



## INSPECTION AND EVALUATION DIVISION

# EVALUATION REPORT

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### **Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the United Nations Statistics Division:**

*“The Statistics Division illustrates the type of activity the United Nations does well, but the Organization has yet to ‘deliver as one’ on statistics.”*

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# INSPECTION AND EVALUATION DIVISION

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## FUNCTION

*“The Office shall evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of the programmes and legislative mandates of the Organization. It shall conduct programme evaluations with the purpose of establishing analytical and critical evaluations of the implementation of programmes and legislative mandates, examining whether changes therein require review of the methods of delivery, the continued relevance of administrative procedures and whether the activities correspond to the mandates as they may be reflected in the approved budgets and the medium-term plan of the Organization.”  
(General Assembly Resolution 48/218 B)*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the United Nations Statistics Division:**

*“The Statistics Division illustrates the type of activity the United Nations does well, but the Organization has yet to ‘deliver as one’ on statistics.”*

The Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) identified the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) as a priority programme for evaluation based on a strategic risk assessment carried out in 2008. This evaluation report on the Statistics Division of DESA is one of 11 detailed assessments of DESA’s 10 divisions and offices and its Executive Direction and Management, and will be issued to DESA as an internal management report.

This evaluation is the first to be conducted by OIOS on the Statistics Division since 1997. The Statistics Division is the largest of DESA’s subprogrammes, with almost USD 33.8 million in regular budget, USD 5.6 million in extrabudgetary resources and 124 staff posts for the 2010-2011 biennium.

In undertaking the evaluation, OIOS examined the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness (including impact) of the Division. It used a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, including a document review, staff and stakeholder interviews, staff and stakeholder surveys, field missions, direct observation of intergovernmental meetings, a bibliometric analysis of the usage of DESA publications and an expert panel review of the quality of a sample of key DESA publications. The evaluation was undertaken in accordance with the norms and standards for evaluation established by the United Nations Evaluation Group.

The evaluation results showed that the Statistics Division performed a pivotal and effective role in the global statistical system. Its substantial and long-standing mandate provided continuity and authority to its work and had resulted in the dissemination of standards and guidance by the Statistical Commission of the Economic and Social Council that shaped the approaches of statisticians and statistical offices around the world and generated valuable statistical collections. Its initiatives to encourage increased participation in Statistical Commission meetings and activities had been successful. It had developed and sustained important partnerships with other statistical entities to streamline data collection from Member States and avoid duplication of requests. Confidence in its outputs was high. Within the United Nations system, it supported the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other economic and social policy analysis through its maintenance of the MDG Indicators database and by working with other entities and DESA divisions to produce data on new and emerging policy issues. It had launched a major data portal, UNdata, and introduced other innovations to improve the responsiveness, timeliness and accessibility of its statistical collections. As required of all United Nations entities, it consistently reflected a gender perspective in its work.

However, many stakeholders within the United Nations system noted areas of actual and potential duplication of statistical effort and were concerned by continuing disparities in official statistics disseminated by the United Nations. While this is beyond the authority of the Statistics Division to resolve, it presents a continuing risk to the credibility of the United Nations in the field of statistics.

Aspects of internal management and of the Division's collaboration with partners concerned staff and some stakeholders. Many staff saw planning, decision-making and communication practices within the Division as unduly centralised and non-transparent, while others believed there was scope for better links with other Divisions and statisticians in counterpart entities and for improved management of staffing, careers and projects. Information technology resources were seen as insufficient to support the complex statistical operations and databases required to fulfil the Programme of Work. Greater collaboration was also sought by a number of partners, including the regional commissions, in order to ensure better use of the statistical expertise and resources in the United Nations system. Better communication of the Division's priorities for capacity development in the regions was also sought.

Nevertheless, OIOS concluded, as it did fourteen years earlier in its 1997 evaluation of the same programme, that the work of the Division illustrates the type of activity the United Nations does well. Its considerable strengths were well-recognised by its stakeholders and well-supported by DESA and have enabled it to service the Statistical Commission, Member States and organisations in ways that have resulted in major advances in the global statistical system. Its status as the secretariat of the Statistical Commission and its close links with national and international statistical organizations have made it effectively the centre of the United Nations statistical infrastructure. Member States may wish to consider whether it is time to formalise this situation and create a central statistical office for the United Nations, building on the Statistics Division, that would provide leadership and oversight across the United Nations system and enable it to 'deliver as one' on statistics.

OIOS recommends that the Statistics Division:

- Re-examine the channels of communication between the Division and the statistics units of its United Nations system partners, including the regional commissions, and develop an action plan in order to achieve better coordination of activity and better use of resources.
- Establish an internal division-wide working group including representatives of staff at all levels to develop an action plan for improving internal work processes, strengthening consultation and communication, and managing staffing and career matters.
- Explore options for improving IT infrastructure and resources in order to support the Division's ability to respond to new and emerging priorities, including the management of global geospatial information.

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## I. Introduction

1. The [Inspection and Evaluation Division \(IED\)](#) of the [Office of Internal Oversight Services \(OIOS\)](#) identified the [Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(DESA\)](#) as a priority programme for evaluation based on a strategic risk assessment exercise carried out in 2008. The forty-ninth session of the [Committee for Programme and Coordination \(CPC\)](#) selected that evaluation to be presented for consideration at its fifty-first session<sup>1</sup>. The selection was formally mandated by the ensuing General Assembly Resolution 64/229 on Programme Planning.
2. This evaluation covers the activities and results of the statistics subprogramme for the period 2006 to 2010. It was undertaken as part of the larger DESA evaluation.
3. This report is being issued to DESA, along with 10 other subprogramme-level reports<sup>2</sup>, as an internal management report.
4. The evaluation was undertaken to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness (including impact) of the Statistics Division during 2006-2010. The evaluation also considered recent past OIOS reports related to the Statistics Division, as well as the results of an OIOS inspection of human resources in DESA undertaken in 2009.
5. OIOS wishes to express its appreciation for the cooperation of the management and staff of the Statistics Division during the evaluation. [*The report incorporates comments received from Division management. Final comments are appended in full, as per General Assembly resolution 64/263.*]

## II. Background

6. Statistical matters have been a priority of Member States ever since the establishment of the League of Nations. The International Statistical Commission was convened as an advisory body in October 1920 to make recommendations on the League's role in the area of statistics<sup>3</sup>. The terms of reference of the Statistical Commission and the statistical office of the Secretariat were subsequently established by Resolution 8 in February 1946 at the first session of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)<sup>4</sup>. The Commission's mandate, which has remained largely unchanged since 1946, is to assist ECOSOC in (a) promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability; (b) coordinating the statistical work of specialized agencies; (c) developing the central statistical services of the Secretariat; (d) advising the organs of the United Nations on general questions relating to the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistical information; and (e) promoting the improvement of statistics and statistical methods generally.

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination, July 2009, [A/64/16](#), paragraph 41.

<sup>2</sup> One for each of the remaining DESA subprogrammes and one covering its Executive Direction and Management.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council, First Session February, 1946 (document symbol: E/1)

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council, Fiftieth Session May 1971;(Document symbol: E/5044). resolution 1566 (L)

7. The Statistical Commission has accorded high priority to its role in assisting ECOSOC in the coordination of statistical activities of the United Nations system. In May 1971, ECOSOC recommended that the ultimate goal of the work of DESA should be an integrated system of collection, data processing and dissemination of international statistics by the United Nations system and requested the Secretary-General to undertake, in cooperation with the specialized agencies, concerted action to assist the developing countries in strengthening their statistical systems<sup>5</sup>.

8. The Statistics Division of the United Nations Secretariat was first established within the Department of Economic Affairs in 1946 and plays an advisory role to the Statistical Commission. It is a key member of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA), which supports the Statistical Commission in developing common statistical standards and platforms, developing methodologies, and undertaking outreach, advocacy and other activities that will promote the efficient functioning of the statistical system<sup>6</sup>. The Committee's members include statistics experts from all United Nations entities, the Bretton Woods Institutions and other regional and professional statistics bodies.

9. While the current mandate and work of the Statistics Division have remained much the same since its establishment, its substantive focus has unfolded against the backdrop of a series of United Nations conferences and summits involving the adoption of an array of internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Of particular importance for the international statistical community was the establishment in 1999 of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), which was founded by the United Nations, the European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in response to the ECOSOC resolution on the goals of the UN Conference on Development. PARIS21 is a partnership of donors and statisticians formed with the objective of promoting, influencing and facilitating statistical capacity development and the better use of statistics, particularly in the development context.<sup>7</sup>

10. The Director of the Statistics Division is responsible for the overall direction, supervision and management of the division and is supported by DESA's Executive Support Unit, Capacity Development Section, Statistical Planning and Development Section, and the Office and Technology Management Section. The substantive work of the division is carried out by five branches: Economics Statistics Branch, Trade Statistics Branch, Demographic and Social Statistics Branch, Environment and Energy Statistics Branch, and Statistical Services Branch.

11. The objective of the Statistics Division for the 2010-2011 biennium was "to advance the global statistical system in order to produce high quality, easily accessible comparable national statistics for policymakers and other users at the national and international levels." In order to achieve that objective, its strategy was to: a) expand the normative role of the subprogramme and the coordination of international statistical activities; b) help countries through technical

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations, "Preparatory Commission of the United Nations, Appendix IV: Observations of the Statistical Work of the Secretariat", December 1945, p.130; accessed online at: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/NL4/600/01/PDF/NL460001.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>6</sup> See [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/acsub-public/workpartner\\_ccsa.htm](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/acsub-public/workpartner_ccsa.htm)

<sup>7</sup> PARIS 21 Website: <http://www.paris21.org/about>

cooperation with national statistical systems; c) develop norms and standards; e) compile and disseminate statistical information; f) develop statistical capacity; g) promote the use of mapping and geographical information systems; and h) coordinate international statistical activities by cooperating closely with other international organizations to enhance the coherence in the statistical data work of the entire United Nations system.<sup>8</sup>

12. When compared with other divisions of DESA, the Statistics Division ranked first in terms of the size of its 2010-2011 estimated expenditures in regular budget (RB) (USD 33.77 million) and third in terms of extra-budgetary resources (XB) (USD 5.62 million) (see Table 1). Its regular budget increased by 16 per cent between 2006-2007 and 2010-2011, while its extrabudgetary resources almost doubled. The Division had 124 posts, 69 of which were at the professional level or above.

<b>Table 1. Statistics Division budget and posts by biennium (USD thousands)</b>			
<b>Component</b>	<b>2006-2007</b>	<b>2008-2009</b>	<b>2010-2011</b>
<b>C. Programme of work</b>			
<b>Regular Budget (RB)</b>	28,952	31,231	33,775
<b>Extra-budgetary (XB)</b>	3,000	4,040	5,620
<b>Total</b>			
<b>Total Posts Number (RB + XB)</b>	123	123	124
Source: Proposed Programme Budget 2006/7, 2008/9 and 2010/11: A/60/6 (Sect.9); A/62/6 (Sect.9); A/64/6 (Sect. 9)			

13. OIOS completed an in-depth evaluation of the statistics programme in 1997 that was submitted to the 37th session of the Economic and Social Council.<sup>9</sup> The evaluation concluded that, while the programme had much to commend it, a strategy was needed to make a shift in allocations, over the four-year period of the medium-term plan, to a focus on services determined by user needs and a knowledge of data utilisation patterns. It recommended that the strategy should also make the complementarity and coordination of regional and central programmes more transparent.

### III. Methodology

14. In conducting this evaluation, OIOS used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, drawing on data from the following sources:

- i. A **document analysis** of key programme and subprogramme documents, including the Strategic Framework; monitoring and reporting information from the Integrated Monitoring and Documentation Information System (IMDIS) and senior management compacts; Beijing+15 outcome documents; Intergovernmental body resolutions and agreed conclusions; United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs); and prior reviews of the subprogramme;
- ii. **18 interviews of all Statistics Division senior managers;**

<sup>8</sup> Proposed strategic framework for the period 2010-2011: Programme 7 Economic and Social Affairs, A/63/6 (Prog.7), p.11

<sup>9</sup> E/AC.51/1997/2

- iii. **19 interviews of a stratified random sample of Statistics Division staff**<sup>10</sup>;
- iv. **39 interviews of stakeholders** (including representatives of Member States, civil society organisations, the United Nations System and other regional and international organisations) conducted in New York and over the phone, and in the field;
- v. **Field missions** to Thailand, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and South Africa<sup>11</sup>;
- vi. A **web-based survey of all Statistics Division staff**<sup>12</sup>, henceforth referred to as the Statistics Division staff survey.
- vii. A **web-based survey of a non-random sample of subprogramme level stakeholders**<sup>13</sup>; henceforth referred to as the Statistics Division stakeholder survey.
- viii. A **web-based survey of a non-random sample of 40 United Nations entity heads**<sup>14</sup>;
- ix. A **survey of all 192 Member State permanent representatives** of the United Nations<sup>15</sup>;
- x. An **independent expert panel review** of the quality and usage of a non-random sample of 18 DESA key publications and databases, including 2 Statistics Division publications<sup>16</sup>; and
- xi. A **bibliometric analysis** on the usage of these publications, including citation metrics (through ‘Google Scholar’), website traffic data, publication download data, and dissemination practices.

15. The evaluation results were derived from a combination of documentary, testimonial, observational and analytical evidence. Where possible, data were triangulated for robust results.

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<sup>10</sup> Ensuring representation of staff at all levels and a confidence interval of 90 percent.

<sup>11</sup> These countries were chosen for field missions based on a mapping of DESA’s stakeholders, capacity development and technical assistance projects, and travel costs and other logistical constraints.

<sup>12</sup> The survey was sent to all 108 subprogramme staff in the Division at the time of the evaluation. It was open for replies from 24 September to 28 October 2010. OIOS received 77 responses, yielding a 71 per cent response rate.

<sup>13</sup> The survey was sent to 185 stakeholders from Member State representatives, international statistical organisations, civil society organisations and United Nation partners. It was open for replies from 3 November to 2 December 2010. OIOS received 72 responses, yielding a 39 per cent response rate.

<sup>14</sup> 17 entities responded, yielding a 43 per cent response rate.

<sup>15</sup> Each of the 192 Member States received a paper-based survey and 27 responded for a 14 percent response rate.

<sup>16</sup> The panel consisted of three independent academic researchers with economic and social matter expertise covering a broad range of regional specialization and topics. The 18 publications and databases were selected in consultation with DESA divisions as representative of the work of the Department and its divisions/offices. Subprogramme 5 selected (i) System of National Accounts 2008, and (ii) The World’s Women 2010: Trends and Statistics. The four assessment criteria employed by the panel were (a) research planning and/or relevance of the issue, (b) research process, (c) interpretation and analysis and (d) promotion of research findings.

16. The evaluation had four main limitations. First, a listing of stakeholders to whom the OIOS stakeholder survey would be sent was compiled on the basis of assumptions made by OIOS, as the Division was unwilling to disclose stakeholder information. Second, low response rates for the stakeholder surveys mean that the data cannot be generalized to represent the views of all Statistics Division stakeholders. Third, the expert panel review did not cover all Statistics Division publications. The publications selected were identified by the Division itself as its “key publications”. Lastly, the bibliometric analysis allowed only limited comparability of the bibliometric data from one type of publication to another, revealed large discrepancies between data submitted by DESA and by the Department of Public Information (DPI), and confronted inherent difficulties in capturing these types of publications through conventional index citation methods.

17. For the purpose of this evaluation, the ‘global statistical system’ was defined to include the national and international organisations that provide statistics at both the global and regional levels together with the mechanisms for binding those organisations, which include the annual meetings of the United Nations Statistical Commission, the meetings of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, international statistical standards and the principles governing international statistical activities.<sup>17</sup>

## IV. Results

### A. The substantial, long-standing mandate of the Statistics Division has provided continuity and authority to its work

18. Support of the Statistical Commission, and through it the global statistical system, is one of the longest-standing functions of the United Nations. As noted above, the Statistics Division of DESA and its predecessors have functioned as the Commission’s permanent secretariat since its establishment in 1946, and the role has expanded and developed, but not fundamentally changed, over the subsequent six decades. The Division’s expected accomplishments have also remained largely consistent and centred on the objective summarised in the Division’s stated mission - *Advancing the Global Statistical System*.<sup>18</sup>

19. This continuity has fostered the development of consistent and long-running procedures in the Statistics Division that are predictable, well-understood and amenable to constant, incremental improvement. As a result, strong relationships have been forged with national and regional statistical organisations and the role of the Division is widely understood.

#### *Continuous statistical activity over many decades has generated long time series and widely accessible statistical collections*

20. The compilation and publication of statistical collections have been a major area of the Division’s activity and expected output, including both directly through its own work and with

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<sup>17</sup> Dennis Trewin, “An Effective Global Statistical System – A Prerequisite for Consistency in Global Measurements” (June 2007) <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/44/29/38774796.pdf?contentId=38774797>

<sup>18</sup> Proposed strategic framework for the period 2010-2011: Programme 7 Economic and Social Affairs, A/63/6 (Prog.7), p.11

various national government and United Nations system entities. Some collections date back 60 years or more and the resultant time series constitute valuable statistical assets that enable trends to be tracked and policy outcomes analysed over extended periods. Demographic, international trade, energy and industry statistics are among the longest-running collections. Other collections, such as the environment and gender series, have been expanded more recently (1990s) in response to changing policy and information requirements. Another category of collections is compiled jointly with other entities (for example COMTRADE, which is compiled jointly with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development where it concerns data of developed countries). In addition to the conventional published form, many of these series are disseminated electronically through the UN21 award-winning UNdata website;<sup>19</sup> nearly all are available in basic form free of charge to all who can benefit from them. Printed publications are generally sold at publication cost. Because the collections incorporate the work of specialist United Nations agencies, as well as the Statistics Division itself, they are comprehensive, credible and evidence of a global statistical system at work.

*These long-running aspects of the Division's role were both clear and unique*

21. There was general consensus among staff and stakeholders of the Statistics Division about its role. Most external stakeholders interviewed believed it to be the *de facto* chief statistical office of the United Nations, and its director effectively the Chief Statistician of the Organisation. This was despite the fact that the Division is by no means the only statistical entity in the United Nations system, and is not the only United Nations or statistical entity approaching Member States for statistics. The recognition appeared to reflect both the Division's role as the secretariat of the Statistical Commission and respect for its achievements.

22. The role of the Statistics Division was also seen as unique. A substantial majority (82 per cent) of stakeholder survey respondents viewed the Division's work as filling a unique niche not served by any other entity in the United Nations system. More than half of those respondents agreed "strongly" with that statement.

**B. Within the United Nations system, the Division provided crucial statistical data support for the Millennium Development Goals and other economic and social policy analysis**

*The Division effectively maintained the MDG Indicators database*

23. Following the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2000, the Statistics Division was tasked with coordinating the database and associated analysis to assess progress towards the MDGs.<sup>20</sup> The data are provided by Governments and their quality is ultimately dependent on that input. The Statistics Division compiles the indicators and associated metadata into the online database, assures the quality of those data, and coordinates the preparation and publication of the annual MDG reports.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://data.un.org/>

<sup>20</sup> The indicators themselves were developed in a separate process, and the numbers contained in the database are compiled by members of the Inter-agency Expert Group on MDG Indicators (IAEG), which includes United Nations specialised agencies with expertise in the particular fields addressed by the goals.

24. These databases and reports are high profile outputs within the United Nations system. When asked how the Statistics Division contributed to the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs, almost every Divisional staff member interviewed referred to these outputs, pointing out that the monitoring role is crucial to any understanding of progress towards the goals and to any analysis of action undertaken to increase the probability that they would be achieved. Several stakeholders suggested that efforts by the Statistics Division to build national level capacity had resulted in an improvement in the quality of the data submitted by some countries and hence in the accuracy of the indicators overall.

***The Division collaborated with other DESA divisions and United Nations entities to generate statistical data on new and emerging economic and social policy issues***

25. The Division also collaborated closely with other specialist divisions within DESA and other United Nations entities, as well as with the Statistical Commission and the CCSA, in order to develop and gather credible statistics on new and emerging issues. Such statistics are required to respond to emerging priorities of Member States, such as climate change and ending violence against women.

26. Within DESA, collaborations between the Statistics Division and the Division of Sustainable Development and Division for the Advancement of Women have been critical in helping to develop and populate new indicators, including on violence against women. Expert groups, including both subject and statistical experts, were convened in 2005 and 2007 to discuss data needs for environmental accounting and violence against women and indicators were subsequently proposed and approved. The resulting statistics now constitute series that underpin debate within and beyond the United Nations on these major policy issues. The Division also collaborated with the Population Division, as data compiled by the Statistics Division constitutes the input for population estimates and projections produced by the Population Division. Recent examples of collaborative activity with other divisions to develop or produce statistical concepts and information included work on women and water and on environment and energy data, among others.

27. In both cases cited above, the formal vehicles of expert groups provided the structure within which this collaboration occurred. The Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting was established by the Statistical Commission in 2005 following a meeting between the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Statistics Division, and the Division subsequently worked with the Division for Sustainable Development to develop a System of Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting (SEEA) and to clarify its proposed role in environmental and climate change-related statistics<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, the Statistics Commission worked with the Division for the Advancement of Women to organise and support the 2007 Expert Group Meeting on indicators on violence against women<sup>22</sup> and the 2009 meeting of the Friends of the Chair of the United Nations Statistical Commission on Statistical Indicators on Violence against Women<sup>23</sup>. The resultant proposed compendium of indicators was

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<sup>21</sup> <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/envaccounting/ceea/default.asp>; <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/envaccounting/seearev/>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/IndicatorsVAW/IndicatorsVAW\\_EGM\\_report.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/IndicatorsVAW/IndicatorsVAW_EGM_report.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/meetings/vaw/default.htm>

welcomed by the Statistical Commission and adopted as an interim set and important first step in the development of sustainable statistics on the subject<sup>24</sup>.

28. These collaborations have been viewed as fruitful by the partners involved in them. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) acknowledged the collaboration in relation to the SEEA on its website<sup>25</sup> and a UNEP spokesperson commented in an interview that the links of the Statistics Division with the national statistical offices had made it a key partner in the project. In 2011, the Statistical Commission acknowledged the strategic role of the IAEG on gender statistics and requested the expansion of its scope of work.<sup>26</sup>

29. Division staff highlighted other areas of collaboration that had resulted in new or improved statistical series. Some staff members cited collaboration with other entities that had resulted in increased comparability of entity data, as well as joint publications. Another staff member referred to the work of the Statistics Division on international standards in relation to indicators, including those developed with DAW on violence against women, as unique and valuable.

30. Despite these successes, it is not clear that the potential for fruitful collaboration across DESA divisions is always recognised or acted upon. Several staff members and stakeholders observed that the Division's collections of social statistics are less comprehensive than its economic statistics. The vast majority of respondents to the survey of Statistics Division staff reported that they engaged with other divisions of DESA infrequently and on an ad-hoc basis: 77.3 per cent 'infrequently' and 9.3 per cent 'never' met with staff from other divisions of DESA (see para 66 below).

***The Division's publications and databases have formed the basis of discussion of many policy issues***

31. If, as statistician and international health academic Hans Rosling put it, 'datasets change mindsets',<sup>27</sup> then the Statistics Division has the potential to change many minds. Research showed that Statistics Division publications were in relatively high demand. The bibliometric review undertaken by OIOS revealed that the 2008 update of the System of National Accounts had accumulated more than 500 Google Scholar references; and by the end of 2010 it had grossed USD 39,442.5 in sales (substantially higher than other DESA publications reviewed). The three publications most commonly cited by DESA stakeholders in the OIOS survey were produced or coordinated by the Statistics Division, and included the MDG indicators report, the Statistical Yearbook and UNdata. Just under 80 per cent of Statistics Division stakeholders professed themselves satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of the publications. A range of uses was reported (see Table 2).

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<sup>24</sup> Statistical Commission decision 40/110 on gender statistics (in E/CN.3/2009/29)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.unep.org/Documents.multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=182&ArticleID=2680&l=en>

<sup>26</sup> <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc11/DraftReport-2011.pdf>, Decision 2

<sup>27</sup> See [http://www.ted.com/talks/hans\\_rosling\\_at\\_state.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/hans_rosling_at_state.html)

Table 2: Purpose for which publications were used by Statistics Division stakeholders responding to the OIOS stakeholder survey	Number	Per cent
As part of my research	26	36.1%
To assist with policy work in which I engage	22	30.6%
To raise awareness on a particular topic	30	41.7%
To help as guide documents for development related activities	27	37.5%
To assist with a norm-setting activity	25	34.7%
Other (please specify)	13	18.1%

**C. The Division successfully responded to its mandate to support the global statistical system to produce high quality, accessible and comparable national statistics for policymakers and other users at the national and international levels**

*The Division has played a crucial role in sustaining and improving the global statistical system*

32. If the global statistical system is considered to include the statistical activities and organisations of the entities charged with compiling or advancing official statistical collections (see para 17 above), then the Statistical Commission stands at its heart. The Commission's sessions are attended not only by all Member States, but also by supranational and professional bodies and the United Nations system itself.<sup>28</sup> This aggregation of forces is the basis for developing harmonised action and outputs and improving the overall quality of global statistical collections. The Statistics Division plays a critical enabling role in meeting this objective. The role has three elements: responding to the requirements of the Statistical Commission and supporting its deliberations, implementing the actions needed to do this and proactively bringing issues onto the global agenda. All three are important, although the balance may shift from year to year.

33. Stakeholders expressed satisfaction with the support provided by the Division to the global statistical system through the development of norms and guidelines for the collection of statistics: 86 per cent reported being satisfied, and almost half of those (41.5 per cent of the total) were 'very satisfied'. None expressed dissatisfaction.

34. The significance of its role was very clear to Division staff. When asked in interviews to identify the main value added of the Division, the vast majority of those interviewed nominated its support of the global statistical system. This was echoed in the staff survey, which reached a larger number of staff members. The majority of staff responding to the survey rated support to the global statistical system as the most effective of the four DESA functions, and almost all regarded that support as effective. A total of 59.6 per cent of staff rated it 'very effective' and a further 38.7 per cent rated it 'somewhat effective'. Of the 35 respondents who provided comments, 24 referred specifically to the normative work and standard setting functions of the Statistical Commission. Almost all respondents (93 per cent) 'strongly' or 'somewhat' agreed that the Division effectively defined and disseminated its work to the international community.

<sup>28</sup> See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/commission.htm>

***The Statistical Commission and the statistical standards it adopts had global reach and impact***

35. The Statistical Commission's mandate requires it to promote the development of national statistics and improve their comparability. While other United Nations entities and other statistical bodies have regional reach or expertise in particular types of data, only the Statistical Commission defines standards adopted by all Member States of the United Nations and all types of official statistics. As a result, a major part of the work of Statistics Division has centred on activities promoting the standardisation of methods, definitions and approaches and support for Member States attempting to apply those standards. Decisions concerning standards and indicators have implications not only for the quality, quantity and cost of statistical collections in individual countries but also for the utility of international statistical collections and the quality of the evidence that informs policy debates within Member States and in international forums. The assessment of potential new standards, indicators or collections consequently involves the entire statistical community and takes into account the trade-off between the desired quality and frequency of statistics and the cost and feasibility of collecting them. Such assessments constitute important responsibilities and substantial coordination tasks for the Division.

***Proactive efforts on the part of the Division had resulted in increased participation in Statistical Commission proceedings and activities***

36. There has been a steady increase in participation by Member States in Statistical Commission meetings. The participation of least developed countries has grown fastest, from 9 in 2005 to 25 in 2010, facilitated by funding from other member state participants. Funding has also been provided for developing countries to attend Commission workshops, and in 2008 close to 500 workshop participants from developing countries were funded. The level of participation of Member States, including less developed countries, is clearly an important element in determining the acceptance of global statistical standards and the quality and credibility of global statistical collections. To some extent, this increased participation has been due to the proactive efforts of the Division, including the coordination of funding from donors and engagement with the Member States involved.

***Working relationships between the Division and Statistical Commission members and NSOs have deepened***

37. Commission members and the heads of national statistical offices interviewed by OIOS generally appreciated the attempts made by the Division to foster personal as well as professional relationships with staff in national offices, and some claimed that it had facilitated their own work and even raised its profile within their countries. In interviews, many stakeholders referred to Division staff on first name terms.

38. Other stakeholders also expressed appreciation for the way in which the Division interacted with them. One stakeholder indicated that he would 'give them a gold star for regular, faithful contact'. Others, particularly in national governments and international statistical bodies, also praised the Division's proactive approach to communication and consultation. Staff expertise was rated as 'excellent' or 'good' by 88 per cent of respondents and staff responsiveness by 75 per cent. Almost three-quarters gave positive ratings to the understanding among staff of their entity's role and work and the willingness of the Division to consult on

matters of mutual interest. However, a small number cited experiences that were less positive, and one was particularly disappointed by the ‘bureaucracy’ of processes and the much greater speed with which activities could be organised by a technical or donor agency.

39. The interactions also appeared to have fostered a sense of shared purpose so that rather than being regarded as obligations to be fulfilled, the data requests and standards of the Statistical Commission and the Division were viewed as being in the interest of all participants.

***The Division has developed partnerships with external statistical entities to avoid duplication in collections from Member States***

40. Partnerships to rationalise the collection of statistics from Member States and to streamline their sharing and compilation have been developed between the Statistics Division and external statistical entities such as the European Commission’s Eurostat and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. A number of these partnerships are long-standing and well-respected. Similar partnerships are in place with member bodies of the CCSA and to some extent with regional commissions. By applying the principle of ‘one asks, many use’ and exploiting complementarities in the respective roles and strengths of different organisations, the potential for inefficiencies and the loss of goodwill associated with duplication and conflicting requirements has been greatly reduced. Several stakeholders from Member States and international organisations commented appreciatively on the ‘huge advances’ that had been made to reduce duplication and promote information sharing among these organisations over the last two to three decades.

**D. Confidence in the Division’s outputs was high, and innovations have improved the responsiveness, timeliness and accessibility of its statistical collections**

***Stakeholders expressed high levels of satisfaction with the Division’s work and approaches***

41. Stakeholders responding to the OIOS survey reported widespread satisfaction with the Division’s work. Overall, almost three-quarters of stakeholder respondents rated the current performance of the Division as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, and just over half believed that it was now more effective than it had been five years earlier. Satisfaction ratings were highest for the Division’s support to the global statistical system (86 per cent of those who had experienced that work were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’) and its substantive support to intergovernmental meetings (82 per cent ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’); they were somewhat lower for collaboration and partnerships for the United Nations development agenda with stakeholders’ entities (69 per cent satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’) and technical assistance for capacity development in those entities (59 per cent satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’). A large majority was also satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of the Division’s publications (79 per cent) and its website (85 per cent).

42. Contributing to these high ratings was the perceived neutrality of the Division’s work. One stakeholder told OIOS that one of the things of which Statistical Commission members are most proud is the apolitical nature of that body and the extent to which they have been able to keep the meetings ‘focused on technical quality and comparability and away from the slippery slope of political issues’. He attributed this to the Division’s leadership in negotiating with

countries to ensure that the benefits of new standards were appreciated even if implementation abilities varied. Other stakeholders also referred to the Division's ability and willingness to safeguard apolitical approaches.

43. Stakeholder confidence in the Division's outputs is important because of the role of those outputs in the stakeholders' own work. Almost half of all stakeholders responding to the OIOS survey indicated that the Division's work was 'very important' to their own key development activities, and a further one-quarter rated it 'somewhat important'. The range of ways in which the work was used was summarised in Table 2 above (after para 31 above).

44. If there was one under-exploited area of complementarity in the Division's work it was the link with academic organisations. Several professional statisticians suggested that the Division's focus on the national statistical organisations had been at the expense of interaction with the academic community and that there were benefits to be gained from new insights and greater theoretical backing for its ideas. However, the Division reported that staff retained a range of connections with academic communities and that there were many opportunities for academic thinking to influence the Division's work.

#### ***UNdata and COMTRADE were seen as major innovations***

45. When asked to nominate particular achievements of the Statistics Division in recent years, most stakeholders referred to the introduction of UNdata, a web-based portal providing access to a broad range of official statistics compiled by the Division and other United Nations entities and organised into 16 different datasets.<sup>29</sup> Links within the site provide access to metadata, glossaries, an update schedule and country-level data, *inter alia*, and functionalities enabling users to search and manipulate data in different ways have been included. The initiative was implemented in partnership with Statistics Sweden and the Gapminder Foundation with partial financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and received the 2010 UN21 award for improvements in client services. While some stakeholders suggested ways in which UNdata could be enhanced, most praised its 'one stop' access, extensive datasets and the fact that it was free of user charges.

46. The Commodity Trade Statistics Database, COMTRADE, was a further innovation of the Statistics Division, working jointly with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (para 20). The database is the most complete global compilation of commodity trade statistics and considered by most stakeholders familiar with it as an innovation of considerable significance. While access to the database is available free of charge, customised services and greater data downloads are available at additional cost. Several stakeholders referred to COMTRADE as 'absolutely critical' to their work and one of the most important outputs of the Division.

#### ***World Statistics Day assisted many national statistical offices to raise the profile of national statistics in their own countries***

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<sup>29</sup> <http://data.un.org/>

47. On 20 October 2010 (20-10-2010), countries around the world observed the inaugural World Statistics Day.<sup>30</sup> Coordinated by the Statistics Division, the Day was intended to raise awareness of the many achievements of official statistics and gave visibility and profile to statistical organisations in many countries. Stakeholders were enthusiastic about the event and delighted with its outcome. ‘It put statistics on the map’, said one stakeholder. ‘Presidents and kings spoke ... it was a huge thing for statistics’. Others expected that the exposure would make it easier for many national statistical offices to obtain funding to improve statistical resources and capacity.

***The Division’s outputs consistently reflected a gender perspective, but less so a human rights perspective***

48. The inclusion of sex-disaggregated data in statistical collections has long been standard in statistical circles and the Statistics Division is no exception. However, the Division takes this aspect of its work very seriously and has also released statistical compilations on women and men (most recently the latest issue of the 5-yearly publication *The World’s Women 2010 – Trends and Statistics*) and participated in initiatives to develop indicators on gender issues, including on violence against women. This work helps data users to compare, contrast and track the situation of men and women and so to apply a gender perspective in their own activities.

49. Less apparent in the Division’s work was a human rights based approach. Statistics on human rights are not collected by the Division and no plans exist to change this. One staff member pointed out, however, that human rights are relevant in framing concepts for new indicators, such as disability, and are taken into account in such discussions. It also seems clear that by publishing a broad range of country data and supporting the strengthening of national statistical systems, the Division has supported citizens’ access to information for informed decision-making.

**E. Statistical roles and activities as well as overall accountability for statistics within the United Nations system were not always clear**

***Despite the apparent clarity of the Division’s role, areas of actual and potential duplication and disparity, as well as lack of overall accountability, were of concern***

50. The efforts to avoid duplication of statistical collection activities and disparities in statistical series that have been successful with non-United Nations entities (see para 40) appeared to have been less successful within the United Nations system itself. Despite the coordinating activities of the CCSA, publications were occasionally released that contained conflicting data on apparently similar topics. The most recent such example related to the 2010 Human Development Report, which included data on poverty and child mortality that was not shared with the Statistics Division prior to publication and differed from that contained in Statistics Division collections. The report also contained indicators that had not been approved or endorsed by the Statistical Commission.<sup>31</sup> Other disparities in statistics released by other United Nations entities were also reported to OIOS, including in relation to MDG indicators,

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<sup>30</sup> <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/wsd/>

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Statistical Commission, Draft Report on the forty-second session, 22 – 25 February 2011, pp.23-24; accessed online at: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc11/Report-Final.pdf>

although these were believed to have improved over time as a result of proactive collaboration among the entities involved. Other disparities were the result of the adoption of different definitions by different entities and could be readily resolved by referring to those definitions.

51. Attempts to harmonise statistical approaches within the United Nations system have long been a priority of the Statistical Commission and the Statistics Division itself. The practice of having specialist entities such as ILO, FAO and the IMF take responsibility for the compilation of statistics in those specialties in consultation with the Statistics Division and then share the resulting datasets has reduced the likelihood of unexplained disparities persisting in collections. Partnerships have also been developed in relation to individual themes or one-off projects. One example was the formation of the Inter-secretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics (IWG-ENV), whose current members include the Statistics Division, the Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the OECD and EUROSTAT<sup>32</sup>. In previous years, the Statistics Division focused on conceptual frameworks for environment statistics while its counterpart in UNECE pioneered work on standard statistical classifications in different areas of environment statistics and implemented them in pilot data collections in the UNECE region.

52. However, stakeholders were concerned by the appearance of disagreement among United Nations entities about the appropriate value of particular statistics and felt it was undesirable for different versions of ‘official’ statistical data to be disseminated. The existence of UNdata as a single data portal for many United Nations statistical compilations has made it easier for users to identify instances of disparity or duplication in particular statistics and so should provide a greater incentive to resolve them. However, as long as individual United Nations entities retain the right to release data independently, overall accountability for statistical matters within the United Nations remains ill defined.

53. The Statistical Commission noted this concern at its most recent session. In a strongly worded report it concluded that “the issue of data quality and adequacy falls within the purview of the United Nations Statistical Commission on behalf of the global statistical system and prior consultation is necessary.” It “urged the United Nations Statistics Division to take a central role to assist Member States in addressing issues of data discrepancies and consistency with international organizations, paying special attention to issues of consistency of data disseminated by United Nations agencies.” It stressed the need for an authoritative agency in the United Nations system to coordinate statistical activities and asked relevant United Nations authorities to review the situation, requesting that the Statistics Division report back to the Commission on this issue at its 43rd session.<sup>33</sup> No such agency currently existed within the United Nations system.

54. In addition to disparities in statistics published by United Nations entities, the issue of discrepancies between data published by international agencies on the one hand and countries on the other has also been brought to the attention of the Statistical Commission. The issue was first raised in the context of MDG reporting in 2005. The Statistics Division was aware of this concern and was attempting to deal with it based on its generally good relations with national statistical organisations.

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<sup>32</sup> [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/stacom\\_archive/brochures/for%20web/Brochure%20-%20Environment.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/stacom_archive/brochures/for%20web/Brochure%20-%20Environment.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc11/Report-Final-E.pdf>

55. Some stakeholders in national statistical organisations expressed the willingness and the ability to develop closer relations with the Statistics Division and to contribute more in areas where they had the resources and technical expertise. In one case, a stakeholder claimed that despite having assisted in setting up an expert group it had not been invited to assist in setting the agenda. A number suggested that the ‘division of labour’ among United Nations entities with responsibilities for statistics was not yet clear. International organisations also commented on the competition or rivalry among United Nations entities that was sometimes obvious when workshops were being established.

***The statistical expertise and resources within the regional commissions were not seen as optimally distributed or used***

56. Collaboration with the regional commissions appeared suboptimal. Statistical units within the commissions are charged with the collection of statistics from Member States in their regions and with statistical advice and capacity building, among other things. When interviewed for this evaluation, each appeared to have different resources, strengths and traditional roles. UNECE, for example, deals with Member States with advanced statistical infrastructure and is able to undertake statistical research and compilations to support and complement the work of SD. ESCWA, on the other hand, would like to develop more services in the region but needs additional support to do so. Others, including ESCAP and ECLAC, had substantial statistical resources but reported some inconsistency in the way their roles were viewed. In all cases, the statistical groups within the regional commissions lacked staff-level links with the Division and many of their staff reported feeling isolated from their New York colleagues.

57. Communication between the Statistics Division and staff in the regional commissions was reported to be frequent but lacking consultation. Some regional commission staff interviewed expressed disappointment that Divisional work plans were shared too late for their planned activities to be incorporated in their own planning, and indicated that events and deadlines were frequently notified too late for them to be able to provide the input they would wish. Others expressed disappointment that major documents (including the recently revised System of National Accounts), guidelines and training materials were often not available in translation and so were of limited use to participants from national organisations whose main language was other than English.

58. Regional Commission staff and other stakeholders also suspected duplication and lost opportunities to build on the respective strengths in headquarters and the regions. Regional staff believed that their close knowledge of country conditions, statistics and infrastructure and their language skills could contribute more to Statistics Division activities in their regions and felt the lost potential keenly. Some sought stronger links with the Division, including, in one case, formal establishment as a regional arm of the Division, under its direct supervision. Another simply said ‘together we can do more...’ The Division reported that attempts were being made to address the concerns expressed, although structural and administrative arrangements presented some constraints.

***Although the Division’s mandate includes a stronger role in capacity development, its approach remained unclear to some stakeholders***

59. Capacity development is, as in all DESA divisions, a significant and increasing focus of the Statistics Division's activities. The quality of the Division's collections is ultimately determined by the quality of the statistics from which they are compiled, and increasing the capacity of countries to generate reliable, comprehensive statistics is clearly a priority of the global statistical system. Reflecting this, ECOSOC called upon international agencies in 2006 to 'identify ways, including through capacity-building where needed, to improve countries' reporting on all Millennium Development Goals...' <sup>34</sup> and the number of capacity development workshops increased from 25 in the 2004-2005 biennium to 45 in the 2008-2009 biennium. In January 2011, an International Statistical Training Centre was launched in Beijing by the Statistics Division in collaboration with the National Bureau of Statistics, China. <sup>35</sup>

60. However, some staff and stakeholders, while recognising the need for capacity development, expressed concern about the determination and communication of Division priorities in this regard. The emphasis on census activity in the years leading up to the 2010 round of censuses was viewed as very positive, and capacity building related to the new System of National Accounts was also applauded. However, integration of the activity was seen as critical and some felt it was not using resources in countries in a systematic way and in many cases not advising members of United Nations Country Teams or regional commissions of its plans, causing duplication and confusion. The establishment within DESA of a Capacity Development Unit, and within the Division of a Capacity Development Section, is bringing about a redefinition of the approach and priorities for capacity building and can be expected to address these issues.

**F. While agreeing that the Division did good work, concerns about aspects of internal management were expressed by staff and stakeholders**

*Staff were proud of the accomplishments of their Division*

61. Staff of the Statistics Division appeared very comfortable in their knowledge of their Division's function and purpose and generally assessed the outcome of its work favourably. In responding to the staff survey, 93 per cent agreed that the Division was effective in supporting the global statistical system, 91 per cent agreed that it was effective in providing normative and policy support to intergovernmental processes, and 89 per cent agreed that it had responded effectively to the emerging priorities of Member States. The vast majority agreed that the Division's mandate was clear, relevant and achievable, and 87 per cent believed that there was 'good' or 'excellent' alignment between the activities and functions of the Division and the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs. Three-quarters believed that the Division's performance was 'good' or 'excellent'. Most staff who responded to the current staff survey (73 per cent) also agreed that there was a shared vision in the Division of the best way to achieve the Division's objectives

*However, planning, decision-making and communication practices within the Division were seen as unduly centralised and non-transparent*

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<sup>34</sup> ECOSOC Resolution 2006/6; accessed online at: <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/docs/2006/resolution%202006-6.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> [http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/internationalcooperation/t20110121\\_402699731.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/internationalcooperation/t20110121_402699731.htm)

62. Staff of the Division who responded to interview requests and OIOS surveys consistently and overwhelmingly identified aspects of internal management that they believed affected both efficiency and morale within the Division. Almost all of the staff and several of the stakeholders interviewed indicated concern about one or more of these issues. Some felt that strategic planning was hampered by excessive focus on the short and medium term. One staff member sensed a tension between long and short term planning and pointed out that international cooperation requires longer term goals, while another suggested that the need for continuity in statistical series meant that new indicators, definitions and methods needed to be sustainable and hence planned for the longer term.

63. Furthermore, decision-making was felt by many staff interviewed to be unduly centralised, with little consultation or transparency. While most respondents to the 2010 staff survey 'somewhat' or 'strongly' agreed that decision-making in the Division was effective overall, a substantial minority (37 per cent) disagreed. Almost every non-management staff member interviewed for this evaluation registered concern about some aspect of decision-making: both the process by which decisions were made and their outcomes were cited. A number of interviewees suggested that their branch and section chiefs lacked autonomy and that the need for the Director to be involved in the vast majority of decisions delayed activity and reduced morale. Some suggested that it would be more efficient to have sufficient financial autonomy to be able to order reference material or make minor software purchases using a credit card, and for access to international phone calls to facilitate contact with counterparts in the Member States. Several cited project proposals that had been rejected without discussion or projects that had been commenced and then dropped without explanation, leaving section staff disappointed and, in some cases, required to explain the change to partners or donors. Some further expressed that the consequence of denying branch and section chiefs the opportunity to take responsibility for decision-making was seen in reduced incentive to innovate, long chains of command and, in the words of one interviewee, 'total risk aversion at section level'. A large number of staff expressed a wish for more consultative leadership.

64. Communication in the Division was also seen as limited and a barrier to efficiency. Just over half (53 per cent) of staff survey respondents 'somewhat' or 'strongly' disagreed that internal communication within the division was effective overall, and communication was also one of the most frequently cited concerns of staff interviewees. The concerns related to communication of work programmes and responsibilities and how they fitted into the wider Departmental programme. Lack of transparency was one of the most commonly-cited consequences of the communication practices by interviewees, along with perceptions of lack of understanding of what others were doing, silo-ing of activities and missed opportunities for collaboration.

65. However, the Division did not lack structures for communication and consultation. Whole-of-Division meetings were held twice a year by the Director and branch and section meetings were held more frequently. These meetings were generally appreciated by staff, although a number suggested that the very size of the Division meeting could be intimidating to any staff member inclined to express a view. Staff reported that there was no opportunity for staff to express views anonymously, such as via a staff survey.

*Links with other Divisions were limited below the level of senior management*

66. As noted above (para 30), the vast majority (87 per cent) of Division staff responding to the staff survey reported meeting ‘infrequently’ or ‘never’ with staff members of other DESA divisions. The reasons for this were readily apparent. Staff of the Statistics Division were generally very clear about their own tasks and in some cases felt they had little to gain from interaction with others. Others felt that interaction ‘should not be forced’ and that if a particular cross-divisional collaboration seemed necessary or desirable, ‘people would find each other’. One suggested that staff of other divisions were more likely to benefit from the input of the Statistics Division than vice versa, and that when the need arose it was typically those staff who would initiate the approach. Nevertheless, many Statistics Division staff members expressed a desire for a better understanding of DESA-wide issues and activities.

***Concerns about career paths, vacancies and recruitment issues adversely affected the work environment***

67. Human resource matters preoccupied all managers and most staff members interviewed in the Statistics Division. The concerns included the time required to fill vacant positions, the difficulty of attracting, training and retaining qualified staff, staff relations and career management. Some of these concerns related to systemic procedures, rules and requirements applicable across the United Nations Secretariat and not directly within the power of the Division to resolve. Others appeared to result from the decisions and approaches of Divisional staff themselves.

68. Many lower level staff in the Division worried about their careers. In the 2009 OIOS human resources inspection survey, less than half the respondents (45 per cent) felt that career development was valued in the Division. While this question was not asked again in the 2010 staff survey, many staff interviewed for this evaluation indicated frustration over aspects of their work prospects and those of others. A number of general service staff felt underappreciated, excluded from the opportunity to participate in country-level activities and in some cases not respected by more senior managers. Several mentioned the lack of support in the Division for work-life balance initiatives. The transparency of decisions related to staff recruitment and promotion was of continuing concern.<sup>36</sup> Concerns about career management were linked with scepticism about performance management. Several interviewees commented that they had observed underperformance among colleagues but saw no action taken.

69. Systemic human resources issues (including mobility requirements and appointment processes) and the constraints imposed by the staffing structure of the Division (which offered limited opportunities for promotion in some grades) were exacerbated by the specialised and technical nature of statistical work and the narrower range of career options typically available to statisticians. Staff suggested several ways in which their work could be made more fulfilling. Some staff interviewed suggested rethinking the role that staff should play in the Division. One suggested that divisional staff should be encouraged to engage in more intellectual thinking so that they could develop greater expertise and enhance the Division’s knowledge and credibility, rather than just ‘number crunching’. Another suggested that the Division’s statisticians should

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<sup>36</sup> 74 per cent of respondents to the earlier OIOS (2009) HR inspection staff survey ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ disagreed that decisions on staff selection were made in a transparent manner.

be encouraged to look beyond the numbers and explain them to others, so that they could contribute meaningfully to the 'data-information-policy continuum'. These views were also accompanied by a conviction among some staff that the Division's work and staff should be more integrated with the policy work of other DESA divisions and with the wider statistical community.

***Although a culture of information sharing and lesson-learning was apparent, project management was seen as ineffective in some areas***

70. When asked about the collection and sharing of knowledge in the Division, almost two-thirds of respondents to the staff survey agreed that critical work processes were well documented and 61 per cent felt that lessons learned were effectively captured and shared with staff. Interviewees reported that systems and processes were in place for this purpose, but that informal information sharing was also important and beneficial. However, some staff interviewed cited problems associated with the lack of defined plans, schedules and responsibilities for major projects. One pointed out that if a project is not clearly defined and planned at the outset, changes can be made by any of a number of supervisors and those changes can have major implications including the need to re-work entire computer programmes designed to process or display the data. Another complained of 'never-ending changes' to project specifications.

***IT resource issues, originating primarily from systemic constraints, also hampered efficiency***

71. The statistics function is dependent on flexible and high-capacity IT systems to store, manipulate and disseminate data, but IT resource issues were one of the most frequently-cited sources of frustration in the Division. Many of these obstacles emanated from systemic constraints not under the direct control of the division and occurred despite apparently clear understanding and support for IT initiatives at the most senior level. Nevertheless, the Division's ability to introduce major user-demanded innovations, such as geospatial datasets (where the data are shown in spatial distributions) and interactive databases, has been consistently limited by the difficulty of accessing the required hardware and software. Inadequate storage space on servers was reported to have required sub-optimal workarounds and to have limited the backing up of hard disks, increasing vulnerability to data loss. The Secretariat's Office of Information and Communication Technology (OICT) was seen as unable to service fully such specialised IT requirements but the Division lacked the funding and autonomy to commission required upgrades and extensions and was only able to introduce its award-winning data portal, UNdata, because donor funding was received.

72. IT procurement was a related problem that was seen as a major consumer of time and energy in the Division. While DESA's Executive Office provided important assistance on procurement matters, staff reported considering splitting procurement requirements into small chunks in order to avoid the more time-consuming requirements of major procurement processes. One interviewee commented that good, no-cost solutions were often available from companies such as Google, but that such acquisitions were not permitted under current arrangements. Speeding and simplifying minor software purchases by permitting them to be charged to a branch or divisional credit card was recommended by several interviewees.

## V. Conclusion

73. Fourteen years after its last evaluation of DESA's statistics programme in 1997, OIOS is able to conclude, as it did then, that the programme 'illustrates the type of activity the United Nations does well'<sup>37</sup>. The current Statistics Division and the two major statistical forums it serves – the Statistical Commission and the CCSA – together constitute the major leadership of the global statistical system and have been instrumental in bringing to that system a measure of consistency, harmonisation and resilience that could not otherwise have been achieved. The dividends are major and for the most part integrated statistical collections that represent the input of all contributing member states and specialist United Nations and other bodies and constitute the best possible evidence base for the discussion of social and economic issues at the global level. This is despite the constraints imposed by the vastly differing quality and range of statistics produced by Member States and the pressures of emerging priorities and new areas of statistical focus and method.

74. The strengths of the subprogramme appear to lie in the universal acceptance by Member States of the mandate of the Statistical Commission, the technical expertise of its participants, and the win-win opportunities it offers to its stakeholders, who do not appear to face significant conflicts of interest or political constraints on adoption of Statistical Commission standards and recommendations. The Statistics Division has exploited these strengths and developed its own – a recognised technical base, good partnerships with its national and international statistical counterparts, deep and mutually respectful relationships with NSOs, and consistency and predictability in its approaches. It has also been able to employ, if not lead, technological advances in order to increase the timeliness and flexibility of its statistical collections and their accessibility to users, and has the will and the ability to take the lead in managing geospatial data. Its UNdata portal and associated collections are innovations that make available its global statistics to all participants in the global statistical system on equal and essentially cost-free terms, so facilitating their use in global and national policy debates and decisions. It has developed processes and structures to avoid duplication in the collection and definition of statistics and standards and so has generally preserved the value and uniqueness of its role. Its continuing relevance appears to be unquestioned.

75. Nevertheless, in two areas its effectiveness was constrained. The first related to internal management within the Division. There were widespread concerns among staff about decision-making processes and transparency in the Division, including around staffing matters. Dissatisfaction was also expressed by stakeholders and staff of regional commissions, who sought closer relationships and genuine partnership in determining workplans and using resources. The efficiency with which publications were produced and other activities were undertaken – particularly non-recurrent activities – could also be improved with better project management and better medium-term planning. These matters were explored in some detail in this report chiefly because the strengths of the subprogramme were so clearly obviously and so clearly important to retain. The Division held the confidence of stakeholders and its staff were proud of its achievements. This can and should be built on. The largest subprogramme of DESA is also one of its most visible, and the United Nations system and the global statistical system have a major stake in the continuation of its success.

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<sup>37</sup> E/AC.51/1997/2, para 84

76. The second area related to the dispersal of accountability for statistical collections and standards in the United Nations, as a result of which statistics are released by different United Nations entities with no necessary reference to each other. As long as this persists, it will prevent the United Nations from ‘delivering as one’ in the field of statistics. The situation is beyond the current authority of DESA or the Division to resolve but warrants attention, as it represents a risk to the continuing credibility of data disseminated by the United Nations. The Statistical Commission has recognised this risk and stressed the need for an authoritative agency in the United Nations system to coordinate statistical activities. It requested that the situation be reviewed and a report prepared for submission to its 43rd session. The desire among stakeholders of the Statistics Division for a central statistical office to provide leadership and coordination across the United Nations system and act as a single reference point for users of statistics was also apparent in this evaluation. The positioning of the Statistics Division in relation to the Statistical Commission, its credibility and its close links with national and international statistical organizations would seem to make it a strong candidate for such an office.

## VI. Recommendations

77. The following recommendations are made to the Statistics Division:

### **Recommendation 1:**

**Re-examine the channels of communication between the Division and the statistics units of its United Nations system partners, including the regional commissions, and develop an action plan in order to achieve better coordination of activity and better use of resources.**

Possible actions could include, but are not limited to:

- An assessment of the resources, work programmes and existing joint activities with partners, including the regional commissions, including their strengths and weaknesses,
- Consultation to ensure *ex ante* discussion and alignment of the work programmes of such partners, including capacity-building activities and technical assistance, rather than *ex post* sharing, and
- Clear explanation in UNdata and elsewhere of the role, if any, of the Statistical Commission and/or the Statistics Division in contributing to the concepts and definitions used in statistics compiled by other United Nations entities and disseminated in UNdata or other official United Nations sources.

### **Recommendation 2:**

**Establish an internal division-wide working group including representatives of staff at all levels to develop an action plan for improving the Division’s work environment, focusing on strengthening consultation and communication, and enhancing management of staffing and career matters.**

Issues addressed should include, but are not limited to:

- Medium and longer term work planning,
- Project design and management,

- Decision-making and financial delegations within the Division,
- Opportunities for staff to engage with their counterparts in other divisions and other organisations to advance their specialist knowledge, policy awareness and work experience,
- Opportunities for staff to raise workplace concerns in an environment that protects their confidentiality (surveys, focus groups, etc), and
- Work-life balance issues and tools.

**Recommendation 3:**

**Explore options for improving IT infrastructure and resources in order to support the Division's ability to respond to new and emerging priorities, including the management of global geospatial information.**

Possible actions could include, but are not limited to:

- An assessment of IT requirements in the medium and longer term,
- Discussions with the appropriate authorities within the United Nations Secretariat, with the Statistical Commission, and with potential donors, and
- Development of an IT plan.

## **ANNEX A**

In this Annex, OIOS presents the full text of comments received from the United Nations Statistics Division of DESA on the draft evaluation of report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD). This practice has been instituted as per General Assembly resolution 64/263 following the recommendation of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee. Overall, UNSD concurred with our findings and conclusions.

### **Comments from UNSD on the draft report**

TO: Mr. Yee Woo Guo  
A: Acting Director  
Inspection and Evaluation Division  
Office of Internal Oversight Services

DATE: 10 May 2011

REFERENCE: DESA-11/00766

THROUGH:  
S/C DE:

FROM: Juwang Zhu   
DE: Chief  
Office of the Under-Secretary-General  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

SUBJECT: Draft report of OIOS on the Statistics Division  
OBJET:

1. I refer to your memo of 26 April 2011 addressed to Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, transmitting the final draft report of OIOS on Statistics Division and inviting comments on the final draft.
2. The Statistics Division expresses its appreciation for the evaluation and has requested the Office of the Under-Secretary-General to transmit its comments (attached herewith) on the final draft.
3. On behalf of Mr. Sha Zukang, I would like to take this opportunity to thank IED/OIOS colleagues for your evaluation of the Statistics Division.
4. We will follow up on the results of the evaluation and the recommendations.

Thank you.

cc: Ms. Carman L. Lapointe  
Mr. Byung-Kun Min  
Ms. Jan Muir  
Mr. Paul Cheung  
Ms. Sabine Warschburger  
Ms. Ursula Germann

**Comments by the United Nations Statistics Division  
on the OIOS Evaluation Report- 5 May 2011**

The Statistics Division very much appreciates the energy and professionalism of the OIOS team undertaking the evaluation and the opportunity afforded to all of the Division's stakeholders, especially Division staff, to express their views on the effectiveness of the Division's work and operations. The Division also appreciates the opportunity provided by OIOS to provide some points of clarification and additional information to the review.

The Division notes the strongly positive findings in the evaluation report and takes pride in the contribution that it has been able to make in advancing the global statistical system. Particularly pleasing is the support that the Division staff has expressed in this work, as summarised in paragraph 61 of the report. There clearly is unity in purpose at the Division.

What follows below are some additional points of information or clarification in regard to each of the three report recommendations that may be useful for the clients of this review.

*Re-examine the channels of communication between the Division and the statistics units of its United Nations system partners, including the regional commissions, and develop an action plan in order to achieve better coordination of activity and better use of resources.*

The Division is disappointed that this critical, first order issue of enhanced statistical coordination within the United Nations system is not addressed by a more direct, stronger recommendation.

The report makes a compelling argument for enhanced statistical coordination within the United Nations system. Stakeholder concerns about this issue are well documented and paragraph 53 notes that the Statistical Commission has "stressed the need for an authoritative agency in the United Nations system to coordinate statistical activities and asked relevant United Nations authorities to review the situation, requesting that the Statistics Division report back to the Commission on this issue in its 43<sup>rd</sup> Session" (in February 2012).

The Executive Summary of the report notes that "Member States may wish to consider whether it is time to .... create a central statistical office for the United Nations, building on the Statistics Division, that would provide leadership and oversight across the United Nations system and enable it to 'deliver as one' on statistics." It could be argued that Member States have already expressed this view in their decision at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Statistical Commission, as recognised by the OIOS in the quote in the previous paragraph.

The Statistics Division will initiate a conversation within the United Nations system on this critically important matter and will report back to the Statistical Commission next year. That conversation could have benefited from a stronger, clearer OIOS recommendation on this matter.

*Establish an internal division-wide working group including representatives of staff at all levels to develop an action plan for improving internal work processes, strengthening consultation and communication, and managing staffing and career matters.*

The Division has already started action to address this recommendation with a communication from the Director to all staff seeking their engagement in a program of seminars and discussion groups to gather views and suggestions for improvement. Based on these activities, a report on the actions required will be discussed at the all-staff Divisional meeting before agreed proposals are implemented.

*Explore options for improving IT infrastructure and resources in order to support the Division's ability to respond to new and emerging priorities, including the management of global geospatial information.*

The head of the Division's Office and Technology Management Section has been asked to lead a review into these matters. It is recognised that any proposals for change will need to be coherent with the overall information technology infrastructure and policies applying within the UN Secretariat.