CONTRIBUTION TO THE 2023 HLPF
STATISTICAL COMMISSION

9 March 2023

The General Assembly in resolution 75/290 B defined the theme of the 2023 HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC to be "Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels".

While presented with great challenges, the global statistical systems have shown strength and resilience, despite the unprecedented demand for timely and disaggregated data and statistics. The Statistical Commission provides strategic guidance to national and global statistical and data systems.

In 2022, ECOSOC adopted the updated terms of reference of the Statistical Commission (E/RES/2022/3). The updated terms of reference, the result of an open, participatory-based, and transparent process, address the changing data ecosystem and how the Statistical Commission can be responsive and reflect the current and futuristic statistical and data needs faced by Member States. The broadening of the scope from statistics to statistics and data highlights how complex the data ecosystem is, and that the Statistical Commission is well positioned to meet these demands.

In this context, the Statistical Commission thanks the President of ECOSOC and provides herewith our most salient contributions to the 2030 Agenda, following the template suggested.

(a) Progress, experience, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17 from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the SDGs and targets, including policy implications of their synergies and trade-offs,

The world is facing cascading and interlinked global crises and conflicts that put the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in grave jeopardy. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on almost every aspect of our lives and across all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with its effects still far from over. Yet, all of these crises – and ways to prevent and navigate them – are addressed holistically in the SDGs.

Regarding the SDGs under review at the 2023 HLPF, the COVID-19 pandemic has left an undeniable impact on progress across these SDGs. *<SDG 6>* For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic drags on, it is abundantly clear that safely managed drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services are vital to human health. But unless progress picks up speed – dramatically – billions of people will still lack these essential services in 2030. In addition, water is fundamental to many other aspects of sustainable development and is under threat due to rising demand from rapid population growth, urbanization and increasing pressure from agriculture, industry and the energy sector. Decades of misuse, poor management and the over-extraction and contamination of freshwater and groundwater supplies have exacerbated water stress and deteriorated water-related ecosystems. This, in turn, affects human health, economic activities, and food and energy supplies. To ensure a sustainable and equitable distribution of water to meet all needs, the average global implementation rate of improved water resources management needs to double.

<SDG 7> While the world continues to advance towards sustainable energy targets, the current pace of progress is insufficient to achieve Goal 7 by 2030. Improvements in energy efficiency, for example, will need to accelerate to reach the climate goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Hundreds of millions of people still lack access to electricity, and slow progress towards clean cooking solutions means that the health of 2.4 billion people is at risk. Huge disparities in access to modern sustainable energy persist, leaving the most vulnerable even further behind. In some countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened or reversed advances already made. Achieving energy and climate goals will require continued policy support and a massive mobilization of public and private capital for clean and renewable energy, especially in developing countries.

<SDG 9> The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of industrialization, techological innovation and resilient infrastructure in building back better and achieving the SDGs. Economies with a diversified industrial sector and strong infrastructure (e.g., transport, Internet connectivity and utility services) sustained less damage and are experiencing faster recovery. In 2021, global manufacturing rebounded from the pandemic, although the recovery remains incomplete and uneven. In LDCs, recovery has been sluggish and less certain with almost one in three manufacturing jobs was negatively impacted by the crisis. Women, youth and low- and middle-skilled workers suffered the most losses. Overall, higher-technology industries performed better and recovered faster, providing a strong example of how important technological innovation is to achieving Goal 9.

<SDG 11> Today, more than half the world's population live in cities. By 2050, an estimated 7 out of 10 people will likely live in urban areas. If well-planned and managed, urban development can be sustainable and can generate inclusive prosperity. However, rapid and poorly planned urbanization leads to many challenges, including a shortage of affordable housing, insufficient infrastructure (such as public transportation and basic services), limited open spaces, unsafe levels of air pollution, and increased climate and disaster risk. The deep inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other cascading crises further highlight the importance of sustainable urban development. Strengthening the preparedness and resilience of cities, including through high-quality infrastructure and universal access to basic services, is crucial in the recovery phase and in our ability to respond to future crises.

<SDG 17> Many developing countries are struggling to recover from the pandemic despite a record-high level of official development assistance (ODA) and a strong rebound in global foreign direct investment (FDI) and remittance flows. Among other challenges, developing countries are battling record inflation, rising interest rates and looming debt burdens. With competing priorities and limited fiscal space, many are finding it harder than ever to recover economically. With the pandemic stretching on and stark disparities in vaccine distribution among countries, there is also the threat of a "two-tiered" COVID-19 recovery. To build back better from the pandemic and rescue the SDGs, a full-scale transformation of the international financial and debt architecture will be required. To find lasting solutions to our global crises across the social, health, environmental, and peace and security spectrums, international cooperation must be scaled up – urgently. In addition, to stay ahead of these crises, significantly more investment in data and statistics will be necessary.

(b) Three key areas where transformative actions for accelerated progress have been successful, and three key areas where support is most urgently needed, with regard to the cluster of SDGs under review in July 2023.

The Statistical Commission as an intergovernmental body responsible for the statistical standards and methodologies used by national statistical offices to produce data and statistical evidence used to measure progress toward sustainable development. National statistical

systems as the backbone for providing data and statistics to measure progress toward sustainable development. Measuring progress requires timely and disaggregated data. Using innovative sources, technologies and methods are tools that help to improve production and dissemination of better, more timely and disaggregated data on key areas related to specific Sustainable Development Goals.

Overall support and financing for sustainable national statistical system is urgently needed to allow these essential offices to carry out their work. Strengthen national statistical capacity allows countries to better respond to new data challenges in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

(c) Examples of specific actions taken to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic that also accelerate progress towards multiple SDG targets, including actions identified by your intergovernmental body, building on interlinkages and transformative pathways for achieving SDGs.

The Statistical Commission as an intergovernmental body responsible for the statistical standards and methodologies used by national statistical offices to produce data and statistical evidence used to measure progress toward sustainable development. National statistical systems as the backbone for providing data and statistics to measure progress toward sustainable development. The pandemic emphasized the need for timely, disaggregated data, and national statistical offices adapted and innovated data production methods and processes to ensure continuity of major official statistical programmes.

(d) Assessment of the situation in the mid-point of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and within the respective areas addressed by your intergovernmental body, and policy recommendations, commitments and cooperation measures for promoting a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

On the flip side of the many negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has forced new ways of thinking and opened up new opportunities, which the global statistical community is exploring. Its aim: to take that knowledge forward to provide better data for better lives – now and in what may be turbulent years ahead.

The impact of COVID-19 on national statistics offices (NSOs) around the world was dramatic. At the start of the pandemic, in-person data collection was abruptly halted in almost all countries. Meanwhile, data demand for policymaking and to inform the general public reached a new high. In seeking to understand the impact of the virus, for example, public health authorities needed timely and disaggregated death statistics. But monthly mortality data are still not available in the majority of countries. Moreover, many NSOs lack the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure to carry out their daily work remotely. Compounding these problems was the fact that domestic and external funding for statistical activities has been cut back in many countries, particularly those that need it most. In essence, COVID-19 posed a serious threat to already struggling national statistical systems and was a wake-up call to the need for stronger statistical and ICT foundations.

Despite the challenges, many NSOs found new ways to get the job done. One of them was using non-traditional data sources, such as mobile phone data, satellite imagery and citizen-generated data, along with new modes of data collection, such as web- or telephone-based or mix-mode interviews. The offices encouraged collaborative efforts and played a stronger coordination role within national data ecosystems. Such initiatives have provided the data needed to better understand the course and effects of the crisis on health, jobs, migration, violence against women and a range of other issues. Yet the level of responses among national statistical systems differed widely. Those that already had a solid and well-established data system have been better equipped to react creatively to the crisis. For instance, countries that only relied on in-person data collection before the pandemic were heavily affected, while countries with experience in remote data collection, or that had experimented with it, were at a considerable advantage. For example, in the United Kingdom, the immediate roll-out of a time-use survey during the pandemic benefited from earlier experimentation with remote data collection. The survey, carried out through the Internet, enabled policymakers to understand how the pandemic changed the way people spent their time.

The crisis is helping to shape the future of innovation in official statistics, with countries exploring new data sources, modernizing ICT infrastructure and taking lessons learned on the importance of fully inclusive data going forward. In addition, the partnerships formed among government agencies, academic institutions, local governments, private businesses and civil society organizations to collect urgently needed data for policymaking helped to foster new ideas and resources as well as increase the inclusivity, timeliness and utilization of the data collected. All of these experiences show that investing in data capacities and data partnerships to leave no one behind, build trust and fill data gaps to achieve the SDGs must be a priority for national governments and the international community if countries are to rely upon evidence-based policy responses to emerge stronger from the crisis and face the unknown challenges ahead.

(e) Key messages for inclusion into the Political Declaration of the September 2023 SDG Summit.

To stay ahead of these cascading and interconnected crises, we need to understand where we are and where we are headed, and that will require significant investment in our data and information infrastructure. Policies, programmes and resources that aim to protect people will inevitably fall short without the evidence needed to focus interventions. Timely, high-quality and disaggregated data can help trigger more targeted responses, anticipate future needs, and hone the design of urgently needed actions. These data strategic assets are essential to not only build back better, but also accelerate implementation of the SDGs. To emerge stronger from these multiple crises and prepare for unknown challenges ahead, funding statistical development must be a priority for national governments and the international community.