Statistics for SDGs in a post COVID-19 environment

Fiona Dawe, Office for National Statistics, UK

Expert Meeting on Statistics for SDGs, March 2021

Statistics and data have never been more important. The pandemic meant the Office for National Statistics (ONS) needed to adapt quickly and it was vital to produce statistics and analysis that the country relied upon. We ensured the public, businesses and policy makers had information they needed, at a time when they needed it most. In 2020 alone, the ONS released over 1,000 publications. Much of our work has focused on us providing new insights on the impact of the pandemic.

The challenge

Coronavirus disruptions have presented challenges in collecting some of our usual statistics. There were measurement challenges with many shops closed, businesses ceasing to trade and no interviewers to knock on doors. We suspended all face-to-face interviewing in our social surveys and the International Passenger Survey (IPS). Where possible we moved to telephone-based interviewing or using online surveys. Alongside rapidly developing new insights, we needed to maintain the quality of our core statistics. This placed the UK at the forefront of measuring the impact of the pandemic on public services in near real time.

Our response

The pandemic hasn't only affected the health of the nation. As the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cover economic, environmental and social issues, so has our response to the pandemic.

We have been ambitious as we adapted existing publications, provided new and specialist in-depth insights, developed dashboards and produced new data series. For example: the COVID-19 infection survey and weekly COVID-19 related death statistics (by occupation, disability, religion and ethnicity).

We produced an analysis of access to gardens and public green space in Great Britain which links to target 11.7. We investigated air pollutants and COVID-19-related mortality (linked to indicator 3.9.1).

Goal 8 refers to decent work and economic growth; the pandemic has affected both of these. We launched the fortnightly Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey (BICS). Using these data we analysed furloughing, international trade, and expectations over time. This provided critical evidence of the impact to businesses, informing some of the most important decisions related to the pandemic.

We adapted the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) to provide weekly updates on the impact of the pandemic. We analysed the effect on: those with a disability, young

people, older people, personal and economic well-being, the impact on caring, home-schooling, and mental health. These extra analyses help to identify who is being left behind, the key principle of SDGs.

To inform users we launched a dedicated COVID-19 page, produced visualizations and interactive tools to help aid understanding of the pandemic, and publicly shared our analytical workplans and engaged with users to shape priorities. The Data Science Campus also outlined how it is working to support the COVID-19 response.

Risks and rewards

We have had to weigh up the risks and rewards in our response to the pandemic.

We are producing and disseminating data faster than we ever have before. This means we can have real time impact on government policies. We have used rapid response surveys, novel data sources, and experimental methods to bring together real-time insights on the pandemic.

We also increased our collaboration with various organisations to ensure the government have the data needed to take the decisions to mitigate the effects of the virus on our economy and society.

However, there are risks in increasing the speed our data are produced and reported. There is greater potential for error and there may not be the time needed to produce detailed and in-depth analysis. We must ensure the quality of our data and reporting does not suffer.

Lessons learnt and implications for the future

Throughout the pandemic, we remained responsive to emerging needs for data and analyses. In 2020 the UK Statistics Authority launched its new strategy: Statistics for the public good. It sets out a vision for the UK official statistics system as: radical, ambitious, sustainable and inclusive. ONS has a lead role to play in this revolution. We are committed to continuing to deliver high quality data to inform the UK, improve lives and build for the future. This is in line with our commitments to the SDGs.

We have delivered at a faster pace than even we thought we could and responded flexibly to the uncertainties and challenges of COVID-19. By continuing our rapid reporting surveys and transitioning some to be broader than Covid-19, we will continue to respond flexibly to emerging needs.

The pandemic has led to deeper than ever collaboration with government, academia and the private sector. We have committed to informing users and partners of our priorities regularly, and to collaborate where possible. These relationships will help us to deliver a sustainable and unique service.

In the spirit of SDGs, and the principle of leaving no one behind, we will continue to be inclusive, ensuring our statistics and our workforce reflect the experiences of

everyone in our society. We have explored the ways users access our data and are introducing more regular webinars and user engagement.

Together, these will help meet the targets and goals set out in Agenda 2030 in this decade of action.