

Towards Principles for Access to Data for Official Statistics

Discussion note

**by the United Nations Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics
for the 13th World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Symposium (WTIS)
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Introduction

In 2014, the UN Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics (GWG) was established by the UN Statistical Commission in response to the emergence of Big Data sources, which have a high potential as sources for official statistics. A number of national and international statistical and other organizations are represented in the GWG, including ITU. One of the tasks of the GWG is to formulate principles for access to Big Data sources for official statistics, reflecting the need to strike a balance between the legitimate interests of organizations holding Big Data and the demand for Big Data for official statistics. The access principles are meant to be based on an appeal to the social responsibility of those organizations and are closely linked to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which are attached to this note.

In 2015, the GWG produced such draft principles. They were discussed at the 2nd Global Conference on Big Data for Official Statistics, which was held in Abu Dhabi from 20 to 22 October 2015. The draft principles appeared to be generally supported by the statistical community. However, it was also noted that the access principles should be broadened to all types of data held by private organizations, and that there is also an urgent need for similar principles concerning data held by national administrations.

After the Global Conference in Abu Dhabi, the GWG modified the draft principles in order to cover all types of data held by private organizations. This note contains these broadened draft principles. It is the intention of the GWG to consult stakeholders on the draft principles, in particular stakeholders outside the statistical community. This is the reason that this note was written for the WTIS-15. Comments on the draft principles are most welcome.

The UN Statistics Division (UNSD) and the GWG are currently considering how to address the need for similar principles concerning data held by national administrations. This may ultimately lead to one integrated set of access principles for official statistics, covering all types of proprietary data held by any organization. The consultation process will show whether there is sufficient support for formal adoption of the access principles by an appropriate UN body. In addition to establishing access principles, implementation guidelines will be needed that are specific to industries and data sources. In collaboration with the GWG, UNSD will contact relevant bodies in order to foster the development of such guidelines.

Comments on this document should be sent to indicators@itu.int

Draft Principles for Access to Data from Private Organizations for Official Statistics

Preamble

The *[name of the appropriate international body]*

- (1) Taking notice** of the high and urgent need for access to data kept by private organizations for the production of official statistics, such as indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals and statistics on phenomena related to modern society, and the social responsibility already shown by private organizations to provide access to new data sources, free of charge, for purposes such as disaster relief and the fight against epidemics,
- (2) Bearing in mind** that in using such data the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, as endorsed by the UN General Assembly¹, unconditionally apply, and that the statistical community has pledged to adhere to the professional ethics, as stated in the Declaration on Professional Ethics, as adopted by the International Statistical Institute², thereby creating the foundation for sharing data for official statistics,
- (3) Recognizing** the legitimate interests of private organizations, including respect for their business model and value proposition, and the need to guarantee a level playing field for private organizations considering the burden created by providing data for official statistics, as well as the legitimate interest of organizations in charge of compiling official statistics to have equal access,
- (4) Stressing** that the burden to private organizations resulting from data requests for official statistics must be fair in proportion to their envisaged public benefits and that the data should be adequate and relevant in relation to the purposes for which they are requested,
- (5) Considering** that legislation aimed at accessing and using data kept by private organizations unavoidably lags the emergence of new types of data sources, that existing national and international legal frameworks fully apply but need interpretation in view of new data sources, especially concerning privacy, data ownership, reuse of data by third parties, and liability in case of breaches of confidentiality, and that there is thus a need for guiding principles,
- (6) Highlighting** the need to create public trust by applying full transparency in the use of data from private organizations for official statistics, in particular in view of privacy concerns, given a number of well-publicized cases of likely abuse outside the realm of official statistics, and the need to provide clarity concerning the possible use for statistical purposes of personal data in customer contracts with private organizations, for instance by referring to the Principles set out below,
- (7) Acknowledging** that private data sources are diverse in many respects, such as data ownership, provenance of the data, purpose of collecting the data, and characteristics of the data itself, and that providing access to the data can take a variety of shapes, such as sending micro data to statistical agencies, providing aggregates compiled according to specifications from statistical agencies, or providing on-site data access for analysis,
- (8) Admitting** that source and branch specific principles and operational rules and guidelines may be needed for dealing with access to data kept by private organizations, that such rules and guidelines should be based on the Principles set out below, that before access is requested for the purpose of producing official statistics data

¹ Resolution 68/261, adopted by the General Assembly on 29 January 2014.

² This declaration was adopted by the Council of the International Statistical Institute in its session of 22 and 23 July 2010, in Reykjavik, Iceland.

exploration may be necessary in collaboration with the private data source, and that this requires the development of partnerships between private organizations providing and statistical agencies using data,

Endorses the following principles for access to data from private organizations for the production of official statistics:

Principles

Principle 1. The role of national and international systems of official statistics is to provide relevant, high-quality information to society in an impartial way. This role is indispensable to the well-functioning of societies. To this end, data is needed from private organizations as inputs to these systems. In view of the emergence of new types of data sources and the social responsibility of private organizations, these members of society are called upon to make the data that is needed available to the statistical agency concerned, free of charge, on a voluntary basis.

Principle 2. The data needed for official statistics may only be collected and processed if the statistical agency concerned acts in full accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics³. These principles guarantee, among other things, the professional independence and accountability of the statistical agency, and the strictly confidential use of the data, exclusively for statistical purposes.

Principle 3. When data is collected from private organizations for the purpose of producing official statistics, the fairness of the distribution of the burden across those organizations has to be considered, in order to guarantee a level playing field.

Principle 4. Data requests for official statistics must acknowledge and take into account the role of data in the business model and value proposition of private organizations, in particular if their data has market value. There must be a fair balance between public and business interests when data is requested and possible harm to business interests has to be kept as low as possible.

Principle 5. The data must be adequate and relevant in relation to the purposes for which it is requested from the private organization. No more data should be requested than needed for these purposes. Operational arrangements have to be agreed on between the private organization and the statistical agency concerned, taking into account business concerns and data adequacy for official statistics. The metadata must also be adequate.

Principle 6. The cost and effort of providing data access, including possible pre-processing, must be reasonable compared to the expected public benefit of the official statistics envisaged.

Principle 7. When private organizations operate internationally, they are expected to treat requests for data from national statistical systems in a non-discriminatory way, unless different treatment is justified by differences in the national legislative frameworks concerned, and provided that adherence to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics is guaranteed in theory as well as practice.

Principle 8. Full transparency about the provision of data to national and international statistical systems has to be exercised by private organizations as well as statistical authorities in order to ensure public trust and to support a level playing field for private organizations and an equal treatment of national statistical systems by them. In particular, private organizations have to make sure that their customers are aware of the possible use of their data for the purpose of official statistics, in full adherence with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

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

Annex: Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

The Economic and Social Council

Recalling recent resolutions⁴ of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council highlighting the fundamental importance of official statistics for the national and global development agenda,

Bearing in mind the critical role of high-quality official statistical information in analysis and informed policy decision-making in support of sustainable development, peace and security, as well as for mutual knowledge and trade among the States and peoples of an increasingly connected world, demanding openness and transparency,

Bearing in mind also that the essential trust of the public in the integrity of official statistical systems and confidence in statistics depend to a large extent on respect for the fundamental values and principles that are the basis of any society seeking to understand itself and respect the rights of its members, and in this context that professional independence and accountability of statistical agencies are crucial,

Stressing that, in order to be effective, the fundamental values and principles that govern statistical work have to be guaranteed by legal and institutional frameworks and be respected at all political levels and by all stakeholders in national statistical systems,

Endorses the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics set out below, as adopted by the Statistical Commission in 1994⁵ and reaffirmed in 2013, and recommends them further to the General Assembly for endorsement.

Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Principle 1. Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information.

Principle 2. To retain trust in official statistics, the statistical agencies need to decide according to strictly professional considerations, including scientific principles and professional ethics, on the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data.

Principle 3. To facilitate a correct interpretation of the data, the statistical agencies are to present information according to scientific standards on the sources, methods and procedures of the statistics.

Principle 4. The statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics.

Principle 5. Data for statistical purposes may be drawn from all types of sources, be they statistical surveys or administrative records. Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents.

Principle 6. Individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes.

⁴ These include General Assembly resolution 64/267 on "World Statistics Day", and Economic and Social Council resolutions 2006/6 on strengthening statistical capacity and 2005/13 on the 2010 World Population and Housing Census Programme.

⁵ For the original preamble used on the occasion of the initial adoption of the Principles in 1994, see the report on the Statistical Commission on its special session (E/1994/29), chapter V, available from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/94report.pdf>. More information on the Fundamental Principles and their history is available from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx>.

Principle 7. The laws, regulations and measures under which the statistical systems operate are to be made public.

Principle 8. Coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.

Principle 9. The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts, classifications and methods promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels.

Principle 10. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.