

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

For discussion and
recommendations

Meeting of the 2020/2021 Bureau
Geneva (online), 17-18 February 2021

Item III(g) of the Provisional
Agenda

DATA COLLECTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Note by the Secretariat

At the Bureau meeting in October 2020, during the discussion on measuring digital transformation, the Bureau asked the UNECE Secretariat to report on the outcomes of the Workshop on Data Collection in Times of Covid-19. This paper provides a summary of that Workshop.

The Bureau is invited to advise on the direction of future work on data collection.

I. BACKGROUND

1. At the request of the Bureau, the UNECE Secretariat initiated a series of workshops on data collection in 2012. They are organised under the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics, and have a focus on innovation. The workshops have been held annually, with the exception of 2014. They have proved very popular, attracting many participants from a wide range of countries in the UNECE region and beyond, and have provided a unique international forum for data collection experts to share ideas and good practices.

2. The 2020 workshop was planned as a physical meeting, to be held in Geneva in October. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and resource constraints in the UNECE Secretariat, the workshop, as originally planned, had to be cancelled and replaced with an on-line event focusing specifically on data collection during the pandemic. It was structured around the three topics of impact, challenges and opportunities, with the support of an organising committee comprising members from Canada, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom and Eurostat.

II. OUTCOMES

3. The Workshop heard that many statistical offices had to deal with a situation that placed enormous and wide-ranging restrictions on their ability to collect data. Challenges identified included:

- The businesses that provide economic and labour force data have been closed;
- The staff that conduct surveys and analyse data have been locked-down in their homes, with new staff hired and trained online;

- Survey-takers and respondents have had to observe new and changing health protection rules such as social distancing and wearing personal protective equipment;
- Supply chains have been disrupted for the basic items needed to gather data, such as paper for printed questionnaires or tablets for electronic data gathering.

4. From the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the official statistics community recognized how crucial it was to maintain data collection. Users of official statistics still expected data to be reliable and comparable with those they used before the pandemic. They also expected data to reflect the new realities of the current situation, such as current unemployment and earnings figures.

5. Presenters outlined the challenges they faced to keep gathering data. In Mexico, the pandemic struck as the country's census was underway. New social distancing rules meant some census enumerators had to call out questions to respondents through their windows. In the Netherlands, an online portal was developed and tested at speed to gather data from businesses without traditional surveys. Ireland, Italy and Poland have employed a variety of techniques to communicate with respondents to secure their vital responses to surveys, from sending postcards and handwritten notes to increased use of telephone calls.

6. Discussions revealed that the more advanced an NSO was before the pandemic in their move towards modern modes of data collection (electronic devices, Internet responses, video interviewing and so on), the easier it was for them to make the changes required by the Covid-19 restrictions.

7. Responding to the challenges of the pandemic requires data on topics not previously measured by national statistical offices. As a result, statisticians have found themselves at the centre of nationwide efforts to collect, coordinate and disseminate statistics on the virus itself, including the number of infections, tests, hospital admissions and mortality rates. New survey questions or whole new surveys were needed to gather data about the impacts of working from home and school closures on mental health, gender-based violence and unpaid care work; the economic fallout of business closures and furloughs; and the environmental impacts of reduced mobility and industrial activity.

8. Examples presented included new questions on Covid-19 impacts in Finland's Consumer Confidence Survey, and new survey modules in Poland on impacts on science, technology, culture, tourism and civil society. In the United Kingdom, a Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey was developed and conducted every two weeks starting in early March, whilst Serbia developed a new system of rapid surveys on various topics. Canada turned to crowdsourcing data and panel surveys to explore different impacts of the pandemic.

9. Over the last decade, UNECE, through the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics, has supported and encouraged national efforts to modernise and streamline statistical collection and production. The focus has been on developing standardised, modular systems, exploring new data sources, and integrating data from multiple sources. This Workshop, and various other events during 2020, have clearly shown that statistical offices that have followed this approach have been better able to quickly respond to new data needs by re-purposing and building on existing production tools, data sources and partnerships, for example the re-use of the Data Hive platform with new data sources in Ireland.

III. CONCLUSION AND ACTION REQUESTED FROM THE BUREAU

10. Statistical offices have seen unprecedented levels of change and innovation during 2020, making opportunities to share ideas and good practices in areas such as data collection even more important.

11. **The Bureau is invited to advise on the direction of future work on data collection.**

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