

Guest Editorial

A brief glimpse into the fascinating world of international statistics

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People often refer to, and think of, the United Nations (UN) as a monolith, a single organization. But in fact, the UN is a complex amalgam of agencies, entities, funds and programmes, all with different (but often overlapping) mandates and governing bodies. Add to this, all of the other international and supra-national organisations (IOs) and the need for coordination becomes obvious. Many of these agencies undertake statistical activities and hence the need for the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA).¹ The CCSA comprises the chief statisticians (or nearest equivalent) in each of the UN and IOs. In short, the CCSA aims to: promote interagency coordination and cooperation on statistical programmes and consistency in statistical practices and development; foster good practices in statistical activities of international organisations in accordance with the *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities*;² and contribute actively to the development of a coordinated global statistical system producing and disseminating high-quality statistics.

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¹Readers can find more information about the CCSA at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ccsa/>. The list of CCSA and CCS-UN members is also listed in an annex to this special issue. The authors of this paper are the current co-chairs of the CCSA and CCS-UN.

²https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ccsa/principles_stat_activities/.

The activities of statistical agencies in the UN and other IOs are wide and varied, ranging from compiling regional or global datasets and analytical reports, developing new conceptual and normative statistical standards, pioneering new methodological approaches, advocating for sound data governance, and running training and development programmes around the world. Many of the issues discussed are international or global in scope and therefore cannot be realized without effective cooperation and coordination between all member states, IOs and other key stakeholders. The UN and IOs use their convening power to bring together governments, businesses, civil society, academia and other international organizations to exchange experiences, identify best practices, develop global or regional standards, and promulgate implementation guidelines.

In recent years, both the Committee for the Chief Statisticians of the United Nations System (CCS-UN)³ which is the coordination body for UN agencies and the CCSA, have, in the face of rapid developments in the data world, and with the crisis presented by COVID-19 begun to critically assess their role, and how the UN and IOs can add value. This has led to the CCS-UN developing and publishing a *System-wide Road Map for*

³<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/unsystem/>.

Innovating United Nations Data and Statistics.⁴ The history of this new development is elaborated in this special edition – see *A Vision for the United Nations Statistical System*, by Me at al.

The increased complexity of data and statistical ecosystems that are currently challenging the role of NSOs and national official statistics systems are also challenging the international statistical system that in addition is suffering from threats to multilateralism.⁵ The international statistical system constituted by programmes in UN and non-UN IOs has been established to serve two main objectives: i) to support Member States to improve their national statistical systems through standard settings and technical assistance; and ii) to provide impartial and comparable international statistics to be used to address regional and international responses to existing challenges and threats. Some decades ago, the international system had a quasi-monopoly on these two areas, but today different dynamics are challenging this dominant position. Together with the sudden and significant disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to statistics operations at all levels, the changing landscape has provided an opportunity for the community of international statistical programmes to innovate. This volume presents some of these innovations.

A new landscape for statistical capacity development

In the last few decades, the donor community has diversified efforts and has increased investments in bilateral, more than in multilateral assistance, moving resources for statistical capacity development towards single countries (or regional organizations) to provide the bulk of the statistical capacity development to other countries in need. This move has resulted in constructive and useful partnerships that have helped many countries to upgrade their statistical system, but it has also exposed the risks of promoting single national or regional practices with less emphasis on international standards. This context has pushed international statistical programmes to find more effective models to engage in statistical capacity development. Many international organizations have started, for example, to partner with national institutions with exceptional expertise in certain areas, in the delivery of statistical assistance

recognizing that peer-to-peer assistance in a context of promoting international standards can be more effective.⁶ There has been an increased awareness among international statistical programmes of the need to better coordinate efforts at national, regional and international level and to ensure national ownership in setting priorities and defining modalities of technical assistance. The papers by Fu at al. on *Toward a new, collaborative global financing architecture for fragile, low, and middle-income countries' data priorities* and by Appel on *World's first platform to track SDG data financing Clearinghouse for financing development data* describe the efforts of international organizations to channel technical statistical assistance through increased partnerships at national and international level. The efforts of international organizations to promptly respond to national needs is also visible in the paper by Wollburg at al. *The Uneven Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on National Statistical Offices Evidence from the Global COVID-19 survey of NSOs* describing the efforts to understand at international level the impact of Covid on national statistical capacity. The paper by Lokshin on *The Highways and Side Roads of Statistical Capacity Building* also offers some reflections in this direction, while the paper by Me et al. on *A Vision for the United Nations Statistical System*, shows the commitment of IOs to “Coordinate and innovate support to Member States” and with UN Country Teams to design and deliver a ONE UN National Statistical Capacity Development Programme through improved national, regional and international cooperation. The paper by Sejersen at al. on *Working together to get everyone in the picture in Asia and the Pacific* also touches upon the efforts to support countries in the specific topic of civil registration.

A series of papers exhibit the role of IOs to support countries with new and innovative methodologies, in some cases relating to SDG indicators, for example on the use of big and alternative data (see papers by Tissot, by Poleshchuk at al., by Mongeau Ospina at al., and by Valero at al.), remote sensing methodology (by Gennari at al.), future household surveys (by Carletto and al.), small areas estimation (by Masaki and al., by Khalil at al., and Gutierrez at al.), improved sex-disaggregated data (by Guerrero at al.), and use of machine learning

⁴<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/unsystem/documents/Roadmap-Innovating%20UN%20Data%20and%20Statistic.pdf>.

⁵As the UN Secretary General said in April 2022 *Multilateral system and the value of diplomacy are under threat from all directions*.

⁶Examples of these partnerships are the centers established by UNSD with . . . (Germany and China?) on geospatial information systems, the two Centers of Excellence on crime and criminal justice statistics established by UNODC in partnership with the national statistical offices of Mexico (INEGI) and South Korea (KOSTAT).

techniques for compiling official statistics (by Hopp). The paper on the *High-Level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics (HLG-MOS) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe* by Gjaltema shows an example of the indirect support that IOs provide to the modernization of official statistics through the provision of secretariat services to expert and inter-governmental working groups.

A new landscape for the production and dissemination of international statistics

There is today widespread recognition of the value of data and statistics. Statistics are in high demand. Thanks also to more advanced technologies there is today a large supply of data and statistics, including international statistics. This is in stark contrast with the past, when IOs were the almost sole source of international statistical series, thanks to their unique authority to collect data from Member States. Like many NSOs, international statistical programmes have adapted to the new diversified demand and supply of statistics, recognizing that statistics produced by IOs maintain their value only if they are able to uniquely provide a set of statistics that embed the values of the UN and other IOs: to be impartial and responsive in an equal manner to the needs of all countries and all constituencies. This demand makes statistics provided by IOs more than the sum of national statistics and places on IOs a strong accountability to meet the expectations for excelling in providing the most authoritative and independent international statistics. While these expectations have always been there, the new statistical environment has triggered renewed efforts in IOs to focus on innovative solutions to provide more agile but nevertheless robust statistics. An example of innovation in international statistics is presented in *Innovation in the European statistical system: achievements and challenges ahead* by Wirthmann et al., while the paper on *A Statistical Quality Assurance Framework for the United Nations* by Reister et al. showcases the commitment of IOs to meet the highest quality standards that in addition to the typical national statistics quality standards (such as timeliness, accuracy, relevance, efficiency, ..) include comparability as a key element. On the role of national institutions in the production of international statistics, the paper by Tissot, *The central banks' contribution to international statistics: a Basel perspective* outlines the role of central banks in international statistics. The paper by Purdie and Rissanen, *From local prices to the global economy: a unique global collaboration that*

underpins the International Comparison, details how local prices contribute to the International Comparison Programme.

The disruption of COVID-19 has further generated innovative solutions for international statistics. A series of papers by Gomis et al., Encarnacion et al., Avanesian et al., and Delamonica et al. describe solutions designed to continue to provide international statistics during crises varying from nowcasting models to gender-responsive remote data collections. The paper by Abidoye on *Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals: A case for investment in data and impact evaluation* is a reminder of the need to look at international statistics also as a tool for programme development.

Two papers in this edition relate to changing frontiers of international statistics. One of the great success stories of the statistical community is celebrated as Willis-Núñez and Cwiek reflect on *Thirty years on, the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics remain the shared foundation of an informed society* and whether they remain the shared foundation for official statistics. The paper by MacFeely et al. *Towards an International Data Governance Framework*, which as the name suggests deals with tentative work to develop a global data governance mechanism that encompasses or is consistent with similar work underway with regard to digital and AI governance frameworks. This paper presents some work in progress in the field of international data, and demonstrates the interest and commitment of the international statistical community to engage in the broader data agenda to promote the ethical and quality standards that have characterized international statistics together, along with a humble recognition that governing data involves a much larger set of issues, and partners than previously was the case.

All too often, references to official statistics implicitly refer to official national statistics, but official statistics also comprise official international statistics. This special edition is dedicated to this important, but sometimes neglected, section of official statistics. A careful reader will be struck by the symbiotic relationship of official national and international statistics, and this is an important message to conclude on. Official national and international statistics are not in competition – quite the contrary – they support each other. Agenda 2030 dramatically expanded the scope of typical NSO work, introducing them to a range of new statistical issues and challenges. Through the UN Statistical Commission and the IAEG-SDG, IOs and NSOs are working closely together to progress the development of official statistics. This special edition gives a glimpse into the rich and exciting work that is underway.