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**Economic Commission for Europe****Conference of European Statisticians****Sixty-ninth plenary session**

Geneva, 23-25 June 2021

Item 2 (b) of the provisional agenda

**Innovation in National Statistical Offices organization and working arrangements****Summary of key points from the Chief Statisticians' sprint on  
"Upholding the core values of official statistics during a  
global pandemic", 9 June 2021****Prepared by Ireland and the Secretariat***Summary*

A "sprint" session for the CES Bureau members and a few invited chief statisticians was held on 9 June 2021 to discuss upholding the core values of official statistics during a global pandemic. This paper summarizes the key points from the discussion, as an input to the CES plenary session, agenda item 6 (How national statistical systems adhere to the core values of official statistics), organized by Ireland.



## **I. Background**

1. The 2021 plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians will be held in hybrid format with participants connected on-line due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This format severely limits the possibilities for detailed discussions on substantive topics of interest to the international statistical community. To partly mitigate this, the CES Bureau decided to experiment with the organisation of two on-line “sprints”. The aim was to allow in-depth discussions in small groups, where ideas and opinions would be documented to provide background papers to inform the discussions on the corresponding agenda items at the plenary session.

2. The second of these sprints was held on 9 June 2021 and considered the topic of upholding the core values of official statistics during a global pandemic. Participants represented 15 national statistical offices and international organisations (Albania, Canada, Colombia, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Mexico, Norway, Poland, United Kingdom, Eurostat, UNECE and UN Statistical Division). The sprint was moderated by Mr. Pádraig Dalton, Director General of the Central Statistics Office, Ireland.

## **II. Key points from the discussion**

### **A. Innovation**

(a) Demand for official statistics accelerated during the pandemic, including for new types of indicators, analyses and visualisations. The emergency situation in many countries called for unprecedented innovation. Core values were very important, providing a basis for rapid decision-making on how statistical offices could contribute.

(b) Data integration, modelling, nowcasting and forecasting to produce best estimates from available data sources became more common. Detailed analysis of microdata to identify impact on particular sub-groups of the population or sectors of the economy required new skills and partnerships.

### **B. Professionalism, independence and trust**

(a) Statistical offices became more prominent during the pandemic. Chief statisticians were sometimes appearing on the same platform as politicians, and the political aspect of data became increasingly noticeable. In these circumstances, demonstrating professionalism, independence and judgement was even more important than in normal times.

(b) In many countries, policy makers and other users turned to official statistics for authoritative data, showing that trust is very important in a crisis. This helped to reinforce messages about the value of official statistics, and that policy makers should turn to official data as their first option.

(c) Trust is a key asset. Many statistical offices were able to capitalise on this as they had to adapt their operations to changing circumstances. This was particularly important in those countries with population censuses during this period.

(d) The shift to remote data collection required new collection channels, but benefitted from public trust as well as the general move to remote and on-line interactions across society.

(e) As the volumes of data grew, so did the need to provide interpretations and insights, bringing out the stories behind the data. The high profile and intense scrutiny demanded that professionalism and neutrality were clearly demonstrated, to ensure public trust.

## C. Quality and transparency

(a) The trade-off between quality dimensions shifted, particularly between accuracy and timeliness. Methods and practices from “peace-time” situations aim at perfection, but users were suddenly much more willing to accept imperfect data. In line with the saying that “perfect is the enemy of good”, there was a move from best possible quality to data that are fit for purpose, or “good enough”.

(b) Statistical offices had to be more proactive, anticipating and interpreting user needs more than before, developing new methods and using new sources to ensure relevance.

(c) International data comparability issues, for example on death rates, were highlighted during the pandemic, strengthening the case for international collaboration on methodology and data quality.

(d) Transparency became increasingly important. Clear communications with stakeholders about methods, safeguards, constraints, limitations and quality were essential to maintain trust. In some respects, there was a shift from “selling” numbers to “selling” confidence intervals.

(e) Statistical offices were forced to become less risk averse. Users demanded rapid innovation and more experimental outputs. The risks to the reputation of statistical offices could be mitigated by a focus on core values such as transparency and professionalism.

## D. Confidentiality and ethics

(a) Maintaining confidentiality of individual data, particularly when multiple data sources are integrated, remains key to retaining trust.

(b) The pandemic raised various ethical challenges, including around the collection and treatment of medical data. Data ethics in the context of artificial intelligence is becoming a hot topic. Having ethics frameworks and groups in place can be very helpful.

## E. Collaboration and community

(a) The pandemic opened new possibilities for collaboration and partnership with data suppliers, including in the private sector. The sense of working together for the national good in a crisis helped to sweep aside some of the previous barriers to collaboration and data access. Statistical offices need to capitalise on this and ensure these new data flows and partnerships are not lost as the pandemic comes to an end.

(b) The pandemic provided an opportunity for statistical offices to demonstrate that they have the skills needed for effective data stewardship, based on the strong foundation of core values. This increases the likelihood of statistical offices being invited to take higher profile roles in cross-government data development and management activities.

(c) As the value of the data skills in statistical offices becomes more appreciated across government, there are likely to be increasing demands for statistical offices to provide data services to other agencies. This will require new safeguards to separate such activities from statistical production. There should be a clear distinction between official statistics and other data products / services.

(d) The existence of a strong international community in official statistics was a very important asset. Knowledge bases were quickly created, information and ideas were freely shared between countries and international organisations. There was a clear sense of solidarity in the community.

(e) More knowledge sharing and institutional capacity building in areas such as ethics, governance and quality assurance will help statistical organisations to be better placed to deal with future crises. Knowledge-based capacity building should be based on the core values.

## **F. Being prepared**

(a) The pandemic highlighted the on-going importance of modernisation and innovation in official statistics, including in less visible areas such as data architecture, integration and standards. Pre-pandemic modernisation activities, including investigation of new data sources, provided a useful basis to react quickly in a crisis situation.

(b) Strong and modern statistical legislation underpins the core values and can facilitate rapid responses in a crisis.

(c) Business continuity planning is an important tool to support fast reactions to a crisis, whilst ensuring core values are upheld.

## **G. Core values and fundamental principles**

(a) Mapping the core values to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and defining the key behaviours to demonstrate the core values for the implementation of the Fundamental Principles would be useful. Whilst the core values and Fundamental Principles should remain stable over time, these behaviours could evolve to reflect changes in society, technology and infrastructures.

(b) The core values could help to interpret new demands and phenomena, and apply new ways of thinking, and therefore provide a good basis for decision making, particularly when under pressure.

(c) The Fundamental Principles could also be relevant in the wider data community, beyond official statistics. This should be investigated further.

3. Some issues raised in the discussion that could benefit from further reflection include:

(a) Professionalism, confidentiality, quality, independence trust and transparency are widely recognised as core values of official statistics, but what else is needed to complete this list? The sprint identified innovation, community, collaboration and ethics. Are there others?

(b) When the list of core values is agreed, it should be mapped to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Behaviours to demonstrate how we “live the values” and implement the Fundamental Principles should be elaborated.

(c) The extension of the Fundamental Principles and core values to the wider data community should be considered.

## **IV. Action requested from the Conference**

4. The Conference is invited:

(a) To take note of the points raised in the sprint session, refer to them during the discussion at the CES plenary session.

(b) With reference to the issues raised in paragraph 3, to reflect on what further activities may be needed to strengthen the core values of official statistics, and their relationship to the Fundamental Principles, and elaborate how they can be demonstrated in practice.

(c) Express views on the way to take this work forward under the guidance of the CES Bureau.

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