

# Setting out a vision for the United Nations statistical system

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## 1. Introduction

In May 2020 the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) of the UN system endorsed the *System-wide Road Map for Innovating United Nations Data and Statistics* (hereafter the Roadmap) [1]. This was a defining moment for the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN system (CCS-UN) as it brought political endorsement and support for the strategic modernization of the UN statistical system.

The Roadmap had been developed by the CCS-UN in recognition of a need to develop a coherent strategic plan in order to modernize UN statistics, improve coordination, and bring a more coherent 'systems' approach across 29 UN entities. The CCS-UN was of the view that while a clear statement of vision would not in itself lead to innovation or progress, without it a unified design would not be possible and any attempts at widespread reform and modernization could not be achieved.

This paper presents an overview of the context and content of the first strategic plan and Roadmap for UN data and statistics. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines of origins of the Roadmap. The importance of vision, mission and value statements is

explained in Section 3 and the CCS-UN vision, mission and values are articulated in Section 4. Section 5 presents the headline actions included in the Roadmap, Section 6 explains the integration of the Roadmap with the wider UN Data Strategy. Section 7 details progress on implementation to date. The paper is concluded in Section 8.

## 2. Origins

The CCS-UN was established to promote coherent and integrated system-wide UN actions to support statistics at the national, regional and international levels, following the principles governing international statistical activities [2], and the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics [3]. One important function of the committee is to support the modernization of national statistical systems and also of the UN data and statistical system.

Reflecting on how to achieve this mandate, the CCS-UN recognized that links to the UN political system (some of the most important statistical users) were not especially strong. Members of the CCS-UN had seen how different sectors had developed common topic positions via the CEB to strengthen support and coherence around that topic. Thus, the question was raised, why not develop a common position on data and statistics? It was thought that setting out a strategic plan, in co-

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operation with the CEB, would help the CCS-UN to push the boundaries and modernize the UN data and statistical system.

Engagement with the UN High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) met with an enthusiastic reception and led to the CCS-UN presenting a conference room paper entitled *The contribution of United Nations data to the 2030 Agenda and United Nations reform: innovating now for better information in the future*<sup>1</sup> at the 38<sup>th</sup> session of the UN HLCP in September 2019. This paper set out a proposed plan for data and statistics relating to all three pillars of the UN: peace and security; human rights; and development. It was noted that the general proposals would contribute to: (a) addressing the needs already identified by the HLCP regarding the improvement of availability and timeliness of data and statistics; (b) supporting the decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and the reformed United Nations development system; (c) delivering on the challenges set out by the Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development in its 2014 report, entitled *A world that counts* [4]; and contributing to the Dubai Declaration *Supporting the Implementation of the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data* [5] arising from the 2018 United Nations World Data Forum. This paper was endorsed by the HLCP and submitted to the CEB, where it was adopted in May 2020.

As part of this work, the CCS-UN had to develop a logo. This was an important step in the coherent branding of the CCS-UN. The logo was formally adopted by the CCS-UN at the March 2020 meeting in New York.

### 3. What are vision, mission and value statements and why are they useful?

A vision statement defines the optimal desired future state whereas a mission statement is a statement of purpose – a reason for existing. Humphreys [7] stresses the prerequisite importance of having a vision and mission to drive fundamental organisational changes. Large, complex and heterogeneous collectives like the UN statistical system will benefit from a clear vision and mission statements to bring coherency of purpose across entities.

The purpose of a vision statement is to communicate a high-level goal. A vision statement simply defines



Committee of the Chief Statisticians  
of the United Nations System

Fig. 1. Logo for the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN system.

an organisation's purpose by focusing on aspirational goals. As such, it does not need to elucidate a measurable target. Ideally a vision statement should be uplifting and inspiring. It should also be timeless, so even if an organisation changes strategy, the vision statement can remain unchanged. A clear vision statement, in concert with a mission statement, brings clarity of purpose so that everyone, both the UN entities and the member states, understand the direction of travel. According to ChangeFactory [8], a good vision statement should describe the best outcome achievable, use unequivocal language, evoke emotion, be short and create the same picture in everyone's mind. Spearman [9] emphasises the importance of simplicity and brevity – between ten and fifteen words and with text that should not require effort on the part of the reader, whether an employee or customer, to understand. Jisc [10] proposes that a good vision statement should be inspirational, ambitious, realistic, creative, descriptive, clear and consistent.

A mission statement should complement and build on the vision statement by defining an organisation's purpose and primary objectives in a more specific way than the vision statement. Mission statements should be set in the present tense, and explain why an organisation exists, both to members of the organisation and to people outside it. They should be short, clear and powerful. Values should reinforce the mission by outlining the guiding principles or core ideals that underpin behaviour and actions in an organisation. They help to define the personality or corporate culture of an organisation.

Kernaghan, quoted in MacCarthaigh [11, p. 8], defines values as those 'enduring beliefs that influence the choices we make among available means or ends.' The OECD [12, p. 12] defines values as 'the individ-

<sup>1</sup>CEB/2019/HLCP38/CRP.3.

ual principles or standards that guide judgement about what is good and proper'. MacCarthaigh [11, p. 9] describes values as 'the individual principles or qualities that guide judgement and behaviour'.

Together, the vision, mission and value statement set the tone and the ambition of the UN statistical system. By publicly articulating a vision, a mission and a set of values, it clarifies for the UN and member states what they can expect. Some good examples of international public service vision and mission statements are the Charter of the United Nations [13] and the OECD 50th Anniversary Vision Statement [14].

#### 4. The CCS-UN vision, mission and values

The vision, mission and values outlined below are straightforward and relevant for the whole UN system. The vision is simultaneously inward and outward looking, in that it serves both the UN system itself and also the member states that the UN system serves. It is important to note that the Roadmap is not an attempt to side-step the UN Statistical Commission but rather it is an attempt to address concerns raised by members of the Commission and bring a coherent vision across a wide and diverse UN system comprised of many entities that each have their own distinct governance mechanisms that are distinct and separate from the Commission.

Readers will note the emphasis on trust and equity in the vision, which in a confused era of data deluge and fake news, will be critical if the UN system is to be recognized as a source of impartial, trustworthy data and statistics – a beacon of truth in a forest of noise and misinformation. Consistent with the principles of the UN generally, and the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in particular, those data and statistics should be open, easily accessible to all, they should be fully representative i.e. no individuals or communities should be left behind or excluded.

The vision, mission and values are:

##### *Vision*

To contribute to a better world through timely, trusted data and statistics for everyone.

##### *Mission*

- To guide and advise Member States, to lead and coordinate the United Nations statistical system, to convene to develop normative standards and international best practices and to support countries with capacity development.

- To open United Nations data to help people and communities access, use and understand data and statistics, to bring trust into public discourse and to empower and protect people by providing inclusive and impartial statistics.
- To improve statistical literacy and to provide and communicate trusted United Nations data and statistics within and outside the United Nations in a way that it can be easily understood and used.
- To innovate and to grow and promulgate the United Nations data and statistics brand.

##### *Values*

- A deep commitment to impartial, open United Nations data and statistics as a global public good.
- A culture of service, consultation and engagement, collaboration, responsiveness, accountability and efficiency.
- The highest standards of ethical professionalism, leadership and trust, including adherence to the principles governing international statistical activities and applying those principles beyond statistics to all publicly available United Nations data.

The roadmap also identified possible blockages or 'challenges' that could derail progress. A distinction was made between internal (institutional, cultural and technical) and external (country capacities and resources). These don't require any detailed elaboration, other than to summarize that coordination or interoperability gaps, perceptions of conservatism and being risk adverse and a lack of skilled staff, modern practices and resources might all mitigate against progress within the UN system or at country level.

#### 5. The Roadmap

The Roadmap is comprised of 3 broad strategic goals. Each of the goals includes a number of targets and details on the actions envisaged to achieve their implementation. The actors best suited to carry the lead or contribute to the implementation of those targets were also identified. Timelines (albeit aspirational) were also outlined, as were existing resources that could support each of the actions.

The three high level goals were:

Goal 1: Create new and timely data solutions

The first goal focuses on the UN system creating new data solutions by harnessing multiple data sources that address emerging policy issues so that statistics on 'what matters'

are available ‘when it matters’. This means taking actions, such as establishing a United Nations data collaborative, promoting continuous professional development of UN staff in data and statistics, and strengthen internal UN system policies, norms and standards that promote the integrity of data and statistics.

Some examples of actions include, establishing and managing UN level agreements with external providers to ensure sustainable access to secondary data, in particular big data; strengthening linkages between UN statistical, geo-spatial and citizen science data communities. It also includes the development of technical statistical training programmes for UN staff and the development of new UN job profiles for data scientists and data analysts. Other examples include defining ethical and quality standards for the use of secondary data in the UN context (including data confidentiality, data privacy, data protection and data security) and reviewing and updating the principles governing international statistical activities in the light of new technologies and methodologies.

**Goal 2: Address emerging policy needs**

The second goal sets out to update the UN data portal so that data from system entities can be linked and presented under a unique UN data brand, strengthen the understanding of and ethics dealing with data and statistics, and improve the useability of UN data and statistics by making them more accessible and timely.

Some specific actions included were the development of a modern, online UN data portal where UN data can be easily accessed; the development of online and face-to-face ‘data savvy’ training for non-technical UN staff on using UN data and statistics; and the establishment of a UN nowcasting and forecasting network, setting out common UN approaches, and develop training on nowcasting techniques.

**Goal 3: Provide coordinated and innovative support to Member States**

The third goal is more outward focused, emphasizing developments in countries, by ensuring that each UN country team devel-

ops a coordinated, innovative and effective data and statistics programme that supports the country at national, regional and global level.

Actions included under this goal include the creation of UN country team working groups on data and statistics to support the monitoring of the SDGs and the implementation of the Cape Town Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data [14]. The development of guidelines on how to provide support to strengthen national statistical systems, including their data and statistical infrastructures, and principles governing the storage, protection and utilization of personal data by non-governmental organizations and corporations. Establish the position of special rapporteur on statistics to be appointed by the Statistical Commission to report on statistical capacity building delivered by the UN. Establish a management and leadership programme for managers of national statistical offices.

## 6. Integration into wider UN Data Strategy

As the Roadmap was being finalised, the CCS-UN were approached by the OSG of the UN. They were developing a UN Data Strategy, which was to become the *Data Strategy of the Secretary-General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere with Insight, Impact and Integrity 2020–2022*, and were anxious to avoid any inconsistencies between the two strategies. Although the UN Data Strategy is inward focused (i.e. deals with UN data) and the Roadmap is both inward and outward focused, it was nevertheless agreed that the UN Data Strategy would incorporate the Roadmap. The CCS-UN supported this, as it brought an extra level of political endorsement for the Roadmap, further promote the socialise the plan across the UN system, and help make clear the linkages between the two strategies.

The Roadmap also dovetailed with other strategic plans central to improving the integration and flow of information to address policy goals and crisis response. These included *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* [16]; the *UN Data for Now initiative*;<sup>2</sup> the *Geospatial Strategy*

<sup>2</sup><https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=33636>.

for the United Nations [17]; the *Secretary-General's Strategy on New Technologies* [18]; the *Data Standards for United Nations System-wide Reporting of Financial Data* [19]; and the *Principles on Personal Data Protection and Privacy* of the CEB;<sup>3</sup> and the common country analysis underpinning the *United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework*.<sup>4</sup>

## 7. Implementation of the plan

Once the roadmap was finalized and adopted by the CEB, consultation among UN entities, led to the prioritization of a select number of targets rather than try and do everything at once. Initially, 5 targets were identified as priorities:

Target 2.1: transform the *data.un.org portal* as a single point of reference for UN data to reinforce position of the UN as a primary provider of global data and statistics

Target 2.2: promote a culture of data literacy and provide evidence to support United Nations policies and programmes

Target 2.3: embed predictive analytics, including nowcasting and forecasting, into UN data/statistical programmes to provide timely information to address emerging policy issues

Target 3.1: support the design and implementation of a national statistical capacity development programme, under the "One United Nations" brand

Target 1.1.4: strengthen the link between UN statistics and geospatial systems, including establishing a network of UN staff that use geospatial information to produce UN data and statistics.

Thereafter, further consultation with member states (via the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN Statistics Commission), one additional priority was added. Notably, target 1.1 – that the UN statistical system improve existing data sources and increase use of new data sources to expand coverage, relevance and timeliness of data and statistics produced and disseminated. Different UN entities were assigned a leadership role for each of these tasks.

A short summary of the progress made to date (April 2022) is detailed below.

- UN data portal. In many respects this is one of the most obviously tangible and immediately beneficial targets set out in the Roadmap. Given the external visibility of this portal, this particular target is seen as especially important by the OSG. Following a special side event at the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN Statistical Commission in 2021: A first conversation on the new vision for UN data. The UN Statistical Commission recommended the formation of a new Interagency and Expert Group (IAEG) to oversee the review and modernization of the UNdata portal and the regular update of its data and metadata. In Nov 2021 a preliminary Roadmap for the Modernization of the UN Data Portal and funding proposal was approved by UN senior leadership. A first inter-agency meeting was held in January 2022 comprised of several agencies to begin testing deployment on the UN Global Platform.
- Data literacy. The ability to make rapid and effective decisions informed by accurate and timely data is increasingly seen as being a critically important skillset for UN staff at all levels. In preparing a curriculum with the UN System Staff College, and in consultation with other academic institutions, it was decided the best area was to focus (initially at least) was on a foundational or basic level. The course should be targeted to enhancing the ability of UN personnel to effectively apply and use data in their work, helping staff to access, use, interpret and communicate data. In autumn 2021 a first modular, online course *Fundamentals in Data Analytics in the UN Context*<sup>5</sup> went online. This course is comprised of 3 modules: data basics; essential toolbox; and decision making.
- Nowcasting. A first CCS-UN nowcasting workshop was held in Geneva in February 2020. Attended by most CCS-UN members, many CCSA members, and representatives from academia, this workshop proved far more popular than anticipated and revealed a sizeable appetite for statistical and modelling capacity development across international organisations. 18 case studies were presented<sup>6</sup> covering concepts, definitions and new approaches (including AI techniques), dealing with

<sup>3</sup>[https://unsceb.org/privacy-principles#:~:text=The%20Principles%20aim%20to%3A%20\(i,particular%20the%20right%20to%20privacy.](https://unsceb.org/privacy-principles#:~:text=The%20Principles%20aim%20to%3A%20(i,particular%20the%20right%20to%20privacy.)

<sup>4</sup><https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/cooperation-framework.>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.unssc.org/courses/fundamentals-data-analytics-un-context-1.>

<sup>6</sup>See <https://unctad.org/meeting/ccs-un-technical-workshop-nowcasting-international-organizations> to access presentations and other resources from the workshop.

economic, social and humanitarian and environmental fields [20]. Four technical papers were published in the *Statistical Journal of the IAOS* as an outcome of this workshop<sup>7</sup> and a nowcasting library with examples of methodologies, including code has also been made available <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YidOwHXud85UWAYOmleYjTYDsKX8vF1rYkDy3WoPnBE/edit#gid=0>. As hoped, a Global Nowcasting Network, was formed at this meeting to provide assistance to international organisations looking for advice or support in this area. This network, in coordination with the CCSA will host a second workshop in June 2022. One of the issues to be discussed at this meeting is whether the mandate should be widened to include forecasting.

- Statistical Capacity Development. A set of modular data and statistical training courses have been developed by the CCSA in collaboration with the UN Development Coordination Office to train UN data officers and economists embedded in country offices. These courses are designed to introduce the country teams to the practical challenges and solutions of using data and statistics for SDGs reporting, Voluntary National Reviews, and the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. It will also introduce field officers to issues of governance, data principles and quality assurance. This training was first delivered over May and June 2022.
- Geospatial. In Spring 2021 the CCSA<sup>8</sup> and CCS-UN held a series of meetings with the UN Geospatial Network to explore the creation of a UN data collaborative on geospatial data. The outcomes of these meetings were three actions: (1) build a bridge between the two communities, through improved and more frequent communication and exchange of information; (2) establish a ‘com-

mon trading language’ to facilitate mutual understanding; and (3) building on the *System-wide Road Map for Innovating United Nations Data and Statistics, Blueprint Geospatial for a Better World* [21] and the Global Statistical and Geospatial Framework [22] and work towards a joint CCSA-UNGN roadmap that formalised collaboration between the two communities. A joint CCSA-UNGN workshop was held in June 2021 [23] where members of both communities attended, sharing and discussing a wide range of issues, including how to improve and innovate the use of geospatial and statistical data, the development of joint workflows, methods, frameworks, platforms, and tools to make available reliable, timely, accessible and disaggregated data, and to further harmonize and integrate the different approaches to data quality adopted by the two communities with the aim of developing a joint understanding on what constitutes high quality geospatial information and statistics.

## 8. Conclusions

The adoption of the Roadmap by the CEB, and its inclusion in the UN Data Strategy are defining moments in the history and development of the CCS-UN. Not only does the roadmap set out, for the first time, a strategic vision and plan for the UN statistical system, but it has brought a greater cohesion and purpose to the CCS-UN. The roadmap is important as it moved the agenda beyond the coordination of institutional activities, and replaced it with a unified, multi-agency CCS-UN product.

The roadmap has also helped the statistical community to proactively engage with the CEB, helping UN statisticians to contribute to the development of the wider UN system, and allowing the leadership of the UN system to appreciate better the value added that can come from engagement with the statistical community – for example, in the work on ‘Beyond GDP’ and global data governance.

As noted above, the drafting of a strategic plan, and the implementation of that plan are two different things. Despite COVID-19, implementation has advanced quite considerably since the adoption of the plan, and good progress is being made on the first tranche of prioritized actions. The next steps will be to select a second tranche of priority actions and begin work on those.

<sup>7</sup>Cantu, F. (2021). Nowcasting global trade in goods and services. *Statistical Journal of the IAOS*. Vol. 37, No.1, pp. 257–277; Esteban, M., Domingo, M., Agustin, P., and Sperlich, S. (2021). On model based nowcasting for highly disaggregated levels. Vol.37, No.1, pp. 279–292; Hughes, B., Mohammad, T.I., Solorzano, J., Yang, V., and Moyer, J.D. (2021). Estimating current values of Sustainable Development Goal indicators using an integrated assessment modeling platform: ‘Nowcasting’ with international futures. Vol. 37, No.1, pp. 293–307; Ruggeri Cannata, R. (2021). The Eurostat business cycle clock: a complete overview of the tool. Vol. 37, No.1, pp. 309–323.

<sup>8</sup>Although the Roadmap is a CCS-UN plan, many of the actions are of interest to the statistical arms of many non UN international organisations. Consequently, during the implementation phase, the membership of the full CCSA was invited to participate.

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