Economic and Social Council

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Item 6 of the provisional agenda*
Statutory issues

Progress report on the transformation and modernization of national statistical systems in Africa

I.   Background

1.   High-quality statistics are required for evidence-based decision-making, and for monitoring and evaluating progress made towards the realization of international, regional and national development goals, plans and priorities, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union; and national development plans and priorities. There is, therefore, a high and ever-increasing demand for national statistical systems across the world to produce and disseminate high-quality statistics. High-quality data are needed to monitor progress towards the achievement of development goals, plans and priorities to ensure that no one is left behind and to respond to user needs. The production and use of statistics support better and more sound decisions, policies and plans that improve the well-being of the population.

2.   Some African countries are stuck in a vicious cycle of low interest in and demand for quality statistics for evidence-based decision-making. Low interest and demand may result in weak statistical institutions that have poor governance structures; inadequate staffing levels, infrastructure and tools; low human capacity of both data producers and users; and a lack of coordination and collaboration mechanisms within data systems. These challenges, in turn, result in low-quality data, which reinforce the initial position of lack of interest and demand, in particular at the policy level.

3.   The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis has highlighted the vulnerability of African national statistical systems. During teleconferences of heads of national statistical offices organized by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to deliberate on the impact of COVID-19 on statistical activities, the Directors General of national statistical offices discussed mitigation measures to continue delivering the core mandate of statistical offices and concluded that there was an imperative need to transform and modernize national statistical systems on the continent. At its seventh meeting, held from 13 to 15 October 2020, the Statistical Commission for Africa approved the creation of an African group on transformation and modernization of official

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* E/ECA/COE/40/1.

statistics, composed of 10 directors general of national statistical offices and requested that ECA undertake its operationalization (see E/ECA/STATCOM/7/12). The mission of the Group is to strategically guide and coordinate work on the modernization and transformation of national statistical systems in Africa.

4.   Furthermore, the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, during its fifty-third session, held in hybrid format in Addis Ababa on 22 and 23 March 2021, endorsed the creation of an African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics, composed of 10 directors general of national statistical offices. The Conference encouraged the group to pave the way and propose regional guidance and standards for modernization and transformation of national statistical systems.

5.   The present report contains a description of the progress made thus far in the operationalization of the group and short-term prospects for its work.

II.   The African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics and its technical teams

6.   The Bureau of the Statistical Commission for Africa nominated 10 directors general to be members of the African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics for a four-year mandate, taking into account regional and language representation and considering the different levels of statistical development of national statistical offices in Africa.

7.   The objectives of the group are:

(a)   To identify priority modernization and transformation areas and domains of focus;

(b)   To identify challenges to the existing organizational structure of national statistical offices in Africa and propose a generic organizational structure that would accommodate changes;

(c)   To oversee and approve the development of frameworks, guidelines, methods and standards to support the transformation and modernization of official statistics in Africa;

(d)   To create, direct and oversee the work of subgroups that would deal with specific topics and issues;

(e)   To advise the Statistical Commission for Africa on issues of strategic importance to the modernization and transformation of official statistics in Africa;

(f)   To propose African champions, who would foster statistical development, including transformation on the continent, and advise Heads of State in promoting a culture of evidence-based decision-making.

8.   The group is composed of directors general of national statistical offices of the following countries:

(a)   For Central Africa: Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea;

(b)   For East Africa: Kenya and Rwanda;

(c)   For North Africa: Egypt (Rapporteur) and Morocco (Second Vice-Chair);

(d)   For Southern Africa: South Africa (Chair) and Zambia;

(e)   For West Africa: Niger (First Vice-Chair) and Nigeria.

9.   The group held two meetings in 2020. At the first meeting the Bureau was elected, the terms of reference of the group were approved and its vision was discussed. At the second meeting, the directors general deliberated on the group's vision and decided on "Modernized statistical systems for a competitive and prosperous Africa"; adopted its work programme, with key milestones; identified the three main thematic domains for transformation and modernization; and approved the creation of three technical teams to conduct work in the following thematic areas:

(a)   Digitalization and integration of data science initiatives;

(b)   Survey methodology;

(c)   Coordination of the national statistical system and statistical legislation (including administrative data systems and other sources).

10.   The technical team on digitalization and integration of data science initiatives will focus on identifying the appropriate mechanisms for the digitalization of production processes and the integration of data science initiatives, such as big data, citizen-generated data and data science. The team will be expected to develop a holistic approach to modernizing statistical systems by embracing proven technologies to enhance official statistics production. The technical team on survey methodology will seek to evaluate and make recommendations on the various methods used to design and carry out surveys and associated data collection techniques. The technical team on coordination of the national statistical system and statistical legislation (including administrative data systems and other sources) is expected to focus on strengthening the collaboration between the various statistical organizations and units involved in the production of official statistics, to explore modalities of leveraging available administrative data to produce statistical information effectively and efficiently, and to develop generic legislation that is holistic and that can guide the transformation and modernization of official statistics.

11.   Each technical team is composed of experts from national statistical offices nominated by their respective countries, as requested by the group following the guiding principle that countries should lead activities. After establishing their respective bureaux, approval of their terms of reference by the group and validation of their work programmes, the technical teams will hold a series of technical meetings.

III. Critical outputs and deliverables produced

12.   As the primary element of the work programme of technical teams is the evaluation of the status of African countries with regard to the transformation and modernization of official statistics, the group's secretariat supported the teams in assessing the national statistical systems in Africa in the three main thematic areas. The assessment report highlighted the areas in which countries should make efforts in each of the thematic three areas of focus. In addition to the imperative underpinning the modernization of official statistics by sound legal or policy frameworks, the report shows that efforts should be focused on the institutional statistical environment, dissemination and user engagement, data security, capacity-building, collaboration within and coordination of the national statistical system, sustainable funding of statistical activities and adherence to international methodologies. Finally, the report invites producers of official statistics to harness the opportunities offered by information and communications technology, administrative data and new data sources to respond to data needs adequately.

13.   A comprehensive report on the transformation and modernization of official statistics in Africa was produced. In the report, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, political, economic, social,

technological and legal factors in the three thematic areas were identified. The report contained an in-depth desktop review of the status of transformation and modernization of official statistics. The review was focused on establishing the current known best practices so that lessons could be learned in order to facilitate a transformative agenda for national statistical offices.

IV. Support from the Economic Commission for Africa

14.   ECA is the secretariat of the African group on transformation and modernization of official statistics. In this function, the Commission assists and supports the group and mobilizes technical and financial resources to streamline its work and that of its three technical teams. In addition, the Commission has reviewed its own work programme, catalysed by the impact of COVID-19 on national statistical systems in Africa, to support the modernization of official statistics in the region. To this end, the Commission has launched a leadership programme in statistics to equip senior managers of national statistical offices with the skills required to lead their institutions by putting in place a transformation and modernization road map. In the same vein, the Commission published guidelines for developing an integrated user engagement strategy, offering a practical mix of good and everyday best practices, instructions, tips and background knowledge needed to conduct a dialogue with users and identify what they need and when and through what medium they need it.

15.   In 2018, ECA launched the data science campus to provide leadership, set standards and strengthen the capacity of member States to use innovative tools and solutions, methods and techniques in collecting, processing, analysing and disseminating data and statistics to measure national, regional and global development initiatives. A number of capacity-building activities were carried out in in this framework.

16.   With the support of its strategic partners, ECA is working to improve the use of new and administrative data sources in official statistics to produce high-quality, frequently updated and disaggregated data in response to data demands. In addition, ECA has developed an application on alternative data collection techniques for compiling specific statistics that are in high demand, such as for the consumer price index (CPI). In response to requests by countries, ECA has been organizing regional webinars and e-training workshops to build the capacity of the member States in applying web scrapping, scanner data, computer-assisted telephone interviews and phone surveys for CPI data collection. Currently, a technical assistance project is under way to support countries that are willing to apply and implement such interviews and phone surveys for CPI data collection. Support is also being provided for the integration of geospatial and statistical information and the use of spatially enabled data for informed decision-making for the African development agendas.

17.   As part of the transformation of census processes from manual to digital, ECA is supporting the undertaking of digital censuses in Africa by developing and deploying information technology applications that improve the quality, timeliness and efficiency of the data. The digital census services technology system developed by ECA experts comprise a census monitoring dashboard, a provisioning tool, an operations tracking system and a census e-question repository.

18.   On the institutional side, ECA provides support to countries in modernizing statistical legislation and designing and updating national strategies for the development of statistics, which is a critical aspect and the main driver of the transformation of national statistical systems.

V. Conclusion and way forward

19.   The main focus of transformation and modernization is to enhance the capacity of national statistical systems to efficiently and effectively respond to increasing requests for statistical information and adapt their operations to address emerging data demands that cannot be anticipated. Therefore, it is worth noting that the initiative of the Group is not an isolated one but rather a complementary effort tailor-made for Africa, which needs strong support from Governments.

20.   A road map on the transformation and modernization of official statistics in Africa is being finalized. It is structured around the pillars of transformation and modernization, and identifies the core elements of the transformation and modernization of official statistics. It highlights the short-term and medium-term activities that a country could undertake to create a modern national statistical system.

21.   The 2022 ECA work programme on data and statistics is mainly focused on supporting countries in the implementation of a programme to transform and modernize their national statistical systems. The programme is supported by a grant from Eurostat, with the aim of supporting the modernization of administrative data and registers in African countries to enhance their use for statistical purposes. It will also strengthen national capacities in the production, dissemination and use of spatial data and geospatial technologies, and will contribute to reducing the data gap to monitor and evaluate progress towards achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

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