

‘Good data are used data’: Interview with Stefan Schweinfest¹

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In 2024 Stefan Schweinfest celebrates his 10th anniversary as director of the UN Statistics Division and just organized with his team the 55th session of the UN Statistics Commission meeting. Moreover, with over 30 years of experience at the UN and playing this central role in the Official Statistics community, SJIAOS found it the time to have an extended interview with Stefan Schweinfest. The interview as published below, is based on the transcript of an informal chat held over video. The pleasant and informative atmosphere of the chat can of course hardly be reflected by the written version of this interview.

In the interview, Stefan Schweinfest talks about his career, and milestones and elaborates on the role and challenges for the UN Statistics Division as well as the

increased complexity of the Official Statistics Community. He also elaborates on the role of the SDGs in the development of statistics, the emergence of the Geostatistics and Geographic Information System community, and the important role of the UN Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics.

Pieter Everaers: Thank you Stefan for allowing me to interview you. It was not easy to find a suitable date for this interview. I understand you were very busy

Stefan Schweinfest was appointed Director of the Statistics Division (UNSD/DESA) in July 2014. Under his leadership, the Division compiles and disseminates global statistical information, develops standards and norms for statistical activities including the integration of geospatial, statistical and other information, and supports countries' efforts to strengthen their national statistical and geospatial systems.

Stefan Schweinfest started his career by joining the Statistics Division in 1989 in the area of national accounting. He subsequently worked in various other areas, such as statistical capacitybuilding programmes, and indicator frameworks. For many years, he was also responsible for external relationships of the Division, both with member countries as well as with international partner organizations. He has been the substantive secretary of two inter-governmental bodies, the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) since 2002, and the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UNGIM) since 2011.

As the Director of the Statistics Division, Stefan Schweinfest supported the work of the Statistical Commission and its Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) to develop the global indicator framework to monitor progress towards the SDGs, which was adopted by UNSC at its 48th session in March 2017 and subsequently by ECOSOC and the General Assembly. Under his leadership, the Division works on implementing this framework and ensuring countries receive capacitybuilding support to monitor progress towards the SDGs.

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¹United Nations Statistics Division. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

with the United Nations Statistical Commission meeting. How did the UNSC go this year?

Stefan Schweinfest: Indeed, the last couple of weeks and months have been very busy, but every year, the weeks immediately after the UNSC provide some downtime for the UNSD staff. Concerning the 2024 UNSC, it was like a typical crazy Commission. We had over 500 people in the conference room, and I had snippets of conversations with many delegates. Owing to the pressure of the work during that week – in addition to the formal meetings there were more side meetings than ever – I regret, that these were only very few real conversations. The main Statistics Commission meeting dealt with several big items, the biggest being the discussion and acceptance of the proposals for the update of the System of National Accounts (SNA). We expect the new SNA to be published in 2025. All in all, a good meeting, including the adoption of the resolution to increase the Statistical Commission members.

Pieter Everaers: Before entering in some details about your role as Director of the UNSD, can you give us some more insight into your career; how you arrived in this position, and maybe share with us what you feel to be the most important milestones in these years?

Stefan Schweinfest: I walked in the UNSD offices in the late eighties. For the first ten years, I worked in National Accounts. Later that proved to be a good training for the rest of my career because in that position I was involved in all the three big pillars of the work we do: data collection, normsetting, and capacity building. This experience laid the ground, specifically giving me the foundations, to make the move to the Office of the Director in 2000. This move was right at the beginning of the work on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). I learned a lot in that period because, coming from the economic side, I had to learn all about social statistics. In that position, I also was responsible for the capacity-building programs for a couple of years. I loved this part of the job. Not only because I like traveling, but also because the capacitybuilding work is very much at the core of our professional role, as it deals with our main customers, the national statistical offices. So, being in touch with the customers and their environment is critically important for me.

Concerning important milestones in my career, I can mention the moment when I took over the work as the secretary of the Statistical Commission in 2002. That's now over 20 years ago. Another big day for me was in 2011 when UNSD also was made responsible for

the geospatial program. I was responsible for it almost from the beginning. Another event was in 2013, when I became the director, and more or less immediately we started with the discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Reflecting on my role as the director of UNSD, the biggest privilege is that I get to work with a fantastic team. This team is the first pillar to carry me in this position. The second pillar is the professional global community of official statisticians with their huge commitment and cooperative atmosphere.

And if you ask me to describe what I am doing daily as a director, I will say, "I am trying to hold it all together. I can elaborate a little bit more on this "holding together" as this has become more complex over time. We deal with more topics than ever, we have more data than ever, and we have more people to talk to.

Pieter Everaers: Stefan, thanks for this introduction, and yes it would be nice if you could elaborate on the increased complexity of the work as director of the UNSD and in general in the official statistics community. You could highlight how your role changed in what direction, and what has made your role more complex.

Stefan Schweinfest: Well, I work of course with countries. The first table I prepared for National Accounts in 1989, counted 160 countries. Now, we have almost 250 countries and areas for which we collect data. So, in my lifetime, this number has expanded quite a bit, and so has the number of UN agencies. The last couple of decades have seen the birth of UN AIDS and of UN Women, for example. A third dimension for me, as a director, is keeping the sectors in official statistics together, Economic, social and demographic, and environment are the three big pillars of the SDGs. It is important to keep that together "in my own house".

He played a key role in the negotiations leading to the 2011 ECOSOC resolution to establish UN-GGIM and has actively involved himself with global geospatial information management since, including the negotiations leading to a second ECOSOC resolution in 2016 that strengthened and broadened the mandate of this Committee of Experts.

He was the Officer-in-Charge of DESA's Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) from 1 March 2018 until 28 February 2019.

Stefan Schweinfest studied Mathematical Economics at the Universities of Wuerzburg and Bonn in Germany. He holds a Diplome D'Etudes Approfondies (Masters equivalent) from the University of Paris in these fields. He also conducted postgraduate research at the London School of Economics (LSE).

In his private time, he likes to sing and has performed numerous concerts with his chorus in Carnegie Hall. He is also a passionate marathon runner and loves to hit the road all over the world.

In addition to this, what has changed in the last 10 years is the types of information. We have no longer just official statistics. We now have, for example, big data, and geo-information. These are also anchored in separate communities, that speak their own languages. This also implies that the number of our partners in countries has substantially increased. Now, we have at least two government agencies as partners in almost every country. Sometimes these agencies communicate well with each other, but sometimes they don't talk to each other at all.

The private sector is also involved much stronger now, especially in the area of geo-information. I learned to talk to the private sector. There is academia. I believe we have traditionally worked well with academia in the past, but it certainly has intensified. What is also new is civil society: these came in especially with the development of the SDG indicators. From the results of the work on the MDGs, we learned that the development goals are not only the responsibility of a government, but development is the responsibility of the whole society, in the private sector and the civil society. This has dramatically changed with the SDGs. We have to talk to civil society and have an agenda item on the commission that is talking about citizen-generated data. And it has become a lot more of everything, more complex, more data, more partners, more everything. And as I said, my job as the UN statistics director is to keep it all together.

Pieter Everaers: And how does this increased complexity, if you compare the job, say with the job as it must have been 20 years ago, require a different or another set of competencies?

Stefan Schweinfest: Yes, it definitely does, because the role 25 years ago was much more narrowly defined on the official statistical system. You nowadays need to have a broader view of what we sometimes call the data ecosystem. Some 25 years ago we were basically talking to national statistical offices. Those were the people and organizations that we were working with on the development agendas when we started with the Millennium Development Goals. With the SDGs, we started talking about national statistical systems, systems that bring in all the relevant line ministries, for example. And nowadays we are talking about national information systems as the information we are using is wider than statistics. Information providers include everybody, big data providers, the private sector, geospatial information, and so on, so forth. So, to the extent that this has changed at a national level, we have changed

at the global level and our intergovernmental body, the UN Statistical Commission, has changed accordingly. And UNSD has to change in line with how the UN Statistical Commission changes.

Pieter Everaers: How did you manage all those changes?

Stefan Schweinfest: The short answer is by having good people. We had to hire new types of people, for example, geo-information experts. We now also have cartographers, geoscientists, and data scientists in the office. You expand the spectrum that you cover with your team. Also on a personal level, I had to learn, for example, about geodesy as I have to meet experts in this field.

We know that the UN does not have any real power, but it can initiate and convene. And when we invite people to the table to talk about problems that concern us all, these experts usually come there to contribute and they're quite willing to help us. To use that convening power constructively, to get the right people together and be able to talk to them on the right topics has been one of the big challenges, but also one of the big satisfactions of my job.

Pieter Everaers: Stefan thanks for this interesting overview of the growing complexity of the official statistics community. Of course, the community has an infrastructure with formal and informal networks, like working groups, friends of the chair groups, etc, but still, it appears to be a hell of a job to keep all this moving and moving in the same direction. Moreover, as the divergence of backgrounds and experiences between all the stakeholders is growing, some official statisticians will have a background in statistics, but more and more also colleagues with experiences and training in other fields, there will be surely different mindsets. How do you manage to keep all these moves under control?

Stefan Schweinfest: First, I want to say that this work is also a lot of fun, I think it is normal that there are changes and differences in opinion. The first time I sat in a Statistical Commission session was in 1991 as a junior professional in the back of the room. I had no idea what was happening. There was only the main formal session. Furthermore, during that period we still had only one Commission session every two years. The meetings mainly used to be a small dialog between advanced countries defining classical, global statistical standards, mainly within the two core programs from that time: censuses and national accounts. In 2000 the

Commission started to meet annually, and nowadays we have a 4-day main session with over 100 side events, not to mention all the other meetings between the informal and regional networks.

I have had the privilege of being at 30 Statistical Commission sessions. So I have seen many changes throughout these 30 sessions. And the Commission is still changing. But the core of the work stays the same, for example, we will also still be talking in 2025, about launching a new SNA and a new census round. This type of official statistics is the central pillar, the central ally, you can build a lot of information around it. I call this the skeleton, the backbone of national information systems.

The big difference is that in the nineties, there were only a few people, mainly from advanced countries, participating. Now we have many more countries, in 2024 we had 110 and at one point a few years ago we had up to 130 countries participating. We also have over 100 side events (virtual and inperson). I'm mentioning this because it points to the breadth of the topics, and the breadth of participation.

I actually quite like our virtual side events. This year, we started a new initiative: "the Road to the Statistical Commission". In this initiative we launched a series of virtual events, the first was on the 15th of January, in fact six weeks before the formal session. This initiative allows a lot of people, who never have the chance of attending the meetings in person, to connect to the Commission session. In fact, during the formal session in New York, you see only the chief statistician from a country, who brings notes from their entire system. With these virtual events, we can bring everybody to the table. However, an important element of the Commission sessions is community building beyond talking about the official programme. The session makes people aware that there is professional solidarity, with people who struggle with the same problems.

Pieter Everaers: To follow up on this solidarity and global community, I think a couple of years ago we could speak about an official statistics global 'family'; people all knowing each other rather well. But with this growing number and complexity can you still speak about your family? Or are there now many relatives who are now on the outskirts? Do you still know the names of all the participants? And what about the members of the official statistics community? Many faces have changed, and how to manage this new generation?

No, indeed, I do not know all the names and faces of the participants anymore. Part of it may be also caused

by the COVID period as in 2021 and 2022 we did not have an inperson Commission session. During this period, I would say about half of the global statisticians have changed. This year we had only the second inperson session after COVID. And it was a great session because you felt that people came and wanted to work together to rebuild that sense of community and beyond. The chief statisticians themselves have also changed. I mean, it used to be a classical status position. Just joking, but the big fight in a national statistical office was whether the census personnel or the national accountant gets the top job. So those were the two kinds of profiles. Now we have a more diverse participation. We now have chief statisticians who come from the private sector, and speak a different language. This is good. We have some people from academia and some professors. This was always the case, but now we increasingly also have 'government managers', coming from other government agencies and bringing much more a user perspective, not so much a producer perspective. At this moment, we have the benefit of having a great mix. What binds us together is the goal to realize a joint vision based on a joint professional, ethical code. We surely will come back in detail to the Fundamental Principles in a minute but this is something that binds us together. The people coming to New York come with a spirit of solidarity, not to fight, but to understand and help each other. They speak one language; this language is our set of global norms. We are actually a language-producing office.

When we create a global norm, what we do is make sure that we understand each other, that we relate to each other, and certainly that we can exchange 'things' with each other. In essence, we are creating a common language. I always say a norm is not a straitjacket, that somebody is a policeman and checks on you. Norm is the ability to exchange meaningful data and experiences. Because otherwise, the data are not globally comparable. But it is not only the data that are comparable, it is also the experiences that will become comparable. And that is what brings us all together. This is the UN at its best: people coming from very different backgrounds, even from different political backgrounds, but when they have to run for example a census they all have similar challenges. I think people do not come to our meetings, as opposed to some political meetings, to fight; they come to understand each other and to work on solving issues together.

Pieter Everaers: And when you talk about more complex, is it now a more formal environment? Or do you

feel it is still as in earlier times with a lot of informal meetings? And what is the role of sub-sectors: for example the CCSA, other United Nations groups, and specific country or regional groups? Has this architecture changed over time? Is there still, as I remember from my time in the Commission, a lobby work in advance? And what about the distribution of powers between the UN organizations to non-UN organizations?

Stefan Schweinfest: The outline of the architecture is still all there, even though there is more diversity and there are many more countries now. Developing countries also speak up about their needs, having difficulties with the last census round, and so on, asking for help and guidance for the next one.

45 international organizations work in the area of official statistics and form the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA). 29 of which are UN entities. And yes, of course, there are differences, between the sectoral interests. When there is a new development agenda, discussions will start again. People will passionately argue for example that issue A is more important than B or C or whatever, but I think that's normal.

But what you also asked about is the balance between more formal and informal meetings. One of the reasons we have introduced and facilitated all these side events is that these take out some of the formality. The UN core event, the Commission session has to remain very formal, because, at the end of the day, the UN Statistical Commission is also my executive board. So for my use of resources (dollars and staff) during the year, I need to have a mandate from the UN Statistical Commission.

Pieter Everaers: Stefan, let's now extend the circle outside the Statistical Commission. What about other international fora that engage in the domain of official statistics? At least, seen from an outsider's position, there seems to be a certain competition between the Statistical Commission and the UN World Data Forum. Some international organizations that are also part as observers in the UN Statistical Commission play an important role in such other international fora. How are these things related and is the system as a whole changing?

Stefan Schweinfest: Thanks for mentioning the UN World Data Forum, and indeed it is the UN World Data Forum. This UN at the beginning is very important to me because the Forum is not only addressed to governments. I see the architecture as having two pillars: we have the Statistical Commission, which has been open-

ing up gradually. This opening up, however, is a process that cannot jump from today's participant numbers to including 1000s of non-governmental players, as the Commission still has a parliamentary nature with a clear parliamentary duty, namely to adopt international standards. a new census round or a new SNA, to be adopted and implemented by governments. Of course, we do not do this without talking to the 'rest of the world', but the ultimate act is a Parliamentary act. And I did not want to dilute that function. With the creation of the UN World Data Forum, we indeed created a parallel platform, which is open. A forum similar to the Forum Romanum, where everybody can walk in and mingle and talk; a place for dialogue and innovation. No need to report at the end, and no need to create a consensus. We are currently preparing the UN World Data Forum to take place in Medellin later this year and see this again as a place to open up to that wider community.

What happens in the relation between the two is that the Statistical Commission is opening up more and more to topics that originate from a discussion from the Forum, topics like talking about citizen-generated data, big data, data science, and opening up to the users Etc. And the Forum is of course not taking place in a vacuum. It has to be connected to be relevant and should not build up a parallel information system. Maybe we are not yet at a perfect balance.

We started with the first UN World Data Forum held in 2017 in South Africa, followed by the Fora in the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland and China. The upcoming Forum in Colombia will close the first round of the first 10 years by going "once around the globe". It will be a good moment to reflect on whether the current modalities work well: that the Statistical Commission and the UN World Data Forum enhance each other: the Commission by framing the topics and challenges and the Forum by developing innovative elements such as open data, citizen-generated data, and by bringing issues of data governance into the Statistical Commission.

Pieter Everaers: Stefan, and what about the OECD wellbeing conferences? Have these been of any influence on the organization and content of the UN Statistical Commission and the UN World Data Forum?

Stefan Schweinfest: Yes, let me put it this way; the UN World Data Forum has many 'parents'. We have been working on connecting the Forum to other events, also well beyond official statistics. We can easily see four parents: There is the ISI World Statistics Conference – a 100-yearold tradition. Secondly there is the

World Economic Forum, which has also many data discussions. Thirdly the OECD Well Being Conferences and then fourthly of course the UN Statistical Commission. I am not saying we have established all the connections perfectly, but I think the idea is to definitely be very open and provide a platform for each and every topic and for everybody to come.

Pieter Everaers: One rather critical issue a couple of years ago was also the relation between the regional UN bodies, the other UN Agencies, and your department, the UN Statistical Division. How has this developed, is there now a certain balance?

Stefan Schweinfest: I am optimistic regarding the balance. My role as the director of UNSD includes the coordination of the global work in official statistics. The UN is a global organization headquartered in New York. So, the global mechanisms are by design the core function and they are supported by the regions. The UN regions have traditionally been diverse, maybe even independent and they are also differently resourced in terms of expertise. The regional bodies are responsible for the regional statistical committee² meetings.

I have observed the functioning of the regional commissions for more than 20 years. It was important to reinforce and recreate all of the regional statistical conferences. Now there are bi-annual regional conferences in Africa, the Americas, and for the Asia, Pacific region, for the Western Asian region, and annual meetings of the Conference of European Statisticians. These statistical committees, the Member States in the respective region and the regional secretariat vary largely in their available resources and expertise.

More than ten years ago, the heads of the statistical divisions in the regional commissions started to meet regularly upon my initiative. Now, they meet (virtually) once every two weeks, and as they are struggling with the same issues, they naturally exchange ideas and of course, sometimes they 'gang up' against headquarters. I am not participating in each but I have very good relationships with the directors of statistics in the regional commissions and the regional conferences and I make it a point that, whenever I can, I will go to the regional statistical committees because the participants are the same constituents as those that show up in the UN Statistical Commission in New York.

²These regional statistical bodies use different terminology: the Statistical Commission for Africa, Committee on Statistics (Asia and Pacific), Statistical Committee (Western Asia), Conference of European Statisticians, and the Statistical Conference of the Americas.

Pieter Everaers: Thanks, that touched on a lot of points I raised under the first question. However, still missing is your expectation for the profile of the new generation of officials and statisticians, beyond all those elements such as extra complexity, data science, etc, etc. Do you still see traditional official statisticians? Or is the mixture now more or less taking over the balance?

Stefan Schweinfest: It is now much more mixed. The official and classical statistician, maybe even people like me who have worked their whole lives in a statistical office, will at some point be the minority. But I also feel we are still an important element in the statistics. It would indeed be interesting to make a professional profiling of all the chief statisticians.

For the younger generation, it is important, that they bring in additional skills, as they are, for example, working in a digital environment. To illustrate this: many, many years ago, I wondered whether statistics was a form of art. We statisticians had a tendency, to double-, triple-, and quadruple-check our product, we were only content when it was according to our scientific methodological standards. I compared this to the production world: we were leaving the product at the end of the assembly belt, for somebody else to open the factory gate and carry the product out into the sun. I have changed in that sense, that nowadays I will say **a good data item is a used data item**. The data have to be validated from two dimensions. First, they are 'good' items from a production side, methodologically solid, and trusted. But secondly, they are also only 'good' if they are used. So, it is no longer just a form of art. The new generation is much more attuned to dealing with data source diversity. They grew up with a phone in their hand, so they know what a valuable data source a mobile phone can be. And they are much more attuned to the users and their needs. And when I say users, it is also not only official users. This is also something that has changed: the data that we are producing are not only for the government but they are also used by civil society and the private sector.

This is how the world of statistics has become more complex. Players are producers and users of information at the same time. This changes the role of official statistics dramatically. Official statistics have changed from a goods provider to a service provider. In the past, a minister would call a chief statistician and say: I need information on this new phenomenon. Can you produce it? Can you run a survey? Can you get me the information? But that is the past! Nowadays, it is more likely

that a minister calls and says: Someone gave me this information; is it any good? Can I use it? So, the role of the statisticians in the statistical office has changed from being the sole producer of official data and information to becoming also the guardian, the quality controller for the user so that they can understand what that information is and what it is good to use for.

Pieter Everaers: Earlier in the chat you mentioned the global norms, the fundamental principles as binding elements of our community of official statisticians. You also mentioned this in the context of the changing profile of the official statisticians. But I noticed, for example, that the participants at the session on the UN Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics at the latest ISI Conference in Ottawa in July 2023, were all relatively old and senior statisticians, with relatively conservative profiles. So, this brings me also to the question if the UN Statistical Commission is indeed still at the apex of the official statistics world, Is it still such a strong binding factor? Are all the participants at the Statistical Commission still fully aware of the Fundamental Principles? Or is it something that is held by a small group?

Stefan Schweinfest: Is the Statistical Commission still at the apex of official statistics? My answer will probably not surprise you: It is. But I must admit: I am biased. I am fiercely protective of 'my' Statistical Commission. To be more concrete, Looking into the room at last week's UN Statistical Commission, all the important people were there. It is like the Olympics. It is not an event that anybody who is part of that 'universe' would easily skip. So I think the apex role is still recognized. But in addition to this, it is not only the fact that the people are there, it is also the spirit that is still there.

About the conservative nature of the work, this is an interesting question. I have thought about it a lot whether those decisions at the Statistical Commission are inherently conservative. There may be two elements to this: The first element is quality control. We have an idea or notion of the critical importance of quality, meaning that we will not jump up, and follow the fashion of the day. If somebody throws a number at us, we will immediately ask, where does this number come from? What does it mean? How was it compiled? Who produced it? Who paid for it? And so on. These are very important and indeed maybe conservative reflexes that we do not jump up and down and run after the fashion of the day. The other element is simply that our professional duty is measuring development. We are

not producing isolated numbers, but time series. In that sense, we are not taking photos, but we are rather making a movie. It is a sequence of photos, that makes us inherently conservative, using the same perspective and the same methods. We will define a norm and it will be there for 10 years. And even if two years later, we have a better way of calculating things, we will not immediately incorporate that. Because we have to produce time series because the phenomenon that we are describing is not the status of the world, but the development of the world.

These elements are making us a little bit more cautious, or you may say 'conservative'. But I want to underline also that in addition to sometimes being conservative, the community has been incredibly adaptive; how we use information technology, how we use different data sources. Not least, we have shown enormous creativity within our limited resources to solve issues within the COVID period, for example. For us, this time was, sadly to say, a good opportunity, a wake-up call, in many ways. Coming back to your question: All of this makes the Fundamental Principles all the more important because they reflect what the core of our business is: that we are transparent and that we are scientific,

Pieter Everaers: Official Statistics is one of the cornerstones of democratic societies. How do you see its role in the context of the populist and anti-democratic movements that can be noticed in many countries? Democracies seem to be very much under pressure. Will these movements influence official statistics? Similarly how to deal with the influencers who are distributing fake news or their own news? How do we protect ourselves against misuse?

Stefan Schweinfest: One of the things we have learned is to speak up. The importance of communication in a national statistical professional environment has increased dramatically. Nowadays, people not only produce the 'good', but they also communicate about it, its methodology and its use. Good information is an inherently democratic tool because democracy means that the citizens have the means to hold their governments accountable.

The Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics were born as a tool of a democratic society, they were born out of the transition of the Eastern European countries, to give societies there a tool. Considering the type of anti-democratic movements you described in your question, the Principles are incredibly relevant. They include a statement on the right to comment on misuse. I would even go one step further: By now it has become

a duty to speak up against misuse! If somebody misinterprets, mispresents, or misuses data publicly, even if it is a high-level politician, the statisticians have not only the right but the duty to speak up.

I am very excited about discussions on whether these Principles have to be called the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Currently, there is a sense that the scope of these Principles goes beyond official statistics. There is more general 'good data conduct' that needs to be codified. Whether the Fundamental Principles in their current form fulfill that enlarged scope is maybe not so obvious. When that question came up some 10 years ago, Enrico Giovaninni was saying that we also need fundamental principles for the private sector. As a reaction, many people were saying that the Fundamental Principles were generic enough; that they still stood the test of time. That was the famous quote of Katherine Wallman.

But I think we surely need to give this question renewed attention. This is why I proposed to set up an advisory board on the Fundamental Principles. It has worried me for a while that we only pay attention to the Fundamental Principles once every five or ten years when we celebrate their anniversary. There is a lot of work to be done in between those anniversaries. I want to make the Fundamental Principles much more visible – continuously visible that is. Such was the idea behind the proposed advisory board. The decision on this has been postponed by the Commission. There was an agreement to more continuously update the implementation guidelines; What do countries really do? A topic that I feel very strongly about is: Are there ways to prevent non-compliance? Is there something the global statistical community can do in the period before there is a potential non-compliance? Could there be a kind of 'hotline' for a chief statistician for him/her to call or a person who stands by and gives him or her some advice?

Coming back to the issue of more visibility, we have surely been successful in elevating the Fundamental Principles to the political level. Ten years ago, we were successful in getting the UN General Assembly to endorse the Fundamental Principles. The Principles are no longer just only a commitment of the professional statistical community, now there is a commitment of governments to these Principles and they can be held accountable. I must admit, I feel rather proud of this accomplishment.

However, we are not checking on this commitment by governments enough. This would require two things: One is that we elevate the visibility of the Principles

within the governments. We need to discuss these Principles with government officials; what they mean and how they translate to the modern world. We have not done that enough. The other big topic is compliance. What do you do if somebody does not comply? How do we react? Who is in a position to react? The European Statistical System has a long and excellent tradition of peer reviews. These peer reviews avoid putting international organizations in the difficult position of having to 'investigate' one of its Member States. Is it maybe the professional organizations of the ISI or other outside organizations, that will have to play this role?

Coming back to your earlier question, there is indeed a little bit of an age bias with those involved in the discussion of the Fundamental Principles. I think this has to do with the experience of the people who understand them. This also has to do with the fact that people who are no longer in government service, have a more independent standing. There are certain things that I, as the director of the UN Statistics Division cannot say or cannot do. But two years from now, when I am the retired Stefan Schweinfest and a private person, I can say things differently.

Pieter Everaers: So, the Fundamental Principles are an important norm for our community. But are we as official statistical community and this norm-setting system, strong enough to survive the current wave of populist movements, and this wave of fake news?

Stefan Schweinfest: I think we are strong enough, we have the tools, and people can understand the difference between a good piece of information and a bad piece of information. But we do have to find a way to communicate it better. For example, one of our favorite terms is metadata. When you talk to a 'normal' human being they have no idea what metadata is. But if you give a 'normal' human being a piece of information, they have a very healthy reflex to immediately ask for metadata, albeit with different words. For example: If you tell your neighbor that the other neighbor is having an affair with a third neighbor, they will immediately ask you: How do you know that? Who told you that? What is the source of information? Is it credible? Have you heard that only once, or from multiple people? There is an inherent human and very healthy reflex to ask for the quality of the information, the source of information for metadata, even though people do not know where it is coming from. We have to connect to that, and not just stand there and 'preach' in technical and scientific terms. We need to be watchful. It is not going to happen by itself. We cannot just produce data. We spend

a lot of effort and a lot of money to produce data, and we comply with all international norms and standards. And that is why we assume that this 'item' sells itself. No, we have to go out and explain and communicate that information and communicate in such a way that people understand. You want quality information, not just somebody who tells you something. People know the difference.

Pieter Everaers: So this is probably the most important message on the Fundamental Principles. We have to be watchful and we have to communicate in the current environment.

Stefan Schweinfest: Yes. One of our most fundamental errors was that we were too focused on the production of information, and not so much on the use of information. We considered this 'other people's problem'. But it is not. After all, the use of the data also has a feedback loop to the funding and the resourcing of our activities. So we have several reasons to be watchful and maintain the quality, but also to make the business case for our operations. Good information is not cheap, good information requires commensurate investment. We need to inform people about that.

Pieter Everaers: Thanks Stefan, Let's change to capacity building in statistics. These include also the work on the SDGs and the MDGs. Is this work on SDGs really a successful path for capacity building?

Stefan Schweinfest: The MDGs and now the SDGs have definitely drawn more attention to data. Data is not only a monitoring tool, data is also an enabler of the development of the agenda itself. As statisticians, we do not want to be the 'guys who just measure the past'. Like at the Olympics where data decides who won the gold medal and who didn't. Our contribution goes beyond that. It is the continuous measurement that after a year or two, three, or four you have a well-established monitoring tool and set of indicators that guide the implementation and allow you to course correct. So in that sense, we become an enabler.

With this increased investment in data, we also hope more attention will come to good statistics. Unfortunately, this is not as straightforward as one would hope. It is still vastly under-appreciated, how costly good statistics are. To have solid statistical operations these need to be solidly funded. If we look at the SDGs as a huge project, there should be a portion of the project funds dedicated to monitoring and evaluation. The money that is invested in any of the development goals should have a percentage dedicated to the data

and monitoring. We are moving in that direction, I think that realization starts trickling through.

We can show that the amount of data available in our SDG database has increased enormously since 2015. We have a lot more data for a lot more countries. But at the start of the SDGs, the number of 231 indicators was too much and created a bit of a shock. We had been struggling for 15 years to get data for the 60 MDG indicators and now had to tell the developing countries that they needed to collect even more. Therefore, I was hoping that at one point early on, we could identify some key indicators, These selected indicators would allow to keep the communication on the agenda flowing. This would have been some 50 to 100 indicators, which I think is a good baseline for a global program of capacity building. I still hope that we will get there ultimately.

But all in all, we have produced more data and that is why the SDGs were good for us. What we need perhaps now is a better understanding of why there are still data gaps. This will help communicate with the users who are wondering why after ten years we still have data gaps. Of course, not all data gaps are equal. Some data are not relevant to some countries. A landlocked country does not need or better cannot produce data on their (non-existing) coasts. That is one example. There are also political decisions; some goals or targets are not deemed of high political importance for some countries, and obviously, they will accordingly not invest in the production of the relevant indicators.

I hope that during the remaining time of the SDG agenda, we can discuss priorities. Obviously, the SDG data cube has 231 indicators, some 200 countries and 15 years, and yes, there are still blanks. To fill in all the blanks is not going to happen. We have to have a better sense of priority and targeted investment. In short, what are the really important, relevant items that we need to look at in the remaining five years, where we can still do something to improve the availability?

Pieter Everaers: So you state that the SDGs triggered an enormous amount of developments and investments. Suppose we would not have the SDGs and with the relative failure of MDGs we would have as official statisticians the task to work on the traditional national accounts and census, where would we have been as an official statistics community? More provocatively formulated, could we say that the SDGs have saved the world of official statistics?

Stefan Schweinfest: The SDGs have done us two very important services. There is a third one on the horizon, which we haven't worked on.

Number one is that the SDGs helped to elevate the importance of data for development; not only as a monitoring tool, but as an enabler. It is a machine. It is a driver of development. The second service is that this development agenda has highlighted the margins of our statistical operations. In the 1950s, we “invented” economic statistics, in the 1970s social statistics, in the 1990s environmental statistics and now we are working on things like governance statistics or, human rights statistics, amongst others. An agenda such as the 2030 Agenda will always challenge us to expand our margins so that we measure what is relevant.

This leads me to the third service, for which I think we have not done the job yet. I hope that it will be something for the future. This is the integration of all of these data sub-sectors. We cannot just provide the silos with our economic data, our environmental data, our social data, and our human rights or governance data. The important question is how these phenomena are interrelated. Politicians understand trade-offs. And to understand trade-offs, you need to have integrated information systems.

We are right now looking at the integration of social statistics. For this, the Statistical Commission has created the Friends of the Chair Group for Social Statistics. This work is new and exciting. Working on bringing two statistical subsystems together means you need to ask yourself how the social and the economic and the social and the environmental issues are interrelated. This is an interesting field with still many open questions and possible directions.

I foresee that a new development agenda will challenge us in that direction of integrated data. I hope, that we can well prepare ourselves for this challenge. Time goes fast – before you know it is 2030 and a new development agenda will have new issues that pop up. I would love the statistical community to be proactive, to plan now and to actively participate in the discussions of larger goals and to ultimately play a much more constructive role in driving a new development agenda.

Pieter Everaers: Concerning the governance of the indicators for the SDGs, the role of the Statistical Commission at the beginning was not that clear. It was in 2016, or in 2015, when the Statistical Commission was in a rush to get this framework agreed upon and to get this system adopted and through the Commission. This was a key moment for official statistics, if the issue had not been solved at that exact moment, official statistics would have missed the boat.

Stefan Schweinfest: I agree. And we had to fight for that. I remember a conversation that I had with the

ambassadors who were driving the SDGs. They said that the SDGs would have goals, targets and indicators. And I said: ‘This is great! I understand what you are doing. You are creating an accountability framework with targets and indicators and not only the goals.’ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is ‘only’ a list of goals. Sure, noble goals, but there is no underlying accountability mechanism. The UN has learned a lesson from past mistakes; we not only need goals, but we also need targets and indicators. I argued with the ambassadors about a clear division of labor – the goals or the targets are political, and to be adopted by the General Assembly, and the indicators are technical and have to be adopted by the Statistical Commission. The ambassadors argued that the concept of the new development agenda would be undermined as they thought that it would not be possible for the global statistical community, to agree on such indicators within a year. I made clear that not making this division of labor would probably result in a long unrealistic ‘Christmas (St. Claus)-type’ of a wish list from their side and insisted they focus on the goals and targets and give the statisticians a year or so to come up with the indicators. In the end, we won that battle. We were extraordinarily lucky to have somebody like John Pullinger (UK) as chair of the Commission at such a critical moment. John is an articulate ambassador, and had worked with Parliament for ten years; he had shaped his communication skills with the political universe. I remember that John and I worked quite a bit in the background, to disconnect the indicators from the goals and the targets.

The politicians had said, that they could not rely on statisticians who would take 10 years to come up with the indicators. That was something that we then had to communicate to the Statistical Commission: ‘It is going to be almost impossible, but we have, at best, one year’. We had to have the indicators on the table in February 2017. Otherwise we, as you rightly said, would have missed a historic opportunity. We as a global statistical community needed to keep that promise.

Pieter Everaers: So in looking backward on your career, I think that was one very important point where you set in stone at least for the next eight years, your work and the work of your team and in fact for an important part the work of the official statistical community?

Stefan Schweinfest: Well, my staff, sometimes looked at me and said ‘What did you do? Now we have to come up with the annual SDG report!’

But it is absolutely noteworthy, that in the past nine years, we did not have any problems with the SDG

report. Not a single government came to us and said 'This is not our data', or 'This wrongly describes where we are in development'. I did not and do not want any attention on the data. The data is a vehicle for the General Assembly to discuss the issues: Where are we falling behind? Where do we need to invest, to pay more attention? Which types of policies have shown what effects in countries?

Apart from the global reports that UNSD produces annually, there are a lot of national reports. All of these together ultimately allow us to tell our stories, stories about whether certain policy interventions have worked in the sense that they have moved us forward in the direction of the goals and the targets and so on. In the end, that is what we want.

Pieter Everaers: It also triggered – this is relevant for the issue of capacity development – important sponsoring, and money streams into support for the development of national information systems

Stefan Schweinfest: Capacity development in statistics, in general, has changed. First of all, the notion of capacity has changed: what do we mean by capacity: is it financial capacity, technical capacity, or institutional capacity? We have also too often seen in the past, that five years after investment in people and methodology, there was nothing left. Not because these people forgot what they learned. No, they went somewhere else, or the institution collapsed, or there was a change of government. We have realized that we have to look at the broad spectrum of financial, human, technical, and institutional capacity and support all of them in an integrated manner all together.

It is also much broader, as you say, it is now much more in partnership with other international organizations, within the government, with the private sector, or with civil society and academia.

The modalities have changed: when we talk about capacity development we no longer talk exclusively about consultants and workshops, but we talk about e-learning, longdistance, advisory services, and so on. This is exciting! Concerning funding, we of course have to be a little bit careful because some of the private funding may distort priorities. We have to help countries organize their national statistical development plans. I have always been a big fan of the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS). These plans allow us to prioritize and when needed to also exclude certain projects and certain donors.

Pieter Everaers: We are almost at the end of our time. When you are leaving your job next year, what will

be the main part of the message that you will give to your successor?

Stefan Schweinfest: We have had quite some architectural shifts in the last ten years, with the building of the geospatial community and the big data community. The Statistical Commission will be extended from 24 to 54 members. This is a great opportunity as we will see better representation from all over the world every year. It is also a signal of the importance of data to the rest of the UN.

I would tell him or her: There was a quiet but important shift away from official statistics to data when the terms of reference of the Statistical Commission were changed two years ago. The Commission is now the governmental body that is responsible for the entire data ecosystem to advise the Secretary-General, the users, and the highest political level on all questions relating to data, not only the classical statistics. We now have to fulfill that mandate; we have to grow into it, which will take time. In addition, further integrating the geospatial and statistical (data) community would hopefully be continued.

And then as I said earlier, the big next milestone is the 'post-2030 agenda'.

Pieter Everaers: I saw an interesting newspaper article this morning. It was about writing the history, for example, of the Roman period. The theory is that what we find from the Roman period is more or less Boulevard Newspaper type of information. We are not finding the real things on the walls of the Roman buildings. What we see are rumors, gossip, cartoons, etc., in a certain sense fake news from that period. We don't see the real and important messages and news. Maybe that's also going to happen in the future when we think about official statistics; what you see from the newspapers and other media that are kept for the future are rumors, fake news and gossip.

Stefan Schweinfest: That is an interesting question. We have so much information about our times. But what information will survive and describe us when people look back on us a hundred years? I have become a bit obsessed with knowledge management, preserving history and proper archiving. One of the things I may want to do is write the history of the creation of the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM). I was in every meeting right from the beginning. I was part of formal and informal discussions, I know what was discussed and what ideas or options were 'discarded' in this process. It is not only what you see from the outside, but what

actually happens. I am in a unique position to preserve that piece of history. I hope I will find the time to do this.

Pieter Everaers: So if at the end some future colleague, say in the year 2200, has to summarize the role of Stefan Schweinfest in the history of statistics, will they then label you as the man who developed geospatial statistics?

Stefan Schweinfest: Maybe. I was at the right place at the right time. It was indeed my moment of opportunity. So, I guess that could be one of the 'labels'. Also, the SDGs came almost five minutes after I took office. They will also always be tied to me. Finally, I still hold the Fundamental Principles dear to my heart.

Stefan, thanks for this great and interesting chat.