

## Discussion Note on Ensuring Continuity

This short discussion note was prepared to facilitate the discussion at the *Special Meeting of the UN Committee of Experts on Business and Trade Statistics on the impact of COVID-19 on Business and Trade Statistics*. This note focuses on the topic of “Ensuring continuity”. It highlights some of the key challenges faced by National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in ensuring the continuity of the statistical programmes on business and trade statistics and meeting new user requirements. It concludes with some key questions for discussions.

International and regional organizations have made considerable efforts to provide countries with opportunities to share their experiences, and to provide countries with guidance on how to deal with specific operational issues. This note brings together some of the findings from the COVID-19 repositories established by these organizations<sup>1</sup>.

### **Ensuring continuity**

A major challenge posed by COVID-19 for NSOs is ensuring the continuity of the statistical programmes and meeting new user requirements. The challenges are not only operational - in a new working environment where staff have to work remotely, but also programmatic and strategic regarding, for example, continuing statistical programs through the use of traditional sources, the identification of new data sources as well as the establishment of a targeted communication strategy with the users and policy makers.

In the business and trade statistics programmes, the continuity of the production of short-term statistics is particularly affected by COVID-19: it is difficult to conduct surveys, there may be a high non-response rate, and overall the population of active businesses is structurally different due

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of these efforts are the following:

- Eurostat - COVID-19: Support for statisticians <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/metadata/covid-19-support-for-statisticians>
- IMF - Special Series on COVID-19 <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/SPROLLs/covid19-special-notes>
- ILO - COVID-19 and labour statistics <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/covid-19/>
- OECD - COVID-19 Discussion Forum <https://community.oecd.org/community/official-stats-workspace-covid19>
- UNSD - Statistics • COVID-19 response <https://covid-19-response.unstatshub.org/>
- UNSD - COVID-19 Data Hub <https://covid-19-data.unstatshub.org/>
- UNSD and the World Bank - Global COVID-19 survey of National Statistical Offices <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/covid19-response/covid19-nso-survey-report.pdf>
- UN ECE - COVID-19 and official statistics <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/COV/Home>
- UN ESCAP- COVID-19 Updates and resources <https://www.unescap.org/covid19>

to the lock-down measures implemented by many countries. Typical seasonal adjustment to time series and imputation methods may not be applicable as such.

This note is organized around three main themes as follows:

- continuity of operations and staffing issues
- continuity of data collection and compilation of business and trade statistics
- communication with businesses reporting data and users of data.

At the end of the note, an initial set of questions are formulated for discussion to guide the discussion for this segment of the meeting.

### **Continuity of operations and staffing issues**

- Various countries put in place lock-down measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. This has meant that NSOs had to quickly put in place plans for new working arrangements.
- Telecommuting arrangements require that staff have computer and internet equipment at home and appropriate software and files are in place to support data compilation and file sharing. NSOs may identify essential staff that need to be in place to guarantee essential operations.
- Data security and secure access to data is particularly important: protocols must be developed to ensure data remain secure even when accessing it remotely, and confidentiality is not at risk.
- IT and network capacity need to be monitored and perhaps use be prioritized for certain data releases and to essential staff or times of day.
- Establishment of channels for regular communication among staff
- Development of protocols for the remote approval and dissemination of data releases.
- Alternative data collection methods to be developed using Computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI)/ Computer Aided Web Interviewing (CAWI)

### **Impacts on data collection and compilation of business and trade statistics**

- Lack or reduced response to surveys. As many non-essential businesses had to temporarily close or substantially reduce and change their business operations, they may not be able to provide exact information such as their sales, production, and employment. In addition, in many countries, enforcement rules on business surveys were relaxed.
- Existing procedures for non-response correction or imputation might not be valid under these conditions as the composition of non-response might be very different in this period. Companies might be (temporarily) out of business and the questionnaires may not seem to apply to them.

- Design and implement a non-response survey or conduct desk research on non-respondents. Similarly, identify which economic activities are considered non-essential and for which periods reasonable estimates can be provided.
- Design and implement alternative data collection methodologies. For example, efforts in CATI/CAWI can be increased with a simplified questionnaire to lower the burden.
- Best practices for the business surveys, as well as for alternative sourcing such as web scraping and machine learning.
- Evaluation of administrative data sources - whether they are affected by the relaxation of administrative requirements, for example, to provide extensions for submission of key administrative tax reports.
- User demand for specific supply chain information on essential products may require the issuance of specific guidance by international organizations. The compilation of international merchandise trade statistics which is heavily based on custom reports seemed to be less affected by COVID-19: NSOs were in general able to collect and disseminate monthly data on international merchandise trade statistics. In addition, efforts were made by the World Customs Organization (WCO) to monitor the supply chains of medical supplies. WCO issued a non-exhaustive list of medical supplies according to HS codes that should be particularly facilitated during the COVID-19 crisis, by identifying the following group of products: COVID-19 Test kits/ Instruments and apparatus used in Diagnostic Test; Protective garments and the like; Thermometers; Disinfectants/Sterilization products; Other medical devices such as Computed tomography (CT) scanners; and Medical Consumables. This is a clear example of how the existing classifications and compilation methods can be adjusted to quickly respond to a clear policy need.

### **Communication with businesses reporting data and users of data**

- Communication with businesses proved very important to understand their ability to respond to data collections and develop alternative data collection methods. It is critical to differentiate these impediments to reporting to statistical inquiries and the various data solutions broadly to be differentiated between large, medium, small and micro enterprises. Where appropriate, administrative sources should be explored, and data sharing arrangements developed or accelerated to maintain an adequate representation of the business population.
- Communication with the users is essential during periods of crisis. It ensures relevance, transparency, trust and credibility of the information provided. Communication with data users is key to understand the user's needs and therefore more adeptly respond to them. At the same time, communication is also key in disseminating the data to the users, explaining compilation methods and data sources as well as shortcomings of the data, and ensuring the correct interpretation of the data.
- Routine dissemination of official statistics will be impacted. Compilers of official statistics will need to take extra steps to ensure that user confidence in official statistics is not

affected. Users need to be assured that every effort has been made to compile reliable statistics based on the available data, and that any data gaps have been addressed using appropriate and accepted methodologies that ensure the compilation of reliable data. Complete transparency is critical at all times, but especially during this challenging period.

- Every possible means should be exploited to conduct outreach to users, including social media, press releases, special websites, data hubs, email, phone calls, and virtual meetings, such as webinars. Extra effort should be made to respond to user queries and requests quickly.

### **Questions for discussion**

- What are the main issues that NSOs have faced to ensure the continuity of their programmes in business and trade statistics?
- What are the lessons learned in maintaining the statistical operations to ensure the resilience of the business and trade statistics programmes?
- What new user demands could be met with existing data collection and reporting programmes in business and trade statistics?
- How can international and regional organizations help NSOs to put in place resilient and agile systems for business and trade statistics that ensure continuity of operations during emergency situations such as that caused by COVID-19?
- What is the role of SBR on the continuity of the planned programmes in business and trade statistics.? And if there are any improvement in the role of SBR to be more response to support of the continuity of the planned programmes?