

Concept Note

Development of a Statistical Quality Assurance Framework for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

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1. Background and rationale

Statistics sit at the heart of ECA's mandate, as they support regional monitoring, think tank operations, speeches by leadership, policy engagement, flagship reports, country support, advocacy, and the public visibility of the Commission's work. The ECA relies on statistics from three main sources: the National Statistical System, international databases, and ECASStats. Rarely does ECA collect its own primary data to generate statistics, integrate and reprocess national micro-datasets, or further analyze already-computed statistics for the designation of regional official statistics. The absence of a Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (SQAF) for harvesting statistics from the three different sources and for the above-mentioned varied uses has led to disparities in the use of national and regional statistics. Among other factors, the disparities have arisen from the unavailability or incompleteness of metadata, differences between country-specific and internationally comparable harmonized statistics, differences in the timing of updating and accessing the statistics, the credibility of the international database, and variations in the configuration of platforms and search engines used to harvest the statistics.

The disparities pose a credibility risk to the Commission. This is because the disparities weaken the potential to achieve the outcomes of policy interventions, render statistics untraceable and irreproducible, lead to inconsistent submissions across the ECA leadership, make statistics non-comparable and non-relatable over time, and cause cost inefficiencies in implementing development agendas. The foregoing underscores the need to shift from the current siloed, unstructured, and ad hoc modes of verifying and validating statistics to a whole-of-Commission approach to ensure quality assurance in the use of statistics. With one of the UN80 directives advancing a UN Data Commons agenda through a regional resetting framework, strongly underpinned by a call for integration, the ECA must urgently and collectively institutionalize internal procedures to steward the credibility of official statistics for the continent's development.

This concept note provides preliminary guidelines in actualizing the development, implementation and enforcement of a Commission-wide SQAF. The success of the SQAF will be premised on intellectual alignment on nuances in the use of numbers, notably their intuitiveness, given the state of conceptual and theoretical clarity regarding development issues, relationships, and context across divisions in the Commission. In this regard, this exercise will be undertaken in tandem with the publication of statistical briefs on blocks of development indicators by the African Centre for Statistics. (ACS). Also, the workings of the SQAF will be aligned with the African Knowledge Management Hub (AKMH) to ensure linkages and seamless comparability across knowledge resources, mainly statistics and policy documents, from all divisions and over time.

The remaining sections of this concept note are structured as follows: Purpose and scope of the Framework; Guiding orientation of the ECA SQAF; Framework development process; Governance, deliverables, and next step; and Expected early gains and key implementation cautions.

2. Purpose and scope of the Framework

The purpose of the ECA Statistical Quality Assurance Framework is to provide the Commission with a coherent institutional system to ensure, monitor, and continuously improve the quality of statistics and related metadata across the organization. In practical terms, the framework should establish a common language for subject-matter-driven quality of statistics, adhere to international professional and scientific statistical practices, establish national and regional context relevance, clarify corporate and divisional responsibilities, develop internal minimum standards and principles for the statistical production approaches, and create a basis for routine assessment, reporting, and improvement.

The framework should be institution-wide in ambition, while phased in implementation. It should apply to the corporate database managed by ACS, to statistics used in flagship and thematic publications, to harmonized and derived indicators, and to any statistical series that ECA disseminates or publicly presents as an authoritative source or co-source. It should also cover the internal processes that materially affect quality, including source selection, metadata management, validation, revision, dissemination, documentation, and collaboration with other divisions.

At the same time, the SQAF should recognize differences in role and maturity across the institution. Some divisions mainly use data, while others compile, adapt, or generate them. ACS combines production, stewardship, and coordination roles. The framework should therefore define common principles and minimum requirements for all, while allowing more detailed protocols where specialized processes are needed. It should also explicitly address administrative, international, and other non-traditional data sources whose risks differ from those of more conventional statistical sources.

3. Guiding orientation of the ECA SQAF

The framework should be practical before it is elegant. It should not become a theoretical catalog of aspirations that staff admire but do not use. Its real test will be whether it improves everyday decisions, including how sources are selected, how metadata are captured, when ACS is engaged, how discrepancies are resolved, how validation is documented, and how numbers move from database to publication. For that reason, the SQAF should be concise, operational, and proportionate. It should define minimum corporate expectations while avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy.

The framework should also be built around a few clear principles. Quality should be treated as an institutional responsibility rather than a late-stage technical check. Professional judgment should remain possible, but it should operate within common rules. Transparency and traceability should be non-negotiable, so that ECA can explain where a number came from, how it was derived, what limitations apply, and why it should be treated as the authoritative figure. User orientation should also be embedded for both internal users who rely on ACS and external users of ECStats and ECA publications.

Finally, the framework should align with recognized international practice while remaining tailored to ECA's reality as a regional institution that both uses and produces statistics. The most relevant external references are the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities. These references lend legitimacy and structure, but the final framework must first address ECA's operational problems, including fragmented practices, uneven validation, weak metadata discipline, and a lack of a visible commitment to quality.

4. Framework development process

The framework should be developed through a phased process led by ACS and anchored in real workflows rather than abstract principles alone. The first step should be a structured diagnostic. This would review existing SOPs and guidance, map how data currently moves across ECA, identify the main quality risks, and document usable practices already in place. The objective should not be to start from zero, but to consolidate and strengthen what ECA already has. A checklist will be developed to guide the diagnostic phase.

The second step should be the drafting of the framework itself. This stage would translate diagnostic findings into a concise yet operational SQAF adapted to ECA's hybrid role as both a producer and a user of statistics. The third step should be consultation and validation. The draft should be discussed with ECA divisions, publication teams, database managers, and senior management, not only to improve technical quality but also to build ownership. The fourth step should be limited piloting in a few workflows, such as a database update cycle and a publication process, before final adoption and early implementation.

Table 1: Indicative development phases

Phase	Main focus	Core outputs
1. Diagnostic, month 1-2	Review practice, map workflows, identify risks and usable assets	Diagnostic note: baseline self-assessment
2. Drafting, months 3-4	Define principles, scope, roles, requirements and tools	Draft SQAF; templates and checklists
3. Consultation, month 5	Test feasibility with divisions and management	Validated draft
4. Pilot and finalize month 6	Try selected provisions, revise, approve and launch	Final SQAF roadmap

5. Governance, deliverables and next step

The development process should be led by the ACS section responsible for statistical production, methods and research, consistent with its mandate to advance and align the adoption of international statistical frameworks, methods and professional standards. That leadership should, however, be exercised through an inter-divisional approach. A small technical drafting team should be established under ACS, supported by a reference group comprising representatives from key ECA divisions and functions that regularly produce or use statistics. Senior management sponsorship will be essential if the framework is to become an institutional requirement rather than a purely technical aspiration.

The initiative should generate five practical outputs, namely, a diagnostic note on the current state of statistical quality management at ECA; the draft and final SQAF; a light implementation toolkit including minimum metadata and review instruments; a short implementation roadmap with quick wins and responsibilities; and a public-facing quality commitment statement for ECA's website. A realistic timeline would be around six months from inception to finalization, provided that divisions engage actively and management support is visible.

The immediate next step is, therefore, to formally launch the development process under ACS leadership, beginning with a diagnostic exercise and the constitution of a small inter-divisional task force. This would allow ECA to move from dispersed practices to a shared institutional discipline. More importantly, it would help the Commission protect the credibility of its statistics, reduce inconsistencies across outputs, strengthen the value of ECASStats, and signal to staff, partners, and users that quality is not an afterthought at ECA but a standing commitment.

6. Expected early gains and key implementation cautions

Conditioned on a co-creation process, collective oversight of implementation and high-level support in tracking enforcement, ECA should begin to see tangible gains quite early. Even before full implementation, the diagnostic and consultation process should clarify how statistics move across the institution, where the main weaknesses lie, and which practices can be standardized quickly. Early improvements could include clearer engagement of ACS in publication workflows, a minimum metadata requirement, a common source documentation approach, and a visible statement of quality commitment on ECA's website. These would already help reduce inconsistencies and improve confidence in the development statistics ECA uses publicly.

At the same time, the initiative should avoid two common mistakes. The first is overdesign because a framework that tries to regulate everything at once usually remains on paper. The second is under-ownership, as a technically sound document will still fail if divisions see it as an ACS compliance exercise rather than an institutional tool that protects the credibility of their own work. For that reason, the SQAF should start lean, focus on the most material quality risks, and combine common corporate requirements with room for domain-specific adaptation. Its value will lie not in its size, but in its usability.

Preliminary Reference Documents

1. African Centre for Statistics (2019). ECA Standard Operating Procedures for Data Collection, Compilation and Dissemination. Addis Ababa. Internal document.
2. African Centre for Statistics (2012). Guide to Data Collection, Quality Control, Analysis and Dissemination. Addis Ababa. Internal draft document.
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4. African Centre for Statistics. Data Validation and ASYB Process. Addis Ababa, n.d. Internal presentation material.
5. Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (2005). Principles Governing International Statistical Activities. New York.
6. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2005). Statistical Quality Assurance Framework for Official Statistics. Geneva.
7. United Nations. Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (2014). New York.
8. United Nations Statistics Division (2019). United Nations National Quality Assurance Frameworks Manual for Official Statistics. New York.
9. United Nations Statistics Division (2019). UN NQAF Self-Assessment Checklist. New York.
10. United Nations Statistics Division (2023). Roadmap for the Implementation of a National Quality Assurance Framework for Official Statistics. New York.
11. United Nations Statistics Division (2025). Module for Quality Assurance when using Administrative and Other Data Sources to produce Official Statistics. New York.