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Progress Report on Work Undertaken by the Communications Task Team

Prepared by the Communication Task Team (CMTT)

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The terminology and presentation of macroeconomic statistics has a significant impact on how the data are interpreted and used by governments, researchers and students, businesses, media, and citizens. Macroeconomic statistics should be presented and communicated in such a way that the full extent of its analytical usefulness, its quality, its scope, comparability through time and across countries, and policy applications are maximized.

1. Background

In November 2018, the Advisory Expert Group on National Accounts (AEG) reconfirmed the three priority areas for the System of National Accounts (SNA) research agenda and identified specific issues to be taken forward in the short term within those areas². In October 2019, at the 13th meeting of the AEG, members agreed to add a 4th priority area – communication which focuses on potential updates to SNA terminology and presentation. At its 51st session, the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) welcomed the establishment of a 4th priority on communication to improve how the data are interpreted and used by governments, researchers, businesses, media and students. Given the importance in maintaining consistency between macroeconomic accounting frameworks and related statistical frameworks there is a need to coordinate this work across the various statistical domains.

The SNA/BPM Joint Task Team (TT) on Communication was established by the UN Committee of Experts on national accounts represented by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on National Accounts (ISWGNA) and the AEG and the IMF's Committee on Balance of Payments Statistics (the Committee) to contribute to the work related to revising the 2008 SNA and the update of the IMF's *Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual, sixth edition (BPM6)*.³ The Joint TT on Communication will oversee the development of recommendations and tools aimed at improving the way macroeconomic statistics and accounts are communicated and presented to a diverse set of users. The activities of the Joint TT on communication will be carried out under five work streams (Joint sub-Task Teams).

2. Communication Task Team Workstreams

2.1 Compilers Hub

The Compilers' Hub workstream includes the development of a digital platform that will facilitate collaboration among macroeconomic statistics compilers and researchers as well as improve the discoverability of information. It is envisioned that the platform will include the following features:

- i. **Digital library:** the Collaborative Compilers Hubs will contain a digital library with links to all supporting manuals, handbooks, and guides, research papers, training material and conference proceedings improving its discoverability by macroeconomic statistics compilers.

¹ This report was prepared by the Secretariat and Co-chair of the Communication Task Team.

² See the 2018 AEG conclusions at: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/aeg/2018/M12_Conclusions.pdf.

³ See the report of the 51st session at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/Report-2020-Draft-EE.pdf>.

- ii. **Research corner:** the Collaborative Compilers Hubs will contain a research corner where international agencies, national statistical offices, and other agencies can upload abstracts and links to current research and invite other members of the community to collaborate to speed up development.
- iii. **Tools section:** the Collaborative Compilers Hubs will contain a tools section where international organizations, professional researchers, and national agencies can post links to tools such as worksheets, algorithms, or other procedures that may be useful and appropriate for compilers or other researchers.
- iv. **Discussion forum:** the Collaborative Compilers Hubs will include a discussion forum where compilers, researchers, and other stakeholders across the world can interact and discuss accounting related questions and exchange ideas.
- v. **Contact forum:** the Collaborative Compilers Hubs will include a contact area where national accounts compilers can make available their contact information, along with their expertise, and identify current areas of research and interest.
- vi. **Training:** the Collaborative Compilers Hubs will contain a training section with links to training opportunities including links to the growing list of online training.

2.2 Digital Manuals

The serviceability of statistical standards for economic statistics and classifications such as the SNA, BPM, and Government Finance Statistics Manual (GFSM) can be enhanced by converting these publications into digitally-enabled and interactive tools with cross references. A suite of digitally integrated statistical standards will greatly facilitate the application of statistical standards by compilers and the navigation from one part of the system of economic statistics to the other. The specific objectives of the digital manuals workstream includes the development of digital and interactive cross-referenced statistical standards and a digital platform that can be used to manage the update of the manuals with an aim to improve the overall speed and accuracy of the update process.

2.3 Terminology

The workstream on terminology will conduct a review of the current macroeconomic accounting terminology and branding and, based on this review, identify complementary alternative terms and presentations. The goal is to improve the overall communication of macroeconomic statistics with non-experts, to better convey the meaning and interpretation data to users. The review will consider the different audiences for and users of macroeconomic statistics and will focus on:

- I. A review of all terms.
- II. A review of the labelling of accounts and tables.
- III. A review of the overall branding, including the way the versions of the manuals are labelled and the way the system is referenced.

2.4 Taxonomy

The taxonomy workstream will oversee the development of a guidance note that proposes a recommended way to describe the different vintages of macroeconomic statistics. Most statistical agencies develop and follow a publication calendar, revisions policy, and disseminate metadata that describe vintages of macroeconomic statistics. However, a comparison of the press releases, revision policies, and series published across countries shows that a wide range of language and methods are used to communicate and describe the vintages of data to users. This issue becomes even more relevant when significant revisions to macroeconomic statistics take place. This impacts their ability to compare, contrast and understand the quality of data from one vintage to another. The guidance note will recommend terms and definitions used in the data production process and suggest a harmonized taxonomy to be used by statistical agencies and international organizations.

2.5 Alignment Framework

The alignment with statistical standards workstream will focus on the development of a clear and consistent framework that measures the degree of implementation and alignment with the international standards (e.g., charts, tables, quantitative indicators). The degree of alignment with international standards provides two important signals to users: first, it informs them about the quality of cross-country comparisons, and second, it informs them whether subsequent major revisions are expected in cases where a country remains distant from the international standards.

Currently, alignment with international standards is a binary, self-proposed definition (i.e., each country declares if it is compliant or non-compliant). As a new round of updates of the macroeconomic accounting manuals is launched, it is important to move away from this binary definition and develop an internationally adopted and accepted framework which measures a country's degree of alignment to the international standards. The framework will consider that the priorities and economic circumstances differ across countries, and that the implementation of the latest version of the standards is not by itself a measure of accuracy. The work will build on existing frameworks such as the set of minimum required data tables and the compliance questionnaire for monitoring the *2008 SNA* implementation, adopted by the UNSC. Specifically, the Joint sub-Task Team is expected to (1) define how to measure alignment to the latest international standards, (2) propose clear and transparent measures of alignment with international standards (e.g., charts, tables, quantitative indicators), (3) propose a framework to communicate the alignment of countries with international standards, considering the initiatives that already exist (e.g., MRDS, SDDS, and DQAF).

3. Task Team Composition and Reporting

Sanjiv Mahajan (Office of National Statistics, United Kingdom) is chair the joint TT on Communication. The chair is supported by the International Monetary Fund, UNSD, and World Bank, which assume the secretariat of the joint TT. The steering group (chair, secretariats and country chairs of the workstreams (sub-TTs)) are responsible for coordination between the work streams.

The chairs the secretariats and chairs of the various workstreams will decide on the size and composition of the contributions to the workstreams. They will organize and align the work and establish a detailed work programme and timetable that considers the milestones for each work stream.

The chair of the joint TT, the secretariats, and the chairs of each workstream will recruit other members of the TTs, normally including other Committee members, experts from international organizations as well as other experts (e.g., from national statistical agencies, central banks, national or local governments, the research community, the media), according to the necessary expertise (e.g., Balance of Payments, Government Finance Statistics, Monetary and Financial Statistics, Environmental Economic Accounting, and Communication). The selection of the members will take into account representativeness (range of regions, country sizes, and stage of statistical development) and the need to coordinate with Committees responsible for other domains.

Progress of work on the five workstreams will be reported to the respective participating Committees like the Committee of Experts on national accounts, represented by the ISWGNA and AEG, the Committee, Government Finance Statistics Advisory Committee (GFSAC), UN Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEA), UN Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics (UNCEBTS), and International Classification and where applicable also the UNSC.