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For discussion and
recommendations

COMMENTS ON THE IN-DEPTH REVIEW OF DATA ETHICS

Prepared by the Secretariat

The note provides the comments from the UNECE Secretariat on the in-depth review of data ethics led by Canada and United Kingdom with input from Eurostat (ECE/CES/BUR/2022/OCT/2).

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   The note is based on an internal discussion in the UNECE Statistical Division on 6 October 2022 to contribute to the CES Bureau discussion on data ethics.

II.   COMMENTS

2.   The following points were raised during the discussion:

(a)   The paper considers both the conceptual and practical sides of data ethics. The paper identifies various principles and aspects of data ethics but does not provide a clear definition of the concept. Therefore, the recommendation for further work towards a definition and communication of what is meant by data ethics is important.

(b)   Data ethics is context dependent and dynamic. What is considered ethical depends on the national legislative and cultural contexts. Societal views around data privacy and use are constantly evolving and respond to specific situations such as health and security crises.

(c)   Existing UNECE models such as the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM) and the Generic Activity Model for Statistical Organizations (GAMSO) could provide a framework for the operationalization and implementation of data ethics across the data lifecycle.

(d)   The data lifecycle includes decisions about which data are collected, which data sources are used in statistical production, and the population coverage of these sources. Data ethics frameworks should take this into consideration.

(e)   While the NSO should be at the forefront of national discussions and strategies around data ethics, it is important to engage all actors across the statistical system such as administrative data holders as well as the public.

(f)   A focal person or office on data ethics may be required for comprehensive and objective implementation, but efforts should be taken to "mainstream" data ethics across all divisions and levels of staff of the NSO and other entities involved in data collection and production in the country. Data

ethics should be promoted as a universal responsibility and not one reserved for a dedicated data ethics mechanism.

(g)   The Task Team on Ethical Leadership under the High-Level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics (HLG-MOS) is actively engaged in work on ethics and ethical management in NSOs. It has surveyed NSOs to collect information on ethics management with respect to both statistical production and organisational processes. Survey results indicate that around 80 per cent of responding offices have implemented some sort of ethics management by setting up programmes, procedures and training. Work proposed for 2023 includes

(i)   integration of business ethics practices within GAMSO and GSBPM;
(ii)   definition of a common vocabulary around ethics management and data ethics;
(iii)   preparation of an organizational framework grounded in ethics principles and concrete guidance for NSOs; and
(iv)   development of a collaborative platform and organization of a meeting to share experiences and good practices on ethics management.

This work should be considered and leveraged in any future CES activities on data ethics.

(h)   The Task Team on Responsible Artificial Intelligence (AI) under the HLG-MOS is working to develop an international framework for the responsible design, development, and deployment of machine-learning-based solutions for NSOs. The framework will be based on work by Canada and emphasizes transparency, accountability and data ethics. Future activities should take note of this work.

(i)   Data ethics cut across the work of several expert groups and initiatives under the CES including the HLG-MOS: (i) modernizing statistical legislation, (ii) core values of official statistics, (iii) data stewardship, and (iv) social license. It is important that activities related to data ethics are coordinated across these groups and that definitions and concepts align across outputs.

(j)   The work on data ethics can be undertaken on a conceptual side (e.g. development of a broad framework that defines the issues that need to be considered by countries) or on a practical side (applied data ethics). With not many countries taking action to implement data ethics in practice, exchange of experience and development of tools is required.

(k)   The paper recommended to organize a session for senior NSO leaders to discuss best practices and produce high level international data ethics standards for NSOs. In alignment with this suggestion, the Secretariat proposes to organise a seminar on social license for official statistics, including data ethics, at the June 2023 CES plenary session (ECE/CES/BUR/2022/OCT/18).

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