Meeting of the 2023/2025 Bureau
Cardiff, UK, 9-10 October 2023

| Approved |

Item V (b) of the Provisional
Agenda

DATA ETHICS – A KEY ENABLER OF SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY: FOLLOW UP ON THE IN-DEPTH REVIEW AND THE CES DISCUSSION

Prepared by Canada, United Kingdom and the Secretariat

The CES 2023 seminar session "Data ethics – a key enabler of social acceptability" took place on 28 June 2023, following an in-depth review on data ethics carried out in by the CES Bureau in October 2022.

This document summarizes the discussion under the CES on the theme of data ethics and suggests possible further activities in this area.

The Bureau approved the proposal for further work.

I. BACKGROUND

1. In October 2022, the Bureau carried out an in-depth review of data ethics based on a paper prepared by Canada and United Kingdom with contribution by Eurostat (ECE/CES/2023/5).

2. The Bureau found the paper highly relevant due to changes in the operations of national statistical offices (NSOs), driven by stricter privacy legislation, the need for public trust, and the necessity for data owner partnerships. They emphasized the importance of explaining and promoting the concept of data ethics both internationally and within NSOs, aligning it with existing frameworks.

3. Data ethics practices aim to ensure data safety, appropriate usage, and public benefit, emphasizing public engagement and transparency. Concrete use cases are more effective in communication, and it is not about addressing unethical practices but adapting to a new context. Data ethics decisions are now part of daily business throughout the data life cycle, requiring sharing experiences and practical advice, including examples of unethical behaviour in the private sector.

4. The Bureau suggested that establishing a few high-level principles, a mechanism to follow the developments, and a diverse group of experts who can discuss the issues seems to be a preferable approach to navigating the complex nature of data ethics. However, only a few countries have implemented such practices, so their impact needs further evaluation. The statistical community needs to engage in broader discussions on data ethics and explore how statistical aspects fit into these conversations.

5.   The Bureau agreed with the recommendations proposed in the paper including organisation of a CES seminar on "Data ethics – a key enabler of social acceptability". The Bureau also agreed to discuss the need for follow-up work in October 2023.

II.   DISCUSSION AT THE 2023 CES SEMINAR

6.   The seminar session took place on 28 June and was chaired by A. Arora (Canada) and N. Shearman (UK). The discussion was informed by presentations of the Ethical Leadership Task Team under the HLG-MOS Capabilities and Communication Group, papers from France and New Zealand, and a joint paper by Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland and Eurostat. A panel, comprised of E. Dhuli (Albania), A. Arora (Canada), D. Rozkrut (Poland) and N. Shearman (UK) gave their perspectives and responded to comments from participants.

7.   During the discussion, the following points were raised:

(a)   Data ethics is not a new issue but it is getting a new conceptual meaning in the context of new data sources. Collaboration with data protection authorities and civil society is important to ensure privacy, and increase trust in statistics;

(b)   The level of social acceptability differs in countries and changes over time. Social acceptability should be broad but not necessarily universal as we may not achieve 100% acceptance from society. At the same it is important to consider opinions of the marginalised groups;

(c)   Statistical organizations must demonstrate that their practices are ethical. Communications on ethics should approach various target groups differently, such as parliamentarians, media, academia, businesses and general public. Society now holds organizations to higher standards and requires greater accountability in terms of ethics;

(d)   Communicating statistics as a public good based on high ethical standards is crucial to maintain trust in statistics. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the materials prepared for their 30th anniversary can be helpful in promoting ethics in NSOs;

(e)   Ethical issues involve complex considerations, such as the balance between public good and privacy. The concept of stewardship highlights the responsibility of official statisticians to promote ethical standards among stakeholders in the data ecosystem. Both new initiatives and existing practices should be reviewed from ethics perspective, and outdated approaches revised;

(f)   Many countries lack resources to work on data ethics. Sharing examples of best practices and working on guidance for data ethics together internationally will allow to pool the resources. Internal culture and understanding of ethics in statistical organizations as both human behaviour and professional/business ethics is crucial. Insider threats are one of the biggest threats to organisations;

(g)   Ethics education should start from schools and include open courses, seminars and collaboration with universities. Incorporating ethics into statistical literacy can help explain the importance of ethics;

(h)   Countries called for the development of a broad framework covering the data ethics issues that NSOs should consider. The framework should be flexible, adaptable and responsive to changes and situations. It should be embedded in the work of NSOs, and its use communicated to users;

8.   The Conference asked the Bureau to discuss the follow-up to the seminar 'Data ethics - a key enabler of social acceptability', taking into account the work currently undertaken under the HLG-MOS, decide on further steps at its October 2023 meeting, and report back to the CES plenary session in 2024.

III.   2024 WORKSHOP ON ETHICS IN MODERN STATISTICAL ORGANISATIONS

9.   The further work in this area should take into account Workshop on Ethics in Modern Statistical Organisations, that will take place on 26-28 March 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland.

10.   This Workshop will be prepared by Ethical Leadership Task Team under the HLG-MOS Capabilities and Communication Group. The purpose of this workshop is to highlight the growing complexity in society, which has led to increased demands for refined and diverse data from NSOs. To meet these demands, NSOs are embracing new data sources and modern data integration techniques. However, this rapid evolution underscores the need for data ethics to guide these activities, ensuring ethical behaviour and maintaining public trust. There is also growing importance of institutional ethics within NSOs, 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.

11.   This workshop will focus 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.

IV.   PROPOSAL FOR DECISION BY THE BUREAU

12.   Many countries lack resources to work on data ethics. Sharing examples of best practices and working on guidance for data ethics together internationally will allow us to pool precious resources. Future work in this area should include:

(a) Collecting best practices on defining, applying, and communicating data ethics across different NSOs. Provide case studies of good practices and the impacts this has had;

(b) Developing a common international definition of data ethics and a common understanding of its relevance for NSOs;

(c)   Developing a principle-based international data ethics framework that can be used by NSOs. Such framework should be high-level, adaptable and responsive to take into account different contexts and changing situations;

(d)   Developing guidance and online training to empower analysts to understand and use the framework in their data collection and use activities. This will help NSOs to embed the framework in their statistical production processes.

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14.   **The Bureau is invited to:**

(a)   **Discuss the presented proposals;**

(b)   **Decide on further work related to data ethics under the Conference;**

(c)   **Express interest in participating in the work.**

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