

7<sup>th</sup> Expert Meeting on Statistics for SDGs

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Session 3: Shrinking resources and partnerships with policy makers

**Stewarding the Sustainable Development Indicators as the basis  
for shaping a National Statistical System**

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1. The NSO is not featured in the Sustainable Development Act as the entity responsible to coordinate requests related to the SDIs. However, as the competent authority in Malta responsible for the production and coordination of official statistics, the NSO recognises the need to address the gaps in the production of statistics for the SDIs, by *inter alia* strengthening coordination between the NSO and other national authorities that produces statistics, map SDI-related transmissions between national competent authorities and custodian agencies and provide technical assistance to non-official producers of statistics. This is not solely for the monitoring of the SDGs, but also as a way to strengthen statistical cooperation and data management among the public sector.

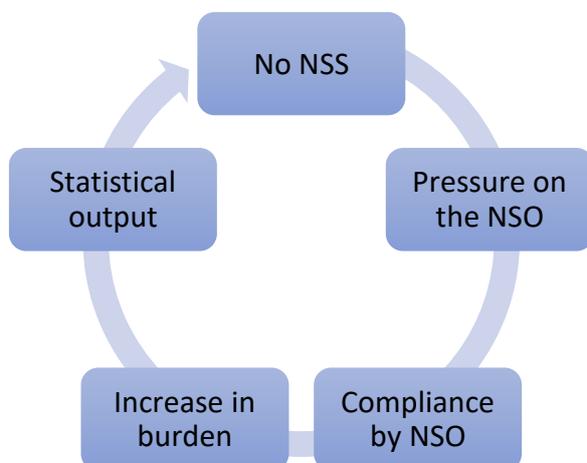
2. As statistical offices, we are now getting used to the qualification of “significant additional burden”. This phrase internalises the truth; mainly that additional burden is an obvious consequence of any changes that statistical offices might experience. Apart from the obvious burden emanating from structural changes that NSIs may have to carry out from time to time and on the ongoing processes to refine their statistical products in terms of quality and timeliness, everything else also has an impact on the operational capabilities of NSIs. As the saying goes “it’s the last straw that breaks the camel’s back”, in that if the balance between user demand and the capabilities of NSIs remains unchecked, the point where we realise this might be too late to address.

3. Small NSIs understand this very well. Malta’s NSO has a workforce of around 200, and as an EU Member State has to engage in all statistical processes and must fulfil all statistical obligations of the EU. Although in general, the headcount in the NSO continues to grow, the increase is slow compared with the continuous user demands for new statistical products and the increase in employees may not be addressing these new demands. Indeed, notwithstanding the added resources to the NSO, the burden on the NSO is increasing in that:

- Users demand newer statistical products;
- New statistical needs may be ‘new’ in terms of focusing more on the scientific domain rather than on the ‘usual’ statistical domains;
- Malta does not have a National Statistical System;
- There is lack of public knowledge/awareness between what is ‘official statistics’ and ‘other statistics’, and;
- The extent of NSO’s compliance with policy and legal statistical needs.

4. These problematic points feed each other and create a vicious cycle. Irrespective of the NSO’s 100% capacity utilisation to ensure timely statistical output required by law, it still tries to

close the statistical gaps which are left due to the lack of a National Statistical System. While on the one hand, this ‘strengthens’ the relevance of the NSO, at least in terms of output, on the other hand it gives the impression that an NSS is not needed, and therefore not worth investing in.



5. This cycle continuously adds burden on the NSO. A capacity utilisation of more than 100% shows that the NSO’s production has exceeded the maximum possible output—taking into consideration its budget, headcount, and expertise—to the detriment of the quality of statistics.

6. The salient question is on how to break this cycle, and instead create a cycle that facilitates awareness of statistical processes and induces the distribution of burden across the public sector. Through this new process you would be exploiting both the comparative advance of the NSO, i.e. statistical expertise, and the thematic expertise of other government authorities and agencies. For this to happen, the following processes are considered as being indispensable:

- Decentralisation of the production of official statistics to address specific scientific thematic issues;
- Centralisation of all national official statistical activities and the management of the national data ecosystem, and;
- Strengthening communication: knowledge and awareness of official statistics and their quality vs. ‘other’ statistics.

7. The NSO is therefore aware of the problems and of what should be addressed to overcome the present cycle. The issue that had to be addressed was how to change the cycle. What was needed was something that was politically interesting, had public appeal and involved the participation of all national authorities. The Sustainable Development Goals served this purpose. Not only, but the NSO understood that these could also help in the national implementation of the legal frameworks that will be adopted to implement the six priorities of the EU Commission, which are all linked to one or more of the SDGs.



Source: European Commission.<sup>1</sup>

8. At a national level, as part of its communication strategy, the NSO started to base their argumentation on UN Resolution 71/313, which stated that official statistics and data from national statistical systems constitute the basis needed for the SDG global indicator framework and stressed the role of National Statistical Offices as the coordinator of their respective National Statistical Systems.<sup>2</sup>

9. The NSO started an outreach exercise with all government Ministries/departments, in particular, those consulting the NSO whenever receiving requests from custodian agencies for endorsement of statistics produced in line with the approved methodologies. The message communicated was clear, in that the NSO will not be in a position to verify the statistical output of custodian agencies without being somehow involved in the management of the SDI-related data transmissions. Moreover, an important point highlighted by the NSO to Government Ministries was on possible negative repercussions on statistics published by the custodian agencies that did not reflect the socio-economic situation in Malta. Some 'incorrect' statistics are due to the way custodian agencies produce estimates—by using data from surveys done in one part of the world and extrapolating them to other countries with different realities. However, other gaps were due to the lack of a quality mechanism in Malta ensuring the timely provision of data and the 'validation' of the statistics produced.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *EU holistic approach to Sustainable Development: The EU approach towards implementing the UN's 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development together with its Member States*, Accessible online at [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/international-strategies/sustainable-development-goals/eu-holistic-approach-sustainable-development\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/international-strategies/sustainable-development-goals/eu-holistic-approach-sustainable-development_en) [accessed on 12 March 2023].

<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly (2017), *71/313. Work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 6.7.2017, New York. Accessible online at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/207/63/PDF/N1720763.pdf?OpenElement> [accessed on 29 July 2021].

10. In parallel, the NSO started work to (i) identify existing data sources and statistical products (national and international) that address the UN SDIs framework; (ii) identify other data and statistical products that are relevant for the monitoring of implementation towards the SDG targets and can therefore be used as a proxy to the UN SDIs, and; (iii) identify national statistics that can supplement the UN indicators and proxies with additional information relevant for a Maltese context. The result of this work was reflected in the publication ‘Sustainable Development in Malta: Statistical Information on the 2030 Agenda in Malta – 2021’.<sup>3</sup> The publication provided a holistic assessment of the majority of SDG targets using existing data at both national and international levels.

11. However, the most important aspect of the publication was the message that the quality of the indicators depends on the underlying statistical process. Many non-official producers of statistics are not as experienced in sound methodological procedures as the NSO, and may even be entirely new to quality frameworks.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the message communicated was that the strengthening of methodological procedures and the coordination between statistical producers are necessary preconditions to ensure high-quality statistical output. In reality, the NSO was not communicating something new since the element of coordination is already covered by the Malta Statistics Authority Act. It mandates the NSO to “monitor and coordinate the carrying out of tasks with statistical implications imposed on other public bodies” and “coordinate the production of official statistics’ systems, including the necessary methodologies, to ensure timelines and standardisation of information, efficiency and to meeting users’ requirements...”.<sup>5</sup> The Act also requires that “if any public authority intends to carry out activities with statistical implications, it shall consult, for coordination, with the Office and accept any recommendations the Office may make”.<sup>6</sup> These processes, applied to the monitoring of the SDGs, have been recognised as an opportunity to start shaping a strong National Statistical System, which is a must if we have to cater for users’ demand for high-quality statistics that are relevant, timely, and accurate.

12. The NSO reiterated this message at one of the Ministerial SDG-focal point meetings and eventually to the Cabinet of Ministers, who agreed to establish a National Expert Group on the Sustainable Development Indicators, to be chaired by the NSO, with the mandate to coordinate all activities relating to the SDIs, and to:

- Ensure that the Competent Authorities strengthen their commitment to data collection and the production of statistics in relation to the SDIs;
- Ensure timely collaboration and submission of information, data and statistics whenever required for the monitoring of the SDIs;
- Ensure the provision of quality and reliable data in conformity with the Malta Statistics Authority Act, the European Statistics Code of Practice and international and EU obligations/priorities relevant to each domain;
- Identify and address data gaps on the SDIs and ensure synergies between the SDIs and European statistical obligations;

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<sup>3</sup> National Statistics Office (2021), Sustainable Development in Malta: Statistical Information on the 2030 Agenda in Malta, National Statistics Office: Valletta, available online at: <https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Media/Salient-Points-of-Publications/Pages/2021/Sustainable-Development-in-Malta--Statistical-Information-on-the-2030-Agenda-in-Malta---2021.aspx> [ accessed on 11 March 2023].

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2021), *Conference of European Statisticians Road Map on statistics for Sustainable Development Goals – 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, ECE/CES/2021/6, Geneva.

<sup>5</sup> Malta Statistics Authority Act (Cap. 422) – 2001. Available online: <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/422/eng/pdf> [Accessed on 6 August 2021]. Paragraphs 10(2)(f) and 10(2)(g).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Paragraph 39(2).

- Assist in the identification of appropriate indicators to monitor the implementation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050;
- Recommend the allocation of funds towards specific tasks necessary for the compilation of data;
- Make viable recommendations to the Sustainable Development Coordinators and Focal Points of each Ministry; and
- Send an annual report to the Cabinet on the work of the National Expert Group.

13. The Cabinet decision also entailed the nomination of technical experts for all SDG indicators to participate in SDG expert group meetings. Following the Cabinet decision, the expert group stated meeting in different task force formations, based on the SDGs covered. Before every Task Forces meeting, the NSO produced a detailed technical report to guide the discussions of the Task Forces. These reports contained relevant information about all the indicators falling under the specific Goal addressed, including:

- The type of statistical product used for the monitoring of the Sustainable Development Targets;
- Availability of Statistics for Malta;
- Information from meetings held with Custodian Agencies;
- A detailed breakdown of each indicator, including definitions, data sources, data flows and data availability, and;
- Suggestions on the use of existing data sources to address the SDG indicators or the targets of the SDG.

14. Moreover, following the TF meetings, reports were drawn highlighting the topics discussed, the presentations delivered by NSO and other entities, significant observations and conclusions, and the actions required (if any) for each specific SDG indicator. The follow-up from each meeting is also steered by the NSO.

15. It is a lengthy and bumpy process, since changing the customary narrative about the exclusive role of the NSO in the production of statistics with the reality that to keep up with the user demands the entire public sector needs to partner up in the collection of data and the production of official statistics. This would require the whole public sector to engage in data collection and statistical processes. However, if the NSO makes this work, it will slowly achieve a system wherein it stewards the processes related to the SDGs, and through the same process shapes the basis for a National Statistical System, based not only on the production of official statistics but also on the stewardship of the national data ecosystem.

