

President's Message November 2018

UN World Data Forum (UN WDF) and Statistics Week Taiwan: commonalities and contrasts

What is the UN WDF and how does it relate to ISI? Its full title is United Nations World Data Forum on Sustainable Development Data, and its objective is to be a platform for intensifying cooperation on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



The High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HLG-PCCB) leads the organization of the UN World Data Forum, under the guidance of the United Nations Statistical Commission and in close consultation with Member States and international partners. The UN Statistics Division (UNSD) supports the organization of the Forum in its role as Secretariat of the Commission and the HLG-PCCB. The first United Nations World Data Forum was hosted in January 2017 by Statistics South Africa. The second UN World Data Forum was hosted by the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority of the United Arab Emirates from 22 to 24 October 2018 in Dubai.

Hence it is not surprising that official statistics tends to be the focus of the UN WDF, but it also includes a range of data managers, users, and civil society stakeholders. Some idea of the diversity of the last can be seen in the list of the [320 partners](#) of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD), a “global network using data to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals - improving lives, fighting inequality, and promoting environmental sustainability.”

Amongst a proliferation of international, national, business and industry conferences on data and big data, the UN WDF fulfils its purpose as a discussion forum for a range of SDG stakeholders, but it is not a scientific conference, nor a technical meeting, nor a meeting with session papers. Its sessions tend to be discussion panels, often conducted in interview format, with seven plenary sessions in its three days, and with only eight timeslots for parallel sessions. In addition, the extent and reach of the SDG's are enormous. In the list of approved Invited Paper Sessions for the ISI WSC 2019, eleven are on aspects of the SDG's, and include speakers from universities and research organisations as well as government, consultant and non-government organisations. It is expected that a number of Special Topic sessions will also be on the SDG's, and the UNSD is aiming for more direct involvement with the WSC.

ISI was specifically represented at the second UN WDF by Irena Krizman (also a member of the program committee), Stephen Penneck, Jim Ridgway and myself, and other ISI members were also participants through their work and UN positions. The third UN WDF is to be held in Basel in October 2020, and it is clear that wider ISI participation will be mutually beneficial.

In contrast, [Statistics Week Taiwan](#), 5th-9th November, was a week of cutting-edge statistical research and review papers, together with forums, ISI Executive Committee meetings, and joint meetings with and for ISI Association Presidents/representatives. The conference of 5th-6th November was part of the Institute of Statistical Science celebration of the 90th anniversary of Academia Sinica, and included keynotes, papers from some EC/Association representatives, a forum on Statistics for the Next Decade, and ISI Young Statistician Sessions, organised by Han-Ming Wu, Chair of ISI Young Statisticians Committee. At the Cheng Kung University (NCKU)-ISI workshop in Tainan, Association Presidents / representatives presented papers on 7th November, and were joined by the EC on 8th November for a forum with the Department of Statistics on the challenges and opportunities in developing data science programs. On 9th November, at the Graduate Institute of Statistics, Central University (NCU), Taoyuan, the International Sessions of the joint NCU and Chinese Statistical Association conference included papers by ISI EC members and Association representatives.

ISI EC members and Association representatives were the guests of the Institute of Statistical Science, Academia Sinica, and we give our sincere thanks and appreciation to Director Chun-houh Chen (an ISI Council member), the Organising Committee of Hsin-Chou Yang (Academia Sinica), Han-Ming Wu (Taipei University), Ray-Bing Chen (NCKU), and Yi-Kuan Tseng (NCU), and the eager members of the Local Organising Team, for outstanding organisation of a very full week and the opportunity to meet with many talented and enthusiastic statisticians. We also give special thanks and gratitude to Director Chun-houh Chen and Academia Sinica for facilitating invaluable meetings and discussion of the EC and Association representatives.

The contrasts between a UN forum on data development for SDG's and conferences of statistical research, review and education are obvious, but the commonalities are of interest and significance to all of ISI and mainly refer to data science, big data and trust in data and what is produced by statisticians from data. In both contexts, it was emphasized that the availability of big data and big computing power opened pathways to tackling increasingly complex real problems of vital importance across all of society, but also brought added responsibilities in statistical modelling, analysis and communication.

In developing data science programs, both contexts illustrated that the challenges are both new and old, and vary greatly from country to country. Existing programs that embed long-time advocacy of experiential learning of the practice of statistics provide a sound basis, but, as always in statistics, internal university restrictions and politics require clever collaborative solutions. Similarly to long-time advocacy from professional statisticians, comments from leading industry data scientists at the UN WDF provide valuable input for universities developing data science programs. These included:

“Data science is everywhere and not new. It’s a label for work being done for years. What’s changed is recognition of what analysts + technology can do and bringing this out of the back room”

“Data Science is not a person – it’s a team. Diversity of specialists essential. Need curiosity in problems; problem-solving; bring together data, data problem-solving, technical; but all members need statistical foundations”

Participation in both the UN WDF and Statistics Week Taiwan was a pleasure and a privilege, and emphasized the remarkable extent and diversity of talent and ability across ISI members. This is also demonstrated in the outstanding slate of candidates for ISI officers in the recent election. I applaud all who were selected for this slate for their achievements, standing and ongoing commitment to ISI and the international statistical community; it was a privilege to acknowledge you all. I congratulate and welcome all successful candidates to ISI office.

Helen MacGillivray
ISI President