Data Systems at a Crossroads: Official Statistics for a New Era

A Discussion Paper for the 57th Session of the UN Statistical Commission

Open Data Watch and PARIS21

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Executive Summary

Official statistical systems are at a decisive moment.

Deep cuts in development financing for statistics, legitimacy issues, rapid technological change like AI, and rising expectations for more inclusive and participatory data are colliding with long-standing weaknesses in trust, capacity, and data use. For many national statistical offices (NSOs), particularly in low- and middle-income countries, this convergence amounts to a systemic data crisis that threatens their relevance, credibility, and sustainability. At the same time, these pressures create a rare opportunity to rethink how data systems are designed, governed, and embedded in society.

This paper argues that the statistical community has reached a fork in the road. Incremental adjustment alone may no longer be sufficient. Countries and the international community face a strategic choice between two broad paths, each with distinct implications for legitimacy, financing, risk, and equity. Rather than prescribing a single solution, the paper aims to provoke informed debate ahead of the 57th Session of the UN Statistical Commission.

1. Introduction and Background

Official statistics face converging pressures that go beyond routine challenges. Donor funding cuts in 2024–2025 threaten the operational viability of national statistical offices (NSOs) in low-income countries. Artificial intelligence is simultaneously disrupting and augmenting how data is produced and consumed. Mandates continue to expand toward greater inclusivity, disaggregation, and citizen engagement, even as resources shrink. And trust in official statistics is under strain from political interference, competing information sources, and lingering credibility gaps exposed during the pandemic.

These pressures interact and vary significantly across countries, creating both acute risks and openings for innovation. Yet several critical questions remain unanswered: How deep are the funding cuts, and which statistical functions are most exposed? What AI applications are realistic for resource-constrained NSOs, and what safeguards are needed? How can expanding mandates be reconciled with declining capacity? And what institutional arrangements best protect statistical independence under political pressure?

This paper assesses the current landscape, synthesizes available evidence and country experiences, and proposes a framework to guide discussions at the 57th Session of the UN Statistical Commission in March 2026. It acknowledges significant uncertainties and invites contributions from international organizations, funders, country representatives, and civil society to refine and extend the analysis.



2. Unpacking the Data and Trust Crisis

Official statistics are foundational infrastructure for governance, development, and social progress. When a government allocates health resources, it relies on mortality and morbidity data. When international organizations track progress toward global goals, they depend on nationally reported indicators. When citizens hold their governments accountable, they need trustworthy information about economic performance, service delivery, and social outcomes. When these systems break, all these actions suffer. The global health data system exemplifies this crisis, where breakdowns in official statistics directly undermine resource allocation, progress monitoring, and accountability in a sector where failures are measured in lives.

Understanding the current crisis for official statistics requires distinguishing between three categories of challenge: the low ebb of legitimacy, trust, and political will, the difficult financing and sustainability situation for LMICs, and the capacity gaps that threaten to widen the inequality between country data systems still further. Each demands different responses, but their interaction creates the volatile conditions that statistical systems now face, particularly amid the additional stress tests from technological change, citizen data, and more inclusive data.

2.1 Legitimacy, Trust, and Political Will

The relationship between official statistics and public trust has always been delicate, but it has become precarious in the current environment. Social media platforms have simultaneously democratized access to information but degraded the quality of public discourse. In this new information ecosystem, official statistics must compete for attention against viral misinformation, partisan talking points, and AI-generated content that can be produced rapidly and tailored for maximum engagement.

This exposes a fundamental gap that statistical systems have been slow to address: official statistics were designed primarily to serve governments, not citizens. The products, formats, and communication strategies of most NSOs remain oriented toward audiences comfortable with technical documentation and statistical abstractions: ministries, international organizations, and researchers. Citizens seeking to understand their own lived experiences often find official data inaccessible, irrelevant to their concerns, or even contradicted by their daily realities.

Lack of trust in governments consequently leads to low trust in national statistics. The perception exists in many countries that data are manipulated to support political agendas or that data that reflect poorly on the government are delayed or withheld. Those living under illiberal regimes and members of marginalized groups may hesitate to participate in data collection, fearing what the government may do with their personal information.

Political will for statistical investment has always been tenuous, but several factors are weakening it. The rise of political discourse that regularly appeals to fake news has brought to power leaders who are indifferent or actively hostile to evidence-based policymaking. Gender equality and other inclusiveness agendas that have driven significant methodological innovation in recent decades face organized backlash. At the same time, statistical leadership in many countries remains technocratic in orientation, often uncomfortable and incapable of the political engagement necessary to build coalitions for reform.

Successful engagement in the political sphere is crucial to building the political will necessary for strong statistical systems. For example, effective engagement with parliamentarians tends to focus on linking data to outcomes legislators care about, such as constituency services, budget oversight, and electoral accountability, rather than abstract arguments about the importance of evidence. Success stories involve sustained relationship-building, not one-off presentations. However, several barriers hinder political will: lack of political incentive to prioritize data investments when returns are diffuse and long-term; high political turnover that disrupts relationship-building with statistical champions; and the underrepresentation of data-literate voices in political processes. These structural barriers suggest that building political will requires systemic, organic approaches, not just better communication.

Transparency and Trust

The open government and open data movements generated considerable momentum a decade ago but have since matured into more sustainable initiatives with less noise, even though the current moment requires ever more open data. The initial excitement about transformative potential has given way to harder work on implementation, making data usable, building feedback loops between producers and users, and ensuring open data can meet the demands of the AI revolution.

For NSOs, the transparency agenda presents both opportunity and challenge. Greater openness about methodology, uncertainty, and data limitations could rebuild trust by demonstrating intellectual honesty. However, it also exposes statistical work to criticism from actors who may not engage in good faith. The path forward likely involves more deliberate engagement with citizens as users and stakeholders, not just subjects of data collection, and designing products and communication strategies with citizen needs explicitly in mind. Stakeholder engagement is key for NSOs to connect with citizens, provide better data, and build trust. For example, the Panamanian NSO strengthened partnerships with churches to disseminate information to citizens about the census process. Recommendations made by the Taskforce on Strengthening the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics include proactive use of social media and public briefings to share not just data but the relevance of the data to policy and the lives of citizens.

Strategic, thoughtful responses to misinformation and misuse of official statistics can strengthen citizens' trust. Principle 4 of the Fundamental Principles of Statistics states "statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics," but NSOs must decide what type of response would be most appropriate and effective based on the context of the misuse. For example, Statistics Norway shared that in cases where a direct response would be unlikely to change any opinions or reach new audiences, such as misinformation posted on far-right news sites, posting clarifications on the NSO site was more impactful than responding directly. Having a strategy in place to respond to misuse of official statistics allows NSOs to be prepared and act accordingly, and when done correctly, can increase trust in the NSO while combatting misinformation. Partnerships and established dialogues with the media can also allow for timely dissemination of data, as well as ensuring accurate, easily understood interpretations of data are readily available for the public.

Box: Facts vs feelings

The disconnect between facts and feelings in many contexts is not necessarily an unbridgeable divide, although it presents a big hurdle to NSOs used to simply reporting the numbers. Rather, this gap reflects a divergence in the tools policymakers and economists use compared to the average person's lived experiences. For example, the general population of the UK believed that net migration rose in 2025, when it actually decreased by two-thirds. Metrics like net change and rate of change are not necessarily intuitive to the public – people may still see an increase in migrants, and unless that net change is drastic, it may not change people's underlying perception of the issue. This presents an opportunity to bring statistics to the public in a way that is easily understandable and to open a two-way conversation between data producers and data users. Publishing data with explanations that connect the data to the relevance of citizen's lives and why the findings may differ from perceptions can bridge this gap and can increase data literacy as well as strengthen the trust between citizens and statistical institutions.

2.2 Financing and Sustainability

The financing picture is bleak. Despite official development assistance (ODA) reaching record nominal levels in 2023, forecasts indicate significant declines in 2024 and 2025, with statistical capacity building as vulnerable as crucial sectors such as health. The Partner Report on Estimating Support for Statistics (PRESS) and the Clearinghouse for Financing Development Data's tracking of donor commitments reveals a troubling pattern: support for data and statistics is concentrated among a small pool of funders, with several major bilateral donors potentially withdrawing entirely from the space.

A recent UN Statistics Division survey found that roughly two-thirds of NSOs report anticipating or currently facing budget cuts in 2025. For offices already operating at minimal capacity, these reductions translate directly into postponed surveys, abandoned data series, and deferred investments in technology and human capital. Household surveys supported by external funding, such as DHS and MICS, which produce many SDG indicators in lower-income countries, are particularly vulnerable, as shown by the recent upheaval at the DHS Program.

National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) remain the primary framework for coordinating external and domestic support for statistical development, but as with all tools, they must be properly implemented to achieve their greatest potential. The most effective strategies link statistical investments explicitly to national development priorities, creating alignment between data production and the information needs of planning, monitoring, and accountability processes. The results of the UNSD survey show that countries recognize this: Over half of the NSOs experiencing budget cuts pursued adaptive measures such as strengthened partnerships with national institutions and increasing national government financial support through domestic resource mobilization (DRM).

Partnership and Coordination

The private sector has received considerable attention as a potential partner for statistical modernization, with discussions of data sharing agreements, public-private partnerships for IT infrastructure, and corporate support for statistical capacity. Yet tangible progress remains limited. Companies guard commercially valuable data, and the governance frameworks needed to manage access to private data sources including mobile phone records, satellite imagery, and transaction data remain underdeveloped in most countries. For example, when Statistics Norway exercised its legal authority under a new Statistics Act to access cash register records and payment card data from supermarkets, the Data Protection Agency found that the NSO's data request went beyond what data should be collected and shared. Dialogues between the NSO and Data Protection Agency are ongoing, as the NSO is working on possible solutions to collect these data while protecting identifiable information. This example demonstrates that statistical system modernization is a governance design problem, not just a legal mandate problem, especially when seeking to partner with non-governmental actors.

While private sector partnerships face complex cross-sectoral governance challenges, the more immediate opportunity may lie within government itself, where shared accountability frameworks already exist. Domestic resource mobilization for statistics requires alignment between NSOs, ministries of finance, tax authorities, and line ministries. The ongoing conversations on the Sevilla Platform for Action on the Future of Data initiative are intended to connect these actors within government with so much to gain from one another. When statistics are seen as serving government priorities rather than competing with them for resources, domestic funding becomes more feasible. The challenge is repositioning statistical offices from cost centers to strategic assets.

International coordination frameworks like the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data and the Medellín Framework have articulated clear priorities but have seen slow and uneven implementation. Financing commitments remain largely voluntary, with limited mechanisms to track follow-through. As the 2030 Agenda nears conclusion, these frameworks represent unfulfilled promises but also concrete foundations on which to build. The statistical community has an opportunity to deliver on commitments already made rather than negotiating new ones.

2.3 Crucial capacity gaps

The current crisis compounds existing structural weaknesses in statistical systems. Understanding these legacy issues is essential for assessing which responses will address root causes versus merely treating symptoms.

Production weaknesses and gaps remain pervasive. Many countries still lack complete vital registration systems and updated census data. These foundational data systems underpin most other statistical operations; without them, even well-designed surveys and innovative data sources have no frame within which to operate. For example, only 30 percent of low-capacity countries meet the standards for vital registration coverage and just half meet the standards of good practice regarding the publication of national accounts data. These persistent foundational gaps help explain why the Statistical Performance Indicators, despite showing gradual improvement, have seen progress stall in several regions, with low-income countries continuing to lag due to limited resources and capacity.

Amid enthusiasm for innovative data sources and AI applications, the importance of foundational data systems—civil registration and vital statistics, census operations, administrative data infrastructure—deserves renewed emphasis. The 2020 census round, disrupted by COVID-19, highlighted both the fragility and indispensability of these foundational systems. Countries that had invested in alternative approaches like register-based censuses, continuous measurement systems, and digital collection methods proved more resilient. For others, significant data gaps emerged that will take years to fill.

Capacity constraints are particularly acute in low-income countries. Offices often cannot independently design and implement survey instruments, lacking both the technical expertise and the equipment necessary for modern data collection. The reliance on external technical assistance creates dependency while doing little to build sustainable local capacity.

The skills gaps facing statistical systems extend across three domains. **Technical skills** in data science, programming, and modern statistical methods remain scarce, particularly in lower-income countries where education systems have not kept pace with technological change. As the digital landscape rapidly changes, new technological skills are needed to

modernize statistics and statistical communication. **Soft skills** in communication, user engagement, and cross-functional collaboration are often undervalued in statistical organizations but are essential for building relevance and trust. Finally, **leadership skills** for navigating political environments, managing organizational change, and building strategic partnerships may be scarcest.

Addressing these gaps requires approaches that go beyond traditional training programs. Retention is often as much a challenge as recruitment. As staff who develop valuable skills frequently leave for better-compensated positions in the private sector or international organizations. Building sustainable capacity may require rethinking compensation structures, career pathways, and organizational cultures.

Data use and uptake remains a left behind part of statistical development, although new insights are being generated. Decades of investment in data production have not been matched by comparable attention to ensuring data inform decisions. The global average ODIN openness score of just 59 out of 100 reveals this disconnect: even when countries produce quality statistics, persistent gaps in data licensing, metadata, and accessibility limit their utility. The disconnect between statistical outputs and policy processes means that even high-quality data often remain unused, undermining the case for continued investment in their production. The Data Value Chain is valuable precisely because it holds both production and use in view simultaneously, resisting the tendency to treat production as an end in itself and keeping data use as a constant measure of success.

But closing this production-use gap is not only a technical challenge. Following through on the entire data value chain requires strengthening engagement between NSOs and diverse users. Recent analysis emphasizes that trust-building requires not just technical safeguards but sustained engagement with stakeholders, particularly as NSOs expand their roles as data intermediaries. This includes understanding user needs, communicating in the language of policymakers, and improving public data literacy to help citizens identify misinformation in an increasingly complex information environment. Systematic user-producer dialogue helps statistical offices prioritize production based on actual needs, ensures statistics are produced in accessible formats, and builds collective ownership. However, establishing these feedback mechanisms and engagement capacities (from user-producer dialogues to statistical literacy programs) requires dedicated resources and institutional commitment that remain underdeveloped in many statistical systems. It also requires a more fundamental rethinking of the NSO's role: moving from a predominantly production-oriented institution toward one that actively mediates between data and their many uses.

3. Pressures Reshaping Official Statistics: Realizing Risks and Opportunities

The diagnosis of crisis is not new. However, the current weaknesses in the system are being further aggravated due to pressures from two main sources: Technological innovation and inclusive and participatory approaches. These additional stress tests make this current moment unique as they require a significant reorientation of official statistics systems around data users and sources of data. Yet these new challenges are also opportunities for data systems for official statistics to become fully integrated into the societies they serve, as well as increasingly prioritized by politics and civil society.

This section examines these additional challenges through existing frameworks, ongoing initiatives, and promising approaches, while acknowledging significant gaps in evidence and implementation experience.

3.1 Harnessing Innovative Technologies

Digital Transformation

Digital transformation for statistical systems connects to broader agendas around digital public infrastructure and legal identity that have gained prominence in development discourse. The case for statistical modernization becomes stronger when linked to these wider initiatives that often command greater political attention and resources.

The practical challenges of digitization vary enormously across contexts. Some NSOs are ready to implement advanced analytics and cloud-based data management, while others lack reliable internet connectivity and staff comfortable with software. One-size-fits-all technology solutions have repeatedly failed; sustainable transformation requires assessment of local conditions and staged implementation that builds capacity incrementally.

Artificial Intelligence: A Two-Way Street

The AI revolution has arrived in statistics, whether statistical offices are ready or not. International investments in ensuring data are AI-ready reflect growing recognition that official statistics must adapt to serve as training data, validation sources, and complements to AI-generated analyses. Yet for most NSOs, particularly in lower-income countries, digital transformation remains aspirational rather than operational.

The relationship between AI and official statistics runs in two directions, each with distinct implications. *AI for Data* encompasses applications of machine learning and related technologies to improve statistical processes: automated coding and classification, computer vision for satellite imagery analysis, natural language processing for text data, and predictive models for nowcasting and small area estimation. These applications

promise efficiency gains and capability extensions but require careful validation to ensure they meet quality standards.

Data for AI recognizes that official statistics have a crucial role in training, validating, and benchmarking AI systems. High-quality, nationally representative data with known properties provide essential ground truth against which AI outputs can be evaluated. Without such benchmarks, there is no way to assess whether AI-generated information is accurate, systematically biased, or entirely fabricated.

Box: India's NSO Connects Official Statistics to AI Tools

In February 2026, India's National Statistics Office launched a beta Model Context Protocol (MCP) server, becoming one of the first NSOs to create a standardized interface between official statistics and AI applications. The open-source server, integrated with India's eSankhyiki data portal, allows users to query datasets — including the Consumer Price Index, labor force surveys, and national accounts — directly through AI tools like Claude or ChatGPT, without downloading files or navigating complex APIs.

The initiative reflects a strategic choice: rather than building bespoke AI dashboards, the NSO adopted an open protocol now supported by major AI providers, making official data accessible wherever users already work. The source code was published on GitHub, offering a replicable model for other countries.

The approach also raises new questions. Data served via MCP arrives stripped of the methodological notes, revision histories, and caveats that accompany published releases — context essential to correct interpretation. And because the data flows through an official NSO server, AI-generated analysis layered on top may carry unwarranted perceived authority. India's experience shows that making statistics AI-ready is technically feasible, but NSOs will need to consider how to preserve metadata integrity and manage the infrastructure demands that follow.

Both directions demand capacities but these are currently very unevenly distributed. Well-resourced offices experiment with machine learning for classification, natural language processing for administrative data, and predictive analytics for nowcasting. Under-resourced offices struggle with basic IT infrastructure, outdated software, and staff who have never worked with data beyond spreadsheets or still use physical forms to collect and store data. Without deliberate intervention, AI risks widening rather than narrowing capacity gaps by allowing well-resourced and governed NSOs to accelerate ahead while capacity-constrained NSOs become dependent on opaque tools that may undermine the very trust, reproducibility and public accountability that give official statistics their

authority. As AI increasingly mediates how users access and interpret official data, new governance approaches and judiciously adapting technical fixes are needed to ensure that the integrity of official statistics is preserved through the dissemination chain.

3.2 Inclusive Approaches to Data

Citizen Data

Citizens increasingly want to see themselves in data and participate in their creation — a fundamental shift in expectations, particularly from communities that have historically been miscounted or counted in ways that perpetuate marginalization. The Collaborative on Citizen Data, convened by UNSD, has made progress developing frameworks for how citizen-generated information can complement official statistics, with successful pilots demonstrating that community-collected data can fill gaps for mobile populations, informal settlements, and marginalized groups that traditional surveys undercount.

But significant governance questions remain. Who owns citizen data? How do communities retain agency over information they provide? How is quality maintained without imposing standardization that strips away the local knowledge that makes citizen data valuable? These are not merely technical questions but inherent to determining what kind of statistical systems should be built.

Intersectional Data

The SDG framework's promise of disaggregation to Leave No One Behind remains largely unfulfilled. The gap is particularly acute for intersectional analysis — understanding how multiple dimensions of identity and circumstance combine to shape outcomes. Work by ODW has helped shift discourse from simple disaggregation toward revealing compounding effects, but mainstreaming these approaches requires investment in larger samples, linked administrative data, and analytical capacities that remain scarce.

The practical barriers are formidable. Standard sample sizes often cannot support reliable estimates across multiple cross-cutting dimensions. Administrative data linkage offers one path forward but requires governance frameworks, technical infrastructure, and legal authorities that many countries lack — alongside careful attention to the privacy of marginalized groups who may not have control over their personal information, such as sex workers or undocumented migrants.

Participatory approaches offer a way to navigate these tensions. Statistics New Zealand partnered with Māori communities using the Māori Data Governance Model to publish population data through the Māori-designed platform Te Whata. Similarly, Colombia's Wayúu Multidimensional Register was designed with and involves the Wayúu community throughout the statistical process. Scaling intersectional analysis will require sustained investment in methodology and data collection, but equally in the participatory processes that ensure such work is done ethically and inclusively.

4. A Framework for the Future: The Fork in the Road

The preceding analysis points toward a fundamental choice facing statistical systems: a choice between two different approaches to navigating the current moment, each with distinct implications for strategy, investment, and risk.

We frame this as a *fork in the road* between the optimization and the transformation of data systems. This metaphor simplifies a complex reality and the choice between paths is not purely binary. Some countries may need to strengthen foundations before transformation becomes feasible, while others have the capacity to pursue transformative approaches immediately. Some elements of either agenda may be necessary in all settings, no matter the final direction.

Several factors might guide these choices. Countries with more advanced systems and enabling environments may be better positioned for transformation. Others may need to focus on protecting core functions while selectively pursuing innovations. External pressures from the broader economy may also create pressure for statistical systems to transform. Regardless of path, success requires a results-based approach with clear outcome targets and robust monitoring systems to track progress and enable course correction. Countries could learn from one another and regional organizations and international bodies could support such learning by facilitating peer exchange and supporting rigorous evaluation.

Some countries may need to pursue elements of both paths; others may want to or be required to choose just one. No matter the final direction, the stakes could not be higher: The status quo is not a sustainable option. The forces buffeting statistical systems, including funding cuts, AI disruption, eroding trust, and expanding demands, will not wait for the statistical community to reach consensus. Those who delay choice may find circumstances choosing for them.

4.1 Path One: Optimization and Smarter Use of Existing Solutions

The first path prioritizes optimization, focusing on extracting value from existing approaches while making improvements. This is not to be confused with complacency but represents a demanding agenda of operational excellence and innovation within established frameworks.

On political will and legitimacy, the optimization path emphasizes expanding engagement with policymakers, taking advantage of existing coordination mechanisms, and scaling approaches that connect statistical insights to relevant conversations. The theory is that well-targeted engagement can build political support without requiring fundamental shifts.

On sustaining production and funding, the optimization path aligns with established strategic frameworks and planning tools and uses coordination mechanisms to improve donor alignment. The focus is on making existing funding go farther and building the case for investment.

On capacity, the optimization path strengthens existing training infrastructure, expands peer learning through South-South cooperation, and improves retention through better compensation and career pathways to close technical gaps while building sustainable local expertise.

On innovative technologies, the optimization path focuses on expanding metadata standards to improve interoperability and AI-readiness, modernizing statistical operations, and leveraging peer learning. The emphasis is on adapting mature technologies to local contexts.

On inclusive approaches, the optimization path builds on existing groups and intersectional frameworks, working to improve accessibility and use of current data products rather than fundamentally reconceptualizing the relationship between producers and users.

The optimization path offers feasibility and near-term results, building on existing capacities to reduce implementation risk. But it may yield only marginal improvements. Success requires clear performance benchmarks, such as stabilizing response rates or increased policy citations to ensure optimization means purposeful improvement rather than incremental drift.

4.2 Path Two: Transformation of Data Systems

The second path pursues transformation, fundamentally rethinking how data are produced, governed, and used to restore trust and unlock new value. This is a more ambitious and riskier agenda, but one that may be necessary to position statistical systems for a different future.

On political will and legitimacy, the transformation path creates new institutional arrangements: for example, multi-stakeholder data stewardship councils, new transparency paradigms, participatory priority-setting, and a revived social contract for development data.

On sustaining production and funding, the transformation path builds data ecosystems leverage data collaboratives and public-private partnerships at scale and establishes domestic resource mobilization partnerships that reduce dependence on external funding.

On capacity, the transformation path reimagines the statistical workforce by blending statistical expertise with data science, communication, and outside engagement, using partnerships with universities and the private sector for talent pipelines and investing in leadership development.

On innovative technologies, the transformation pathway centers on the systematic use of advanced analytics, the integration of novel data sources, alignment with digital infrastructure, and the development of privacy-preserving, distributed data.

On inclusive approaches, the transformation path advances the institutionalization of participatory data practices, embeds intersectional analytical approaches, and integrates community-generated evidence within formal statistical systems.

The transformation path offers potential for significant improvements in relevance, trust, and capability, but requires substantial investment and carries higher implementation risks. Success demands rigorous evidence: Are partnerships improving coverage? Is participatory data building trust? The higher risks and costs require demonstrating new value, not just activity completion.

5. Conclusion and Questions for Discussion

This paper has argued that official statistical systems face a moment of genuine crisis. There are not merely the existing chronic challenges that have long characterized the field, but an acute convergence of pressures that demands response. The current crisis of low trust and political will for data and statistics, financing and sustainability issues, as well as capacity gaps are colliding with new pressures from innovative technologies and innovative approaches to data in ways that threaten the foundations of evidence-based policymaking.

We have characterized the fundamental choice as a fork in the road: optimize existing systems or pursue transformation. Both paths involve tradeoffs but countries must choose.

The 57th Session of the UN Statistical Commission offers an opportunity to begin an honest conversation about these choices. The stakes are too high for diplomatic platitudes or incremental tinkering dressed up as strategic vision. Official statistics either matter enough to warrant serious investment and reform, or they do not. The evidence suggests they do but that case must be made and acted upon, not just asserted.

We invite participants in that conversation to engage with the following questions, designed to move beyond diagnosis toward action:

1. **Which path – "optimization" or "transformation" – is currently more appropriate for national statistical systems? And what are the signals that shape this choice?**
2. **What are examples of successful optimization or transformation reforms of national statistical systems? What worked why and how?**
3. **How can the international statistical community collectively support a transformation process, in particular in low- and middle-income countries?**

These questions do not have easy answers. What we hope this paper has provided is a clearer framing of the choices at hand and the stakes involved. The work of rebuilding statistical systems for a changed world will extend far beyond any single Commission session. But that work must begin somewhere. We hope it begins here.