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**Items for discussion and decision: Fundamental Principles
of Official Statistics**

Report of the Friends of the Chair group on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2019/210 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Friends of the Chair group on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. The group describes its work in producing two supplementary chapters to the *United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: Implementation Guidelines* – a chapter on assessing levels of compliance with the Principles and a chapter on the application of the Principles when using new data sources (available as background documents). It also introduces the revised section on the Principles of the website of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat with a proposed strategy to update its country profile database.

The Statistical Commission is invited to review and approve the work of the group. The action to be taken by the Statistical Commission is set out in paragraph 36.

* [E/CN.3/2020/1](#).



I. Introduction and background

1. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics¹ were endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 68/261 on 29 January 2014. The Assembly endorsed the Principles on the twentieth anniversary of their adoption by the Statistical Commission. From 2011 to 2015, a Friends of the Chair group worked on selected dimensions of the implementation of the Principles in the context of the twentieth anniversary of their adoption.
2. In 2017, the Commission, in its decision 48/107, re-established the Friends of the Chair group to work on selected dimensions of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles in the context of the preparation for the twenty-fifth anniversary of their adoption, to be celebrated in 2019.
3. In 2019, the Commission, in its decision 50/104, requested the group to complete its work and prepare two supplementary chapters to the *Implementation Guidelines* providing guidance on evaluation criteria for compliance with and implementation of the Fundamental Principles when using new data sources, to be presented at the fifty-first session in 2020. The Commission also agreed that the group should continue its work for another year and that, after the fifty-first session, the work on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics would be concluded and would subsequently be resumed in time for the next appraisal, in 2024.

II. Work programme

4. The Friends of the Chair group, constituted in February 2018, currently consists of 12 country representatives and 8 international agencies and international organizations as observers (see annex I to the present report). New Zealand is the Chair of the group.
5. Concerning the organization of its work, the group held a physical meeting on the sidelines of the fiftieth session of the Commission, in March 2019, and then held regular teleconferences approximately every six weeks to review progress.
6. The following activities were established to respond to the request of the Statistical Commission at its fiftieth session:
 - (a) Produce chapters to supplement the *Implementation Guidelines* with guidance on: (i) evaluation criteria and recommended actions to assist countries in transitioning their official statistical systems towards compliance; and (ii) implementation of the Fundamental Principles when using new data sources for the production of official statistics;
 - (b) Provide a repository of case study examples to support learning and good practices.

¹ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/FP-New-E.pdf>.

III. Summary of outputs

A. Supplementary chapters to the *United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: Implementation Guidelines*

1. Maturity model/framework as a tool to assess levels of compliance with the Fundamental Principles

7. The supplementary chapter provides criteria, in the form of a maturity model/framework, to assess compliance with the Fundamental Principles. Instead of assessing implementation just by “compliance” or “non-compliance”, maturity models help organizations gauge their level of compliance and identify areas for improvement.

8. Using a maturity model to assess the level of compliance can: (a) serve as a diagnostic tool that enables organizations to assess where their current capabilities lie in terms of the Fundamental Principles and, therefore, their current maturity level (descriptive); (b) be used to identify desirable maturity levels and suggest actions to reach a desired maturity level (prescriptive); and (c) serve as a comparative tool, since it allows for external benchmarking among other organizations (comparative).

Background

9. The Fundamental Principles enshrine the basic guiding principles of official statistics produced by national statistical agencies and all entities that are part of the national statistical system. As such they lay the very foundation for the institutional set-up and operation of official statistics and are of such a general and basic nature they may be referred to as the “basic law” or the “constitution” of official statistics.

10. Like other “constitutions”, the Fundamental Principles come to life and become meaningful only through their implementation and application. They have been supported by a variety of tools at the global and national level, including the good practices database,² implementation guidelines,³ and the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*.⁴

11. The Fundamental Principles were designed to be universal across cultures, political systems and time. The Principles are a pillar of the global statistical system. By embodying a profound conviction and commitment that official statistics must adhere to well-defined professional and scientific standards, they define the professional community of official statisticians, reaching across political, economic and cultural borders.

12. Official statistics are a recognized part of the knowledge infrastructure for a country (and region), underpinning decisions by Governments, businesses, communities, citizens and the international community; influencing investment choices; monitoring progress; and informing policy development and measuring its success. Official statistics are also integral to good governance and meeting citizens’ expectations of authoritative and trustworthy information about their country, informing debate and decisions on issues of national importance and monitoring the outcomes of those decisions.

² See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/searchgp.aspx>.

³ See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/impguide.aspx>.

⁴ See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/hb/searchhb.aspx>.

Why compliance is important

13. Coupled with any set of principles and implementation guidelines is the desire for an understanding of what compliance might look like and how it can be achieved.

14. In 2015, the Statistical Commission initially focused its attention on country compliance with the Fundamental Principles and subsequently explored ways to effectively address perceived non-compliance with the Principles (see [E/CN.3/2015/18](#)). In discussion at that time, the group noted the absence of definitions of compliance and non-compliance, leaving these definitions open to interpretation across different national and regional contexts. A shared, common understanding of compliance will help to ensure less diversity of interpretation and more consistency, overall, in achieving compliance across the global statistical system.

15. There are significant benefits to implementing and achieving compliance with the Fundamental Principles to produce high quality, reliable and impartial official statistics.

*Assessing compliance can take many forms***Self-assessment**

16. Self-assessment is recognized as having an important role in bringing compliance challenges into the open and promoting good practice. It is a good way to promote compliance and detect non-compliance (*ibid.*). Self-assessment, primarily through the regular global review of the Fundamental Principles, should form the basis for evaluating the level of compliance and risks of non-compliance in the first instance.

Peer review

17. An alternative to self-assessment would be a peer review programme. Peer reviews can enable assessment of a country's capacity to produce and disseminate official statistics and form a view on their adherence or alignment to established standards/principles.

18. In official statistics, such assessment processes have led to quality improvements in the institutional environment, statistical processes and statistical outputs. Peer reviews can contribute to improving the image of official statistics as a useful and credible public good and can be used to enhance the independence, integrity and accountability of the statistical organization.⁵ Peer reviews also enable the direct sharing of experience and best practices.

19. While establishing a global peer review is impractical, a more manageable option is for countries (or groups of countries) to invite independent peer review on a voluntary basis. Such processes have been used effectively in the European Union⁶ and could be helpful in supporting countries to understand how they might improve their practices to build compliance and in highlighting good practice in specific cases.

20. The outcomes of peer reviews should be published publicly. For the process to work effectively there would need to be an open and transparent process to appoint peer review teams and agreed terms of reference for the remit of such reviews.

⁵ Martín-Guzmán and Aguilera (2015), cited at www.oecd.org/iaos2018/programme/IAOS-OECD2018_Pohjola.pdf.

⁶ See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/peer-reviews>.

Accreditation

21. A third option for improving the implementation of the Fundamental Principles might be some form of certification or accreditation, conferred on producers that exemplify sustained and consistent application of some or all of the Principles.⁷ Certification would usually be based on the assessment of a third party. There are practical challenges, in particular, time and cost, to this option and therefore the implementation of such a system can be reconsidered in the future if there is a recognized need, supported by countries. The process would require a proper assessment methodology and indicators.

Assessing compliance with the Fundamental Principles: a maturity approach

22. Whether an organization assesses its compliance with the Fundamental Principles by self-assessment, peer review or some other mechanism, it is useful to view compliance with the implementation of the Principles through a maturity assessment lens.

23. Maturity models are becoming more prevalent in the world of official statistics. Recent examples include the modernization maturity model⁸ and the communications maturity model.⁹

24. The concept of “maturity” seeks to capture an organization’s capability for self-improvement. A maturity model is designed to help statistical organizations gauge their current maturity and to propose areas for improvement. Essentially, it is a road map that helps assess and guide organizational practices.

25. The approach is structured as a series of levels of compliance, which begins with an assessment of current compliance. Once the current level has been determined, the next level sets out the activities to be prioritized to move to that level or maintained to stay at the current level.

26. The following are the main applications of a maturity model:

- *Descriptive*: the maturity model serves as a diagnostic tool that enables organizations to assess where their current capabilities lie in terms of the Fundamental Principles and, therefore, their current maturity level.
- *Prescriptive*: the maturity model can be used to identify desirable maturity levels. The model suggests actions to reach a desired maturity level.
- *Comparative*: the maturity model serves as a comparative tool, since it allows for external benchmarking among other organizations.

27. A maturity model approach can be helpful in assessing compliance with the Fundamental Principles. The Principles maturity model provides an assessment tool that can be used to assess current maturity against a standard framework. This tool can be used as part of self-assessments or peer reviews.

28. When using a maturity model, an organization should not necessarily focus on attaining the highest maturity level, but rather on identifying ways to continuously improve. In other words, the purpose of a maturity model should not be to “tick the box” and comply with the description of the highest maturity level, but to be used as a tool for achieving greater maturity over time.

⁷ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/50th-session/documents/BG-Item3b-FPOS-Implementation-guidelines-E.pdf>.

⁸ See <https://statswiki.unece.org/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=129172266>.

⁹ See www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/2019/7_Strategic_communication_framework_for_consultation.pdf.

29. The maturity levels in the draft supplementary chapter were drawn from existing resources, including the *Implementation Guidelines*, the *Handbook of Statistical Organization* and the 2018 United Nations Global Assessment Survey and serve as familiar material, repackaged to provide guidance about compliance with the Principles.

30. The Fundamental Principles maturity model has a number of dimensions and levels. Each Fundamental Principle is represented as a dimension. Depending on the complexity of the principle, some have subdimensions. For each dimension or subdimension, organizations may have a different maturity level. The model includes three maturity levels – Developing, Practising and Leading – with “Developing” being the least mature level and “Leading” the most mature.

31. Full details of the model are provided in a background document for review by the Commission.

2. Guidance on the application of the Fundamental Principles when using new data sources for the production of official statistics

32. The guidance is in the form of a background document with country and organization examples matching the Fundamental Principles with the use of non-official, non-traditional and new data sources.

B. Repository of case study examples to support learning and good practices

33. This activity included the revision of the section on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics of the Statistics Division website.¹⁰ The new section, developed by the Statistics Division under the guidance of the Friends of the Chair group, is now available at <https://unstats.un.org/fpos/>.

34. Regarding the country profiles database that is included in the revised Fundamental Principles website, the members of the Friends of the Chair group noted that it contains valuable qualitative information on national statistical systems, such as references to national statistical laws and background information on the structure, mandate and outputs of national statistical systems. In most cases, however, this information is almost 10 years old, and the group agreed that it would be beneficial to request countries to provide a systematic update at least every three years. In this connection, various members of the Friends of the Chair group have noted the need to review the contents of the database with a view to ensuring consistency and avoiding duplication with other platforms, such as the statistical capacity monitoring website (<https://statisticalcapacitymonitor.org/>) of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century. Annex II contains some possible items to be included in a Fundamental Principles country profiles database questionnaire, to be further developed and administered by the Statistics Division in collaboration with the Partnership every two to three years, beginning in 2020. It is proposed that the questionnaire be combined with additional, more detailed questions in 2023, in the context of the next appraisal on the implementation of the Principles.

¹⁰ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd>.

IV. Way forward

35. The work of the Friends of the Chair group on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics has concluded for the current round of reviews and will be resumed in time for the next appraisal, in 2024.

V. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

36. **The Commission is invited:**

- (a) **To take note of the present report;**
- (b) **To review and approve the proposed compliance and maturity framework supplementing the *United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: Implementation Guidelines*;**
- (c) **To review and approve the proposed guidance for the use of non-official and non-traditional data sources;**
- (d) **To express its views on the redesigned Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics website;**
- (e) **To approve the proposed strategy to update and maintain the country profiles and documentation of good practices in national statistical systems;**
- (f) **To review and approve the proposal to consider the work of the Friends of the Chair group concluded for the present round of reviews, but to be resumed in time for the next appraisal, in 2024.**

Annex I

Membership of the Friends of the Chair group on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Chair

New Zealand

Members

Argentina

Australia

Egypt

Italy

Jordan

Malaysia

Mauritius

Poland

Suriname

Sweden

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Observers

Collaborative on Sustainable Development Goal data interoperability

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

International Statistical Institute

Open Data Watch

Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21)

United Nations Initiative on Global Geospatial Information Management secretariat

World Bank

Annex II

Proposed categories for updating the information contained in the country profiles database of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics website

Main statistical agency

Main statistical agency name

Web address

Mission or mandate

Position in the government

Organizational structure

Brief history and other relevant background information

Role and responsibilities of other members of the national statistical system

National statistical council

Statistical services in the central bank

Statistical services in line ministries

Statistical offices at the subnational level (region, province, etc.)

Public research institutions

Statistical research and training centres

Private institutions

Other

Statistical legal and policy frameworks

Statistical laws and regulations

Statistical codes of conduct

Open data policies and principles

Data privacy and confidentiality laws and policies

Data quality frameworks

Statistical planning instruments

National strategy for the development of statistics

Sectoral statistical plans

Subnational statistical plans

Statistical dissemination/communications strategy

Advance release calendar

Other

Main statistical dissemination products

Print publications

Online publications

Online data portals

Web application programming interfaces

Resources for users

Resources for the media

Resources for researchers

Main user/stakeholder coordination mechanisms

Main social media accounts

User support hotlines (email, telephone)

Statistical methodology

Main methodological manuals/publications

Main statistical classifications

Peer or expert reviews from international committees, national committees, professional associations, etc.

International statistical coordination

Office of international relations/cooperation

Role of supranational statistical agencies (e.g., Eurostat)

Participation in international statistical activities
