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Documents

International Principles Governing Official Statistics at the National Level: are they Relevant for the Statistical Work of International Organisations as well?

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1. Introduction*

Basic principles governing national statistical systems have recently been developed and adopted by two international organisations[1] and one supranational administration[2]. Their implementation falls in two parts: The use at national level and as criteria for accession to international organisations. The principles have been the object of discussions at various occasions, including meetings of the CES and its Bureau.

These principles have been instrumental in triggering a number of important structural adjustments at national level, especially for transition countries, and have contributed to creating and maintaining a credible institutional framework for NSIs and other producers of national official statistics within which they are able to carry out their statistical functions in a rapidly changing environment to the satisfaction of users.

However, the questions of whether these basic principles should be applied, and if this question is given a positive reply in principle, of how they could be applied to the statistical work carried out within the international organisations themselves, has, to the knowledge of the authors, not been addressed in such meetings[3]. This might be interpreted either as a sign that this issue is not considered to be highly relevant for NSIs and better be left as internal affair to the Secretariats of international organisations without involving member countries, or as an indication that it is taken for granted that what international organisations preach to their (present and future) Member States is more or less automatically applied at the level of the organisation itself.

This paper, while giving some explanation to the lack of discussion on this issue up to now, will argue that both interpretations given fall short of reflecting the current state of affairs and the challenges of the future. It will give some arguments why is in the interest of national statisticians that a process of convergence of rules and practices of official statistics at national and international level be started, which implies, given the recent adaptations at national level, a kind of catching up process by the international organisations in this important, but hitherto mostly neglected area.

The issue of this paper is thus not with the quality of the figures but with the integrity of the process, for which standards established by organisations for assessing the frameworks in countries exist. It is both logical and practical to take them as a starting point for comparing the framework that govern the statistical work of international organisations with what exists at national level. It is our task to ensure that the credibility attributed to the international statistics by analogy to the national context is mirrored by an analogy (not meaning identity) of institutional frameworks for producers at national and international level and a comparable quality of the products.

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[1] UN/ECE and IMF.

[2] EU. The EU as a supranational administration is not covered by any reference to «international organisations» in this paper. Where appropriate, explicit references concerning the EU are added.

[3] In the EU, these issues have been addressed at various occasions (see end of chapter IV).

2. ECE/UN fundamental principles for national production and dissemination

Spelling out in practical terms what the ECE/UN fundamental principles mean for national production and dissemination could be done as follows:

- Official statistics has to cover «relevant» information needs of various users and of the public at large and transform these needs into operational (measurable) concepts which are compatible with statistical concepts and classifications defined at international level where they exist;

- Information needs have to be bundled and assigned to data collection instruments so as to make most efficient use of resources and minimise burden to respondents (this includes of course the maximum use of administrative data for statistical purposes);

- Producers of official statistics have to provide adequate information to respondents and guarantee the confidentiality of the data collected;

- All results have to be made accessible in an impartial (i.e. ubiquitous) way to all potential users. This includes an appropriate infrastructure for answering ad hoc requests on the base of existing data. The only legitimate reasons not to release results are privacy or data quality considerations;

- All metadata (concerning questionnaires, design, processing, definitions etc.) have to be accessible to all users.

The entire process takes place under the umbrella of professional independence for official statisticians, guaranteeing that all choices during this process are based strictly on scientific considerations and non-partisan. The legitimate role for decisions by non-professional authorities in this process are limited to the decision on what is relevant for data collection (including priorities), and on whether a proposed data collection is proportionate considering response burden and resources required on the one side, and the gain in relevant information on the other. All other decisions are strictly within the statistical system.

The professional independence is, in most countries, enshrined in a formal law, i.e. at a level of legislation which cannot be changed unilaterally by government. One of the key institutional safeguards is that there is one principle agency for the production and dissemination of statistics, the NSI, that is mentioned at the level of the law itself, with no other tasks assigned (especially tasks which could create conflicts of interests) than statistics, and sometimes with institutional features specific to the NSI. Many of the other fundamental principles are also enshrined either in the statistical law, or in lower level legislation, but in all cases the rules governing at least the statistical office are fully transparent and public.

The professional independence is a feature that sets the NSI clearly apart from «normal» administrative or executive agencies, which within the limits of laws continue to be governed by policy considerations. It has lead to a (depending on the country) more or less pronounced identity for official statisticians distinct from other civil servants or public employees.

3. What is the basic rationale for international organisations to carry out statistical work, and how has it changed over time and what is the relevance of the fundamental principles?

If one starts to consult the basic legal texts of international organisations, it is revealing that, with the notable exception of the EU, the article where statistical activities find their formal ground has not been changed (or complemented by other articles) since the creation of the organisation in the period after world war two. In the case of the OECD this is article 3 letter a of the Convention of 1960, by which Members «furnish the organisation with the information necessary for the accomplishments of its tasks». For the EU, it was (and formally still is) article 213 of the Rome Treaty, by which the «Commission may, within limits and under conditions laid down by the Council in accordance with the provisions of this Treat, collect any information and carry out any checks required for the performance of the tasks entrusted to it».

The terms of references of the UN Statistical Commission are set forth in Economic and Social Council resolution 8(I) and 8(II) of 1946. The Commission shall assist the Council i.a. «in promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability» and «in the development of the central statistical services of the Secretariat». For the IMF the Article VIII of Agreement provides that the Fund may require members to furnish it with such information as it deems necessary for its operation.

These articles have two things in common:

- they do not distinguish between information collected for statistical and other purposes as is the case at national level;

- collection of information is justified exclusively by the purpose of the organisation, with other users of the information not being mentioned.

The main reason why the national level distinguishes between data collected for statistical and other purposes lies in confidentiality and privacy considerations. For international organisations, this distinction does not seem very relevant, since they rarely themselves collect personal data or receive such data from NSIs.

International organisations are however a forum where confidential information of another type is exchanged between representatives of governments, or given to the Secretariat for the purposes of the organisation. Such information is not meant to be publicly accessible (or only in a condensed or purified version, or with some delay).

From the point of view of international organisations statistics can be covered by such a procedure because it leaves the decision of whether this information is public or not entirely with Member countries, and it allows the

collective products to be released if and only if all national figures are published anyway or, exceptionally, if everybody agrees. Given the second element mentioned above, publishing collective products is not an officially recognised objective of the organisation anyway, and is carried out as an option at the end of the whole process aimed at fulfilling the needs of the organisation only if it is considered to be in the interest of the organisation and its Member countries.

It is certainly justified to consider an organisation working under such rules to be, in the first instance, a user, and, where applicable, a redisseminator of national official statistics rather than a producer in its own right. At national level, the fundamental principles are meant to apply to producers of official

statistics, but they are not meant to address either the users or (private) redisseminators. If one were to accept this analogy, it would therefore be perfectly legitimate to argue that the fundamental principles do not apply to the statistical work of international organisations.

Do the original articles or paragraphs where the statistical activities find their formal ground still reflect the reality of what international organisations carry out as statistical work? Or, alternatively, has their role not stretched well beyond this user/redisseminator role so as to reach a level of production and dissemination which can be assimilated to the function of a NSI, except for data collection from individual respondents such as households or firms? Would it not be more appropriate to describe today's role of at least some international organisations as producers and disseminators of «official» statistics of their own, i.e. of statistics which offer a substantial value added beyond a mere redissemination of national figures[4]?

The answer to this questions depends on three elements:

- in what way do international organisations process, adapt or modify the figures they receive or take over from national statistics in order to make them ready for internal (and external) use?

- to what extent has the dissemination to external users gained in importance compared to the internal use?

- how important is the group of international users of statistical products, be it in the Secretariats of the international organisations themselves, in the national administrations and policy makers, in multinational companies (or in general companies with international relationships), media and the public at large?

The third question is in fact the most important. Even if one disagrees about the exact meaning and even more so about the implications of the term globalisation, a growing demand for internationally comparable figures is one aspect everybody seems to agree with. More and more decision-making is based, directly or indirectly, on international statistics (rather than on purely national figures), be it by administrations or markets. It is therefore fair to say that products with international statistics have a far greater actual or potential impact today than when these organisations started their work. It is certainly in this respect that products with international statistics have assumed a significance which equals, if not surpasses in certain areas, that of national products. Statistical products have also become an important aspect of the image of the organisation with the public.

Given that the origin of international figures lies in national official statistics with their credibility backed by an institutional framework in line with the fundamental principles, and given that the international figures are produced and disseminated by international organisations controlled by the same national governments which, at national level, have agreed to see national statistics produced in accordance with the fundamental principles, the credibility and quality label of national official statistics is, at least in the eye of non-specialists, more or less automatically extended to international statistical products.

Growing demand, and growing production, of international statistics are matters of fact, and they make the first element above, the degree of own processing within international organisations, even more important. When there is a great demand for international statistics, even the mere «assemblage» of national figures in one table, using trivial methods like conversion to a common currency or base-year, adding footnotes which should guide users in terms of assessing comparability, and presenting

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[4] Value added to be interpreted here in terms of statistical products, and not in terms of statistics being an input into policy-analytical work at international level, be it for one country or a group of countries.

this table with a common terminology in widely used languages, offers a considerable value added to users primarily interested in international comparisons. The value added is clearly different from what a redisseminator of national statistics might add to the original national products. The figures will be seen under a totally different perspective if they are part of international tables implying comparisons than if they simply appear as national time-series.

Adjustment of national figures to increase comparability or coherence for international users has gained in importance as well, with the adjustments carried out directly by NSIs or within the international organisations. In certain areas such as PPPs, a crucial part of processing takes place at international level, and it is impossible to calculate national figures without integrating data from other countries.

Another important aspect has to be added here. The recent upgrading of institutional and legislative bases for national statistics was in part caused by the technical development in data processing. Being able to recombine data beyond the pre-conceived tables in publications so as to answer ad hoc requests was a milestone in extending the usefulness of statistics and range of users, which called for a more explicit and more comprehensive coverage of the dissemination role of official statistics (and of confidentiality as well). There is no reason why the data collected by international organisations should not offer the same potential. What can receive in addition to published figures and publicly accessible databases is limited (although it differs from one organisation to another), due rather to institutional than technical reasons.

Coming back to the original question whether the role of international organisations has gone beyond that of a mere user and redisseminator, the answer has to be yes. Some subject areas may be further advanced concerning the significance and use of international figures, but it will be a question of time until all subject areas will have a market for international comparisons. The production and dissemination process of internationally comparable statistics will increasingly be seen as one important product line of statistical work to which national and international actors contribute (and where the exact division of work may change over time), but where it is as unimportant for the user to know exactly who contributed what as it is for the user of any other end-product. There has to be an overall quality and credibility label attached to such products, and this can only be ascertained if national and international actors adhere to the same basic principles as regards quality and integrity.

NSIs have not shown a great degree of interest in the production and dissemination work of international organisations, since they are, in general, not users of such data. Their main concern seems to have been to reduce the response burden caused by international work, and to ask for maximum co-ordination in data requests (including requests for metadata) from and form filling for international organisations. In international meetings such as the CES, the production and dissemination work of the Secretariat gets little attention, if any. Even less attention has been given to the environment in which such production and dissemination takes place. It is only the setting of statistical standards (since they are meant to be standards for countries), which are a partial, but important exception (for this latter aspect, see chapter V).

One reason for this state of affair may be that we have not (yet) experienced any major row caused through the dissemination of international statistics, and we may conclude from that that the institutional framework under which our colleagues within the international organisations work is sufficiently robust to be comparable with the national environment. But we should look forward and ask the question: are these frameworks sufficiently robust for meeting the growing demand for international statistics with the same credibility as national frameworks are for their customers?

4. A comparison of national and international producers of statistics

If the production and dissemination process for national and international statistics are compared, the following differences can be noted:

- There are much more data available within the international organisations than are published. Some are used exclusively for the Secretariat (or even part of the Secretariat), some may be accessible for administrations (or specific parts of the administrations) of member countries, but only a small proportion is publicly accessible (although, in absolute terms, availability has increased as shown before). When there is a public release of statistics, public access is often not simultaneous with the access for privileged users within the Secretariat or in national administrations.

- The specification of metadata still leaves much to be desired. This covers metadata on national practices for producing the figures used in the international products, the international definitions and concepts used, and especially the transformations added to national figures at international level. The questionnaires by which international organisations collect data from Member countries are seldom publicly available. Since comparability between countries is still fragile, users need more meta-information in order to be able to assess whether the data are sufficiently comparable for the purpose they have in mind.

- International organisations do not excel in bundling information requests from inside and handling them in a way which is least burdensome for the respondents, in this case the national administrations and most often the NSIs. Too often, ad hoc requests are simply transformed into a questionnaire without proper investigation whether the data are already available (either in another department or with another international organisation) or could simply be retrieved from national on-line databases. On the other hand, the bundling of regular core information requests in a given subject area between international organisations and the subsequent sharing of data has made progress.

- A striking difference between the national and international level is the lack of institutional specificity for statistics within most international organisations, separating them clearly from policy-oriented work. There is no equivalent in the formal rules to the professional independence for (at least the key phases of) statistical work, or with other words, the same rules apply to statistical and other departments. As a consequence, policy bodies have to agree on statistical issues, including definitions and concepts, at various phases in the statistical production and dissemination process. The release of results is frequently governed by the same rules as the release of other information, which implies a clearance procedure involving non-statisticians. Even if the practice within an organisation has arrived at a de facto difference between statistical publications and other publications (as is often the case for regular products), this exception is not written down explicitly and may therefore be in jeopardy when it could matter most. Whatever the rules, they are seldom written down very clearly, and if they are, they are not easily accessible to Member countries, let alone to the public. This lack of specificity for statistics has also prevented the creation of an identity as official statisticians at international level distinct from an international civil servant. Knowledge about these fundamental principles is not widespread among staff working in the production and dissemination of statistics and are generally considered not to be of direct relevance to their work. Awareness of the principles is sometimes even more reduced with consultants engaged by international organisations who visit countries in order to advise them on statistical issues.

In this absence of specificity for statistics, there is a striking parallel between international organisations and some producers at national level other than the NSIs. The Special Dissemination Standard of the IMF does not only cover statistics produced by NSIs, but also those by Central Banks and ministries of finance. It is revealing to see some of the metadata in the SDDS Bulletin Board concerning the integrity of Central Bank statistics: the comments are about the independence of the Central Bank from the government, but not about the independence of the statistical department within the Central Bank from the policy departments of the Central Bank, as it should be. The request to document the rules by which the production and dissemination of official statistics by Central Banks and ministries of finance is governed has shown to be much more difficult than for NSIs. At best, such activities are also covered by the statistical law, but otherwise there are no specific rules distinguishing statistics from other activities within the same organisation. The IMF standards will be very instrumental in bridging this gap, and it may well be worth considering what could be done to create an incentive to bridge the parallel gap between NSI work and work within international organisations.

The first and the last elements presented above are the key differences between national and international statistical institutions. Another way of putting this finding is that the notion of official statistics, within international organisations, is often blurred at best, and sometimes ignored. This is of course in line with the user/redisseminator philosophy described at the outset of the paper, but it is difficult to see how this can be a recipe for the future.

This may be the place to have a closer look at statistics within the EU. As a supranational system, the relationships between the Commission and the national administrations of EU (an by extension EEA) countries are of a different character because of the pooling of sovereignty in some areas and the much more intense decision-making at EU level, to which comparable statistics are supposed to be an essential input. Consequently, the issues addressed in this paper have been taken up in EU bodies, and some recent changes in legislation are a clear signal of the catching up process in which the institutional framework for statistics at the EU level is currently engaged. In this respect, international organisations could find some inspiration from the EU process.

For a very long time, the Statistical Office of the EU, EUROSTAT, was one Directorate General (DG) among many others. The legal texts on statistics referred, without any difference in impact, sometimes to the Commission, sometimes to EUROSTAT (or the SOEC), and sometimes to «the Commission (EUROSTAT)». The first clear break in this philosophy was introduced through the Council regulation No. 1588/90 on the transmission of data subject to statistical confidentiality to the SOEC, adopted in 1990. In this legal act, it was made very clear that data subject to statistical confidentiality and transmitted by NSIs to EUROSTAT had to remain with EUROSTAT and are not accessible to anybody else within the Commission. It is interesting to note that the demand for detailed break-downs of national data, necessary as building blocks in order to produce tailor-made, specific aggregates for decision-making at the EU level, was sufficiently strong to get such a regulation adopted. The next step was the Council regulation 322/97 on Community Statistics from 1997, which is an equivalent in substance and form to national statistical laws, and contains in its chapter III most of the fundamental principles of the UN/ECE list to be applicable both at national and supranational level. For the latter, this legal act refers to the Commission, and EUROSTAT as the statistical office of the Commission comparable to a NSI at national level is only introduced at a lower level of legislation (Commission Decision 97/281). Finally, the Amsterdam summit of June 1997 has agreed to introduce, in the basic Treaties of the EU, an article 213a concerning Community statistics, which enshrines a list of key principles at what might be called the constitutional or primary level of EU legislation. Such an article, once in force, could form the base for bringing, through appropriate secondary legislation, the institutional framework for Community statistics even closer to those prevailing at national level by i.e. allowing it to deviate, in some aspects, from the general framework applicable to all other DGs.

5. Statistical standards, indicators and the question of who decides on relevance

The elaboration and adoption of statistical standards has been the part of the statistical work of international organisations where NSIs have been most involved and shown the greatest interest. It is easy to see why: these standards do not only determine what the international organisations collect from member countries as part of the production process described above, but they increasingly determine the ways NSIs collect and process data, notably the terminology and classifications used.

The ways such standards are prepared and adopted at international level shows a great deal of variety. There are examples where the whole process, up to the final adoption, lies entirely with statisticians and bodies composed of official statisticians from countries and international organisations. There are other areas where the whole process is under the umbrella and control of policy-makers (to which statisticians are associated, but with no formal power of decision-making) or of a mixed body composed of either statisticians and policy-makers, or of statisticians and representatives from outside the government (an example is the Conference of Labour Statisticians of the ILO).

At national level, it is clear that the decision on what information needs should be served by using the resources of official statistics is a decision at the policy level. This is the function of statistical programmes which are adopted either by governments or sometimes even by parliaments. It is important that the policy makers can address their information needs to statisticians, and that they can make resources available for this purpose. The statistical system has to show that it can react to such requests in an efficient way; otherwise it is soon considered as being inflexible and bureaucratic.

It has to be admitted that the international statistical system is generally rather slow in reacting to policy needs expressed at the international level, even within the organisations themselves. This is unfortunate, given the growing importance of international statistics. It is even less reactive to users of international data who cannot make their needs heard through bodies of international organisations. There is a lack of systematic attempts to find out about what different types of users of international statistics want. At the national level, most NSIs have started to do this, in order to provide an input to policy makers when they have to decide on the statistical programme and in order to anticipate on future needs. There is nothing even remotely similar to this at the international level[5]. Bringing international statistics in line with the fundamental principles implies the recognition that statistics serves a variety of users and are not only established for the narrowly defined purposes of the organisations. As a corollary, ways have to be found to detect what the needs of various users are with respect to international data, and a visible intervention of a suitable policy body to determine which of these needs are the most relevant to be provided with resources has to take place.

There are international organisations such as OECD or IMF which have recognised the risk of too little involvement of policy-makers as regards statistical information needs. In these organisations, standards setting remains in many subject areas under the control of a policy body. Whereas this is an excellent way of ensuring that the statistical work covers effective information needs and is not a purely intellectual exercise, it has its risks during and at the end of such a process when a policy body „adopts« statistical standards such as the Frascati manual, including standards for definitions and methods of data collection which, according to the fundamental principles, should fall under the

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[5] Again, the Community Statistical Programmes of the EU are an exception to this. The preparation of such prorgammes inludes the consultation of users within and outside the Commission, in addition to Member countries. The five year programme for 1998 – 2002 has recently been approved by the Commission for transmission to Council and Parliament.

professional independence of statisticians. Will a senior representative from a national ministry, who is a member of such a body, not be tempted to ask for a similar role at national level?[6]

It is fair to say that until now there are very few instances where such bodies have altered the technical specifications of such standards proposed for adoption. There is a growing tendency however, that the technical preparation phase of such standards will be unduly affected by non-professional considerations on one hand, and neglect professional input by statisticians on the other.

The risk of the latter is greater for international organisations focused on one area only. They lack the opportunity to bring statistical knowledge from various subject areas together, and this may have a negative impact on the quality of their statistical work. Such organisations also tend to have ministries as their main interlocutor at national level, and the possibilities for NSIs to influence the statistical work of such organisations, especially with respect to standard setting, may be rather limited, if they are aware of such work at all. Institutional fragmentation of statistics by subject area has obvious drawbacks in terms of multiple use of the same data. Information needs tend to become more interdisciplinary, and the potential for taking this aspect into proper account is certainly greater with international organisations that produce statistics in many areas. These organisations also tend to have more direct links to NSIs, who are the only existing national interlocutors available for this type of issues.

The interference of non-professional considerations with the specification of technical standards is a by-product of a specific type of use of international data that is of increasing importance. There is a growing tendency to use international figures for what we might call «operational» purposes at international level in the sense of indicators which determine the allocation of funds, membership contributions, eligibility for a specific international scheme etc. Such types of use are common at national level as well. The difference is that at national level, such operational systems have mostly been in existence before official statistics started to produce relevant statistics, and these systems used their own definitions and concepts and created their own administrative flow of data which are used as input into statistics rather than the other way round. An example is the income tax declaration: tax authorities used concepts of income long before national accounts set standards for statistics. These authorities can adapt their concept of income independently of any revision of the national accounts, and national accountants can implements new standards without paying much attention to the income concept used for tax purposes.

At international level, however, statistical concepts and figures have preceded such schemes. When these schemes were set up, policy makers were happy enough to be able to use a «neutral» concept which nobody could criticise for being biased. Statisticians were happy as well, since this was an example of practical use of international statistics. The problems started to emerge either when policy makers wanted the statistical definitions to become more precise for their specific purpose (ignoring all other users), or when statisticians, because of other users, started to revise and adapt the concepts, while those responsible for the funding scheme rejected the revision because it affected the payments in an undesirable way. Policy-makers started therefore to become very vigilant of such definitional issues, and tried to influence the work of statisticians in their way. One may even say that there is a risk of statistical concepts being highjacked by one specific use, with a subsequent risk of concepts becoming too rigid and inflexible for other users. This risk increases if the key for allocating money is

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[6] The EU's decision making on standards does involve the policy level mainly because of the compulsory character of such standards for Member countries and the implications for national resources and take the form of adoption of legal acts. Technical specifications are sometimes included as part such legal acts, and sometimes delegated to legislation at a lower level. The decision body for the latter is in many cases a statistical body (the Statistical Programme Committee).

enshrined in a precise way at a relatively high level of legislation: it is then institutionally easier to change the statistical concepts than to adapt the legislation concerning the allocation of funds.

A similar risk is with the definition of «indicators» without immediate consequence for funding or similar purposes. If official monitoring at international level should be carried out by using a specific type of indicators, policy makers have a desire to influence the choice of indicators in a certain way, and to discourage the specification of alternative indicators which, although preferable on professional grounds, may give a less favourable picture.

The different international organisations handle these issue in a very different way, sending mixed signals. The picture has become even more blurred through the growing importance of the environment area (the integration of which into official statistics is accomplished at very different degrees even at national level) and the subsequent creation of new international actors specific to this area. At international level, there is no analogy to an essential function of statistical laws at national level, viz. harmonising some aspects of the decision-making procedure on statistics, notably on surveys, irrespective of which agency within the administration will ultimately carry out the work. Looking at the fundamental principles and the way such issues are addressed at national level offers some guidance for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate interference of policy bodies in such an international context, although they are unlikely to answer all questions.

It is clearly legitimate for policy-makers to decide on the key they want to use for raising funds, allocating money or determining eligibility. Statisticians should provide them with some options, indicating the availability and robustness of the corresponding figures. Policy-makers may either choose one of these concepts as such, take an existing statistical concept and apply some corrections on their own, or reject all statistical concepts (in which case they would have to organise their own data collection, which, at an international level, looks more difficult than at an national level). In order not to fall into the trap described above, statisticians should encourage policy-makers to make increasing use of the second method: figures for the original concept could then be defined and produced under the full professional independence of statisticians, whereas the corrections for the specific purpose in mind are defined by the policy-makers as a specific user and can be adapted independently of modifications of the basic statistical concepts. If policy-makers choose the first option, they should recognise that they are only one user of these concepts, and that such concepts may be changed for other reasons.

In the case of monitoring (in the large sense), policy-makers have to specify their information needs. The best ways of translating these information needs into operational concepts and data collection (comparable at international level) is a matter for statisticians to decide. Policy makers at the end may «adopt» the statistical standards, but only for the purpose of whether their information needs are indeed covered, and not with respect to the technical specifications. This latter function should be the prerogative of a statistical body.

In order to guarantee a constant exchange of information between policy makers and statisticians for this type of issues, mixed bodies with advisory (but no decision) functions may play an important role. Most countries have established advisory bodies for exactly this purpose; they play a key role in issues at national level such as revising the consumer price index which are similar to the one described above. It would be unfortunate if the development of international standards (with their determining influence on national standards) were biased by either too much policy influence or too little policy relevance. The closer the institutional frameworks for developing work in statistics at the national and international level are, the smaller is this risk.

6. Some practical proposals to move forward

Defining which production/dissemination activities of international organisations fall under an umbrella of official statistics (and what products can claim the corresponding label as results of official statistics) should be the first step in the further implementation of the fundamental principles in the work of international organisations. The second step is to specify and write down the rules that are meant to govern such activities. The scope of what official statistics covers at international level should be broader than the activities of statistical departments; there may be a greater need for statistical activities in other departments for starting a catching up process, since the results tend to be less disseminated to the public and the activities less integrated with related statistical work than what is carried out by statistical departments of international organisations. Statistical departments may act as a shining example for other statistical activities within the same organisation in this respect, and they should be given the responsibility and the instruments to ensure that these basic rules are gradually implemented across the board.

Once it is decided what is relevant for an international organisation to collect data about, there is no reason why the policy level should intervene in the production and dissemination process at the international level. The situation is even more clear-cut than at national level: there are no confidentiality considerations, and the issue of response burden can be legitimately covered by NSIs. Only the question of resources, both at the international and national level, justifies a role for a policy body in the subsequent decision making process, especially if there is a de iure or de facto obligation for member countries to produce figures they would not have produced otherwise.

As a practical proposal, one might start with distinguishing between, on the one hand, regular production/data collection activities by international organisation, including the statistical products (whether regular, continuous or ad hoc) derived from them, and ad hoc collection of data (and the subsequent processing and dissemination which may result). The first type of activities and products would fall under a new definition of official statistics at international level, whereas the second would remain in the traditional user/dissemination framework as long as it is not sufficiently regular to change status. It would then be necessary to create explicit rules which enable all users to access the data from the first category. Practically, this implies continuously updated databases with access for all users (and with updates being available simultaneously for everybody). A minimum list of metadata should be included, with pointers to the rest. This is of course a daunting task, and it can be implemented only gradually. The principle should, however, be established at the beginning and in a visible way for each organisation which wants to officially act as a producer of international statistics.

NSIs have to become more involved in the production and dissemination work of international organisations in a mutually beneficial way beyond the transmission of national data as inputs. This is not meant to be a plea for involving NSIs in the micro-management of international organisations, but for helping them that a catching up process gets started, makes progress and gets support from and visibility to users both within and outside of the organisation. This process may start in areas where NSIs feel (or anticipate) a demand from national users to act not only as a disseminator of national data, but as redisseminator of international data, with appropriate explanations added. In taking over a role in this respect, NSIs implicitly guarantee that the data they redisseminate have a similar quality and integrity label as the national products, and they would have a greater incentive than today to care about the quality and metadata aspects of international data.

It will also take a lot of time and energy to rearrange the decision-making processes on standards at international level. The first step might be to ensure that all statistical standards are adopted by the UN Statistical Commission, whatever the subject area. This may (or even should) be in addition to an adoption by a policy body (within any organisation of the UN family or the OECD) for ensuring that relevant information needs are addressed (and for resource questions where relevant), but not for the specifications. With such a system, the confusing signals sent out by today's fragmented system of

international statistics would gradually give way to a better structure, in which the respective roles of policy-makers and statisticians are in line with the spirit of the fundamental principles. This is likely to serve both policy-makers and national and international official statisticians alike.

As regards the use and misuse of statistical results and statistical concepts for what was called operational purposes at international level in this paper, statisticians have to devote more time to explain the role and limits of official statistics to international policy-makers in a similar way this is done at national level, and to be involved in discussions about possible indicators at a much earlier stage than it is the case today. International and national policy–makers are in many instances the same persons, and it seems logical that such a person could easily accept as proper practice at international level what has been successfully in operation at national level for ensuring the credibility of official statistics. There are few fora for regular dialogues between policy-makers and statisticians at the present moment.

The ultimate and decisive criteria for whether the international system of official statistics is creating a value added that is sufficient to justify its existence is not with standards as such, but with the production and dissemination of timely, comparable and high-quality data about relevant issues in ways that meet user needs. This is exactly the same objective that is the raison d'être for national systems of official statistics and consequently appears in a highly visible way in many corporate plans of NSIs. If the basic objectives are the same (although, to give an example, comparability at international level may occasionally not entirely coincide with the type of comparability that is most important from a purely national point of view), the basic principles that so many countries have officially recognised as being crucial at national level should indeed become applicable at all levels, the international organisations included. The ways (the plural is essential) of how to translate these common principles into operational measures and organisational structures may vary in the same way as they vary between countries, but this is not the same as declaring all existing mechanisms and frameworks as being fully compatible. It is therefore important that, as a visible starting point, the objective of bringing these framework into closer line with these principles be identified, highlighted and accepted not only by the community of official statisticians, but by whatever body acts in the role of »legislator» for each international organisation concerned.

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