

Monitoring the State of Statistical Operations under the COVID-19 Pandemic

December 2020

Highlights from the third round of a global COVID-19 survey
of National Statistical Offices (NSOs)

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Key Messages

- Most of the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) have at least partially reopened since the initial closure in March-April. Only 2 percent of the NSOs were still closed to all staff as of October 2020.
- Globally, about a quarter of NSOs had no restrictions to face-to-face data collection, but there were large regional differences.
- Seventy-three percent of NSOs had a Population and Housing Census planned in 2020 or 2021 before the pandemic hit. In the low and lower-middle income group, 68 percent of the NSOs that were planning a census had to postpone it.
- Half of NSOs have developed new written fieldwork protocols for face-to-face interviews, while most of the remaining NSOs would consider it useful to have this type of guidelines for their survey operations.
- NSOs remained heavily involved in tracking the spread and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- NSOs are engaging in new partnerships to bridge the data gaps created by the pandemic. The main challenge in establishing new partnerships with public or private sector partners has been in formalizing the institutional collaborative arrangements.
- Many NSOs have taken on a data stewardship role, coordinating with government or national agencies, especially on data quality and data sharing agreements.
- The use of geospatial information and technologies has not been mainstreamed yet in COVID-19 related data collection in most NSOs, with the majority of NSOs in low and lower-middle countries expressing clear needs to build analytical capacity and infrastructure in this area.

Overview

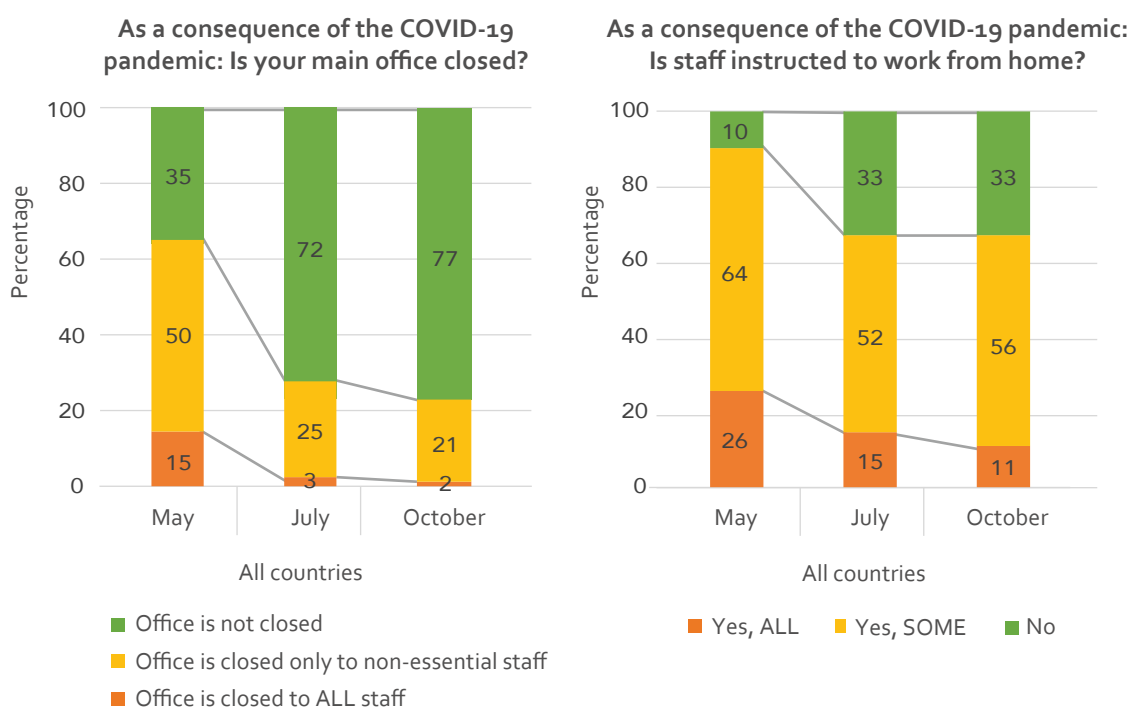
This report presents the results of the third round of a global survey on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of National Statistical Offices (NSOs).¹ The first round conducted in May 2020 focused on shedding light on office closures and the disruptions to data collection as a consequence of the pandemic. The second round, rolled out in July 2020, looked at the extent to which restrictions and disruptions had receded or become more widespread. The third round, carried out in October 2020, is focused on how NSOs have adapted to the new reality by implementing new surveys, developing new protocols for face-to-face data collection, and by building new partnerships. The questionnaire also contained questions on Population Census operations and economic statistics, proposed by the International Committee on Census Coordination (ICCC) and the Friend of the Chair (FoC) Group on Economic Statistics, respectively.

¹ Information and documentation on all rounds is available via the [UN Statistical Division](#) and [World Bank](#) websites.

Survey coverage and response rate

A total of 195 NSOs were invited to participate in the first three rounds of this web-based survey. Of these, 122 NSOs (63 percent) responded to the first round that took place in May. For the second round (July), 112 NSOs (57 percent) responded. Some 125 NSOs (64 percent) participated in the third round, completed in October. The survey participation in the third round in each region was as follows: 7 NSOs in Central and Southern Asia (50 percent), 11 in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (69 percent), 34 in Europe and Northern America (76 percent), 18 in Latin America and the Caribbean (53 percent), 18 in Northern Africa and Western Asia (75 percent), 5 in Oceania (36 percent), and 32 in Sub-Saharan Africa (67 percent). Overall, 149 NSOs (76 percent) participated in at least one round of the survey.

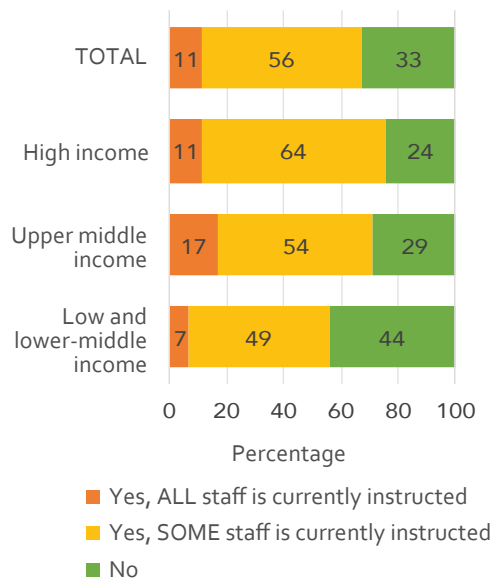
Most offices have reopened for at least some of their staff. Only 2 percent of the NSOs were still closed to all staff as of October 2020



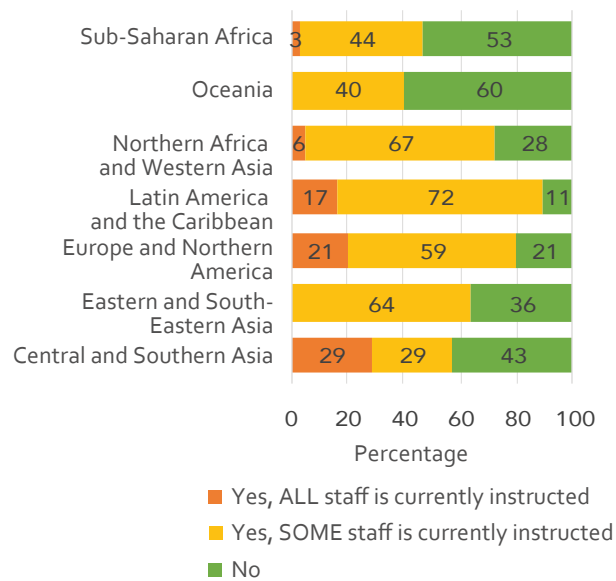
Globally, National Statistical Offices (NSOs) continued to gradually reopen their main offices, with 77 percent of NSO main offices open as of October this year, up from 72 percent in July. This was in sharp contrast with the situation in May, when only 35 percent of NSO had their main offices open.

Despite the reopening, remote work continues to be the norm. Two thirds of NSOs reported that at least some staff members continued to work from home. Globally, there was little change between July and October regarding the prevalence of work from home, which 90 percent of NSOs had relied on in May. However, work from home was less common among NSOs in low and lower-middle income countries. In October, only 56 percent of survey respondents in this group reported that at least some of their staff were instructed to work from home, as opposed to 71 percent of NSOs in middle income countries and 75 percent of NSOs in high income countries.

October 2020: As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic: Is staff instructed to work from home?



October 2020: As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic: Is staff instructed to work from home?

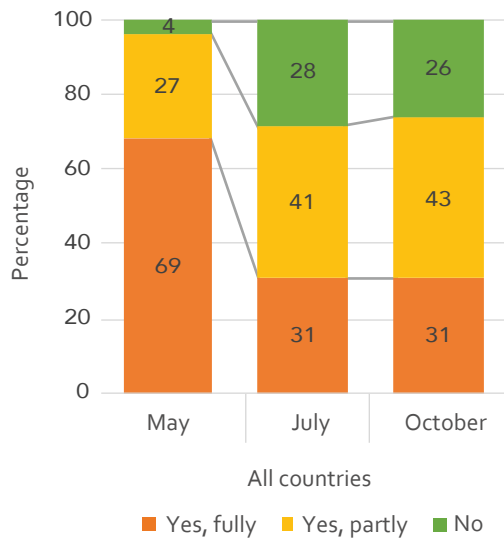


Moreover, there were differences between regions in the prevalence of working from home. Rates were highest in Latin America and the Caribbean and in Europe and Northern America where respectively 89 percent and 79 percent of NSOs reported that at least some staff were working from home. While the NSOs in these regions in general faced less significant connectivity and IT infrastructure issues, they also included countries where some of the most serious global hotspots of the COVID-19 pandemic were located in October. Conversely, less than half of NSOs in Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa reported that their staff were working from home in October. Lastly, it was noteworthy that almost 1 in every 3 NSOs in Central and Southern Asia were still instructing *all* staff to work from home.

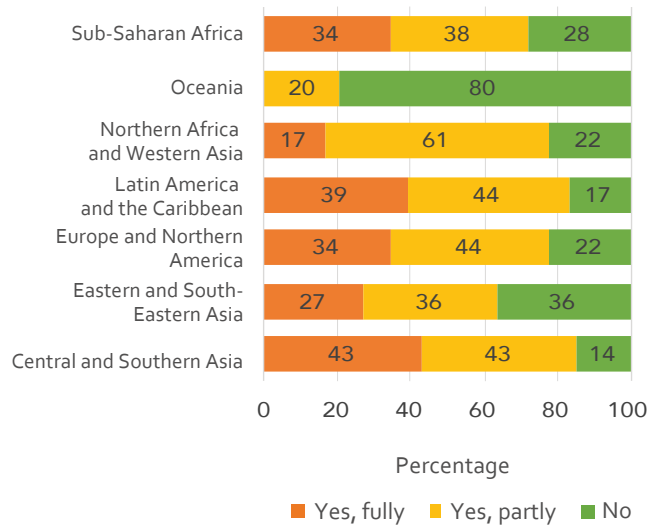
While 26 percent of the NSOs globally continued with face-to-face data collection, there were wide gaps between regions

Almost three quarters of NSOs had fully or partly halted face-to-face data collection in October, continuing at a similar level as in July. While there were no marked differences by income group, there were some regional differences: for instance, 4 of the 5 countries surveyed in Oceania were conducting face-to-face data collection operations in October, compared to only 14 percent of NSOs in Central and Southern Asia and 17 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, substantial uncertainty remained about when face-to-face data collection could be resumed, with less than half of NSOs able to provide a clear timeline. This was similar to the situation observed in July. While almost three quarters of NSOs in high income countries considered it hard to say when face-to-face data collection would resume, over 60 percent of NSOs in low and lower-middle income countries expected to resume this type of data collection operation in 6 months or less.

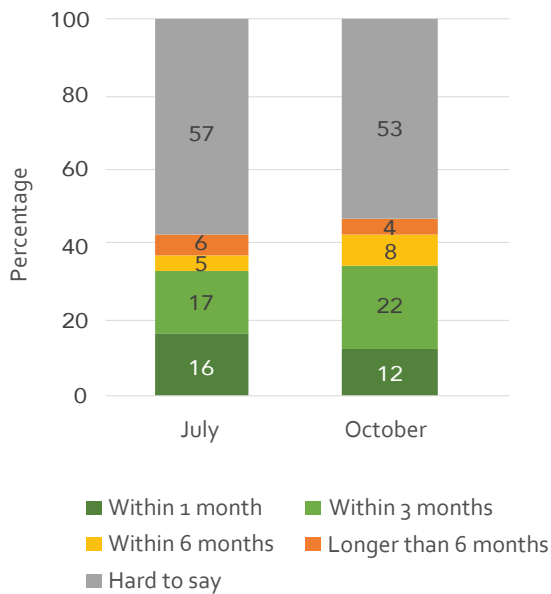
As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic: Stopped face-to-face data collection



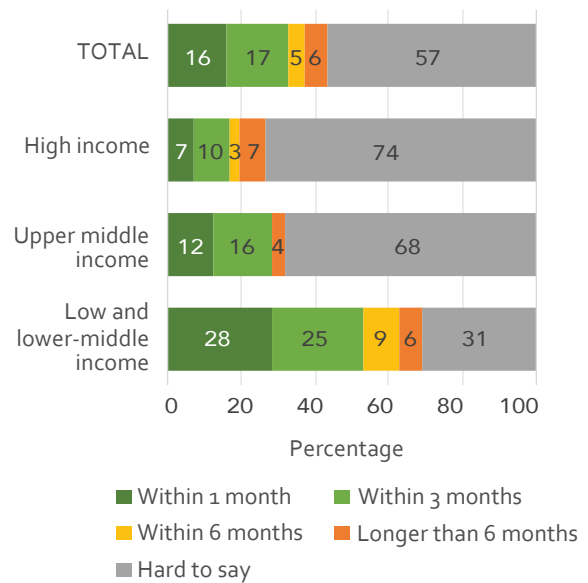
October 2020: Is field data collection involving face-to-face interviews currently fully or partly halted?



When do you expect to be able to resume face-to-face interviews in full?

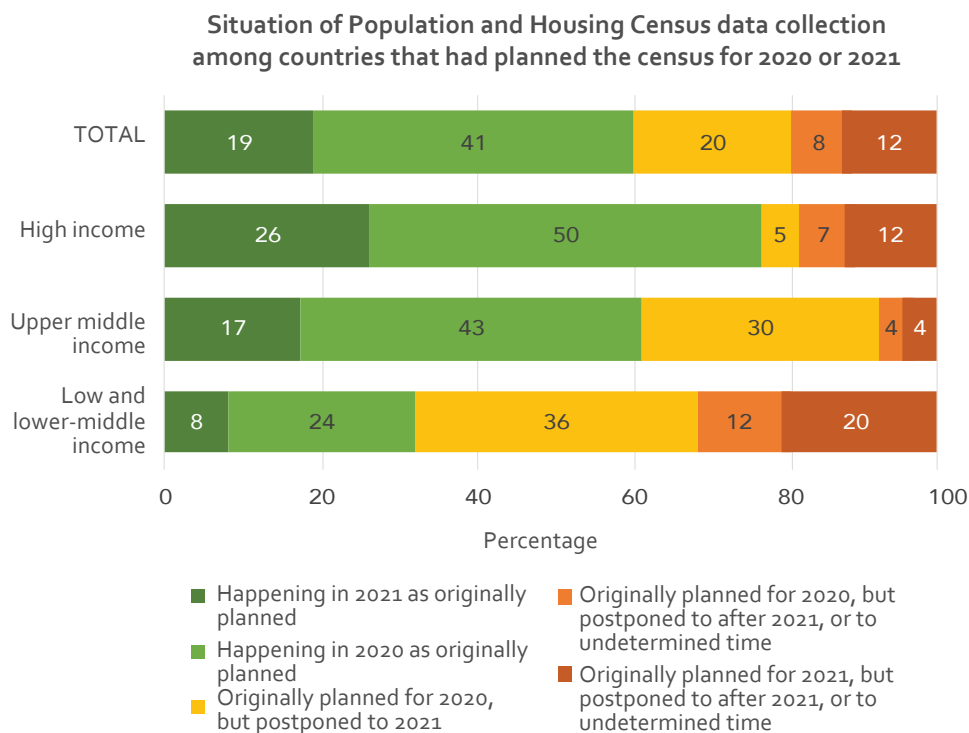


October 2020: When do you expect to be able to resume face-to-face interviews in full?



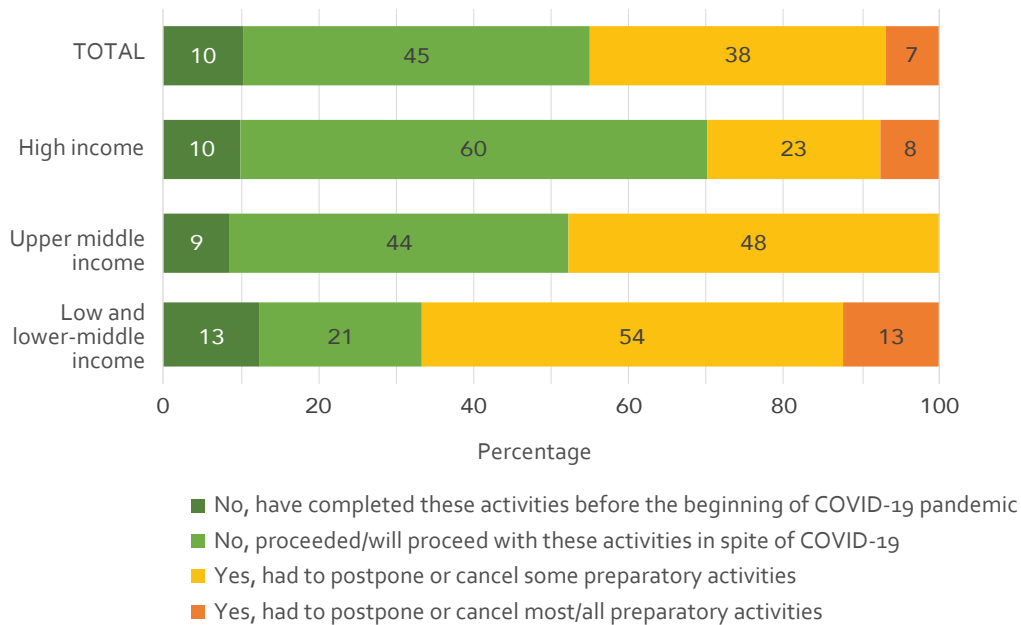
Seventy-three percent of the NSOs had a Population and Housing Census planned for 2020 or 2021 before the pandemic hit. Among them, 40 percent had to postpone the census; in low and lower-middle income countries the percentage was as high as 68 percent.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also led to substantial disruptions in the implementation of Population and Housing Censuses. Almost three-quarters of NSOs that responded to the survey (90 countries) were planning on conducting a Population and Housing Census in 2020 or 2021 prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. As challenges to face-to-face data collection persisted, 40 percent of them indicated that they had to postpone data collection operations. The resulting delays were substantial, with half of NSOs with plans for a census in 2020 or 2021 postponing data collection to after 2021 or to an undetermined future date. Disruptions were particularly widespread among the group of low and lower-middle income countries, where 68 percent had to postpone the census, roughly half of which to after 2021. Even among the 17 NSOs that reported their population and housing census was to take place in 2020 as planned, only 70 percent had already started enumeration as of October. Among low and lower-middle income countries, this figure was 50 percent (results not shown).



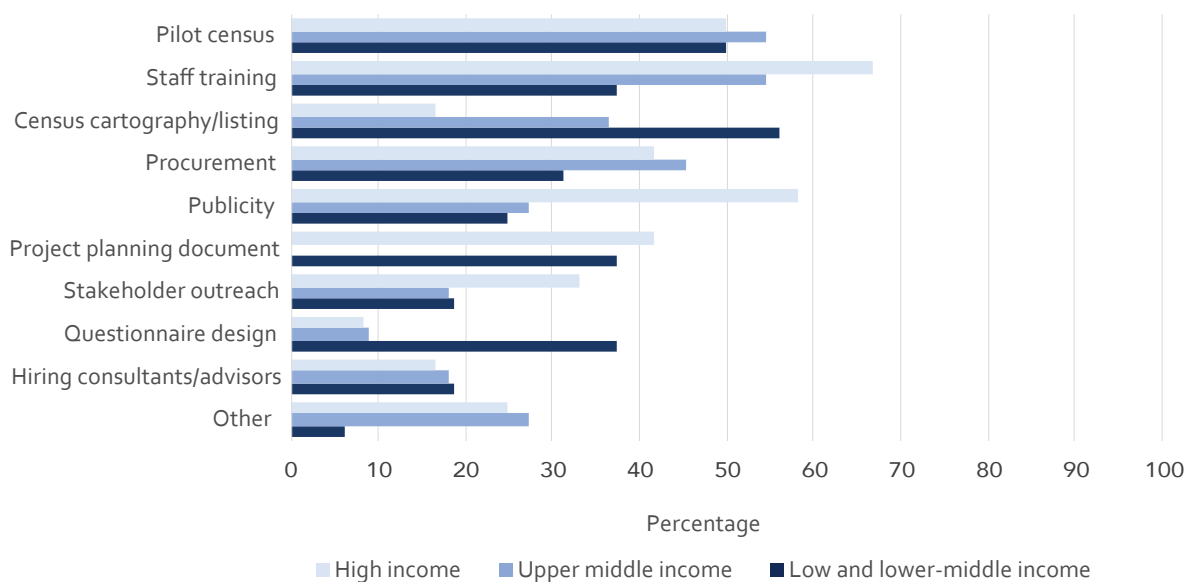
Delays were also reflected in the progress of preparatory activities. Some countries had been able to compensate for the initial delays in their census preparatory activities, but many were still struggling to get activities off the ground. In October 2020, out of the 90 NSOs with plans for a census in 2020 or 2021, 45 percent indicated that they had to postpone some or all of the preparatory activities, down from 55 percent in May 2020. Two thirds of low and lower-middle income countries, however, still reported disruptions to preparatory activities in October.

If you were planning to conduct a Population and Housing Census in 2020 or 2021, did you have to stop or postpone preparatory activities the due to COVID-19 pandemic?

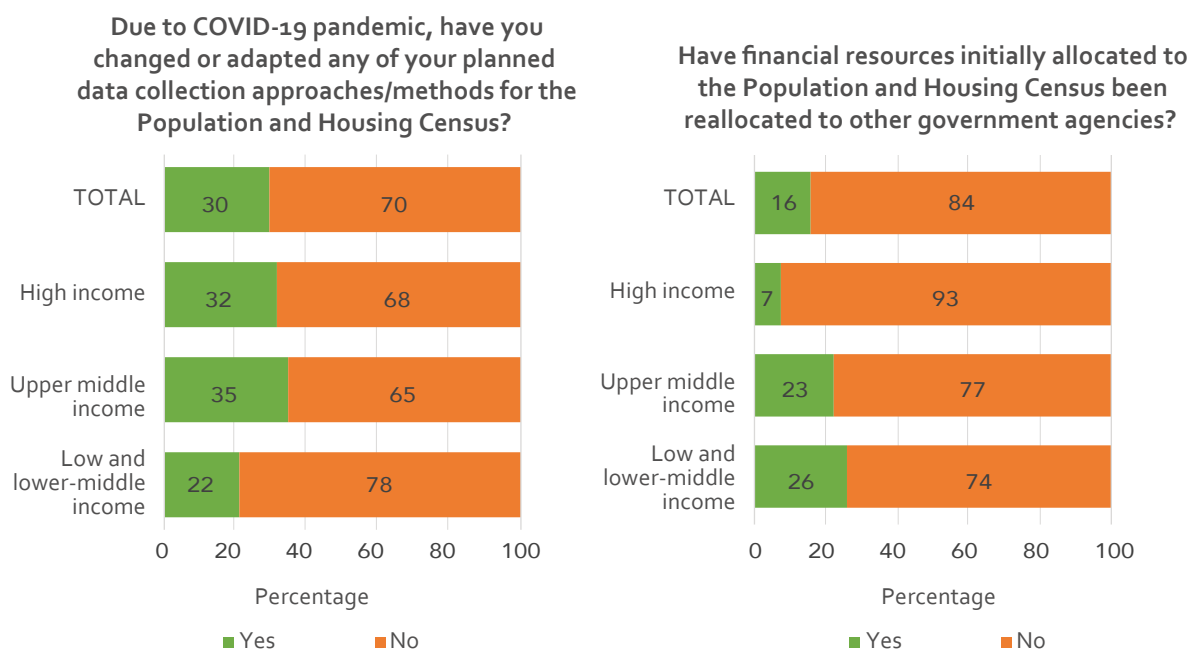


While approximately half of countries in all income groups reported having postponed pilot census exercises, other preparatory activities seemed to be affected differently across these groups: staff training, publicity and stakeholder outreach have been relatively more affected in high income countries than in low and lower-middle income countries. The opposite was observed for the preparation of census cartography and questionnaire design, where delays have been more prevalent among low and lower-middle income countries.

Which of the following preparatory activities of the Population and Housing Census have been postponed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

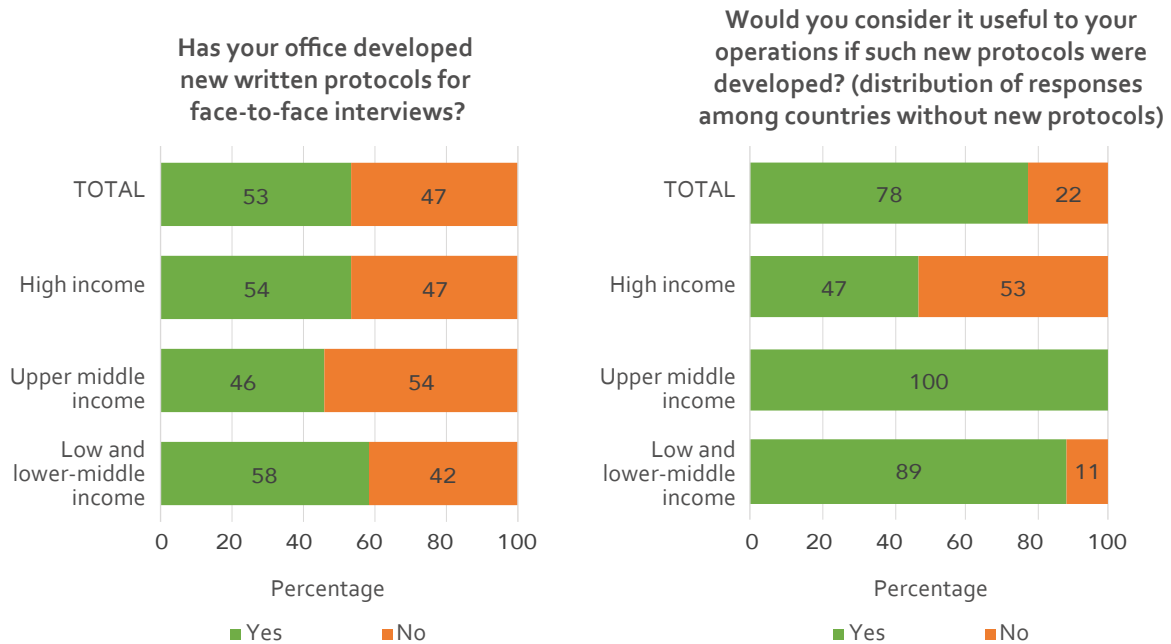


In responding to the COVID-19 crisis, around 3 in 10 NSOs have adapted their data collection approaches and methods for the population and housing census. While globally it was uncommon that financial resources were reallocated from the census to other government activities (only 16 percent of NSOs), this was markedly more common among NSOs in low and lower-middle income countries (26 percent), thus highlighting the risk of a potential funding gap in future censuses.

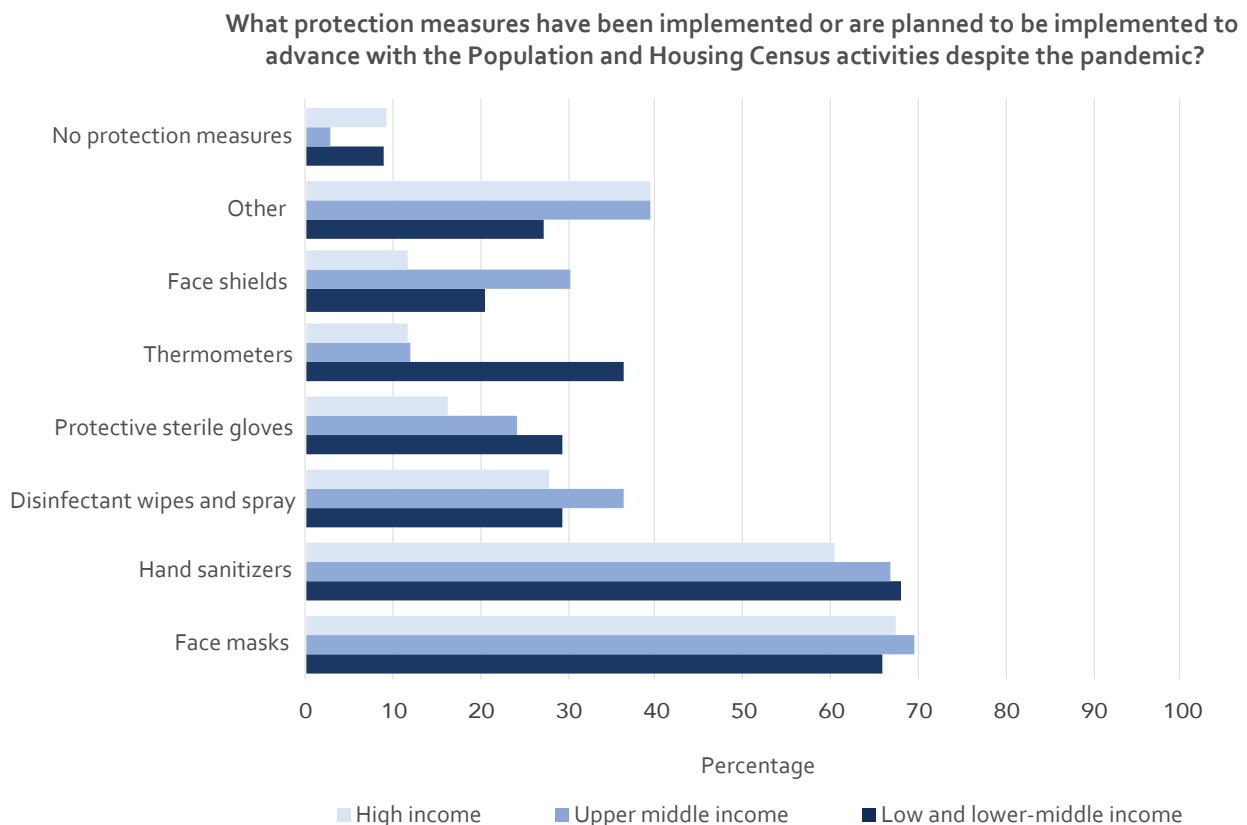


Half of NSOs have developed new fieldwork protocols for face-to-face interviews

The pandemic has brought new challenges for NSOs to be able to safely conduct face-to-face interviews. However, **just over half of NSOs have developed new written fieldwork protocols** to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 among respondents and enumerators, such as procedures and guidelines for travelling, contacting respondents, conducting interviews, or practicing social distancing. Among those NSOs that had not developed such protocols, almost 8 in 10 considered it useful if such new protocols were developed, especially among low and middle-income countries. Furthermore, almost 4 in every 10 NSOs that have developed new COVID-19 fieldwork protocols, have already made them publicly available and another 43 percent is willing to share them (results not shown). This will facilitate sharing of experiences with those countries interested in following suit.

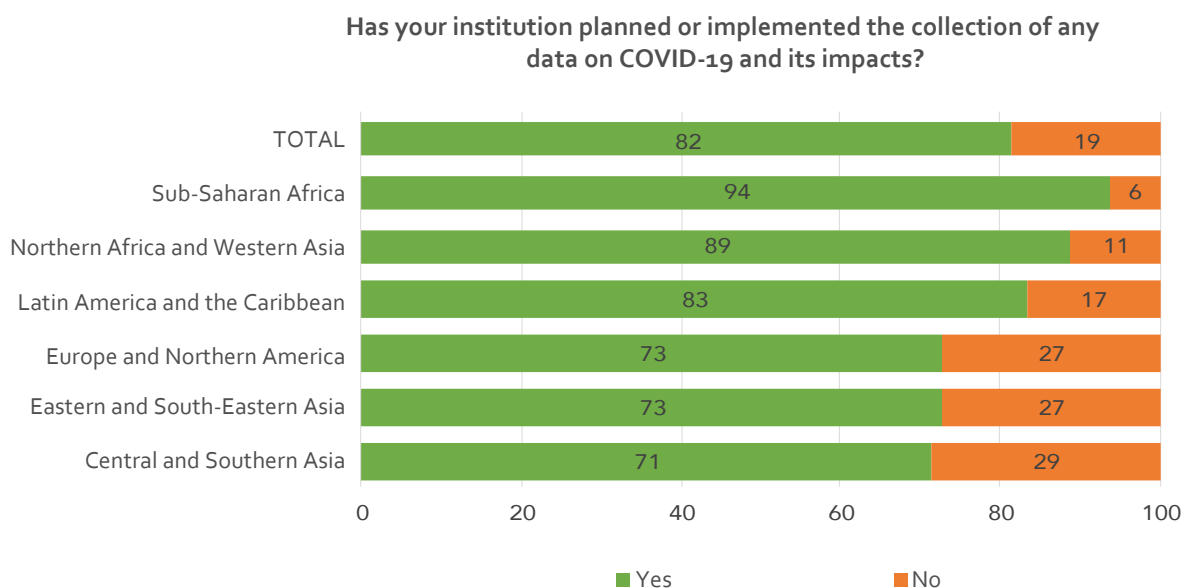


When asked about the type of protection measures that NSOs had implemented or were planning to implement to advance with the Population and Housing Census activities despite the pandemic, around two thirds reported the use of face masks and hand sanitizers. In addition, approximately one third of low and lower-middle income countries reported the use of thermometers as part of the protection measures for enumerators and respondents during face-to-face data collection.



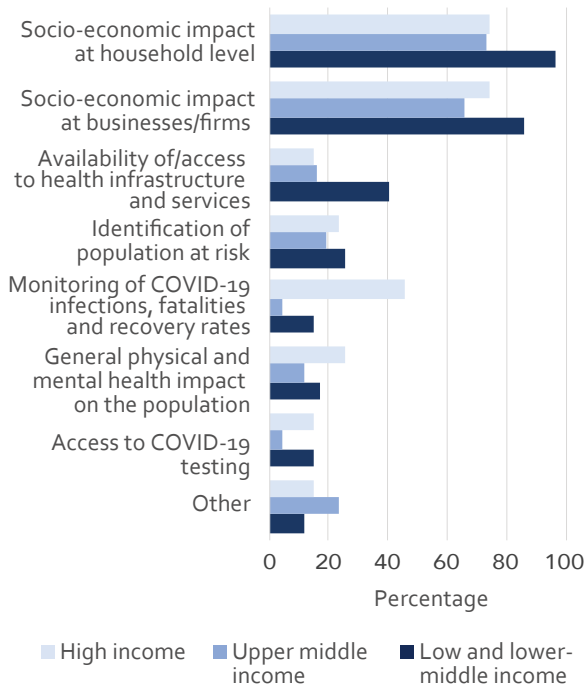
NSOs have been heavily involved in collecting data to track the spread and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

NSOs responded to the new data demands brought about by the pandemic. Among those interviewed, 82 percent were involved in collecting data on COVID-19 and its impacts. In particular, approximately 9 in 10 respondents from sub-Saharan Africa and in Northern and Western Asia indicated that their offices are planning or already implementing efforts to collect data on COVID-19 and its impacts. The collection of such COVID-19 related data by NSOs focused predominantly on measuring the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic on households (82 percent) and the impacts on businesses (76 percent). However, approximately 46 percent of NSOs in high income countries conducting COVID-19 data collection operations were monitoring infections, fatalities and recovery rates, while 40 percent of the NSOs in low and lower-middle income countries have measured the availability of, and access to, health infrastructure and services.

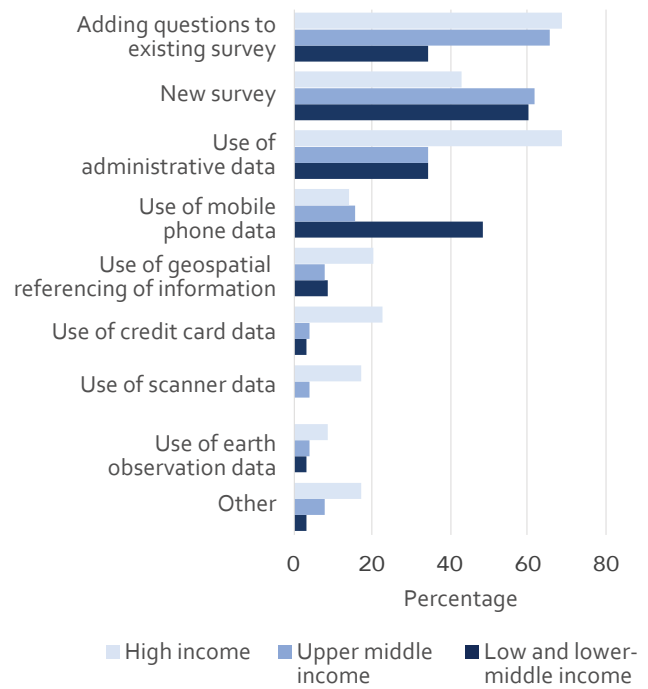


In terms of data sources and methods used by NSOs to collect information on the spread and impact of the pandemic, more than half of the NSOs that have planned to collect or collected data on COVID-19 have added questions to an existing survey or have created a new survey. This was roughly consistent with the findings of the first round of this survey of NSOs, conducted in May 2020 that found that 39 percent of individual survey programs had added a COVID-19 related question. Furthermore, 47 percent of NSOs collecting data on COVID-19 are using administrative data, with the use being particularly high among high income countries at 69 percent. High income countries also preferred the use of existing surveys, in contrast with low and lower-middle income countries that have often launched new surveys (60 percent) or used mobile phone data (49 percent).

What is the focus of the COVID-19 collection?



What are the data sources and methods used to collect information on COVID-19 and its impacts?

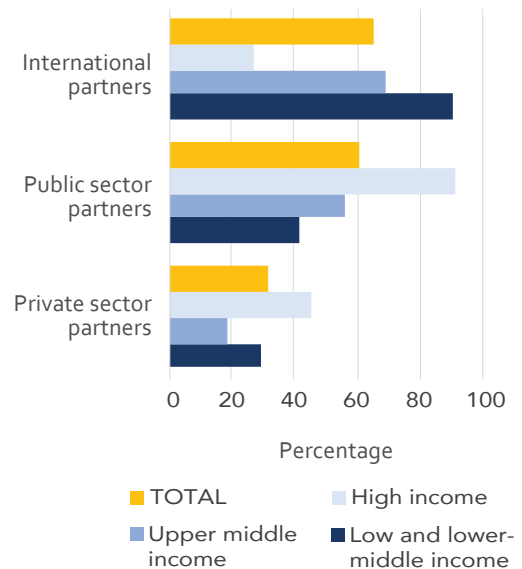


In addition, approximately 1 in every 5 high income countries used credit card or scanner data to obtain information on the spread and the impact of the disease. Over 7 in 10 NSOs that collected data on COVID-19 and its impacts relied on at least one partner to do so. This practice was nearly universal in low and lower-middle income countries, where 89 percent of NSOs produced these data with at least one partner, mainly with international partners. In high income countries, public sector partners were more prevalent.

Was the COVID-19 information produced by the NSO with any partners?

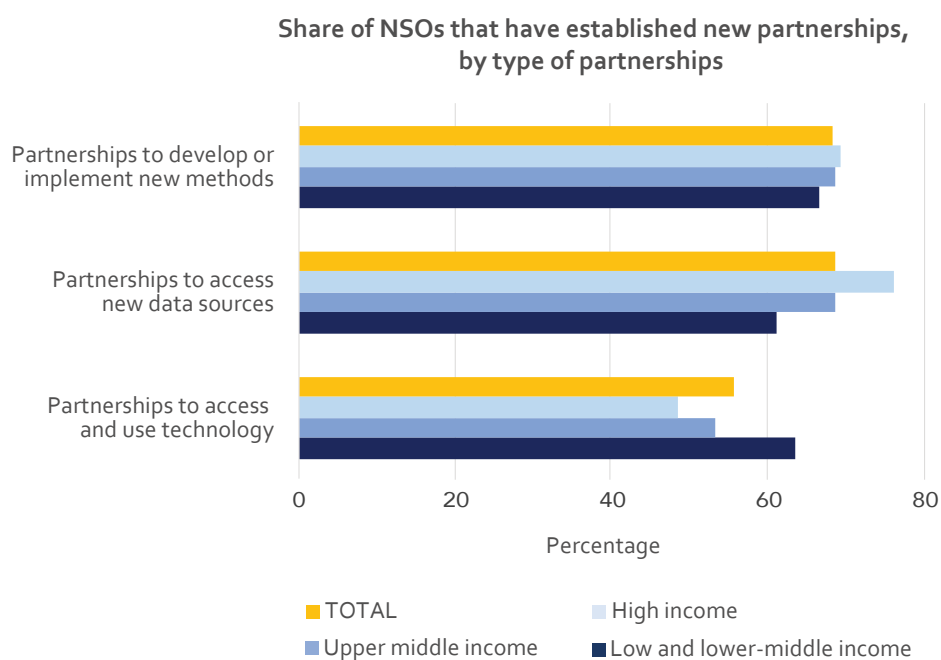


If yes, which partners was the information produced with?



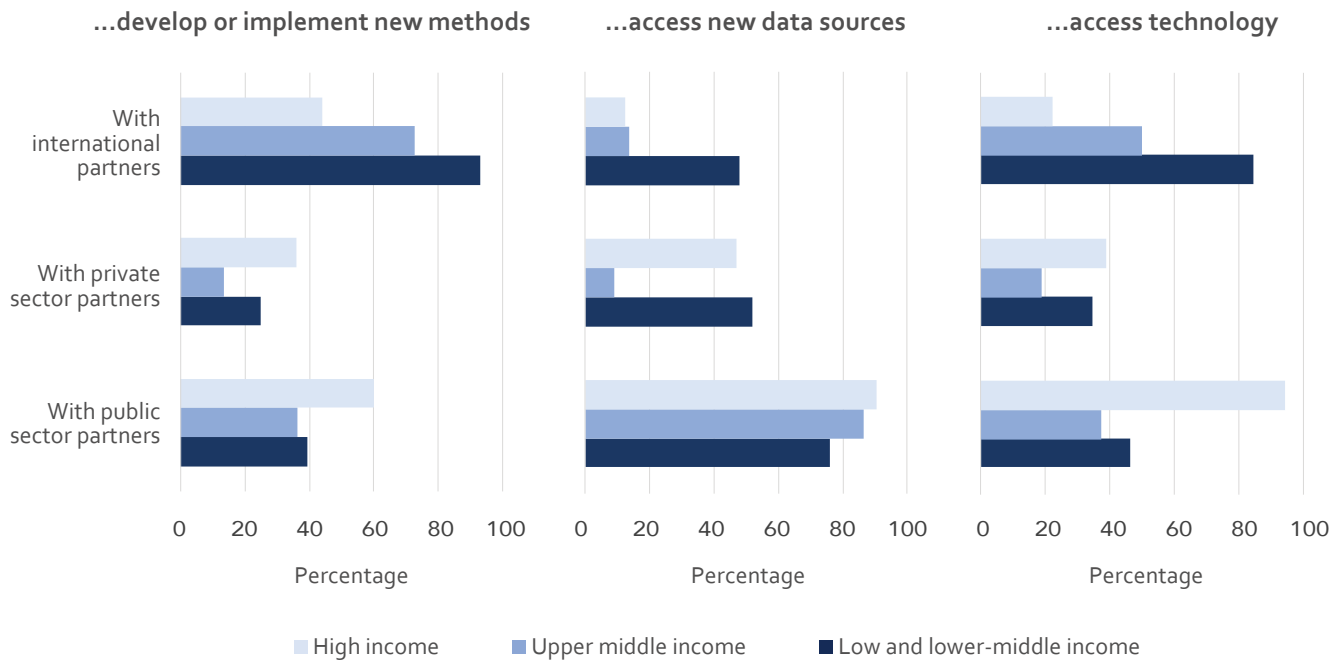
NSOs have established new partnerships to bridge data gaps created by the pandemic

A majority of NSOs reported having established new partnerships, networking arrangements and alliances more generally, in order to bridge the data gaps resulting from the pandemic and the disruption of regular statistical operations. The new partnerships were formed for different goals. These included accessing new data sources (69 percent), developing and implementing new methods for data production (68 percent), and improving access to and use of technology (56 percent). The most frequent types of partnerships varied across income groups. More specifically, 63 percent of NSOs from low and lower-income countries entered into new partnerships aimed to enhance access to, and use of, technology, as opposed to 49 percent of NSOs in high income countries doing the same. Conversely, 76 percent of NSOs in high income countries entered into new partnerships to access new data sources, while only 61 percent of NSOs in low and lower-middle income countries reported this kind of new partnership.



When it comes to technology and methods, low and lower-middle income countries built more networking arrangements and alliances with international partners than with public sector partners, while the opposite was true for high income countries. In general, however, access to new data sources relied more on public sector partnerships across all income groups.

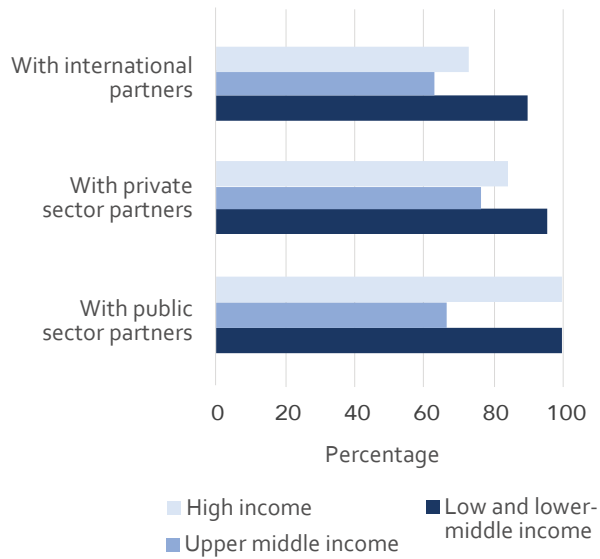
Has your NSO established new partnerships to bridge information gaps from the pandemic to...



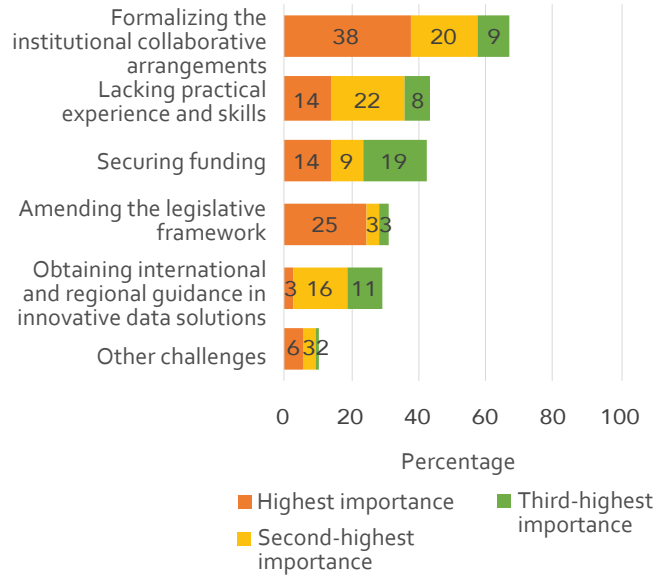
The main challenge in establishing new partnerships with public or private sector partners has been formalizing the institutional collaborative arrangements

All respondents from NSOs in both low and lower-middle income countries and high income countries, as well as two thirds of upper-middle income countries, indicated that they were facing challenges in establishing new partnerships with private sector entities during the pandemic. Although partnerships with international organizations were less frequently identified as challenging across all income groups, still 9 in 10 low and lower-middle income countries have had difficulties establishing this type of partnership. Approximately one-third of NSOs with a partnership with public sector partners recognized that the main challenge was formalizing the institutional collaborative framework. The share was about the same for NSOs with partnerships with the private sector, which were a smaller number. In the case of international partners, the main challenge highlighted was securing funding.

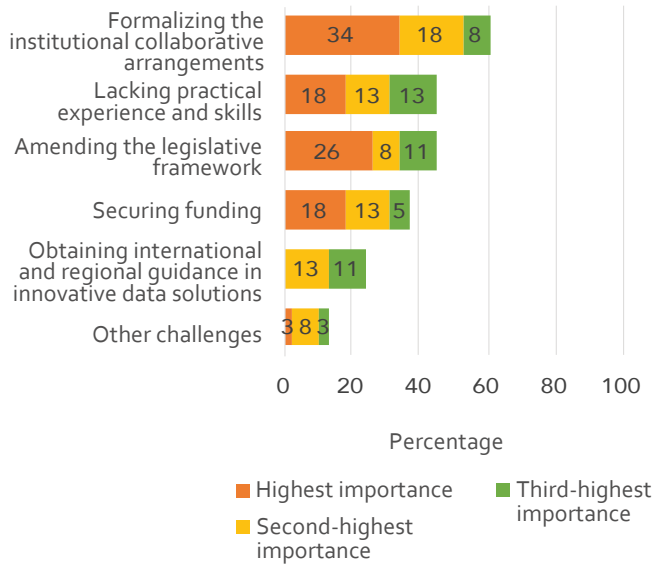
Do you face challenges in establishing new partnerships during the pandemic?



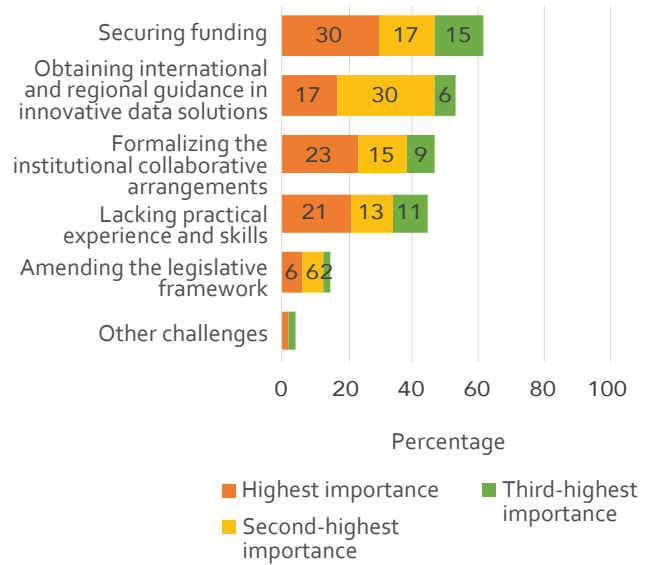
What are the main challenges in establishing new partnerships with public sector partners during the pandemic?



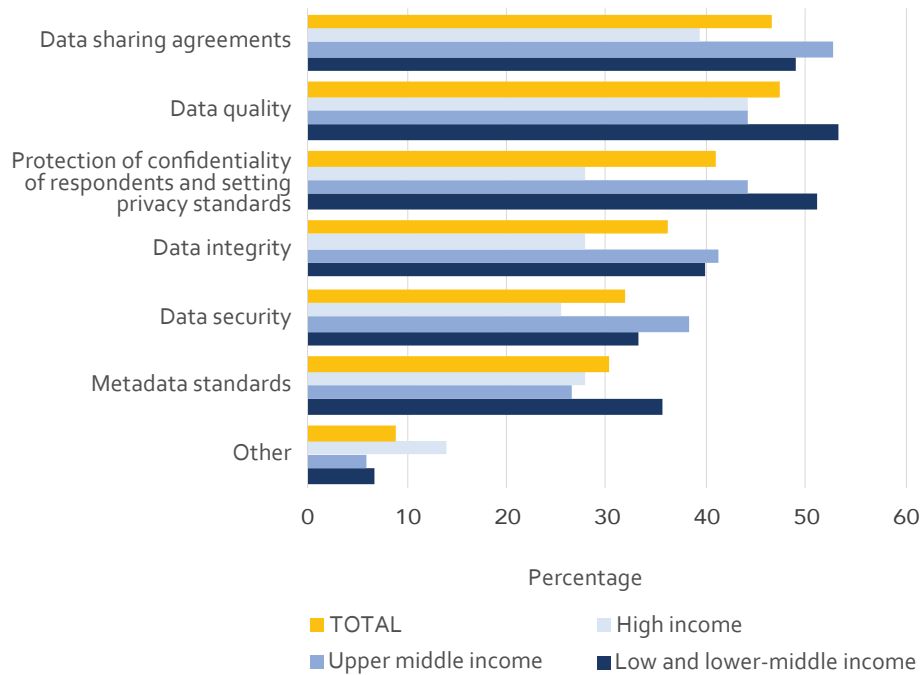
What are the main challenges in establishing new partnerships with private sector partners during the pandemic?



What are the main challenges in establishing new partnerships with international partners during the pandemic?



During the pandemic, has your office coordinated government work, with other national agencies, in any of the following areas?

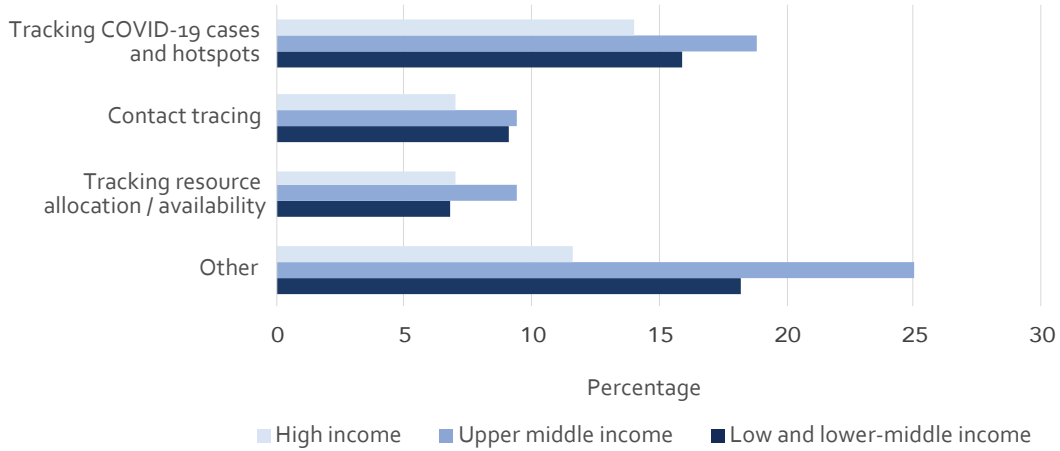


Most NSOs have coordinated with government or national agencies, especially on data quality and data sharing agreements. **NSOs’ data stewardship role has been particularly relevant** in ensuring that data sharing agreements were in place and data quality and data confidentiality were maintained in the production of data during the COVID-19 pandemic.

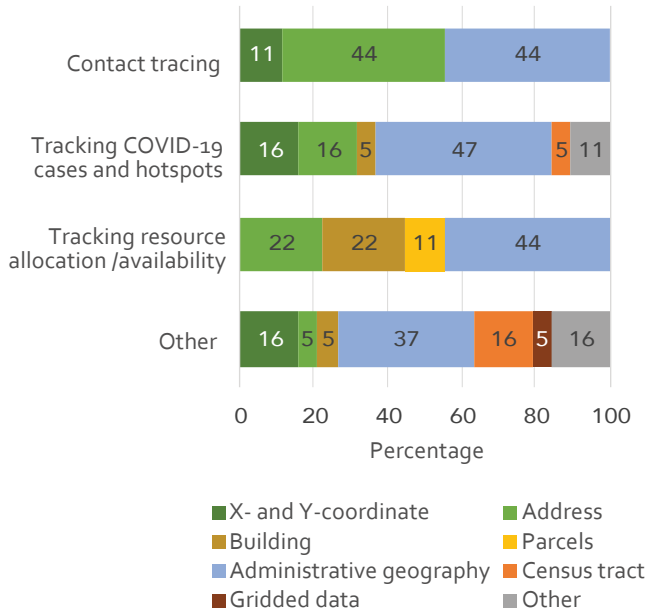
The use of geospatial information and technologies has not yet been mainstreamed in the production of COVID-19 related data

Overall, 16 percent of NSOs reported the use of geospatial information sources, methods and technologies to produce integrated statistical and geospatial information to track COVID-19 cases and hotspots. Only half as many countries used this type of information to track resource allocation and for contact tracing. However, upper middle-income countries, and to some extent also low and lower-middle income countries, seemed to use geospatial sources, methods and technologies more frequently than high income countries for COVID-19 tracking and contact tracing. This difference may have reflected the fact that NSOs in high income countries were able to access and use administrative data sources more easily (e.g., from health information systems), while other countries with less developed administrative data systems may have needed to rely more heavily on alternative sources of data and methods.

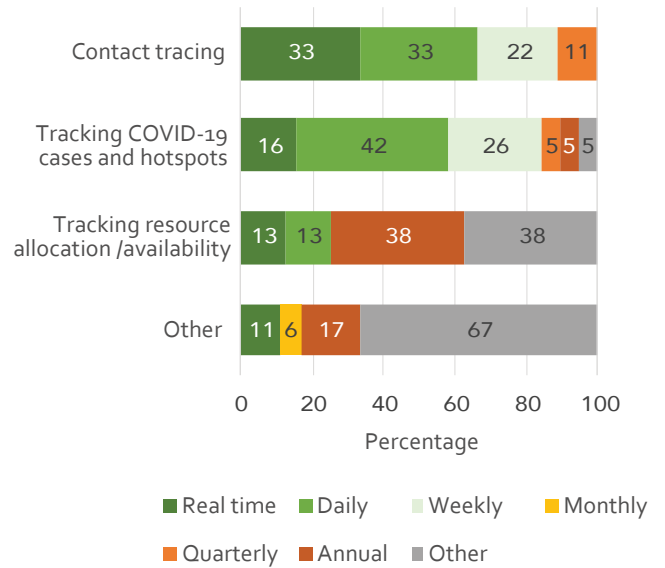
Is your office using geospatial information sources, methods and technologies to produce integrated statistical and geospatial information on any of the following topics?



At what level of disaggregation is your office using geospatial information sources, methods and technologies?

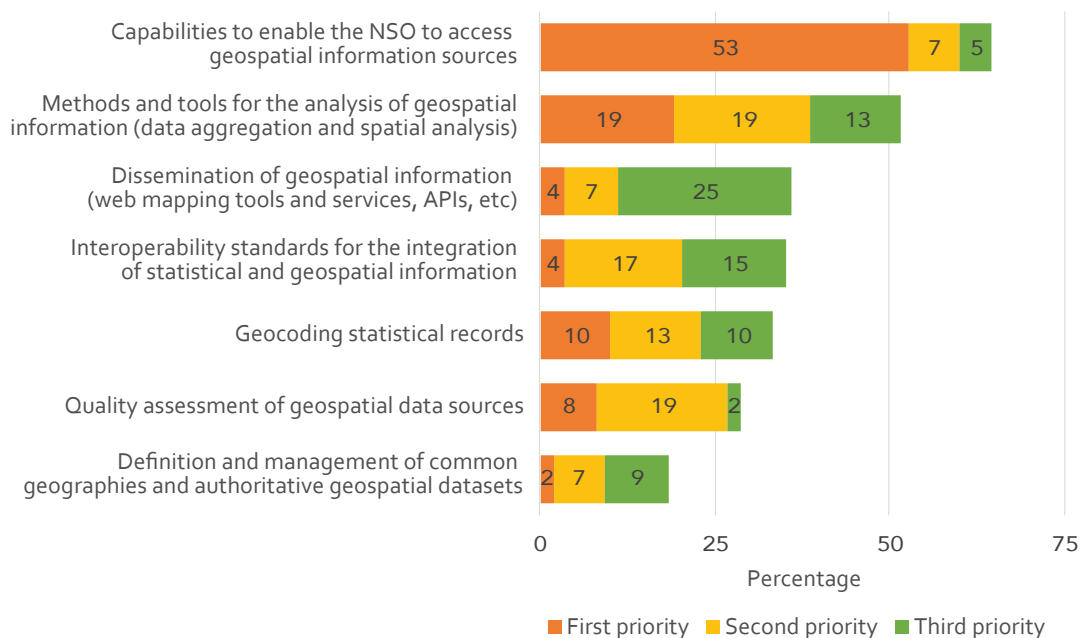


With what frequency is your office using geospatial information sources, methods and technologies to produce integrated statistical and geospatial information?



The use of geospatial information sources, methods and technologies for contact tracing and for tracking COVID-19 cases and hotspots usually relies on data that are high-frequency (e.g., weekly, daily or real-time) as well as highly disaggregated (e.g., at the level of coordinates, address, building or parcel). This contrasts with traditional statistical production approaches that rely on monthly, quarterly or annual data and on the use of administrative geographic areas. Consequently, enhancing NSO's capabilities to access geospatial information sources was the area most frequently identified by survey respondents for capacity building need. This was followed by the need to improve access to methods and tools for the analysis of geospatial information (e.g., for data aggregation and spatial analysis).

What are top capacity building needs around the use of geospatial data sources to inform the response to the COVID-19 crisis in your country?



The COVID-19 survey of NSOs - Round 3

- Mode: Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), programmed in Survey Solutions
- Launched on 23 September, questionnaire accepted through 15 October 2020
- Questionnaires sent to 195 NSOs, 125 responses received
- Sections: Monitoring of operations under COVID-19; Population and Housing Census; New information demand; Partnerships; Data stewardship; Use of geospatial information and technologies
- This work was carried out under the aegis of the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD), in partnership with World Bank's Development Data Group and in coordination with the UN Regional Commissions. The Team who worked on this round of the survey and the report was led by Francesca Perucci (UNSD) and Gero Carletto (World Bank), and consisted of Jonathan Gessendorfer and Luis G. González Morales (UNSD), and Ivette Maria Contreras Gonzalez, Yannick Markhof, Sergiy Radyakin, Zurab Sajaia, Philip Wollburg and Alberto Zezza (World Bank). Inputs to the design of the questionnaire were also provided by Olivier Dupriez (International Committee on Census Coordination, ICCC) and Ivo Havinga (Friend of the Chair Group on Economic Statistics, UN Statistical Commission).