Dear Colleagues:

It has been almost a year since Jae C. Lee, Ada van Krimpen, and I had the opportunity to meet with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The main reason was to mark the celebration of the International Year of Statistics, but we also used the occasion to give an overview of the ISI and discuss possible collaborations between the UN Statistics Division and the ISI. The meeting was held when the ISI team was at the UN Headquarters to participate in the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) in 2013.

The 2014 UNSC, to be held in early March, will celebrate another major milestone in Statistics: the endorsement of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS) by the United Nations General Assembly on January 29, 2014 (https://unstats.un.org/unsd/default.htm). This is the first time that the FPOS have received such high recognition at the global political level, almost 20 years ago after their adoption by the UNSC.

The FPOS were originally developed by the “Conference of European Statisticians” in the early 1990s. This was done at a time when many new countries were being formed in Central Europe and Central Asia. As described by De Vries and Warschburger (2002), principles, systems, and infrastructure for official statistics were being re-invented in these new nations. “Public trust in official statistics had to be rebuilt and governments had to learn to understand the place of official statistics in a changed context. To support these processes, it was deemed useful to develop an official international document that would set out the importance of official statistics, as well as provide some general guidelines for the functioning of statistical systems.”

Since 2011, a group called “Friends of the Chair” on FPOS, led by Katherine Wallman (US Chief Statistician and ISI member) and others, has been working on preparing a revised preamble of the Fundamental Principles and the subsequent process, leading to their adoption by the UN Economic and Social Council in July 2013. These efforts have eventually culminated with the endorsement of the FPOS by the UN General Assembly this January. This is widely considered to be a major milestone and has important implications for the practice of official statistics. Statistical offices can rely on the FPOS in critical situations: independence in the selection of methodologies, ensuring confidentiality, production and dissemination of high-quality official data, etc.

The ISI has developed its own Declaration of Professional Ethics (DPE) which has a slightly longer history. We set up a Committee for the Code of Ethics for Statisticians at the ISI World Statistics Congress (then called Biennial Sessions) in Manila in 1979. The code, which was developed after extensive amount of work and discussion, was adopted by the General

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1 Willem De Vries and Sabine Warschburger (2002): “Distant cousins or close relatives?”
Assembly at the ISI Congress in 1985. The DPE was revised and formally adopted in 2010 (http://www.isi-web.org/images/about/Declaration-EN2010.pdf). The ISI has also set up an Advisory Board on Ethics to provide guidance to the Executive Committee and Council on important matters related to professional ethics.

The FPOS and the ISI’s DPE have some overlap, but there are many differences in terms of the scope and audience. FPOS deals explicitly with official statistics and related statistical information. It is aimed primarily at governments and statistical offices. On the other hand, the Declaration of Professional Ethics addresses individual professionals in their practice of statistics and covers ethical issues in all areas of statistics. De Vries and Warschburger (2002) provide a good discussion of these issues.

An ISI team will be attending the UNSC this year, as we have done in the past, and will join the celebration marking the endorsement of the FPOS by the UN General Assembly. The UNSC is “the highest decision making body for international statistics, especially the setting of statistical standards, the development of concepts and methods and their implementation at the national and international level” (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/commission.htm). There is annual meeting of the UNSC attended by Heads of National Statistical Offices and of other statistical agencies from around the world. The ISI has consultative status with the UN which allows us to participate at the meeting and make “interventions” (comments) on relevant matters.

The meeting also provides a good opportunity for us to network with Heads of National and International Statistical Offices and develop collaborations. We have been organizing “side events” where we can discuss issues of mutual interest with the participants at the UNSC. In 2013, the ISI side event presented activities associated with the International Year of Statistics and all of the excitement surrounding it. There will be another side event this year where we plan to discuss possible areas and models for collaboration with Heads of National and International Statistical Offices (http://isi.cbs.nl/2014/InvitationletterSIUNsideevent.pdf). This effort is being led by our Vice President Irena Križman, and there will speakers from a variety of organizations.

A lot of the above information may be new (and hopefully useful) to ISI members who live outside the world of “official statistics”. It was all new to me also when I started on the ISI Executive Committee in 2007. I should say, however, that this has been one of the fascinating aspects of the ISI – meeting so many interesting people with such varied backgrounds, enjoying the diversity, and seeing the impact of Statistics in so many different areas!

Until next month ..................... Vijay (isi-president@umich.edu)