

Discussion Note on Pivot Post-COVID

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 “Pivot Post-COVID”. It highlights some of the changes that were put in place by NSOs that can prove useful in the modernization of the programmes of business and trade statistics beyond the health crisis posed by COVID-19.

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 organizations¹.

Pivot Post-COVID

NSOs had to put in place a number of organizational and programmatic changes for business and trade statistics in order to respond adopt new methods and data sources to continue their statistical production processes and rapidly address new policy demand during the pandemic. As we move post-COVID-19, there may be a need to consider whether the new working and statistical production arrangements make the statistical system more resilient. Moreover, it has to be considered how the new-found ways can be sustained like the new data solutions, new partnerships, and new data solutions in providing an more integrated and multidimensional statistical measurement of business and trade statistics of the economy, the wellbeing of citizens and the environment.

¹ 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>

This note addresses changes in methods, use of data, and institutional arrangements that could be sustained to increase the resilience of the business and trade statistics programmes and enhance the responsiveness to new user requirements as we transition post-COVID-19 to a new normal. These changes can be arranged by the following thematic areas:

Working arrangements. NSOs had to quickly adapt to new working arrangements to ensure the safety of the staff during the pandemic. This may provide an opportunity to revisit the traditional working methods and evaluate the productivity and efficiency of staff. Existing collections could be modified with additional questions and existing methods of imputations for missing data could be adopted.

Data solutions. NSOs had to adopt innovative solutions to provide real-time data relevant to the users by looking into new data sources, developing methods to integrate data from different sources, ensuring the quality of the data, and informing the users on the shortcomings of the data and building partnership with other data providers. Data solutions which applied micro data linking techniques using integrated business, trade and population registers and administrative data sources provided timely and granular responses meeting the new data demands. These data solutions could be put in place on a more permanent basis in order to improve the timeliness, frequency and granularity of business and trade statistics.

Responding to new users' needs. NSOs demonstrated their ability to engage with the users and policy makers during the pandemic and adapt to new users' requirements for timelier, more frequent, and more granular information in a combination of macroeconomic, sectoral and microeconomic perspectives. In particular, there was/is a considerable need for understanding the supply chain relationships by economic industries (such as retail, tourism, aeronautics) and the potential contagion of the non-financial corporate and SME sector (i.e. real sector) on the household, government and financial sector.

Accessibility: This topic is twofold. The first refers to some regulatory frameworks to access external registers (public and private) that are useful to address some critical issues such as those that arise in a negative event (like the COVID-19). The second relates to how NSOs can continue to offer services such as microdata access through secure environments (like data science campuses).

Communication. COVID-19 underscored the importance of communication to understand users' needs, respond to them and disseminate the statistics to the users. Ensuring all users have access to trusted data is fundamental especially during periods of crisis.

Role of NSOs. In a crisis more than in any other time, NSOs need to reach beyond their traditional mandate as data producers and engage in data stewardship as data service provider across the data ecosystem. Data stewardship will become particularly pivotal in the long-term, since the observed shocks might spill over to the whole data ecosystem and cause chronic disruptions along the data value chain. Delays in production and dissemination of economic statistics might result in poorly fitted policy responses to economic shocks in the aftermath of the crisis, causing collateral damage to the economy with potential backlashes on government funding.

Partnerships. Strengthening mechanisms for collaboration and coordination among relevant institutions and between public and private institutions can increase the ability of the statistical system to develop relevant data. NSOs are in a unique position within the statistical system as they can facilitate the coordination among institutions and develop meaningful partnerships for statistics.

Institutional Arrangements: It is important to establish the mechanisms necessary to create partnerships and develop Memorandums of Understanding between different agencies and the private sector to take advantage of sources that can feed the traditional statistical system. Also important is to consider that the domains of business and trade statistics are closely interlinked for which a better integrated working arrangements should be ensured through joint work programs possible and progressively under a common mandate and governance.

Questions for discussion:

- What are the specific elements of the main thematic areas elaborated in this note to be implemented on a permanent basis for the business and trade statistics programmes?
- Is there a need to initiate a detailed analysis of the lessons learned from the COVID 19 initiatives to provide insights for the future strategic directions of the business and trade statistics programme?
- How can the UNCEBTS foster a more integrated and multidimensional approach to statistics that combines measurements of the economy, wellbeing of citizens and environment to ensure that no one is left behind?
- The UNCEBTS provides a unique forum for business and trade statisticians to discuss and share experience, develop guidance and mobilize efforts. Based on this crisis, is there an impact on the work programme of the UNCEBTS to advance and better integrate the area of business and trade statistics?