Beginning in March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic caused National Statistical Offices (NSOs) across the world to adjust household data collection activities. According to surveys of NSOs carried out by the UN Statistics Division and the World Bank, 96 per cent of the countries stopped face-to-face survey data collection, either fully or partially, in May 2020.

Despite the challenges faced by carrying out face-to-face interviewing during the pandemic, many countries adopted innovative approaches to meet the increased demand for data that can support recovery measures and policies. When asked in May 2020 about the changes that would be introduced for their planned surveys, more than 50 per cent reported changes of data collection mode or use alternative data sources; around 40 per cent reported adding COVID-19 related questions to their surveys and 15 per cent reducing survey length or sample size. (United Nations Statistics Division and World Bank, 2020b).

Given the urgency in national data needs for policymaking during the pandemic, almost all countries implemented at least one COVID impact assessment survey. Resiliency and fast actions of NSOs in the crisis have further expanded their roles as an indispensable partner for formulating pandemic-related interventions and policies.¹

How countries responded to COVID-19 has proved the resilience of NSOs in responding to crisis but has also raised a number of questions that a panel of experts will debate on:

1. There is a big increase in demand for delivering “quick data” during COVID. When accuracy and timeliness cannot be achieved simultaneously, what is more important during a crisis like COVID-19? Do we give more weight to more timely data than accuracy? Where do we draw the line?

2. The ability to contact respondents by phone is far from universal arising from lack of phone ownership, incomplete network coverage or the unavailability of contact details. This issue is more pronounced when web-based data collection is used due to low Internet access. This can create differential non-response and potential bias in estimates. The most common way to correct the potential bias in the frame coverage is through different forms of weighting or calibration. Those not reached in a phone and other surveys are usually among the most vulnerable population. How can we make our methodology more inclusive and ensure that we are leaving no one behind?

¹ Story of Ghana, Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021: Investing in data and build back better. [Investing in data to save lives and build back better — SDG Indicators](https://un.org)
3. For countries that do not have a good phone frame pre-COVID, obtaining phone numbers for survey respondents has been a challenging task. Some resort to private companies or to previous data collection with a phone number on file that were collected for data validation purposes. By doing this are we infringing on the privacy of citizens? Some argue that demanding absolute privacy in the context of public health emergency is unethical but others believe that proper ethical measures should always be in place even if that means no data will be available. Which position should we take? How do we ensure that we are not facing the same dilemma when another emergency arrives?