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Post-Covid: sustaining organisational and product innovation in National Statistical Offices**Innovation in national statistical offices organization and working arrangements****The response and handling of the Covid-19 crisis*****Prepared by Norway***Summary*

The paper presents Statistics Norway's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on key enablers allowing the organization to react quickly and continuously adjust to the phases of the crisis.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' session on "Post-Covid: sustaining organisational and product innovation in national statistical offices - Innovation in national statistical offices organization and working arrangements" for discussion.

* The present document was submitted late due to resources constraints.

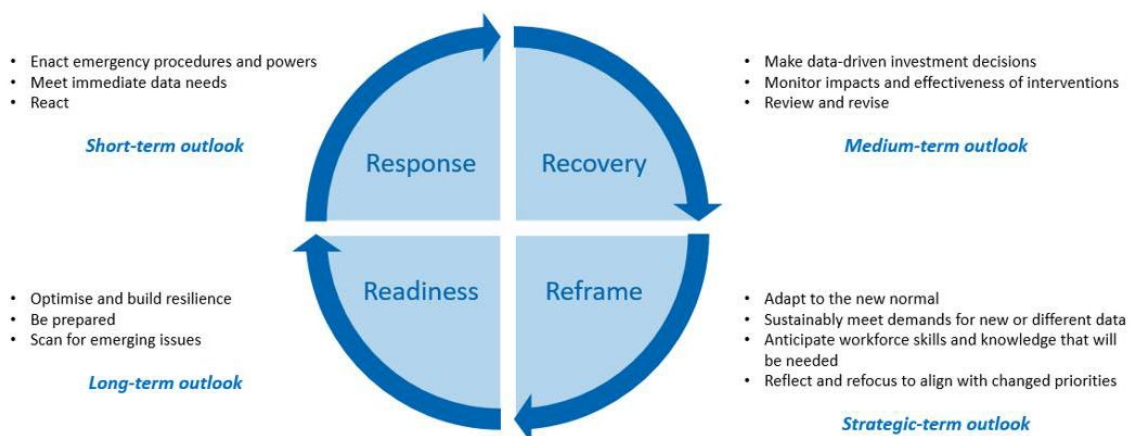
I. Introduction

1. When the Norwegian government on 12 March 2020, introduced Covid-19-related restrictions on a scale never experienced in Norway in peacetime, Statistics Norway (SSB) set the Pandemic plan in action at the same time as a national lockdown was put in force. SSB went from starting normal workday activities on Thursday 12 March, to sending staff home in the afternoon, then setting up teleworking on Friday, to having a confirmed Covid-19 infected case among our staff on Saturday. All this in course of only three days. With the plan in hand, SSB was able to react quickly to the crisis and to make policy driven decisions for the short term. The short term was considered to last through Easter 2020, a period of some weeks. At that time this was seen as rather drastic and could possibly be disruptive to business and work morale. Little indeed did we know what lay ahead of us.

2. In the following, we look at the key organizational enablers that allowed SSB to react quickly to the crisis. We have used the model developed by StatsNZ and shared in the preparation for the 2021 CES plenary session on “Innovation in national statistical offices organization and working arrangements” to analyze the phases in our response. The model helped us understand the various phases and key defining elements of each phase (Figure 1).

Figure

Four stages and outlook time horizons of a crisis management resilience model



II. “Plans are nothing; planning is everything”

3. It was just as impossible for SSB as for the next NSO to understand the scale of what was to hit the world in the first months of 2020. Earlier pandemic waves had turned out to be less harmful than first envisaged, like SARS in 2003 and the Swine Flu in 2009. But largely thanks to these outbreaks, SSB had in place an emergency plan for handling a pandemic, which included setting crisis management. A detailed plan, outlining authority and responsibility, as well as setting activity plans, is extremely useful when something unexpected and unprecedented takes place. But we soon saw that the plan was written for a scenario that did not match the actual situation. The pandemic plan was based on a scenario in which many of our employees became ill. This did not happen, instead the threat from Covid-19 was sending as many employees as possible away from the office locations and to set up working from home. The emergency plan gave us a helpful baseline for how to organize and respond, with certainty, efficiency and without waste of time. But in a situation new to us all, continuous planning and adjusting was needed.

III. Crisis management

4. The primary concern of the crisis management was to secure the health and safety of the staff. The next was to avoid disruptions in production and publication of statistics. Management's agility and commitment to adhere to the plan by setting crisis management at once, set the responses in motion. We severed all contact between SSB's two office locations to be able to maintain on-site activity in at least one workplace. We still had some employees coming to the office, to keep the facilities running or in circumstances where teleworking was not possible. This was a matter of importance, in order to getting access to servers on-site for example. The practical step was to have social distancing, to protect people still being at the office locations.

5. When SSB decided to set crisis management, this consisted of the management team. For the first months, they met every second morning for a crisis management meeting. Here any new actions were decided, communication messages outlined and follow-up through the reporting lines was carried out. To monitor the daily developments from the health authorities and the situation within the organization, the crisis management was assisted by a task force consisting of three members from Security, Communication and HR respectively. The task force was responsible for preparing proposals for decisions to be made by the crisis management team. Throughout the whole period, this cooperation between the task force and the crisis management team has been vital in the daily running of the response to Covid-19 in SSB.

IV. Home office arrangements

6. Recovery step one was to enable teleworking and establish new routines to maintain business-as-usual. IT services and support desks were from the very beginning in much demand. A sudden and widespread rush for support in setting up home office connections came all at once from every part of the organization, without any extra resources at hand in the IT Department.

7. The solution was for IT staff to work extensive hours during that first crucial week or two. Nearly all SSB employees have a laptop, but not all were set up for teleworking. The IT department decided promptly to roll out a VPN solution for everyone, a decision which was already in the pipeline at that time but had not yet been made official policy. It was a key enabling factor for seamless connection between the home offices and SSB. The installations were a considerable workload for IT client support being obliged to give one-to-one support to a high number of employees over the first couple of weeks.

8. SSB supported employees by arranging home-deliveries of computer monitors, computers, and office chairs. A temporary work-from-home arrangement, as this was at that time considered to be, had no legal requirements for the employer for the equipment of the home office. Nevertheless, it was obvious for SSB as well as for most employers, that it was important to support employees in setting up suitable home offices to make it possible to carry on working. This service continued throughout the year and into 2021. With Covid-19 continuing over time, new demands became apparent and the employer's responsibility for home office conditions was highlighted.

V. Communication

9. With physical distancing, employee communication became the primary way to promote closeness between people. Digital channels were the only way to maintain contact and provide information. Internal communication was an overall priority.

10. The company intranet is a communication hub and its relevance became obvious when we saw how the daily visits increased. The intranet can be accessed on the mobile phone as well as on the computers. Employees were able to respond to articles with questions and comments.

11. Timely and unequivocal information was a key aspect. SSB was conscious of the importance that the information to staff must be based on certain founding principles permeating every message:

- SSB places trust in its employees – trust taking preference over control.
- Middle managers received an email in advance of new information on the intranet, regarding change in policies for social distancing, coming to work, etc.
- Information on rules and decisions made by the crisis management team were placed on a central spot of the intranet. Employees shall always find correct and updated information on the intranet.

12. SSB had already for some years used Yammer as a channel for technical and professional discussions within the organization. This channel also had an increase in daily visits and engagement in different subject groups. All spaces in this channel are open to all employees. The purpose is to have a place where employees may meet and interact across organizational divisions and borders.

VI. Health, Safety and the Environment (HSE)

13. Measures have been taken to enable employees to do a good job in unusual and difficult circumstances. Top management based the decisions on a belief that the lockdown is a situation forced upon everyone, not a situation considered as an opportunistic opportunity to avoid having to come to work. This gave SSB the common ground of shared beliefs and helping our employees in making the best of a difficult situation:

- Flexibility was introduced to make it possible for all to keep working: some employees were faced more difficult situations than others, for example due to home schooling, belonging to risk groups, unfavourable home conditions making working from home challenging, et cetera.
 - This included: Regulations concerning core working hours were opened so that working hours could be shifted into evenings, and this made it possible to find individual solutions during the pandemic. Parents could take days off when kindergartens and schools were closed. In this area SSB followed national regulations given by the Government.
- We made sure to keep abreast with official rules, regulations and recommendations and adapt what we can to the best for SSB, always maintaining workforce health and safety as the number one consideration.
- We emphasized the importance of dialogues between manager and employee and between colleagues, encouraging cooperation and helping each other.

14. We decided to monitor the well-being of the workforce by conducting staff surveys on employee satisfaction in the home office. The surveys were carried out four times in 2020. The survey results were published on the intranet. Management meetings on Teams were held after each survey, addressing remote management issues and sharing experiences among managers, in keeping the attention on what was suddenly new in management and employee relations. We put effort into maintaining good relationships with unions and involving unions and safety representatives in risk assessments and being transparent in our management communication.

15. These factors helped us in the recovery phase. The emergency plan helped us make the right decisions, and the staff surveys helped us monitor impact and effectiveness of interventions.

VII. The present

16. What obstacles and challenges have become evident in NSO efforts to remain resilient, agile and responsive? How were staff kept motivated under conditions of teleworking, an uncertain future, and in some cases reduced budgets?

17. Looking back to March 2020 and the time passed under Covid-19 restrictions until today, the period can be viewed as divided into four phases so far. There was an intensive first phase lasting from 12 March to Easter 2020. We entered a new phase after Easter 2020, when we learned that beating Covid-19 was not a short-term effort. The second phase took us through summer 2020. The third phase began after summer with increase in the spread of the virus and lasted until the end of the year. From beginning of 2021 a new fourth phase has begun although it is quite similar to the previous phase.

18. These phases fit well into the crisis management resilience model prepared by Stats NZ which consists of four time horizons (phases); *Response* (short-term), *Recovery* (medium-term), *Reframe* (strategic-term), and *Readiness* (long-term). When we came to the *Reframing* phase, especially after Summer 2020, focus was to adapt to the new normal. The strategic-term outlook consisted of responding to Government's and society's need for new information. New statistical output was identified, and work was initiated to combine and produce new data.

19. As time passed on from March 2020, and the time perspective moved from Easter to summer, new aspects had to be addressed to the organization. It now became apparent that this was not a passing, short crisis, and it became clear that a "new normal" had to be established. This involved not just holding heads over water during a passing crisis but learning to work and live under completely new and unprecedented circumstances. We had to realize that work seminars, appraisal talks, feedback, training and development, i.e. the whole range of workplace relations, had to be managed digitally and remotely over a longer time. Classroom training had to be redesigned and made in a new fashion according to online training. Managers had to learn that control and supervision could no longer be done by observing employees work directly and participating in the same room on shared activities. The answer was to give more trust to employees and be active and attentive in follow up through indirect means, such as online meetings.

20. After summer 2020, when realizing that beating the pandemic would still be long-winded and not successful until extensive vaccinations have been completed, new challenges related to motivation and fatigue became apparent among SSB staff. Managers experienced an additional work burden combined with concerns for the well-being of staff. Employees missed going to the office and meeting co-workers. Everyone found it more difficult to be creative. People missed the brainstorming elements achieved when being together in the same room. The prevailing concern is still that we have not yet seen the long-term effects. Focus will have to remain on managers' resilience to avoid long-term negative effects on sick leave, burn-out and possible resignations.

VIII. The situation for Statistics Norway's statistical survey activity

21. While the content in this paper so far has centered around how SSB in general responded to the Covid-19 crisis, some special remarks are needed to give a more complete picture. The Social surveys unit (coordination unit for social surveys data collection) and their interviewers faced a different set of challenges in addition to the rest of the organization. Interviewers are part-time employees and work is usually done after regular office hours, in the evenings and on Saturdays. SSB has call-centers in both the office locations in addition to a nationwide corps of interviewers working from their own homes.

22. All interviewers, independent of their locations, works online on the same decentralized-CATI system. Similar to the SSB's overall plan, the emergency plan for conducting surveys during a pandemic had been revised just before the pandemic started. This was again a positive contributing factor in being able to have a quick response to the crisis. Another defining factor was that most of the data collection for individuals and households in SSB is done either by telephone interviews (CATI) or online (CAWI). Only a small part of data collection is done by personal face-to-face interviews (CAPI) if needed. This significantly reduced the risk for SSBs data collections.

23. However, the interviewers did not have the same up-to-date IT equipment and infrastructure or technical know-how as the rest of the organization. A call for investment in

new IT equipment had been rejected based on lack of funding as late as beginning of March 2020. The main priority was to get interviewers at the two call-centers up and running from home office. However, pending investments, we did not have sufficient IT equipment at hand.

24. This was solved by rolling out already available equipment and to be inventive within the limits of what was available. Given this situation it was therefore especially satisfying to see that all surveys were delivered according to plan in 2020 with only to exceptions; a large international study using face-to-face interviews where the whole survey was postponed for a year (the OECD PIAAC), as well as the planned visits as a part of the Purchasing power parities survey for service (PPP). With the longevity of the Covid-19 crisis, budget was released partly at the end of 2020 and for 2021 for investment in computers, mobile phones and VPN for all interviewers regardless of location. Falling outside the core activity of SSB's business model, it is fair to say that this unit had more obstacles than the rest of SSB in adapting to the challenges rising from Covid-19.

IX. Optimizing and building resilience – Motivation and initiatives

25. Motivation has been a key concern for us the whole time. Most of the motivation work falls on the middle management. Some heads of divisions in SSB have as many as 30 employees who directly report to them. They are in some degree supported by team supervisors. However, it is obvious that several managers have considerable responsibilities. Fortunately, the employee surveys during Covid-19 tell us that people are satisfied with the support they get from their manager. Throughout the period, we have had leadership seminars on Teams, highlighting remote management and sharing ideas for how to be a good leader during these challenging times.

26. Initiatives taken by employees themselves are welcomed and have been encouraged. This has taken a variety of forms: be it joint problem-solving on Teams or outdoor walks with colleagues. The Communication department has been very active throughout the whole period, publishing weekly pep talks from the director general and the department directors, as well as writing intranet articles promoting good work examples. Articles with content of what colleagues are up to, are the most read articles, there is apparently a widespread surge to read about co-workers.

27. Human Resources has put emphasis on maintaining good relations with the four unions in SSB. This has included joint risk assessments on health and safety aspects regarding returning to the office locations as well as work conditions in the home office environment. It has been very important for us to keep unions well informed every time new Covid-19 measures have been taken in SSB. The way we handle employee relations during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic will stay with us also in the long run. In other words, we influence our future reputation by our actions today. A long-term outlook is included in the decisions we make during the crisis and this is a way to build resilience. We believe cooperation and a shared understanding of common goals will help us when we eventually return to the new "normal".

28. Flexibility is understood to be one of the key factors going forward. We will readdress how we view teleworking. With our new understanding of how digital platforms and cooperation work in practice, we will most likely be less focused on where people do their work, and more inclined to let the results be the overriding point of management attention, not where the work is carried out. Furthermore, flexibility cannot exist without trust. We can continue building on the high level of autonomy and trust as key elements of labor relations in Norway.

29. None of this would have helped without employees continuing to take pride in their work and deliver good quality on time. The level of initiative, responsibility for own work and deliverables, has been high in SSB throughout the pandemic and this keeps the wheels in motion, with new ways of working and cooperating. Clear goals and delegation of responsibilities are prerequisites for the high level of autonomy of work among our employees. We saw that many were inspired by overall events and uncertainties in society to

come up with innovations and new insights. These combined efforts from many parts of the organization made it possible for SSB to be in the lead as a reliable and relevant provider of facts for the Norwegian government, media and the public also during Covid-19.
