

Recommended Practices on the Use of Non-Official Sources in International Statistics¹

Preamble

Recommended practices on the use of non-official sources are guided by the existing *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics*, the *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities* and the existing *Quality Assurance Frameworks* of international and supranational organizations. The following practices are particularly relevant since they acknowledge that, as a rule, national official statistics strive to achieve the highest quality standards and that international organizations have to base their choice on data sources exclusively in relation to professional standards.

Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

- 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 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, sustainability in time and the burden on respondents.

Principles Governing International Statistical Activities

- Principle 1. High quality international statistics, accessible for all, are a fundamental element of global information systems. Good practices include:
 - Compiling and disseminating international statistics based on impartiality.
- Principle 2. To maintain the trust in international statistics, their production is to be impartial and strictly based on the highest professional standards. Good practices include:
 - Using strictly professional considerations for decisions on methodology, terminology and data presentation.
- Principle 4. Concepts, definitions, classifications, sources, methods and procedures employed in the production of international statistics are chosen to meet professional scientific standards and are made transparent for the users. Good practices include:
 - Documenting how data are collected, processed and disseminated, including information about editing mechanisms applied to country data;

¹ The practices set out relate to data series that are regularly compiled by national statistical authorities and subsequently disseminated by international organizations as part of their regular statistical work.

- Giving credit, in the dissemination of international statistics, to the original source and using agreed quotation standards when re-using statistics originally collected by others.
- Principle 5. Sources and methods for data collection are appropriately chosen to ensure timeliness and other aspects of quality, to be cost-efficient and to minimize the reporting burden for data providers. Good practices include:
 - Facilitating the provision of data by countries;
 - Working systematically on the improvement of the timeliness of international statistics;
 - Ensuring that national statistical offices and other national organizations for official statistics are duly consulted and advocating that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are applied when data are collected in countries.

Quality Assurance Frameworks adopted by International organizations

Various international and supranational organizations have established detailed quality frameworks in line with the *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* and the *Principles Governing International Statistical Activities*. These frameworks were taken into account when establishing the recommended practices below.

Recommended Practices

Official statistics is typically the best source of information for data used by international organizations, however, there are instances when international organizations need to use non-official sources to fill gaps or to improve data quality and comparability. While each international organization makes decisions on data sources on the basis of its own needs and its data quality framework, the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities recognizes the following practices as the recommended approach to handle non-official data at international level:

Use of non-official sources

1. Non-official sources may be used by international organizations in compiling official statistics to reach the following objectives:
 - a. to give background or context to data from official sources;
 - b. to assess data received from official sources on their plausibility;
 - c. to apply transformations to national official data in the interests of international comparability or for the purpose of producing new indicators (for example, applying different classifications, base years or units of measurement or construct per capita ratios);
 - d. to construct international data series in fields which are not covered by existing official sources;
 - e. to impute national data where national official data do not exist or are of proven poor quality;
 - f. to impute missing values within an official national time series;
 - g. to extend time series.

2. Only professional scientific standards are used in determining sources of data and estimations in international statistical series. Accuracy, relevance, independence, stability and expected availability over time are among the most important factors to be considered by international organizations. Non-official sources are considered instead of national official sources only when national official sources are not available or are of proven poor quality.
3. Non-official data may be used and disseminated by international organizations only after a thorough quality assessment of available official national and international statistics. In such review, priority is given to data produced by national authorities within national statistical systems or as officially provided to the international organization by national authorities.
4. The quality of the data-generation process embedded in the non-official source is reviewed before the source is adopted. The availability of consistent time-series is one of the criteria to be used to evaluate the quality of non-official statistics. The quality of the metadata provided by the non-official source may be used as an indicator of the seriousness of its statistical production.

Consultation

5. Relevant national official source organizations are consulted as appropriate when non-official data are published for single countries that fill gaps in official time series.
6. In case of a dispute between an international organization and national institutions on statistics to be included in international statistical series, the international organization initiates a technical consultation with national official sources with the purpose of finding a common position which does not compromise the quality standards of the international organization and national official sources. It is expected that the majority of controversial cases are resolved with technical consultations, but in the rare case that an agreement cannot be achieved, the international organization may opt for one of the following actions:
 - a. Publish the data submitted by national official sources with a footnote which explains the non-compliance of the data with international quality standards;
 - b. Leave a gap and not publish any data;
 - c. Publish the data according to the international organization's standards and acknowledge the data provided by national official sources;
 - d. Publish data according to the international organization's standards.
7. Methodology and criteria for selecting non-official sources are clearly stated in the international organization's quality framework which is widely accessible. International organizations are encouraged to facilitate information sharing with national counterparts to discuss and review data quality methods applied at international level.
8. International organizations make reasonable efforts to overcome the gaps in national data availability and quality that lead to the use of non-official sources and they prioritize capacity building programmes in the areas where these gaps are more acute. When deciding on the use of non-official sources, international organizations carefully consider

if the use of non-official sources by international organizations may undermine the efforts of national statistical systems.

Documentation

9. Consistent criteria for determining the selection of non-official sources or the production of original estimations and imputations are properly documented and made equally accessible to all users.

Dissemination

10. Non-official data are disseminated with clear and easily accessible metadata. They may be flagged when disseminated to inform users about the different nature of the source or to clearly separate data from official and non-official sources. Sources of non-official data and methodology used to construct new indicators or impute national data are made transparent and visible.