

Meeting of the Bureau
Geneva (virtual), 15-16 October 2020

Approved

Item III (c) of the Provisional
Agenda

DATA STEWARDSHIP: PROPOSALS FOR WAY FORWARD

Note by the Secretariat in consultation with Estonia and Ireland

*The CES and its Bureau discussed data stewardship in subsequent meetings (most recently at the CES 2020 plenary session) and developed a possible step-by-step action plan. **The Bureau discussed and approved proposals for further practical steps in this area.***

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Bureau started the discussion about the role of national statistical offices and statistical systems in the new data ecosystems at the Bureau meeting in February 2018, and carried out an in-depth review in October 2018. CES discussed the topic at a seminar in 2019 and in 2020. These discussions have taken into account outcomes of the discussions at similar EU, OECD and global level meetings, and have converged towards proposals for practical ways forward to enhance the role of NSOs in the new data ecosystems and in public data governance.
2. The aim of the paper is to provide basis for the Bureau for deciding on concrete and practical steps forward in this area.

II. DISCUSSION AT THE 2019 CES SEMINAR

3. The topic ‘Emerging role of national statistical offices as offices for statistics and data’ was selected for a 2019 CES seminar based on the preferences of CES members. The seminar used as important background material a paper prepared by Estonia, Canada, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and UNECE.
4. The organizers of the seminar carried out a survey among NSOs in May 2019. The survey results showed that overwhelming majority of NSOs see the need to change and undertake new roles. Most offices plan to adapt through establishing strategic partnerships, gaining access to new data sources and acquiring skills to use the new sources.

5. Among other issues, the 2019 Conference noted that:

(a) Thinking about how to go beyond the traditional role of NSOs should start from **considering again what is the core task of NSOs and their essential value**. NSOs have a lot to offer to potential partners: strict principles, transparency and quality. Assuming responsibility for governance of other agencies' data can pose a risk of decreasing trustworthiness of statistics produced by NSO.

(b) Effective communication promoting what NSOs have to offer is crucial for creating win-win partnerships with other stakeholders. **A common narrative on this topic would be helpful**.

(c) NSOs should carefully consider what roles they can take up. A possible task for NSOs can be **to govern metadata** (explain where the data is, what it means, what is its quality), support building up metadata systems and their interoperability.

(d) There is still a **huge gap between the available data and an infrastructure and standards that enable to disseminate and use it**.

(e) **A concrete action plan** for supporting NSOs as part of a larger data ecosystem and **sharing of good practices** are needed.

(f) There are **various approaches to NSOs' roles in data stewardship**. This depends on the national setting: tasks performed by other agencies, existing resources, and willingness of NSO to play an active role in this area.

(g) Understanding of the main terms of data governance/stewardship and the underlying functions still varies. **Harmonization of these definitions will be key in further collaboration on common principles and standards. Defining the minimum set of core responsibilities for a data steward would be useful**.

(h) **A toolkit providing NSOs with good practices, guidance and tools for implementing the new role is needed**. Concrete case studies should demonstrate risks and opportunities of alternative approaches.

6. The 2019 Conference decided to organize **a follow-up seminar during the 2020 CES plenary session on the implementation of the new role of NSOs in an era of expanded possibilities**. The seminar was planned to have a practical focus moving from thinking to implementation and include case studies and considerations of the impact of the new role on core activities of NSOs.

7. An informal Task Team (consisting of Albania, Canada, Estonia (lead), Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and the UNECE Secretariat) prepared a paper synthesising the experience and different approaches demonstrated at the 2019 seminar, proposals made at the Conference, and a possible action plan with issues to be taken forward.

II. DISCUSSION AT THE 2020 CES

8. The CES Bureau decided to continue the discussion on “Implementing the role of NSOs in an era of expanded possibilities” during the CES 2020 plenary session. This topic also **received high support from CES members during the electronic consultation on the CES 2020 seminar topics.**

9. The Bureau recommended that the discussion should focus on drawing strategic conclusions and delegate implementation details to relevant working groups. The Bureau also emphasised the importance of following up with concrete steps, based on the paper and action plan prepared by the informal task team led by Estonia.

10. The CES 2020 plenary session discussed data stewardship and the role that NSOs can play in this context on 24 June 2020.

11. The Conference noted that in several countries NSOs have seized the opportunity to step up their role in cross-government data strategies as providers of timely and reliable data in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The discussion built on the paper by Estonia et al.¹, a paper by Ireland, and presentations by Estonia, the Netherlands, Switzerland and UNECE.

12. The main points raised in the discussion included:

(a) There are **different views of what data stewardship means**, and what role national statistical offices can play in this. Statistical offices need to be careful not to compromise the independence of official statistics and public trust, particularly when data may be used for legal, administrative or fiscal purposes;

(b) **Legislative changes and public debate may be needed to clarify the use of privately held data for official statistics;**

(c) It is helpful to **have a clear position on what the NSO will and will not do, consistent with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics;**

(d) There is **huge potential in using more administrative data**, but it is important to improve their quality and cooperation with the holders of these data;

(e) Official statistics should **capitalize on the opportunities presented during the Covid-19 crisis to sustain innovation and modernize its role.**

13. CES concluded that the role of NSOs is changing in response to new demands and opportunities, and this has been accelerated by the Covid-19 crisis. There are different ideas about how NSOs should position themselves in the new data ecosystem, with **a range of possibilities from minimal change to full data stewardship**. NSOs are at different starting points, and some already have cross-government roles. Therefore, **there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution.**

¹ Prepared by a task team led by Estonia, consisting of Albania, Canada, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and the UNECE Secretariat

14. **Communication** with policymakers and other data holders is very important to ensure transparency and maintain trust. **International collaboration** between relevant initiatives is needed.

15. As a conclusion, the Conference emphasized the need to continue the discussion, sharing ideas and experiences. **Examples of good practice (and mistakes) could be shared on a web platform.**

16. The participants proposed **to set up a Task Force to turn the considerations in the paper from Estonia et al. into a roadmap and action plan to support NSOs.** In doing so, it is important to take into account the legal basis, and recognize that NSOs can move forward at their own pace and take on a stewardship role to a different degree. **A “maturity model” approach**, as used in modernization and capacity development activities, could be useful.

17. The evaluation questionnaire of the CES 2020 showed the discussion on data stewardship as the most useful one among this year’s sessions. Participants appreciated that the discussion was informative, relevant, practical, included good examples and was very helpful for future work of NSOs.

III. WORK UNDER THE UN STATISTICAL COMMISSION

18. Activities related to NSOs and data stewardship have also started at the global level under the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC). The topic of the High-Level Forum on Official Statistics back-to-back with the 51st UNSC session in March 2020 was ‘Data Stewardship - A Solution for Official Statistics' Predicament?’.

19. The Forum concluded that data stewardship has different interpretations, but most encompass the notions of care and management of data, maximizing the value of data and statistics, and building citizens’ trust and confidence in the data system. Data stewardship frequently focuses on data held by government but is not limited to it. In several countries national statistical offices already have the formal function of data steward, but the actual implementation varies. Different approaches and practices that cover certain aspects of data stewardship are emerging.

20. Participants agreed that the global statistical system has an important role in supporting national statistical offices in becoming data stewards by professionalizing this function through peer-to-peer learning, and developing partnerships, best practices, guidance and standards (see [summary of the event](#)).

21. The 51st session of UNSC requested the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building (HLG-PCCB) for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda to establish a working mechanism open to other stakeholders and linked to existing initiatives at the global and regional levels to address the issue of data stewardship and the role of statistical offices in the new data ecosystem. UNSC requested for **a stocktaking exercise and specific recommendations on the way forward, to be provided to the Commission at its fifty-second session.**

22. HLG-PCCB at its 11 June 2020 meeting considered a stock-taking exercise on data stewardship and NSOs (see [HLG-PCCB data stewardship scoping paper](#)). A first draft of a compendium of case studies is planned to be prepared by end September 2020, and a report to UNSC by January-February 2021.

IV. POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

23. The paper by Estonia et al. to CES ([ECE/CE/2020/10](#)) included 21 considerations that can serve as a possible road map for NSOs wishing to increase their role in public data governance. The suggested way forward included the following proposals:

(a) Collect implementation case studies and make them available on a dedicated platform (*this activity is now carried out by HLG-PCCB*). It will be important to describe in case studies the rationale why statistical offices are stepping into the data stewardship roles;

(b) Develop a common data strategy road map for the data ecosystem (wider than the national statistical system);

(c) Invite countries to share more detailed information about their approaches and lessons learned in implementing their data governance strategy;

(d) Prepare an action plan for supporting NSOs as part of a larger new data ecosystem and sharing of good practices about data use;

(e) Develop further guidance on the role of NSOs in the new data ecosystem:

- i. Discuss the role of NSOs in public data governance with different stakeholders at national and international level (e.g. in a form of a seminar);
- ii. Ask HLG-MOS to develop guidance on items related to the national data ecosystems and data services (referring to paras 20-23 from paper ECE/CES/2020/10: broaden the scope of CSDA and GSIM as standards for a national data ecosystems architecture, review infrastructure for data protection, clarify difference between privacy, security and statistical confidentiality, etc.);
- iii. Cover items related to the next generation of statistics and analysis (referring to paras 24-26 from paper ECE/CES/2020/10) in a broader discussion about data partnerships and by other task forces (for example, on communication).

24. An additional task to be considered could be to clarify the terms around data stewardship and the different tasks that this may include in different settings (what kind of data can be covered, what kind of functions/activities/roles undertaken by NSO, etc.). For some countries the term 'stewardship' may not be the most appropriate and they would prefer to speak about data governance, curation, etc.

25. Further work should take into account the work done at the global level under HLG-PCCB, so that the two work streams would complement each other. Moreover, any work under the Conference can be a contribution to the work at the global level initiated by UNSC.

III. PROPOSAL

26. The Bureau is invited to consider the creation of a Task Force to take the work forward as proposed by the 2020 CES session. In particular, the Task Force could undertake the following:

- (a) Define 'data stewardship' and the related terms (data governance, curation, etc.);
- (b) Develop a menu of possible responsibilities of a data steward (based on the experience of countries who are undertaking this role). This can serve as a basis for identifying a minimum core set of responsibilities and a maturity model of data stewardship;
- (c) Develop a toolkit of good practices, guidance and tools for implementing the role of data steward;
- (d) Clarify what NSOs can and what they can not do in this respect, consistent with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

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