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Working Party on Transport Statistics

Seventy-first session
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Notes of the Chair of the Working Party on Transport Statistics in lieu of its seventy-first session

Contents

I.   Introduction

1.   Due to COVID19 measures it was not possible to hold the seventy-first session of the Working Party on Transport Statistics (WP.6) in-person. Interpretation was not possible virtually, therefore an informal and virtual session was held in lieu. The secretariat circulated a significantly modified provisional agenda in advance of the meeting. Delegates were also informed that only business-critical decisions would be possible, following the 10-day silence procedure necessary as per the decision of the Executive Committee of UNECE.[1]

2.   This document is an informal summary of the discussions that took place, produced by the Chair and the secretariat, and can inform future formal sessions of the Working Party. The two decisions taken by silence procedure are set out in Informal document WP.6 No. 3 (2020) and mentioned in agenda item 6 below.

II.   Adoption of the agenda (agenda item 1)

3.   After an introduction on meeting logistics and other technical matters from the secretariat and the Chair (Mr. Peter Smeets of Statistics Netherlands), the meeting adopted the modified agenda (Informal document WP.6 No. 1 (2020)).

III.   Transport-Related Sustainable Development Goals (agenda item 2)

4.   Mr. Jean Todt, the United Nations Special Envoy for Road Safety, opened the informal meeting and made remarks on the importance of accurate, comparable and timely road safety statistics for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals. By giving updates on the third Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety held in Stockholm in February 2020, he gave valuable context to why the data collected by member States on road traffic accidents are so important.

5.   Following this the secretariat introduced the session that covered monitoring of the transport-related Sustainable Development Goals. Firstly, the secretariat gave a short update on UNECE road accident statistics, and the importance of disaggregated data to leave no-one behind (for example, by monitoring fatality rates among vulnerable road users). The UNECE Sustainable Development Goal Data Dashboard[2] was also mentioned as a tool for comparing progress of countries at the international level.

6.   Canada presented one aspect of their transport-related Sustainable Development Goal monitoring activities, relating to a new monitoring effort around indicator 11.2.1 on the proportion of the urban population with convenient public transport access.

7.   The Partnership on Sustainable, Low Carbon Transport (SLOCAT) presented their recent report that tracked how transport has been included in member State Voluntary National Reviews already conducted, which was a useful example of while the SDGs are to be monitored globally, they are to be implemented nationally, and each country can choose additional indicators that best fit their national circumstances.

8.   A consultant working with the Research for Community Access Partnership (ReCAP) shared the results of their study tracking rural access to transport, for monitoring Sustainable Development Goal indicator 9.1.1 on the proportion of the rural population within 2km of an all-season road. The study detailed a method for producing an indicator on rural access based on available data sources (population grids and OpenStreetMap).

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[1] www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/commission/EXCOM/Agenda/2020/Remote_informal_mtg_20_ 05_2020/Item_3_ECE_EX_2020_18_ITC_sp._procedures.pdf .

[2] https://w3.unece.org/sdg.

9.   The secretariat gave an update on efforts to better monitor Sustainable Development Goal indicator 9.1.2 on passenger and freight volumes. The presentation included background on global monitoring of this indicator, as well as the guidance framework that has been prepared by the secretariat. The presentation noted that this indicator, when used to monitor inland modal split, will be a useful tool to monitor transport sustainability as transport habits change coming out of COVID-19 lockdown, with a fear that private car use will surge due to fears about taking public transport, although cycling may increase as well.

IV.   COVID-19 Impact on Transport Statistics Production (agenda item 3)

10.   This agenda item was not in the original provisional agenda, but given the extraordinary circumstances experienced in many member States it seemed timely to look at how the COVID-19 crisis has affected transport statistics production, and also how statistical offices are responding to the crisis by publishing new mobility indicators. Presentations were made by Canada, Czechia, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, Russian Federation, Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America,.

11.   The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland presented their work on producing near-real time data from a wide range of sources to inform Ministers in COVID-19 tracking. These sources included passenger data for national rail, the Tube and buses (London and non-London), motor vehicles (split by cars, light utility vehicles and heavy goods vehicles), and aviation traffic. In addition to these data sources that were already available, mobile phone data was used to make estimates of total trips made, changes in walking and cycling levels (combined with data from the National Travel Survey), trips between the constituent nations of the united Kingdom, and also changes in commuting patterns. Finally, the presentation highlighted that understanding the details of new data sources was crucial to interpretation, especially with respect to accuracy.

12.   The United States of America showcased work on flash mobility indicators, which is a new product line of provisional indicators on transport activity. Naturally timeliness was the biggest focus in these new indicators, whereas traditional statistical products with high verification standards remained a core function. Timely data were acquired from mobile phones (to see if users stayed at home or made trips) and border crossing posts. Indicators could be produced on personal travel (by trip length and county), passenger throughput, roadway volumes, freight vessel activity and intercity train ridership, among others. The weekly indicators can be found at www.bts.gov/newsroom/week-transportation. Based on the discussions had during the meeting, the United States of America subsequently added an API link to their data covering trips by distance during the COVID-19 lockdown. The API can be found at www.bts.gov/browse-statistical-products-and-data/trips-distance/overview-trips-distance-during-covid-19-travel.

13.   Canada showcased their response to the crisis, which from the transport side has focussed on weekly indicators on aviation, rail and international travel, while other exceptional statistics outputs include "fast-track" data on manufacturing, wholesale and retail, flash estimates of prices and GDP, and overall their COVID-19 and Economy Dashboard is updated weekly, including eight transport and travel-related indicators.

14.   Russian Federation considered the impact of COVID-19 on different export corridors and outlined potential changes to logistics chains.

15.   Ireland's presentation discussed some of the challenges they have been facing as a result of COVID-19, in particular the human resource challenges of suddenly having a large proportion of staff telecommuting. Regular data production activities have worked largely well as the main data sources have come from administrative data sources. Road freight data production has been the biggest challenge, given that companies struggling for survival cannot prioritise survey responses. A source that was increasingly used was road traffic counters. A sense of goodwill in the short term was noted with regards to data sharing across both the public and private sectors.

16.   The Netherlands showed that their COVID-19 new page public mobility was one of the five key pillars (the others being social impact, public health, economic and supply chains). Data published include port information, rail movements, road freight and inland water transport. The indicators dashboard that they developed was the result of collaboration between Statistics Netherlands and many other stakeholders, including port authorities and Amsterdam Schiphol Airport.

17.   Sweden updates their COVID-19 dashboard of indicators on a weekly basis, and it includes total road traffic (national network only), both passenger and freight train movements, as well as aviation, maritime passengers and maritime freight movements. These indicators come from a mixture of both existing and new data sources. Data on road traffic accidents are also included. Weekly data for the national road network (excluding local roads) are used to produce weekly vehicle-km figures (covering around 75 per cent of total vehicle-km), while traffic levels are also obtained from congestion tax stations for the cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg on a monthly basis, broken down by vehicle type. Some example statistics on passenger mobility include all journeys being down year-on-year by 25 per cent, whereas the drop is 76 per cent for public transport.

18.   Statistics Finland described that most data have traditionally been based on register data rather than survey data, meaning that telecommuting didn't pose huge production challenges for them. Like other countries, a mixture of existing and new data sources were used to exceptionally track the COVID-19 impact. An interesting example of using transport data as a feed-in to other areas of statistics production was the use of open traffic flow data for lorries (120 counting posts) in the Uusimaa region (which includes Helsinki and Espoo) to feed into a nowcasting model for real economic output. Comparing the historical results of the modelled output with real values shows a very strong relationship.

19.   The Ministry of Transport in Czechia faced similar data production problems as those of other countries with regards to human resources and survey data availability. They also recognised that transport data would be crucial after the critical phase of the crisis, in order to assess economic consequences and prepare accordingly. Their approach recognised that if they did not continue regular statistics production, data would be permanently lost, and so they persisted with reluctant responders and took a flexible approach to deadlines. Their results agreed with those of other countries, in that they showed a much bigger drop in passenger transport for e.g. rail than for goods transport. They also shared some road traffic accident statistics on a monthly basis, which did not see significant falls compared to 2019 in contrast to road traffic levels. One of the most striking changes for transport were the daily passenger figures for the Prague metro.

20.   Following these nine country presentations the secretariat presented its own work on how short-term data sources that can be used to track COVID-19 impact have been collated. A representative of European Commission/DG MOVE also described their own efforts in collating short-term road safety information, and the similar challenges faced in terms of coverage and accuracy.

21.   Both in the presentations and the discussions that followed, the following topics were covered: the sustainability of the new data sources (sometimes relying on goodwill of data providers); the advantages of continuity of administrative data sources compared to surveys; and questions around the accuracy of new data sources, often with no historical trend to compare to.

22.   Some countries noted crisis has changed the balance between official and non-official statistics; statistics offices can no longer be bystanders to reality. Either statistics offices need to monitor the situation themselves directly, or they need to partner with other organisations to ensure that this is done.

V.   Statistical Challenges Faced by member States (agenda item 4)

23.   This agenda topic was dealt with in other agenda items, including items 2, 3, 5 and 6.

VI. Urban Transport Statistics (agenda item 5)

24.   The secretariat updated delegates on the tram and metro statistics collection that has been piloted in the past year. Data availability for countries with tram or metro systems has typically been excellent, and the data disseminated in May 2020 covered over 35 member States and more than 140 cities. As the data are simple to collect, the secretariat plans to continue the exercise as a pilot collection. In addition, these data are of particular importance in the near term due to interest in how public transport use will change post-lockdown in many countries.

25.   The secretariat highlighted that for some countries, confidentiality of data was an issue, even when the system is run using public subsidy. Many countries shared their views on this, and for some their confidentiality requirements cannot be waived, despite the data sometimes being published elsewhere. Other countries noted that to publish the data required a bilateral agreement with the public transport company. Sweden noted that as the public transport systems are run by regional authorities, they were not considered private operators thus not subject to confidentiality requirements. The United States mentioned that monthly data might be available for a few specific cases, but not for all 70+ systems operating in the United States, in case that short-term data were to be collated at the international level.

26.   The Netherlands presented their challenges of obtaining public transport data from a private operator. Previously a mobility survey had been used to produce public transport data but this was not sufficient to collect reliable data. In the Netherlands a single transport card can be used to access almost all public transport systems in the country, by swiping in and out. These data are collected by a private company. As the individual microdata can potentially identify individual movements, there are very strict confidentiality requirements to adhere to. Therefore, the company and Statistics Netherlands are working together on producing a public transport monitor, which will allow national totals for each mode to be viewed over time. The source for this monitor is a mixture of the card data, registers and national surveys. The monitor showed for example, that the number of daily check-ins to public transport systems has decreased 60-85 per cent compared with similar days of 2019 for May and early June 2020. The monitor can also highlight differences across different times of day.

27.   Obtaining microdata for the check-in and check-out data would allow detailed passenger numbers for all modes, including national rail passengers. The transport companies have various concerns about the security of the data provided, privacy aspects relating to individuals, and also their own competitive positions. Thus, Statistics Netherlands is continuing discussions with the Ministry of Transport, the private companies and others to overcome these issues.

28.   Israel shared their own challenges with confidentiality as there is only one light rail operator in Jerusalem. There are also data limitations, as data only cover ticket sales, whereas they know that there are a number of riders who do not pay.

VII. Administrative matters (agenda item 6)

29.   The Inland Transport Committee (ITC), at its eighty-first session in February 2019 adopted its new strategy to 2030. Following this adoption, the ITC mandated its subsidiary bodies to review their work in order to align their activities to the new strategy. The secretariat prepared a document (ECE/TRANS/WP.6/2020/6) detailing relevant elements of the ITC strategy with regards to WP.6, and how to better align the activities of WP.6 to the ITC strategy. **Draft decision: The Working Party adopted the secretariat's document detailing possible realignment of the Working Party's activities towards those set out in the ITC strategy, in particular to better support monitoring of the transport-related Sustainable Development Goals. The Working Party requested the secretariat to draft new Terms of Reference to reflect this new emphasis, to be discussed at the next session of the Working Party.**

30.   The secretariat will draft new Terms of Reference to be presented at the next session for discussion.

31.   **Draft decision: The Working Party provisionally elected Mr Michael Scrim of Statistics Canada as Chair for the period 2021-2022.**

32.   Finally, delegates considered future topics, both for the next session and more for the nearer term (to continue the positive country exchanges of practices and idea sharing). Czechia approved the increased focus on SDG indicators and also WP.6 being at the heart of this work. They also agreed that data quality should be a particular focus in light of new data sources being used, and also stressed that official data collated internationally should come through official sources.

33.   Germany also strongly made the case that new data sources and model-based data are useful to increase timeliness and impute missing values. But to assess the accuracy of these sources, new methods will be required, and collaboration with colleagues from methodology departments may be useful.

34.   The United States echoed that data quality of new sources would be particularly important in the near term and agreed that discussing this in further virtual and informal settings would be productive. Slovenia agreed that discussing these new sources is vital, from a perspective of quality assurance and data timeliness. They also suggested that having these discussions made in a separate virtual meeting at some point before the next formal session would be useful. Canada agreed as this could lead to more productive in-face meetings and improved participation. Sweden was also supportive of these ideas.

35.   The secretariat agreed to circulate some proposals along these lines in the near term, and finally the Chair ended the informal meeting.

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