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Report of the sixty-eighth plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians
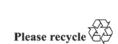
Addendum

Chair's summary of discussions and conclusions

Summary

  The sixty-eighth plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) was organized in two segments. A formal segment was held on 22 June 2020 as a hybrid meeting. Back-to-back to the formal segment, informal virtual sessions took place on 22 June starting at 14:00 and on 23-24 June.

  The current document presents a short Chair's summary of discussions during the informal sessions. The summary of discussion and decisions taken during the formal part of the sixty-eighth CES plenary session are reflected in the formal report of the meeting (ECE/CES/99).

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I. Introduction

1.   The summary of discussions and decisions taken during the formal segment of the sixty-eighth plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) is presented in document ECE/CES/99 adopted by the Conference at the end of the formal part of the plenary session. It covers the opening and adoption of the agenda, globalization and the future of economic statistics, new CES guidelines and recommendations and the programme of work of the Statistics subprogramme of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

2.   This document presents the Chair's summary of discussions and conclusions from the following informal sessions on 22 p.m.-24 June (in English only):

- Measuring digital transformation

- New roles for statistical and geospatial agencies in emerging national data ecosystems (joint session with UN-GGIM: Europe)

- How official statistics can help to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, including providing data for Sustainable Development Goals (joint session with UN-GGIM: Europe)

- Data stewardship – National Statistical Offices in the changing world (joint session with OECD CSSP)

- Business continuity of official statistics (joint session with OECD CSSP).

II. Summary of discussion and conclusions

A. Measuring digital transformation

Documentation: ECE/CES/2020/3 and 20

3.   The session was organized by Eurostat, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It was chaired by Mr. Gallo Gueye (Eurostat). The session was based on a joint paper by the three organizations and a paper by Canada on measuring well-being in the era of the "digital society". Mr. Gallo Gueye (Eurostat), Mr. Paul Schreyer (OECD) and Mr. Louis-Marc Ducharme (IMF) presented the activities of their organizations on measuring the digital economy, collaborative economy, digital transformation, new digital data sources, and the related training opportunities.

4.   The following issues were raised during the discussion:

(a)   Digitalization is one of three priority areas on the research agenda of the System of National Accounts (SNA). A Task Team on digitalization established by the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts (ISWGNA) will develop guidance notes on the related topics, such as a satellite account on the digital economy; valuation of free assets and free services; recording and valuation of data in the national accounts; crypto assets; and price and volume measurement of digital goods and services. The update of the 2008 SNA is planned to move in conjunction with an update of the Balance of Payments Manual.

(b)   In 2020, OECD published the *Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade*, Version 1 that provides a conceptual framework for defining digital trade and gives guidance on its measurement.

(c)   The collaborative economy, where products and services are offered via online platforms, raises both conceptual and practical measurement challenges. Some examples of the collaborative economy include short-stay accommodation, transport services and new forms of employment, including platform work. While the problems associated with price and volume measurement and quality changes are not new, they have been accentuated by

digitalization. A joint OECD-ILO-Eurostat Expert Group is developing a *Handbook on Measuring Platform Work* to give guidance to countries.

(d)   Measuring the digital economy should be seen in conjunction with measuring the digital society more generally. *How's life in the Digital Age?* (OECD, 2019) discusses the opportunities and risks of the digital transformation for well-being. No single indicator on digitalization can answer all questions. Hence, there is a need for a broad framework, including a set of indicators.

(e)   New digital data sources should be used to measure digitalization better. This requires development of methods and tools for collection and integration of data from different sources, such as transaction data from mobile telecom operators and credit cards, sensor data, scanner data, and data from web-scraping. Investments are needed in the digital infrastructure for data storage and processing.

(f)   At the same time, there is unrealized potential in existing surveys. To make use of innovative solutions, Eurostat is developing smart survey tools for household budget and time use surveys to be ready for use in 2022.

(g)   The use of digital data requires cooperation with the owners of digital data sources. International collaboration and common approaches can help statistical offices to obtain access to these data. In some countries, an update of the statistical legislation may be considered.

(h)   Capacity development and training are essential to maintain expertise and capabilities to deal with the issues associated with digitalization, electronic data sources and data integration. Good use can be made of the increased opportunities for online training.

(i)   Digitalization and its impacts have been accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The crisis underlined the need for NSOs to produce relevant and (more) timely statistics. Covid-19 also accelerated the use of telework in statistical offices and resulted in valuable experiences on how to organize resilient digital statistical production processes. The movement to digital data sources and data capturing approaches can help to improve timeliness. In this respect, countries are relying on support from the international statistical community. The work of OECD, Eurostat and IMF is going to be critical and offers opportunities for greater coordination across the CES member countries.

Conclusions and proposals for future work

5.   The meeting recognized the challenges to statistical offices due to digitalization that call for the development of new statistics to meet users' needs. At the same time, digitalization impacts the production of official statistics in terms of the emergence of new data sources and data infrastructures, and there is potential in better using the existing surveys.

6.   The meeting recommended follow-up work related to digitalization and its impact on the production of official statistics. CES can provide a platform for exchanging experiences and good practices, and for coordination of international activities related to digitalization.

7.   The outcome of the discussion will be reported to the CES Bureau. The Bureau and the Secretariat will follow-up on the issues raised during the discussion and consider possible further initiatives in relation to digitalization.

B.   New roles for statistical and geospatial agencies in emerging national data ecosystems (joint session with UN-GGIM: Europe)

Documentation: ECE/CES/2020/10, 11, 26, 27 and 28

8.   The session was organized by Denmark and Canada (as Chair of the UNECE High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics). It explored the implications of the development of national data ecosystems for national statistical and geospatial agencies. The session considered the perspectives of both communities with a view to identifying areas of

common interest, as well as common issues, where the communities can work together more closely in the future.

9. Mr. Anil Arora (Canada) introduced the session by outlining the trends and opportunities for integrating geospatial data in statistical production.

10. Mr. Mart Mägi (Estonia) and Mr. Tomaž Petek (Chair of UN-GGIM: Europe, Slovenia) gave keynote presentations. The presentations demonstrated that the statistical and geospatial communities face some common challenges and opportunities. Additional short presentations of national good practices were given by Ms. Marjo Bruun (Finland) from a statistical perspective, Mr. Colin Bray (Ireland) from geospatial perspective, and Mr. Julio Santaella (Mexico) from a combined perspective. These presentations highlighted the value of good collaboration between statisticians and geospatial experts.

11. Belarus, France, Poland and Portugal provided written contributions. Common themes included the value of geo-statistical dissemination tools, the importance of integrating geospatial information in the statistical production process, and the need for geospatial information and tools for areas such as population and housing censuses, and statistics for SDGs. A background paper by the UNECE Secretariat outlined the various standards and initiatives relevant to the integration of statistical and geospatial information.

12. A series of online polls of participants during the meeting highlighted that countries are at different levels regarding the development of national data ecosystems. However, almost all countries have some form of regular collaboration between statistical and geospatial agencies. The main areas of collaboration are for data visualization and censuses, though 38 participants reported initiating collaboration on response to the Covid-19 crisis. Apart from financial constraints, the lack of common standards is the major barrier to greater collaboration.

13. The following issues were raised during the discussion:

(a) There should be a systematic approach and action plan for developing data ecosystems, keeping the central focus on user needs;

(b) Integrating statistical and geospatial data is important for local decision making; at the same time, confidentiality principles should be maintained;

(c) More guidelines and capacity development activities on integrating statistical and geospatial information, and tools for open use are needed;

(d) To improve interoperability, standards such as the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework (IGIF), the Global Statistical-Geospatial Framework (GSGF) and the various standards and models developed under the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics should be brought together;

(e) Work is needed on quality guidelines, common data and metadata standards, and common reference systems (such as registers for addresses and buildings, boundaries of administrative units);

(f) Further collaboration in a range of different subject-matter areas was proposed, particularly in the context of censuses and statistics for SDGs.

Conclusions and proposals for future work

14. The joint session resulted in a very active and useful virtual discussion. National data ecosystems are developing at different speeds in different countries, and the levels of ambition and what is possible vary. The level and ways of collaboration between statistical and geospatial agencies also vary, but the cooperation is increasing, partly due to the data requirements for the 2030 Agenda and the Covid-19 crisis.

15. Geospatial and statistical data are cornerstones of national data ecosystems, and statistical and geospatial agencies can support each other to enhance their roles. Sub-national data ecosystems to support local-level decision making are becoming important in many countries. There is a need for continued dialogue between statistical and geospatial communities, and undertaking joint activities with concrete outcomes to enhance the value

of data. The UNECE High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics is ready to support work on standards and interoperability.

16.   The joint session recognized the need for future work in the following areas:

        (a)   Renewal of the collaboration agreement between UN-GGIM: Europe and UNECE;

        (b)   A joint task team to determine where geospatial and statistical standards need to be better aligned to ensure greater interoperability;

        (c)   Coordinated capacity development activities, e.g. on implementing international standards and promoting data integration;

        (d)   Another joint plenary session to be held in June 2022.

17.   The outcome of the discussion will be reported to the CES Bureau. The CES Bureau may discuss possible follow-up activities at its next meeting.

C.   How official statistics can help to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, including providing data for Sustainable Development Goals (joint session with UN-GGIM: Europe)

18.   The session focused on how NSOs and national geospatial agencies responded to Covid-19 by providing data to governments, health authorities and the general public to help manage the crisis and assess its impacts.

19.   Mr. Michael Nagy (UNECE) presented country case studies from the UNECE platform on Covid-19 and official statistics (https://statswiki.unece.org/display/COV/Home).

20.   Sir Ian Diamond (United Kingdom) described how the Office for National Statistics (ONS) acted quickly to provide data needed throughout the crisis, such as data on prices and availability of highly demanded goods, population movement and adherence to lockdown measures, deaths involving the coronavirus, and the impact of the pandemic on people's lives. A national survey was set up to provide weekly estimates of the proportion of the infected population. The survey has been central to the government's decision making on lockdown measures.

21.   Mr. Julio Santaella (Mexico) presented an INEGI online portal, the Analytics Viewer for Covid-19 providing information for the analysis of the Covid-19 situation. The Analytics Viewer combines statistical and geospatial information into analysis-ready, open data for decision makers and the general public. Data presented in the portal include socio-demographic, health, employment and dwelling statistics and indicators, and information on banks, supermarkets etc.

22.   The discussion showed that one key strength of NSOs and geospatial agencies has been the ability to quickly re-purpose existing tools, portals, data flows and partnerships. In many countries, statistical and geospatial agencies are already working together. This allowed them to adjust rapidly by:

        (a)   Adapting the content and frequency of existing surveys;

        (b)   Establishing new data collections;

        (c)   Integrating information from various sources and domains for analysis and visualization;

        (d)   Setting up new statistical products, such as geoportals, dashboards and special reports;

        (e)   Using and refocusing existing ways of communication.

23.   The examples demonstrated how NSOs and geospatial agencies were able to respond quickly with the data, tools and analysis for making the right decisions in this challenging time. As the decisions can be unpopular, transparency and trust are of the highest importance.

The current innovation can also be leveraged to build a culture of more responsive NSOs and increase relevance and value of official statistics in the long term.

Conclusions and proposals for future work

24.   The presented experiences are an important input for the work of the CES Task Force on measuring hazardous events and disasters for developing the implementation guidelines of the *CES Recommendations on measuring hazardous events and disasters*, and a set of core statistics and a 'data kit' to be available in emergency situations. The lessons learned will also be considered in other CES workstreams, such as population and housing censuses, gender statistics, national accounts, CPI, modernization of official statistics, climate change-related statistics, and environmental statistics and indicators.

D.   Data stewardship – national statistical offices in the changing world (joint session with OECD CSSP)

Documentation: ECE/CES/2020/10 and 29

25.   The session discussed data stewardship at the national level and the role that NSOs can play in this context. Several countries have seized the opportunity to step up the role of NSOs in cross-government data strategies to better deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to data, NSOs are providing other support, such as advice to other agencies on dealing with data, tools for mobility analysis and contact tracing, etc. NSO expertise in data collection, management, ensuring international comparability, protecting privacy, or using big data and new tools are valuable assets that can help society to better cope with the pandemic. At the same time, a rapid response may increase expectations for NSOs to continue releasing data earlier and more frequently also post Covid-19.

26.   The discussion built on a paper by an informal task team consisting of Albania, Canada, Estonia (lead), Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and the UNECE Secretariat, which was prepared as a follow-up to the CES 2019 seminar on 'Emerging role of national statistical offices as offices for statistics and data'. The session was also informed by a supporting paper from Ireland. Presentations were given by Mr. Mart Mägi (Estonia), Mr. Bert Kroese (the Netherlands), Ms. Manuela Lenk (Switzerland) and Mr. Michael Nagy (UNECE).

27.   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 take 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)   There should be a balance between the use of private data sources and retaining trust in authoritative official statistics. 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, being consistent with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. In some cases, this can mean facilitating others to do what is outside the NSO responsibility;

        (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)   Users are willing to accept more timely data that may be of lower overall quality, but it is important to be transparent about data quality and limitations. However, more timely data does not have to mean lower quality, more efficient approaches may allow to produce high quality data quicker;

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

Conclusions and proposals for future work

28. 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.

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

30. The meeting emphasized the need to continue the discussion, sharing ideas and experiences. Examples of good practice (and mistakes) could be shared on a web platform.

31. 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.

32. The outcome of the discussion will be presented to the CES Bureau for follow-up on possible future activities in this area. The topic may also be brought to the 2021 plenary session to review progress.

E. Business continuity of official statistics (joint session with OECD CSSP)

Documentation: ECE/CES/2020/30, 31, 32 and SDD/CSSP(2020)6

33. Mr. Anil Arora, Chief Statistician of Canada and Chairperson of CSSP, introduced the topic as an opportunity to identify current lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic on business continuity of official statistics. He informed that the discussion would take place in panel format and introduced the panellists: Mr. Tudorel Andrei, President of the Romanian National Statistical Institute; Ms. Mariana Kotzeva, Director-General of Eurostat; Mr. Brian Moyer, Acting U.S. Chief Statistician; Mr. Mark Sowden, New Zealand Government Statistician. He indicated that Mr. Paul Schreyer (Acting OECD Chief Statistician) would moderate the session and turned the floor over to Mr. Schreyer.

34. As an introduction, Mr. Schreyer highlighted a few of the many impacts of COVID-19 on official statistics including increasing demands for timeliness and granularity of data, and the growing importance of innovation in responding to new demands, complicated by challenges to normal statistical operations from social-distancing requirements. He indicated that the pandemic has caused a rise in many methodological questions, for example with regard to labour force statistics and the consumer price index (CPI), as well as structural changes on how statistical offices collect and manage data efficiently during the crisis.

35. Panellists then made their presentations. Common elements included the importance of preparation and agility in responding to the crisis, and the need for statistical agencies to make a transition towards greater reliance on non-traditional data sources, including administrative data and data collected from the private sector, such as mobile phone and credit card service providers. The panellists also stressed the importance of coordination between agencies and the need for international guidance for maintaining comparability of statistics between countries for measuring the impact of the crisis. They indicated that data governance and proactive communication with users is crucial for maintaining trust in official statistics during a crisis, and to manage and raise awareness of trade-offs among the quality criteria for statistics (e.g. timeliness, relevance, and accuracy).

36. During the ensuing discussion with all participants, the panellists reflected on the future of the adaptations and innovations enacted in response to the pandemic. The panellists indicated that despite the negative impacts from Covid-19, the pandemic has provided momentum for innovations in official statistics, many of which had been under development before the crisis and have accelerated their progress or prominence as a result. The

innovations include increasing use of alternative data sources and increasing flexibility of data collection in terms of mode and frequency of collection of data. They indicated that a general issue for further reflection after the crisis would be how to continue the momentum behind innovation and how to continue broadening the roles of alternative data sources and their interoperability with traditional data sources, like surveys.

Conclusion

37.   Mr. Arora concluded the item by providing some summary remarks, emphasizing the importance of continuing the discussion by learning from more experiences of national statistical agencies' responses to the pandemic. He commented that during a crisis, the demands for data and analyses tend to grow quickly and the response from statistical agencies inevitably depend heavily on developing new tools and innovations. He indicated that many positive examples had been described in the course of the seminar, demonstrating the resilience of national statistical agencies. He further commented that statistical agencies should take the opportunity to reflect on how preparedness of official statistics for responding to a crisis could be further improved in the future.