

**Statistical Commission**  
**Fifty-first session**

**The COVID-19 pandemic:**  
**How the data and statistical community stepped up to the new challenges**

**High-Level Side Event**  
**24 February 2020, 8:00–9:30am**

This event provided an opportunity to discuss the main challenges faced by the data and statistical community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to take stock of lessons learned and emerging good practices from the perspective of national, regional and international statistical organizations as well as from private sector and civil society in order to move towards more agile and resilient data systems.

**Participants:**

Prof. Samuel Annim, *Government Statistician of Ghana*  
Mr. Anil Arora, *Chief Statistician of Canada*  
Ms. Ola Awad, *President of the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics*  
Ms. Shaida Badiie, *Managing Director of Open Data Watch*  
Mr. Oliver Chinganya, *Director of the African Centre for Statistics at UNECA*  
Sir Ian Diamond, *National Statistician of the United Kingdom*  
Ms. Mariana Kotzeva, *Director-General of Eurostat*  
Ms. Linda Peters, *Global Head of Official Statistics at Esri*  
Ms. Sandra Quijad, *Director of the National Institute of Statistics of Chile*  
Mr. Stefan Schweinfest, *Director of the United Nations Statistics Division*  
Ms. Jenna Slotin, *Senior Director of Policy, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data*

The event was divided into two sessions. The first session opened with a keynote presentation reflecting on how the global statistical system has responded to countries' demand for support and guidance during the pandemic, followed by presentations from the heads of National Statistical Offices from three different regions on their responses to the operational challenges and the new data demands resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. The second session focused on lessons learned from the response to the crisis, with a view to build resilient data and statistical systems.

**Session 1**

In his opening remarks, Mr. Schweinfest noted that COVID-19 experience over the last year has been a journey from disruption to solidarity. Highlighting that the crisis started in a context of an already increased demand for data, as the World was being called to mobilize towards the decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in the midst of a serious shortage of resources for

statistics, Mr. Schweinfest commended National Statistical Offices for responding with agility and solidarity, mobilizing long over-due investments in IT infrastructure, developing new protocols for data collection, adapting survey and census operations, accelerating the use of innovative data sources, engaging with users, and providing leadership to develop new concepts of data governance and stewardship. Mr. Schweinfest also reflected on the response by the global statistical system, developing guidance, setting up data and information resources, and establishing new partnerships for data innovation to support countries in their responses to the crisis. Mr. Schweinfest concluded by highlighting the enormous creative opportunity that the global data and statistical community has as it moves from a crisis-management mode to a new normal.

In his presentation, Sir Ian Diamond provided a number of examples of how the Office of National Statistics of the United Kingdom is contributing to tracking the evolution of Covid-19 infections, providing data to assess the effectiveness of government policy interventions, delivering faster indicators to monitor the impact of the crisis on the economy at the national and local levels, and identifying inequalities across population groups to inform targeted policy responses. Sir Ian Diamond highlighted also how wider research collaborations are enabling the Office of National Statistics to provide insights on the local social and economic impacts of the virus and associated inequalities, combining test and trace, outbreak indicators, and other local data to produce real-time updates, and facilitating the development of guidelines for decision makers at a range of geographies.

Prof. Samuel Annim reflected on how, at the outset of the pandemic, the Ghana Statistical Service developed an institutional strategy to respond to the new data demands. He noted the decision to build a COVID-19 dashboard to showcase not only data provided by the Ministry of Health, but adding value by augmenting those data with socio-economic information disaggregated at the regional or district level to help identify vulnerable population groups. Prof. Annim also described the use of call-detail records to assess the effectiveness of lock-down measures through population mobility analysis, and noted that the implementation of a telephone-based COVID-19 rapid surveys in partnership with a private-sector has opened new opportunities to complement future GSS data collection efforts. Similarly, Prof. Annim noted how the experience of developing a household and job tracker, a business tracker and a local economy tracker to measure resilience against the COVID-19 impacts can potentially contribute the computation of regional GDP moving forward. Prof. Annim concluded by stressing the importance of having the National Statistical Office be part of the government panel that develops policy interventions in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, in order to be able to provide relevant data on target beneficiaries.

In her presentation, Ms. Sandra Quijad indicated that the first challenge faced the National Institute of Statistics of Chile was to maintain the operational continuity of the regular statistical production processes and the timeliness of data dissemination. This led the Institute to adjust fieldwork protocols, to transition to teleworking and telephone and web-based data collection, and to increase the use of complementary data from administrative records. Additionally, there was a particular focus on communicating to the public the impacts of the pandemic on statistics. Ms. Quijad also described how Chile's National Statistical Office launched in 2020 a geostatistical data platform to identify active COVID-19 cases and to provide sociodemographic data, based on data generated from the population census and economic statistics. She also provided some examples of statistical operations that were rescheduled or suspended, while still producing updated information regarding the impact of the pandemic on the country's socio-economic situation. Ms. Quijad also highlighted the collaboration with

the Ministry of Social Development and Family (MDSF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC), stressing the vital importance of such collaboration in meeting new information needs. She concluded by noting that the various measures introduced during the pandemic are likely to permanently change some of the statistical production processes.

## **Session 2**

Ms. Awad, provided an overview of the PCBS initiatives to proactively respond to the pandemic. Since the pandemic reached Palestine at a later stage, PCBS developed economic forecasts to analyze the consequences of the lock down in different periods of time, which the government used as a basis for the decision to lock down. Moreover, PCBS used data from their existing surveys to enable various stakeholders to respond effectively to the crisis. The NSO invested in dissemination tools, such as story maps and the COVID-19 portal developed with support from esri and UNSD through the FCDO-funded project on SDG monitoring, to make data openly accessible. Further initiatives included changes in existing surveys, such as collection of price indices from monthly to weekly.

In the panel discussion, Ms. Kotzeva described how Eurostat, at the outset of the crisis, focused on providing practical guidance to harmonize both the responses of national statistical offices to the data collection disruptions and the incorporation of new data elements to monitor the impact of the Pandemic, with a view to ensuring cross-country comparability of statistics outputs. She also stressed the importance of communicating to users, including through a dedicated website for accessing data on the EU and its member states, a dashboard to track crises and starting recovery, as well as a single entry point to national websites. In addition, Ms. Kotzeva highlighted the key role of internal communication in statistical organizations, aimed at encouraging staff to work together and innovate in a time of crisis. Finally, Ms. Kotzeva reflected on lessons learned from the crisis, and the need to upgrade business continuity plans, and how Eurostat put together a voluntary crisis protocol specifying priority information that needs to be collected and published to support rapid decision making in future crises.

Ms. Peters shared an overview of the support that esri is providing to more than 4,000 organizations globally through its disaster response programme, which mostly focuses on technology, but also includes support on data provision and service execution. As part of this support, esri has given countries access to the ArcGIS system to set up data hubs to share information, and has made available at no cost additional applications for optimizing site location and management of testing sites, modelling the spread of the disease, and facility status applications to understand operating capabilities, among others.

Mr. Chinganya underlined the challenges faced in the Africa region related to the ability of continuously providing technical assistance and capacity development support to countries during the pandemic. This led to the development of new methodologies and the establishment of new partnerships focused on supporting member countries. Recognizing the lack of readiness for a crisis of this magnitude, Mr. Chinganya described how UN ECA conducted a quick assessment at the continental level to understand the impact on key statistical activities, ICT infrastructure needs, and required methodological innovation. Mr. Chinganya also described UN ECA efforts to revamp its databases and websites, including setting up dashboards to facilitate data access, and to develop new partnerships with private sector and non-governmental organizations.

Mr. Arora shared key elements of Statistics Canada's strategic response to the pandemic, underlining the importance of being able to adapt to the changing context and to link to the efforts of the broader international community. He noted that at the beginning of the pandemic, Statistics Canada had been already undergoing a full modernization process, focusing on identifying partnerships to leverage new data sources and investing in infrastructure, including to enable staff to work from anywhere. In this regard, Mr. Arora emphasized that Statistics Canada strategy is primarily about people, highlighting the role of leadership in enabling staff to innovate and explore opportunities, while maintaining trust through transparency and attention to data privacy issues. He also indicated that the current crisis has opened opportunities to leverage people's enthusiasm to explore new ways of doing things, which has enhanced the ability to produce timely and disaggregated data, and ultimately led to an increased use and impact of official statistics—a welcomed effect in the current era of misinformation. Mr. Arora also noted that Statistics Canada is already preparing for the post-pandemic phase.

Ms. Shaida Badiee reflected on the revolution that is currently taking place in the data landscape, triggered by increased data demand and intense discussion around issues of data security, data privacy, and data inequalities. She described the efforts of Open Data Watch to raise awareness among national statistical offices about knowledge resources to support data innovation and mitigate risks. Ms. Badiee also stressed how open data has become a key issue for countries during the Covid-19 pandemic, as many national statistical organizations are paying special attention to understanding the use and impact of the data they disseminate. She noted the launch of the latest Open Data Inventory (ODIN) report, which provides a tool that can help identify gaps in the coverage and openness of official statistics in the context of the pandemic, and can encourage the dialogue between national statistical offices (NSOs) and data users. Ms. Badiee also stressed the importance of improving the availability of sex-disaggregated data in the post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Mr. Arora then commented of the importance of collaboration with the academic sector to foster data innovation. In this connection, he shared the experience of Statistics Canada in providing secure access to microdata for research purposes. This collaboration also enables Statistics Canada to bring to the table its own expertise and knowledge about data as a service for the broader covid-19 response efforts. For example, he described how Statistics Canada is supporting national vaccine distribution efforts, by bringing together various crucial geographically disaggregated datasets, as well as how official statistics is providing critical information to align supply and demand of personal protective equipment in Canada.

Ms. Awad elaborated on the importance of building trust by engaging with all stakeholders and partners, letting them be part of the statistical production processes and helping them set up the priorities that guide the work of the National Statistical System. In this regard, she stressed the need to open new channels of communication with users, not concerning data use only, but also as part of the whole statistical production process. Ms. Awad also described how PCBS has focused their innovation efforts, in collaboration with the World Bank, on bringing reliable, timely data that reflects the impact of the pandemic on establishments with sufficient granularity to support policy interventions. Finally, she highlighted the work of PCBS to engage with different target groups, including school children and policy makers, with the aim of improving their understanding of data and data science. In this context, Ms. Awad noted the recent launch of a joint bachelor's degree in data science with a local university, where students will have the opportunity to work in PCBS on projects to deliver on specific country priorities.

Ms. Peters noted the important role of the global statistical geospatial framework and the critical need to continue investing in the development of GIS skills in NSOs. Recent experiences have brought to the front challenges related to the integration of statistical and geospatial information, as well as issues related to data privacy when working with geographically disaggregated data. She also stressed the importance of data sharing agreements in order to reduce the time required to access the data needed for analysis, and in this connection encouraged stronger collaboration with national mapping agencies. Ms. Peters also noted the opportunities to work with new GIS analysis and modeling approaches developed over the last year, while acknowledging infrastructure challenges that impact the ability to collect and work with geospatial data. In this regard, Ms. Peters suggested to work on assessing the use of cloud technologies and web services, considering existing national data privacy and security laws and regulatory frameworks.

Ms. Badiie highlighted the need to invest in skills around data stewardship and data governance, and balancing data access and protection of privacy in order to be able to embrace an “open data by default” approach for data dissemination. She stressed also the need to invest in skills for planning better statistical systems and setting up statistical strategies. Finally, Ms. Badiie emphasized that there is still lack of domestic and international investment in data, and commended the work of the Bern Network, a coalition of stakeholders working to mobilize more and better financing for data.

Ms. Kotzeva encouraged to not be afraid of experimenting and publishing the results of data innovation projects, providing user with sufficient information about the experimental nature and caveats of some these results while at the same time meeting the needs of decision makers for timely and disaggregated data. She also encouraged the strengthening of data innovation partnerships with researchers from academia and the geospatial communities and with civil society organizations, as these can extend the lifespan of statistical data. Ms. Kotzeva expressed her confidence in the fact that, once the crisis is over, the statistical community will be better able to provide sustainable access to the new data sources discovered during this period, and will continue building on the partnerships and innovative communication efforts launched as a response to the pandemic.

## Appendix: Selected questions and answer from Webex chat

### **First Segment:**

*Question: Is there an inventory from UN or others of COVID19 tracking and response tools that are open source?*

The NSO's have different responsibilities on providing annual population data by small geographic scale and for different population groups (such as age, sex, ethnicity, morbidity, etc). Also on mortality data, especially by causes of death.

*Question: With the Covid19 pandemic, what are the learned lessons in your NSO in providing (or working together with other providers) these type of data (currently and accurately) available for all users?*

We have been adjusting efforts as we have been learning about COVID along its waves. What operational continuity you consider should stay in place moving towards the new normality? What other changes in terms of collecting data you would like to have?

*Comments:*

Mexico: In Mexico we identify three different impacts of the COVID-19 on statistics: (i) business continuity since lockdowns impede field operations; (ii) shifts in concepts such as employment, purchase intentions and transactions from households and firms; and (iii) expanded demand for new information that was not available at the time.

### **Second Segment:**

*Question: Does ESRI also have an active programme of collaborating with the National Statistical Offices?*

Esri: Yes, Esri has a program focused on providing support to NSOs including learn lessons to help with capacity building and much more

*Comment:*

All NSOs could learn much from the Australian and UAE examples of integrating GIS into all their data products

The pandemic is an enormous shock to both supply and demand. Household consumption and expenditure shift dramatically. Starting with prices, with establishments closed and items out of stock, many prices are simply missing. For missing prices, the procedure is to use the known price from the previous period, effectively assuming that it is unchanged. As for expenditure shares, in between the biennial comprehensive revision, the CPI weights are largely unchanged. Assuming that prices are unchanged means that reported inflation is too low. And, from a welfare perspective, by underestimating inflation, we are overestimating consumption.

*Question: Is there a provision in sharing your experience to other NSO's who are struggling with the work in supporting their constituencies in collaboration with UNSD and other international partners?*

StatCan: Through our active participation in the UN events, for, and task teams, as well as working with organization like Paris21, the high-level groups on modernization, OECD, we are sharing our lessons learned and in turn also learning from others. To add, we need to apply the principles we are applying during the pandemic (partnerships, strong privacy measures, not aiming for perfection but good enough quality to privilege timeliness, and playing a stewardship role, more visualization and integrated tools) to our ongoing programs.

#### **YouTube Live Chat**

GSS: The wave 3 of the Households and Jobs Tracker Survey hopes to include questions on perception of respondents on the vaccines and whether they will accept it. This will give a pointer.