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How national statistical systems adhere to the core values of official statistics

Upholding the core values of official statistics during a global pandemic

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Summary

This document presents the experience of the Department of National Statistics of Colombia (DANE) with upholding core values of official statistics during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' session on "How national statistical organisations adhere to the core values of official statistics" for discussion.



I. How to balance urgent data needs with quality, confidentiality and professional ethics?

1. Given the nature of the pandemic as well as its evolution, from the Colombian perspective we were somewhat fortunate as when Covid-19 arrived in Colombia we were able to quickly adapt to the different challenges by building on the best practices and experiences of our fellow European colleagues.

2. Since the beginning of the pandemic, one of DANE's Directorates (Regulation, Planning, Standardization and, Normalization) started to compile a weekly update on Covid-19, in which the methodological and policy strategies adopted to face Covid-19 were presented. More than a year after the beginning of the crisis, this report continues to be compiled and has greatly benefited the decision-making processes in the institution.

3. This allowed us to adopt decisions regarding several aspects of statistical production. One of the biggest changes adopted to comply with the isolation measures was to allow all of DANE's work force (more than 1.000 employees) to work from home. Secondly, given the importance of providing quality information, several adjustments were adopted in the statistical operations carried out by DANE, which implied a lot of challenges as never before had DANE implemented CATI operations.

4. The main strategy adopted by DANE to assure the quality, confidentiality and professional ethics in the statistical production was the strengthening of its institutional framework. This was done mainly through three actions: a) the establishment of an internal committee to adopt all the policies needed to allow the institution to keep functioning during the crisis; b) Establishment of "tiger teams" that were tasked with the design and implementation of "new" statistical operations that had as their main objective to provide quality information to decision makers (some examples of the outputs of these tiger teams are the per block vulnerability index and its geovisor, the social pulse, and the business pulse); c) The strengthening of the Statistical Reserve Assurance Subcommittee (SARE) in order to cope with the requirements associated with the implementation of Decree 458, and the design and launch of Colombia's Statistical Ethics System (SETE).

5. In March 2020, the Colombian Government issued Decree 458 which established exceptional conditions for the treatment of statistical reserve, within the framework of the Covid-19 emergency, allowing for a transfer of the statistical reserve. Since the issuance of this Decree, the SARE has received a total of 53 requests for information covered by Decree 458.

6. One of the main challenges that DANE faced was to strengthen its communication and dissemination strategies with the subnational level (municipalities and departments). Even if this challenge pre-dated the covid-19 pandemic, it is worth highlighting that January 1, 2020 marked the beginning of the new term in office of mayors and governors.

7. As such, as soon as the restrictions were lifted a strategy was designed under which, on a weekly basis, DANE's management (mainly the General Director and the Deputy Director) were tasked to go to the different municipalities to meet with the new officers and share with them the "statistical" perspectives of the policy challenges they faced, as well as the different tools designed by DANE.

8. Regarding the ethics associated with the statistical production, on October 2020, DANE launched its Ethics System, based on the experience of UK, USA, New Zealand and Eurostat among others. The governance of the SETE is composed of an Ethical Committee, an Appeals Room and a Base Group. The SETE has as its main functions to: 1) Monitor the ethical framework; 2) Make recommendations on DANE's policies and strategic plans; 3) Evaluate from an ethical perspective the statistical operations; 4) To make ethical monitoring of statistical operations; 5) To design and execute training programs in statistical ethics; and 6) Design and execute communication plans.

9. The SETE is anchored in 15 principles structured in four axes:

Table

Principles of the Statistical Ethics System (SETE)

<i>Axis</i>	<i>Principles</i>
Human dignity, confidentiality, and differential approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection of the fundamental rights of the people. • Respect for the personal and family privacy rights. • Control of the individuals over their personal data. • Guarantee of the differential approach in statistics • Respect of human dignity
Impartiality, transparency, and publicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency and accountability as enabling principles • Transparency and accountability as principles guarantors of access to information and social control. • Ensuring participation of stakeholders. • Integrity in the treatment of data and the publication of results. • Timeliness and equitable access to information • Impartiality on statistical production.
Legitimacy and generation of public value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjustment of statistical production to the legal frameworks. • Generation and promotion of confidence in the statistics. • Contribution of data to the public good.
Safe use of current and future technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weighting of implications and risks of Collaborative data (SEN). • Promotion of human supervision, considering the limits and risks of the use of new information technologies

10. Moreover, SETE has established a set of nine ethical risks: i) Disrespect for the autonomy and privacy of individuals; ii) Invisibilization or statistical exclusion; iii) Stigmatization and labeling; iv) Non-relevance of statistical information; v) Poor communication; vi) Bias and manipulation; vii) Lack of truthfulness and opacity; viii) Unsafe use of current and future technologies; and ix) Abuse and harm of collaborative data.

II. What pressures have Chief Statisticians felt during this period, and how have they responded?

11. There are different pressures that had to be managed in this period. The first type of pressure is an administrative one, in which we had to quickly adapt to allow the institution to keep working, maybe this is something which might seem rather small, but in the Colombian work culture, this was never seen in a positive manner, so besides the technicalities of it, we had to change our mindsets and working culture.

12. The second pressure, which might be shared by most of the Chief Statisticians is related to the emerging methodological challenges, and it is worth highlighting that thanks to the different international bodies, we were able to identify and share the different innovation opportunities.

13. Finally, the third type of pressure has a political nature, and it is that NSOs might face criticism for the statistics that are disseminated within a complicated social context. To face this pressure, DANE's management decided to establish collegial bodies which are tasked to over to supervise key statistical operations, such as income and multidimensional poverty, which has allowed us to preserve our independence.

III. In a crisis situation, to what extent can the long-established norms and practices be pushed aside?

14. The pandemic has had a direct effect on practices and norms of statistical production. This impact is associated, mainly, with the use and exploitation of new sources (i.e., administrative data, satellite images, among others) which has demanded to issue new normative frameworks to guarantee an ethical use of these sources. Moreover, as highlighted in several international scenarios, the pandemic has also provided a window for innovation, for example in the establishment or reinvigoration of new partnerships with members of the National Statistical System.

15. One of the main impacts that the pandemic has generated on the Colombian NSO is the design and implementation of a framework that covers the production of experimental statistics. To advance in this process, we greatly benefited from the experiences of the colleagues at Eurostat and the United Kingdom. Currently we are advancing in a communications strategy allowing for an accurate dissemination process of this information.

IV. Possible questions for discussion with the public

16. Upon discussion with the different bodies within the Colombian National Statistical System, we have identified that in order to advance in the establishment of flexible frameworks for the production of official statistics, one of the routes that we have taken is to advance on the conceptualization of what is the International Statistical Regime. Why did we choose to catalogue this as a regime? Mainly because we have followed Krasner's definition of an international regime as a "*set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge*". As such, in the statistical community we have a set of explicit principles materialized on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and also sets of norms and rules which are materialized in the different regional statistical communities.

17. Based on this approach, two questions might be useful to discuss: How relevant and useful have the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics been during the pandemic? How could the FPOS be strengthened to cope with the new reality and challenges? Would the FPOS be strengthened if they included more specific principles that present the ethical challenges and developments that we face nowadays?
