the pandemic, the international statistics community continued to work together, in partnership with national statistical offices and systems around the world to ensure that the best quality data and statistics are available to support decision making during and after the crisis. All three volumes of the unprecedented publication were compiled jointly by more than 30 international organizations for each volume, under the aegis of CCSA. They provide a snapshot of some of the latest information then available on how COVID-19 is affecting different aspects of public and private life. For a fuller account of this initiative see [7].

### 2.2. *The Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN System (CCS-UN)*

The Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the United Nations System (CCS-UN) “promotes the coordination of the statistical programmes of the United Nations system entities with the aim of “delivering as

one”, by fostering synergies, avoiding duplication and overlap, and facilitating data exchange. It promotes the adoption of common quality criteria to drive the statistical production of all agencies of the United Nations system and supports the sharing of knowledge and good practices. It also defines common United Nations positions on statistical matters, to be reported at the Statistical Commission or at other coordination bodies, such as the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities.” The Committee comprises the, currently 29, statistical services of United Nations funds and programmes, specialized agencies and the UN Secretariat, as well as the regional economic and social commissions, the mandates of which include the provision of international official statistics in the context of the *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities*. It was formally established on 10 September 2014 in accordance with a decision of the Statistical Commission, albeit members had met informally since 2007.

The Committee adopted its original terms of reference in 2016 and revised it in September 2020. In addition to holding two annual sessions, the Committee works actively between sessions through task teams. It reports to the Statistical Commission. Angela Me (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) and Steve MacFeely (WHO) currently serve as the co-chairs of the Committee. UNSD also provides the secretariat to this Committee.

Milestones of the work of CCS-UN include the commitment of a significant number of chief executives to the Principles Guiding International Statistical Activities in 2017, the development of the *UN Statistics Quality Assurance Framework* [8] in 2018 (see ‘a statistical quality assurance framework for the United Nations’ by Reister et al. in this issue), and the development of a *System-wide Road Map for Innovating United Nations Data and Statistics in 2020* (see ‘Setting out a vision for the United Nations Statistical System’ by Me et. al in this issue).

### 2.3. The relationship between CCSA and CCS-UN

CCS-UN is a subset<sup>5</sup> of CCSA and in its very nature its membership is more coherent due to the unifying policy frame and similar institutional and organizational arrangements. This is recognized and reflected in the setup of the co-chair positions in each committee

<sup>5</sup>IOM is the only member of CCS-UN that has not formally applied for membership in CCSA, but attends CCSA meetings as observer.

and the relation intentionally created between them. Both committees, CCSA and CCS-UN, are led by two co-chairs, respectively, whose terms overlap, ensuring smooth transitioning. For CCSA, traditionally, one co-chair is chosen by members of the UN System (effectively the members of CCS-UN) and the other co-chair is chosen by the members of the Committee that are not part of the UN system. This ensures diversity in leadership.<sup>6</sup> Since the establishment of CCS-UN in 2014, the senior co-chair of CCS-UN is automatically nominated to serve as CCSA co-chair. This enhances coordination between the two bodies, who often discuss similar issues.

To further enhance coordination between the two committees, CCS-UN meets back-to-back with but always before CCSA and, consequently, briefs CCSA on matters discussed by CCS-UN that are of more general interest. Frequently, initiatives of CCS-UN are brought to the attention of CCSA and become a wider initiative. Similarly, though in rarer instances, topics discussed by CCSA have turned out to be of more UN-related nature and thus were referred to the CCS-UN for further consideration and discussion.

### 2.4. The relationship of CCSA and CCS-UN with other coordination mechanisms

Both CCSA and CCS-UN have established ties with the geospatial community, in particular the United Nations Geospatial Network, which is “a coalition of entities within the United Nations system which engage in geospatial information management activities”.<sup>7</sup> The United Nations Geospatial Network reports to a complementary subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council, the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, and offers a practical mechanism that the Committee for the

<sup>6</sup>To further ensure that the interests of the various “subgroupings” of members are adequately represented, CCSA added three vice chairs to its leadership in 2017. According to the terms of reference “The Vice-chairs preferable represent the diverse membership of CCSA in regards to regional/subregional organizations, specialized organization and organizations with a more general mandate.”

<sup>7</sup>“The Network mission is to strengthen the coordination and coherence of geospatial information management within the United Nations system, including its overarching trends, technology, practices, data, needs, capacity building, and partnerships. The Network is composed of designated representatives, nominated by United Nations system entities. Representatives are to be considered as the most senior geospatial professional within their entity and are supported by a nominated alternate representative.” (see <https://ggim.un.org/UN-GGIM-Thematic-Groups/>).

Coordination of Statistical Activities can use to support the integration of statistical and geospatial information within the United Nations system. As a first joint activity, the Committee and the United Nations Geospatial Network convened a workshop on current geospatial applications and enabling technologies to enhance and complement the statistical and geospatial activities in international organizations in 2021.

Over time the Statistical Commission has also issued a mandate with coordinate to several other groups in order to achieve harmonization and avoid duplication of efforts in certain areas. These are, in particular, inter-agency or intersecretariat groups but specific committees also fulfil coordination functions within their statistical domains. Examples are the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HLG-PCCB), the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal indicators (IAEG-SDGs), the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts (ISWGNA) and the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (CEEA). All these groups report directly to the Statistical Commission.

The CCSA and CCS-UN have also established strong working relationships with some of these groups, for example, with the HLG-PCCB when the CCS-UN supported their work on the “Modernization of the United Nations Statistical System” (2018–2020), which culminated in ECOSOC resolution 2020/15 on “Strengthening coordination of the statistical programmes in the United Nations system”.<sup>8</sup> The System-wide Road Map for Innovating United Nations Data and Statistics<sup>9</sup> noted above, is fully aligned with the UN Secretary General’s “Data Strategy for Action by Everyone, Everywhere”.<sup>10</sup> The CCS-UN is also working closely with the UN High Level Committee on Programmes to develop coherent messaging regarding data for the Global Digital Compact, the UN Summit of the Future, and also to prepare tentative work in preparation for a Global Data Compact (see Towards an International Data Governance Framework by MacFeely et al. in this special edition).

<sup>8</sup>See <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/156/56/pdf/N2015656.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>9</sup>See <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/243/72/pdf/N2024372.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>10</sup>[https://www.un.org/en/content/datastrategy/images/pdf/UN\\_SG\\_Data-Strategy.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/datastrategy/images/pdf/UN_SG_Data-Strategy.pdf).

### 3. Interagency coordination in official statistics: A brief history

#### 3.1. *The Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities (1967–2001)*

The ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities (ACC-SSA) was established by the ACC at its 43rd session in 1966 – an initiative that was very much welcomed by the Statistical Commission.

It met for the first time in Rome from 10–13 July 1967 and met for its 35th and last session in Vienna from 18–20 September 2001. Until the 27th session (1993) the Subcommittee was chaired by the Director of the UN Statistical Office<sup>11</sup> with one exception when WHO (Mr. W. Logan) chaired the third session in the absence of the director of UNSO.<sup>12</sup> Starting with the 28th session and after a revision of the Subcommittee’s working methods (see also below), chairmanship was rotational. Later chairs came from the IMF (28th–29th session), ILO (30th–31st session) and UNICEF (32nd–35th session).

The first session was attended by 8 organizations (UN, incl. the UN Statistical Office (UNSO), ECE and UNCTAD), ILO, FAO, UNESCO, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), IMF, WHO and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Remarkably, the status of an “observer” was established early on, in the very first session, as the report notes: “In view of the importance of the statistical activities carried out in its region by the Inter American Statistical Institute, that organization was invited to participate in the meeting and provide information on its statistical progress.”

Topics discussed at the first session were grouped into “Coordination of data collection and work program of interest to all agencies” and “Specific questions directly involving perhaps only two agencies but with some interest to the others”.<sup>13</sup> Topics discussed under the latter included “vital statistics”, “ISIC” and “costs of medical care”. Topics discussed “of interest to all agencies” included topics that are still at the core

<sup>11</sup>These include: P.J. Loftus (1st–3rd and 5th session), A. Aidenoff, Acting Director (6th session), S.A. Goldberg (7th–8th and 11th–13th session), S. Nordbotten (14th–16th session), Y. Kurabayashi (17th–20th session) and W. Seltzer (21st–27th session).

<sup>12</sup>However, no information or documentation is available on the 9th and 10th session.

<sup>13</sup>A third group was entitled “Questions relating to the Statistical Commission”.

of today's coordination work: "The growing burdens on national statistical offices", "training of statistical personnel", "consistency of published statistics" and "technical assistance activities".

The last session of the Subcommittee was held in Vienna from 18–20 September 2001. It was attended by 17 entities<sup>14</sup> and considered more than 40 documents, ranging from "Experiences with user-producer dialogues", "Quality assurance for statistical in international statistical services", "Reporting on the review of global progress towards the Millennium Declaration Goals" and "Coordination of data sets that may be disseminated by different organizations covering the same subject matter".

Topics and documentation discussed had expanded over the decades. Driven by the increasing need for interactions caused by, inter alia, the "increased globalization of statistical work", "changing roles, coverage and priorities of organizations at the international level", "a greater regional dimension" and "resource limitations" the ACC-SSA introduced major changes to its working methods at its 27<sup>th</sup> session (1993). The ACC-SSA established a bureau, which was initially comprised of ECLAC, ILO, IMF and the Statistical Division of the UN Secretariat (UNSTAT), to "provide guidance to the overall work of the Subcommittee [...]". The Subcommittee confirmed these arrangements at its following session, defining a two-year term for bureau members and with UNSTAT as a continuous member given its role as Subcommittee secretariat. To provide continuity, it was decided that the change in membership (in the Bureau) should be staggered, with two members elected in one year and one member elected in the following year. The Chairman would be elected for a two-year term and be eligible for re-election. Later the requirement that the previous chair be part of the new bureau was added.

Notably, the ACC-SSA worked closely with the ACC Subcommittee on Demographic Estimates and Projections. The ACC-SSA regularly considered a report from the ACC Subcommittee on Demographic Estimates and Projections and a member of their bureau participated in the ACC-SSA sessions.

### 3.2. *The Interagency Meeting on Coordination of Statistical Activities (2002) and the establishment of CCSA*

The new United Nations Chief Executives Board on Coordination (CEB) decided to abolish the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities (and the other Subcommittees) at the end of December 2001 but recognized the need for a number of inter-agency bodies including the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities to pursue their coordination work as expert bodies, rather than as subsidiaries of the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP).

Following this development, the Statistical Commission, in its 33<sup>rd</sup> session held in March 2002, inter alia "Requested the international organizations to develop a new system for effective coordination given that the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities had been disbanded as of 31 December 2001." Organizations that were represented at this Commission session in New York held a consultative meeting on 7 March 2002 to discuss how best to continue to handle the coordination of statistical activities as requested by the Commission. Building on the strong continuing need for coordination of international statistical work, organizations requested the chairman of the consultative meeting and former chairman of the disbanded ACC-SSA (Gareth Jones, UNICEF) and UNSD to work together to develop proposals on how to proceed.

Subsequently, UNSD organized the "Interagency Meeting on Coordination of Statistical Activities", which was held in New York, 17–19 September 2002 – the dates for which the 36<sup>th</sup> ACC-SSA had been planned. The meeting was chaired by the chair-elect of the former ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities, Andy Flatt (ESCAP). Among other items, attending organizations discussed "How to organize the future coordination of statistical activities" as requested by the Statistical Commission and "decided to establish a Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities" (CCSA). This decision was welcomed by the Statistical Commission in March 2003. The first CCSA session was held in New York on 3 March 2003 on the margins of the Statistical Commission session and was attended by 21 organizations.

Over the course of two decades, CCSA membership has grown to 45. The terms of reference of the Committee have been amended, the latest revision is from September 2017, when the office of three vice chairs was introduced to assist the co-chairs, notably an arrangement that had been introduced by the ACC-SSA before. The CCSA will hold its 40<sup>th</sup> meeting in the fall of 2022.

<sup>14</sup>They include: UNSD, ECLAC, ESCAP, ESCWA, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNICEF, UNODC, ILO, FAO, UNESCO, WHO, UNIDO and as observers: OECD, WTradeO, WTourismO and CISSTAT.

### 3.3. Coordination within the UN System and the establishment of CCSA-UN

Until the disbanding of the ACC-SSA the UN System organizations had formed the core of this Subcommittee, with non-UN organizations playing an active and vital role in the work of the Subcommittee. With the formation of CCSA as a successor organization, this group was enlarged with UN and non-UN system organizations afforded equal status. Over time, the need for a more coherent group of UN system entities to meet amongst themselves to discuss topics of relevance solely for the UN system arose and the first informal meeting of “UN entities on Statistical Programmes” was held on 9 September 2007 in Madrid, on the margins of the 10<sup>th</sup> Session of CCSA. Since then, the Group met regularly twice a year, once in spring on the occasion of the annual session of the UN Statistical Commission and once during the fall on the occasion of the fall session of CCSA.

The UN Statistical Commission considered the coordination of statistical activities in the UN system during its 43<sup>rd</sup>, 44<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> sessions. In its latest decision (45/112) the Commission “endorsed the proposal that the United Nations chief statisticians hold regular meetings and mandated the group to follow up on the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair for improved coordination and report back to the Commission.”

Following this decision, the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN System constituted itself in the new, more formal format and met officially for the first time on 10 September 2014, in conjunction with the twenty-fourth session of CCSA, held in Rome.

### 4. The future of interagency coordination: A few thoughts

Interagency coordination has a long tradition and will continue to be necessary but needs to remain adaptive to an ever-changing environment. While not the focus of this article, traditionally such coordination has focused on data collection and dissemination as well

as normative work. The future focus could include coordination in the area of capacity development. New challenges include the increasing cooperation and partnership with the private sector in many statistical areas and the renewed partnership between national, regional and global statistical offices, which increases the need for clear yet adaptive cooperation mechanisms as well as good understanding of who coordinates what and how.

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