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Implementation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Statistical Programme 2020

Addendum

Report of the Expert Meeting on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals

Note by the Secretariat[1]

Summary

> The document presents the key outcomes of the Expert Meeting on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals, organized as an online meeting on 29 March - 1 April 2021.
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> The report is submitted to the Conference of European Statisticians for information.

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[1] This document was submitted late for document processing as clearances from relevant parties were received late.

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I. Attendance

1.   The Expert Meeting was attended by Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Czechia, Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, Montenegro, Mongolia, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, South Africa, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and United States of America.

2.   The meeting was also attended by representatives from Eurostat, UN-Women, United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD), UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Georgia, Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia, Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), Eurasian Economic Commission, European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-STAT), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Statistical, Economic and Social Research, Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC) and World Bank.

3.   In the academic field, the Vienna University of Economics and Business also participated, along with the non-governmental organisation FAI "Rosdornii".

II. Organization of the meeting

4.   Taking into account the travel and participation restrictions imposed by Covid-19 pandemic, the Expert Meeting was organised online, with simultaneous Russian-English interpretation.

5.   An introduction and information session was held on 29 March, 15:00 – 17:00. The participants were informed about the progress with preparing the Second edition of the *Road Map on statistics for SDGs*, and other relevant work at the international level, including the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDGs), the High-level Group on Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for statistics for the 2030 Agenda (HLG-PCCB), the global working group on big data, the 2021 UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, and the work on measuring hazardous events and disasters.

6.   The substantive sessions discussed the following topics:

(a)   Measurement of progress towards SDGs – Cannot put a genie back in a bottle

(b)   Impact of Covid-19 on SDGs – "Leave no-one behind" (LNOB) perspective

(c)   Statistics for SDGs in Post-Covid environment.

7.   All documents and video recordings of the sessions are available at: https://unece.org/info/Statistics/events/351549.

A. Session 1 - Measurement of progress towards Sustainable Development Goals – Cannot put a genie back in a bottle – 30 March 2021, 15:00 - 17:00

8.   The session was organized by Joanne Evans, (United Kingdom) and Miriam Blumers (Eurostat), co-chairs of the Task Team on Capacity Development. Measuring the progress towards SDGs became as important as progressing with the Agenda 2030 itself. The COVID pandemic did not cancel the commitments towards the Goals, it made them even more important and relevant. But how to inform the target audiences on what progress your country

is making to achieve the Goals? How do you deliver information and visualise the progress and gaps according the needs of your audience? Working on methods, tools and the innovative solutions and approaches are a statistician's "best toolkit" in all times. The session showcased some of the examples.

9.   Estonia presented its "Tree of truth" visualization, detailing the design and launch process. It received the national Clear Message award 2020 from the chancellor of Justice and is regularly used by the media and schools.

10.   Ukraine demonstrated how it measures SDG progress based on the UNESCAP methodology. There is strong support from the government on the collection of data to monitor progress on SDGs. The State Statistics Service of Ukraine is the coordinator of data collection for monitoring of the SDGs and has been producing the Monitoring Sustainable Development Goals report since 2020. For this, the State Statistics Service of Ukraine jointly with VoxUkraine supported by UNDP Ukraine made a pilot of measuring the SDGs progress in Ukraine using UNESCAP's methodology and on the basis of the SDGs Voluntary National Review. Two principal measures were used to assess Ukraine's progress towards the SDGs: Current Status Index and Anticipated Progress Index.

11.   FAO presented its statistical approach for assessing progress towards the SDGs. The focus was on the challenges associated with assessing the current situation and projecting whether the target will be reached by 2030. Data is needed for each country in the current year. However, some SDG indicators do not have numerical targets and FAO does not set a statistical target for these. They estimate the empirical distribution and assign to each country the corresponding quintile. Other difficulties include how to handle geographical aggregation and aggregation by goal. For the future status, the actual growth vs required growth is compared. Different growth models can be assumed (linear vs. geometric). Other issues identified are how to deal with outliers, missing values, and different types of data.

12.   The United Nations Statistical Division presented its SDG Progress Chart which presents a snapshot of global and regional progress toward the SDGs through a traffic light dashboard. The dashboard features both a trend assessment and a level assessment. A task team was formed composed of experts from 15 regional and international agencies. This task team selected indicators and developed a standard methodology for the assessment. However, some agencies applied a different methodology due to the nature of the indicators.

13.   The session concluded that it is important to understand your target audience, respond to their needs and learn how to get their attention (e.g., through visualisations). Overarching view of progress is key to engaging stakeholders, the details can be given later. Simplicity is not simple! It takes a lot of effort to develop clear and concise communications and sometimes the most robust statistical method is too complicated to communicate clearly. Transparent and replicable methods are important for building trust in official statistics.

B.   Session 2 - Impact of Covid-19 on Sustainable Development Goals – "Leave no-one behind" perspective – 31 March, 15:00 – 17:00

14.   The session was organized by Claire Plateau (France) and Lieneke Hoesksma (Netherlands). The session examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the principle of the 2030 Agenda to leave no-one behind. The pandemic has made more obvious the weaknesses in economic and social systems, challenging our "normal" way of life and the things we took for granted. There is a risk that as a result of this crisis more people and new categories will be left behind; and that goes against the principle of SDGs. The session considered how statistics can help shed light on these developments and ensure that vulnerable groups will be visible in the data.

15.   Ireland presented its COVID-19 data hub, which was rapidly deployed in response to the pandemic on the GeoHive platform. Ireland's NSO provided the data infrastructure to combine current data on testing, hospital beds and cases with data modelling experts from academia, department of health, etc. All data was encrypted and transferred to the NSO where it was anonymized and converted to CSV-format for research access. The data governance aspect was done in parallel with data collection, with researchers being appointed as Officers of Statistics and the preparation of a Data Protection Impact Assessment.

16.   France presented an assessment of the impact of the first lockdown on social inequalities. Risk of exposure to the virus varies according to one's socio-economic background and is more frequent among the poorest and manual workers. Job loss mostly affected groups that were already economically insecure to begin with. People living alone were more likely to report lockdown difficulties than couples. Women continued to take on most domestic work even when working outside the home. Last, pupils form disadvantaged backgrounds experienced material difficulties more often and had less help from their parents.

17.   Canada's presentation focused on a review of the Global Indicator Framework in light of COVID-19. Indicators were determined to be impacted strongly by examining data on the pandemic's impact and assessing the impact on each global indicator based on existing empirical evidence and knowledge. The final analysis was submitted as a background document to the 2021 UN Statistical Commission. Countries can use it as a starting point when assessing the pandemic's impact on the SDGs. A next step is to evaluate the indicators for vulnerable groups to guide policymakers.

18.   Sweden presented its Annual Statistical Review with a focus on LNOB. The impact of COVID-19 was not the main aim of the study. It was based on existing tools (e.g. the Road Map on Statistics for SDGs) and current knowledge (e.g. population groups known to be at risk). The report considered 9 areas and 14 different disaggregations. The results showed that vulnerabilities intersect, as for each area the same groups were highlighted. Challenges involved in LNOB include the fact that some groups are difficult to survey and there are gaps in statistics for certain areas (e.g. statistics on gender based violence and sexual violence).

19.   UNHCR detailed the disaggregation of SDG indicators by forced displacement. Forced displacement has a dedicated SDG indicator (10.7.4) but its scope is restricted to stock of refugees by country of origin. 12 SDG indicators were identified as priority for disaggregation to enhance visibility of forced displacement in Agenda 2030. However, UNHCR finds that forcibly displaced persons (FDPs) are systematically excluded from national sampling universes. In studies on the general population, it is often not possible to directly identify FDPs. Colombia was presented as a case study, with IDPs included in national statistics leading to a set of rights-based indicators used for public policy making. The Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics was established to work in this field and it has created guidelines and recommendations on how to measure these groups accurately.

20.   The session concluded that the impact of Covid-19 reinforced the LNOB perspective. With the pandemic, new categories are added to the most vulnerable groups, such as young people, children with disabilities, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and manual workers. The 2030 Agenda, and in particular the principle of leaving no one behind, provides an excellent framework for analysing vulnerability also in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

21.   Official statistics need to keep a specific attention on these issues when measuring progress on SDGs and communicating data in Voluntary National Reviews in the following years. In looking for more data for this purpose, it can be useful to investigate new data sources, use small area techniques when possible, be innovative and set up partnerships with other institutes. The communication aspects should not be neglected, using data visualisation and geospatial information to inform policy makers and the different stakeholders in general.

C.   Session 3 - Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals in Post-Covid environment – 1 April, 15:00 – 17:00

22.   The session was organized by Mary Smith (Ireland) and Lisa Lundstrom (Sweden). The session focused on how we might end up working with statistics for SDGs post COVID-19. As a result of the pandemic, it has become more difficult to produce statistics, while high quality and timely statistics are needed more than ever to inform policy makers in this current environment. Difficult decisions are being made in relation to the pandemic in how NSOs operate and allocate the limited resources. This has resulted in adapting and changing statistical processes to meet the current challenges. The presentations showcased some of the work being done by NSOs to address the challenges created by the pandemic.

23.   Poland focused on how communication with users could change because of the pandemic. The uncertainty associated with our current situation has fuelled an increased demand for information. For Statistics Poland it triggered a change in the way publications were released to the public, with a new focus on fully digital and interactive publications. Digitalisation has improved flexibility and expands the content for users. It is now more important than ever to thoroughly consider the purpose of a publication, its intended audience and the message.

24.   The presentation from the UK focused on statistics for SDGs in a post COVID-19 world. The pandemic presented some unique challenges, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) balancing the COVID-19 response with its core statistics. Data collection faced disruptions due to a move away from face-to-face interviewing and business closures. However, the ONS is uniquely placed to provide insights across health, social, economic and environmental impacts of the pandemic. They adapted existing publications, provided new surveys and data sources, in-depth analysis, developed dashboards and new communication methods. For example, the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) was adapted in late March 2019, to provide weekly updates on how the coronavirus pandemic has been affecting the whole population. All in all, the office is producing and disseminating statistics faster than ever before. However, there are risks in increasing the speed at which data are produced and reported. There is greater potential for error and there may not be the time needed to do detailed and in-depth analysis. Going forward, the ONS aims to be more timely, inclusive, and actively seek out collaboration.

25.   Turkey highlighted some of its achievements and challenges in light of COVID-19. Turkey produces data on an additional 31 SDG indicators in 2021 compared to 2020 and has published the SDG indicator roadmap report. There is a production plan to release further 66 relevant indicators in the future. However, there were also challenges. International cooperation projects with custodian agencies were disrupted as well as national workshops that aimed to bring together all national data providers.

26.   The session concluded that it has been crucial to adjust quickly to the new environment, both by providing relevant Covid-19 data and by using new working methods. Many NSOs set up dedicated Covid-19 pages and web portals and used interactive tools. The statistics have been provided more rapidly, in some cases almost real-time. In many offices the pandemic has been an accelerator of innovation. It will be important to keep these innovations also after the pandemic and make them part of the regular statistical work.

III.   Future work

27.   The next Expert Meeting and workshop on statistics for SDGs will take place on 29 March – 1 April 2022. The exact modalities of the meeting are to be decided depending on the situation with the Covid-19 pandemic.