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Data ethics – a key enabler of social acceptability**Follow-up on the Conference of European Statisticians
seminar “Data ethics – a key enabler of social acceptability”****Prepared by the Secretariat***Summary*

This document describes the follow-up to the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) seminar session “Data ethics – a key enabler of social acceptability”, which took place on 28 June 2023. Mainly, it presents the result of the discussion by the CES Bureau in October 2023, the outcomes of the Workshop on Ethics in Modern Statistical Organizations, which took place in Geneva on 26–28 March 2024, and the status of the ethics reference book prepared under the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics (HLG-MOS).



I. Background

1. The Conference of European Statisticians (CES) seminar session on “Data ethics – a key enabler of social acceptability” took place on 28 June 2023, following an in-depth review on data ethics carried out by the CES Bureau in October 2022.
2. During the discussion, several key points regarding data ethics emerged. It was emphasized that while data ethics is not a new issue, its significance is evolving with the emergence of new data sources. Collaboration with data protection authorities and civil society is deemed essential to ensure privacy and enhance trust in statistics. Moreover, the level of social acceptability varies across countries and changes over time, necessitating a broad but not necessarily universal approach. Statistical organizations are urged to demonstrate ethical practices, tailor communication on ethics to different target groups, and uphold higher standards of accountability. Communicating statistics as a public good based on high ethical standards is crucial for maintaining trust, with frameworks like the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics being instrumental. Additionally, addressing ethical issues involves complex considerations, including balancing public good with privacy concerns and promoting ethical standards among stakeholders in the data ecosystem. Resource constraints in addressing data ethics highlight the importance of sharing best practices internationally. Cultivating an ethical culture within statistical organizations and integrating ethics into education from an early stage are seen as vital steps forward.
3. In response to the request of CES to discuss follow-up actions from the seminar, the Bureau held a discussion on this topic during its 2023 October meeting. The following points were raised in the discussion:
 - (a) Data ethics is a long-established topic but it has a new conceptual meaning in the current data environment;
 - (b) Communication of data ethics is important to maintain trust in official statistics;
 - (c) Official statistics can demonstrate what is ethical to do and what not, to give the public confidence about ethics; ethics is an important component of data stewardship;
 - (d) Working on ethics is not optional but mandatory. It is at the heart of official statisticians’ work that everything should be done with an ethical lens.
4. The Bureau also discussed the proposal for further work prepared by the seminar organizers, Canada and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: collecting best practices, developing a common international definition of data ethics, developing a principle-based international data ethics framework, and developing guidance and online training to understand and use the framework in statistical production processes. The Bureau agreed that the Ethical Leadership Task Team under the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics (HLG-MOS) Capabilities and Communication Group was in principle well positioned to initiate follow-up work on data ethics.
5. The remaining document summarizes the work of the Ethical Leadership Task Team that has taken place after the CES Bureau meeting.

II. Workshop on Ethics in Modern Statistical Organizations

6. The Ethical Leadership Task Team organized the Workshop on Ethics in Modern Statistical Organizations. The Workshop took place in Geneva on 26–28 March 2024 and was chaired by E. Dhuli (Albania).
7. The purpose of the workshop was to share experiences and lessons learned regarding the ethical issues arising as national statistical offices (NSOs) utilize new data sources and technologies. With the growing demand for refined and diverse data, NSOs are embracing new data sources and techniques. However, this evolution underscores the need for data ethics to guide these activities, ensuring ethical behaviour and maintaining public trust. Importance of institutional ethics within NSOs is also growing, particularly in the era of social media and disinformation. NSOs must act as moral authorities, with leaders promoting

ethical practices, upholding organizational values, and ensuring the highest ethical standards in handling sensitive data.

8. This Workshop focused on the following topics:

- (a) Ethics in institutional contexts;
- (b) Ethics in daily work life;
- (c) Ethics for new data sources and technology;
- (d) Ethics and proactive communication.

9. The key messages and takeaways from the Workshop are the following:

(a) Working on ethics is not optional but mandatory.

(b) Sharing examples and pooling resources are an effective way to collectively address the issue as many countries lack resources for working on data ethics. A compilation of available materials on data ethics in official statistics was proposed.

(c) Sometimes it is not easy to distinguish between ethical and quality principles. It is important to define clear goals for ethical behaviour. We should be specific when discussing ethical dilemmas, and clearly define the roles of actors in the scenarios.

(d) The Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM) is useful to ensure that ethical considerations are taken into account at every stage of statistical production.

(e) Ethics frameworks should apply to all data sources.

(f) New data sources present new ethical issues of concern. The pandemic also has raised issues of work-life balance given the consequential increase in teleworking.

(g) The importance of delineating roles and responsibilities of individuals, as well as the need for more organizational controls was highlighted. The process of ethical decision-making by the data ethics staff and escalation of vulnerable cases to the internal ethics committee are necessary functions of organizations. The establishment and functioning of an ethics committee, including selection of members and identifying responsibilities, are important for organizations.

(h) It is important to clearly communicate ethical values.

10. Several themes and ideas were identified as future work priorities during the Workshop:

(a) Developing a cohesive definition of ethics in official statistics, along with its constituent components, is imperative. Equally crucial is the creation of a flexible framework that accommodates diverse needs. Moreover, providing guidance and online ethics training will empower NSOs to effectively utilize this framework.

(b) Expanding the scope to address future challenges, such as the evolving role of NSOs in data governance and stewardship.

(c) Exploring methods to enhance staff engagement in changing organizational culture through an ethical lens.

(d) Examining the various roles of NSOs in ethics, including data collection, dissemination and awareness promotion.

(e) Considering methods to build social acceptability of official statistics, whether through internal efforts or external assistance.

(f) Conducting a study on data ethics cases related to statistical production using new data sources.

(g) Expanding discussions on data ethics and responsible artificial intelligence (AI).

(h) Conducting further discussions on microdata ethics and AI, focusing on the roles of NSOs. Providing concrete examples will clarify ethical considerations in practical contexts and guide ethical decision-making processes.

11. All presentations and materials from the Workshop are available on the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) website <https://unece.org/statistics/events/Ethics2024>.

III. Reference book on ethics

12. Based on the discussions at the CES seminar session as well as the CES Bureau meeting, the Ethical Leadership Task Team has initiated the development of a reference book on ethics (title to be confirmed). The work was further informed by the conclusions and future work priorities identified from the Workshop. The draft outline of the book is as follows:

- (a) Introduction;
- (b) Conceptual groundwork: discussion on related concepts (ethics, law, code of conduct), ethics in the context of official statistics and analysis of ethical principles and guidelines in NSOs;
- (c) Ethical challenges in modern statistical organizations;
- (d) Managing and applying ethics in statistical organizations: role of leadership in the management of ethics, compliance governance, implementation procedures and tools;
- (e) Ethical dilemmas: real-life examples of ethical dilemmas from NSOs as well as how to address them using the tools described in the previous section;
- (f) Culture and communication: promotion of ethical values and culture in the organization, training on ethics and communicating with the public;
- (g) Conclusions and future challenges;
- (h) References and suggested reading;
- (i) Annex: glossary of key terms and detailed results from Ethics Survey (2022).

13. The Task Team invites other NSOs to contribute to the development of the reference book.
