Building trust in official statistics in a digital society: A Commentary

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1. Introduction

   This document provides a commentary on ESCAP/CST(10)/4 on Building trust in official statistics in a digital society. This topic of the management seminar in December 2026 is responsive to the current situation of official statisticians. Achieving trust has always been a goal of the global statistics community and national statistical systems(NSSs). However, the current context faced by the offical statistics community has brought new challenges to trust in official statistics. The framework on trustworthiness with four dimensions provided by ESCAP/CST(10)/4 provides clarity on discussing trust. These dimensions as clearly defined are:

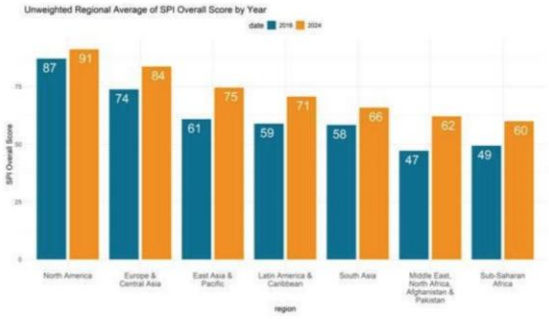
   Credibility as demonstrated through professional independence and methodological rigor; *Transparency* as demonstrated through openness regarding statistical methods, data sources and limitations; *Accessibility* which concerns the ability of diverse users to find, understand and use official statistics; and, *Ethical integrity* referring to the responsible collection, management and use of data, including the protection of statistical confidentiality and privacy.

2. Current State of Trust in Official Statistics in the Asia and Pacific Region

   Public trust in official statistics across the Asia Pacific region varies considerably, mainly due to differences in institutional governance, transparency, and confidence by users including the academe,media and the public. While specific stand-alone external surveys tracking trust solely in statistics are rare, broader institutional metrics such as the Statistical Performance Indicator(SPI) of the World Bank may point to trust in the national statistical system based on the dimensions of trustworthiness. The SPI of Asia Pacific Countries as a group has increased[1]:

[1] https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099010211242513346/pdf/IDU-2d7d8351-fb03-4e10-ae72-ace1d416225b.pdf

Figure 7. Comparison of SPI Overall Scores in 2016 and 2024 - Unweighted Regional Averages



Note: N=172 economies. Economies with less than 500K population are excluded from this analysis.

Even as this collective improvement is noted, the SPI of individual national statistics systems in the Asia Pacific Region reflect the varied stages of statistical capacity. Other metrics such as the Open Data Inventory[2] and internal client satisfaction surveys for those with ISO certifications such as ISO 9001:2015 (Quality Management System)[3] may also be used as refelctive of trust. It is also noted that trust in official statistics may vary according to the products of the national statistical system. For example, the public already understand reports on the performance of the country's economy through releases on Gross Domestic Product and inflation. Reports on poverty statistics using national methodology, on the other hand, are challenging because of limited understanding on methodology.

Whatever their levels of statistical capacity, Asia Pacific countries all face the same challenges to trust which are related to digitalization: "rapid technological change, growing demand for timely and granular data, increasingly complex information ecosystems". Another situation of many is the decreasing financing both from development partners and domestic sources.

Rapid technological change includes artificial intelligence(AI), chatbots , digital platforms and apps, smart devices. Growing demand for timely and granular data include demand for real time, subnational(local level, urban and rural, unserved and underserved areas);sectoral (economic, social, environment and climate change); and, for specific population groups(women, youth, Indigenus Peoples, Persons with Disability, older people).Increasing complex information systems include traditional and non-traditional as well as competing sources of information. Another challenge being experienced by many statistical systems is the decreasing financing on official statistics from both domestic sources and international sources especially through development agencies.

It must be emphasized that the current status on trust on official statistics described above pose not just challenges but also opportunities. National

[2] https://odin.opendatawatch.com/
[3] https://www.iso.org/standard/62085.html

statistical systems and especially national statistic offices(NSOs) should be able to discern what opportunities to grab.

3. Credibility

Credibility is demonstrated through professional independence and methodological rigour.

Vital to credibility of official statistics is a statistics law that provides legal basis for the development,production, and dissemination of official statistics. This is Principle 7 of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS)[4].The Generic Law of Official Statistics (GLOS)5 developed through the the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) 9th tranche project for the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia provides a strong reference for developing a solid legal basis for the functioning of a National Statistical System consistent with the FPOS. It is important that this generic law be crafted in the context of the country. For example, the Philippine Statistics Act of 2013[6] was a recommendation from a review in 2008 of the Philippine statistical system[7] with specific sections applicable to the context of the country. It is noteworthy to point out the following features of the law that upholds the FPOS:

(1) In Section 11,the national statistician is to be appointed by the President of the Philippines only from a list of nominees of a special committee composed of the country's professional society of statisticians(the Philippine Statistical Association, Inc.), two academic institutions offering Statistics programs (the University of the Philippines School of Statistics and the University of the Philippines Institute of Statistics), the Department of Economic Statistics of the central bank(Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas), and the mother agency of the Philippine Statistics Authority(the National Economic and Development Authority, now the Department of Economy, Planning and Development or DEPDev). This upholds Principle 2 (Professionalism and Professional Independence) of the FPOS.
(2) In Section 7, the policy making body of the statistical system, the PSA Board, that is chaired by the secretary of DEPDev , has the secretary of the Department of Budget and Management as vice chair. This is strategic in ensuring the provision of budget for the statistical programs through the annual general appropriations, not just for the PSA but also for other government agencies. This addresses relevance in Principle 1.
(3) the crafting of the Philippine Statistical Development Program to accompany the Philippine Development Plan is in a separate section, Section 24. This promotes Principle 8(National Coordination).
(4) Section 10 explicitly lists interagency committees which serve as a forum for discussions by concerned producers, users and other stakeholders of sectoral and agency-specific statisticso, including standards ,new methods,

[4] https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/68/261
[5] https://unece.org/DAM/stats/publications/2016/ECECESSTAT20163_E.pdf
[6] https://psa.gov.ph/system/files/article-release/20130912-RA-10625-BSA.pdf
[7] https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidspn0808.pdf

and new data sources. This section promotes Principle 5(Sources of Official Statistics) and Principle 9(Use of international standards) of FPOS.

Another important tool that a chief statistician uses to ensure independence is the issuance of the Advance Release Calendar at the start of the calendar year. This specific term does not appear in the Philippine Statistical Act of 2013. However, its Implementing Rules and Regulations [8] explicitly mandate the **approved statistical calendar** and the **System of Designated Statistics(e.g.,** Rule 9, Article 13(b)(i)(c) of the Sectoral Statistics Office, which serve as the legal basis for the calendar's publication. In practice, the PSA Board releases the Advance Release Calendar through a Board Resolution. For example, the 2026 calendar was released on January 8, 2026.[9]

4. Transparency
   Transparency is demonstrated through openness regarding statistical methods, data sources and limitations.

   Principle 3 of FPOS explicitly refers to transparency. Related principles are Principle 2(Professionalism and Professional Independence) and Principle 4 (Prevention of Misuse). The following are activities of the national statistical system, led by the NSO, to demonstrate transparency- the availability of the advance release calendar in the NSO website; metadata documentation in the website and discussed when statistics are released and disseminated through workshops; technical papers on statistical methods and sources of data; information on upholding confidentiality of information collected and managed by concerned agencies in the national statistical system. Vital to transparency is the participation and engagement of the NSO and other data producers of official statistics in meetings and other forum where methods and limitations of data are questioned.

5. Accessibility
   Accessibility concerns the ability of diverse users to find, understand and use official statistics.

   Principle 1 of FPOS emphasizes the character of official statistics- a public good meant to honor citizens' right to information about the country's economic, social, environment situation. The Advance Release Calendar is an important calendar because users are informed at the start of the year on dates of releases of specific information and in what format- through a press conference, through a press release in the website, through a dissemination forum. The websites of the NSO and other data producers are vital for accessibility. NSOs should engage with traditional media to promote its statistical products and services, but it should also explore the use of social media including Facebook and LinkedIn. Statistical policies released by the statistics council, results of censuses and surveys, metadata, open data, data visualization should be in

[8] https://psa.gov.ph/system/files?file=RA%2010625_IRR.pdf
[9] https://psa.gov.ph/content/psa-issues-2026-advance-release-calendar-system-designated-statistics-0

websites. Any query and request for statistical products and services should also be received through web queries or email. Public use files are also important to be accessed by users. Confidentiality of information on specific entities should not be sacrificed by Accessibility. Thus, public use files should be anonymized. Establishment survey results are difficult to anonymize, so the Philippine Statistics Authority provides access to these results in data enclaves where users access survey results in PSA premises , under supervision of PSA , where the users do data processing and analyses with only the aggregate results are approved for them to bring out of PSA.

6. Ethical Integrity

   Ethical integrity relates to the responsible collection, management and use of data, including the protection of statistical confidentiality and privacy.

   Principles 2,3,4,5,6,9 all ensure ethical integrity. They are implemented by a strong NSO led by a strong and steadfast chief statistician with support from other NSO officials, competent technical and other support staff. In a digital society, NSOs should be innovative, open to new data sources and new technology. For sustainability, it is important for NSOs to engage with the major drivers of innovation – universities and research institutions. These institutions act as primary engines for research and new technologies. They bring additional resources to NSOs and national statistical systems with their own funding, specialized equipment, and bright minds ready to solve complex problems.

7. Regional Partnerships

   Principle 10(International Cooperation) highlights the importance of support that NSOs and chief statisticians should provide each other, especially on knowledge sharing. It also promotes engagement with other international communities – e.g., geospatial, policymakers, development partners. The role of UN regional commissions, ESCAP in the Asia Pacific region in particular, is vital in this regard. ESCAP serves as convenor of expert group meetings and seminars that add to capacity building especially on innovations using the digital resources. Another role of ESCAP is the support to networks of chief statisticians, of deputies who could be the next chief statisticians, of technical staff in various statistical domains.

8. Role of the Consultative Advisory Board on FPOS

   The Consultative Advisory Board(CAB) on FPOS was established by the UN Statistical Commission in its 56th session in March 2025 to provide advisory services to national statistical authorities, the Statistical Commission and the United Nations Statistics Division and, as relevant, to professional associations and partner organisations, with the objective of strengthening the application of the Principles in practice in a fast-changing data and technological landscape. The inaugural members of the CAB were appointed in March 2026 and has met three times since then, under the chairmanship of Pádraig Dalton, former

Director General of the Central Statistics Office of Ireland. Its mandate and responsibilities are[10]:

(1)Raising awareness and advocacy

The Board shall be committed to raising awareness about the Fundamental Principles among relevant national, regional, and global stakeholders and advocating for consistent implementation. This includes, jointly with national statistics authorities, facilitating awareness campaigns, webinars, and dialogue sessions with policymakers, data providers, and user communities to build and support trust in official statistics.

(2)Advisory services to national statistical authorities

The Board shall provide advisory services to national statistics authorities, offering guidance to enhance their capacity to implement and promote adherence to the Fundamental Principles. This includes supporting national efforts to align regulatory frameworks and statistical procedures with the Fundamental Principles and sharing best practices informed by global and regional frameworks, such as codes of ethics and good practices. The Board shall also address evolving challenges, particularly those arising from a rapidly changing data environment, to ensure that official statistics uphold integrity, relevance, and trust. The Board shall consider each country's specific governance and institutional frameworks in delivering these services.

(3)Review of best practices

The Board shall periodically review best practices related to the implementation and adherence to the Fundamental Principles, focusing on addressing challenges in a rapidly changing data landscape. These best practices will be incorporated into the regular review and updating of the implementation guidelines for the Fundamental Principles, conducted in collaboration with the Statistics Division.

(4)Providing guidance to strengthen adherence

The Board shall address specific requests from national statistics authorities and other relevant stakeholders seeking guidance to strengthen adherence to the Fundamental Principles. National statistical authorities shall be the primary focal points and consulted first when specific guidance is requested to strengthen adherence. The Board may offer guidance and, as appropriate, propose recommendations while respecting each country's governance and institutional frameworks and ensuring no harm is caused to any party involved. Confidentiality and discretion shall be maintained and actions will be guided by the principle of subsidiarity (national/regional mechanisms are exhausted first) .

[10] https://unstats.un.org/fpos/advisory-board.cshtml#statement