



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
EUROSTAT

The Director-General

Eurostat and ESS initiatives following the COVID-19 outbreak and their expected pivot post pandemic

Fourth Meeting of the Friends of the Chair Group on Economic Statistics

29&30 June 2020

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to summarise actions taken, recent developments and state of discussions on the way forward concerning the ESS in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. It also reports on recent Eurostat products related to the pandemic.

2. ESS response to the Covid-19 outbreak – first steps

Since the very beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, Eurostat has been in a very close contact with National Statistical Institutes, at all levels. In the first weeks of lockdowns, the attention had been on understanding the difficulties that the MS were facing and the risks that the confinement measures were generating to the continuity, quality and timeliness of the primary data. At the same time, NSIs reported that the current exceptional circumstances also had positive effects concerning, for example, access to new public and privately held data, as data owners became keener on sharing those data for better measurement of Covid-19 economic and social impact.

In response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 outbreak, Eurostat has taken a number of concrete actions. Addressing the methodological issues brought by Covid-19 outbreak and ensuring the comparability of the statistics based on new techniques and sources have been our top priorities. The set of guidelines, methodological notes and practical solutions developed by our experts with the support of their colleagues from the NSIs have been highly appreciated within the ESS but also by the institutions beyond EU borders. These solutions, primarily aimed at guiding the statisticians in the ESS, have provided support and inspired statisticians from other countries at a time when they needed to develop immediate solutions to ensure continuity of producing comparable and timely official statistics.

A special attention was paid on the indicators considered crucial for providing the first objective picture of the economic and social situation in Europe as well as for the development of an adequate response to the economic and social shocks, caused by the corona virus pandemic. These indicators included monthly or quarterly Principal European Economic Indicators,

selected indicators from Labour Force Survey, from statistics on population, managed migration, agriculture, energy and transport.

The agreement on prioritised statistics did not mean that the rest of European statistics had lost their importance. On the contrary, Eurostat has been consistently recalling that the proper application of EU law remains crucial and obligatory across all the statistics, including respecting deadlines established in law. In her letter to Director Generals of NSIs on 18 March 2020, Director General of Eurostat called for continuing to produce high-quality statistics on Europe to fulfil our duty towards European citizens and policymakers who rely on ESS data. With this in mind, Eurostat has continued to explore the potential flexibilities with a view to finding pragmatic solutions in each case, while safeguarding the interests of the EU as a whole.

In term of practical organisation of the work, and to ensure business continuity, a number of virtual meetings have been successfully organised since March 2020. Virtual communication channels with NSIs and stakeholders have been established at both technical and strategic level in all statistical domains. The reliable and well-functioning IT infrastructure has been crucial factor for ensuring business continuity.

3. Current situation and future developments

The ESS discussions related to Covid-19 have evolved and are currently focusing on:

- Aspects of the COVID-19 impact on statistical production and dissemination, in particular methodological and comparability issues, that need to be addressed in the coming months;
- How the ESS could be even more relevant through leveraging and expanding experimental statistics and other initiatives that have been launched at the national level;
- Achievements in terms of access to new data sources, innovative solutions and organisational efficiency that could be taken for the future, after the end of the pandemic.

European official statistics: robustness, comparability and communication

Lower response rates and reduced timely availability of administrative sources have triggered wider use of imputation methods and estimations. Questions on the way the ESS ensures comparability of the statistics based on newly employed techniques and primary data sources have been increasingly raised across countries. In this respect, a transparent and more proactive communication around the statistics indicating the higher degree of uncertainty surrounding them, but even more importantly, justifying comparability of estimates across the countries is gaining crucial importance.

In this respect, Eurostat in cooperation with experts from the NSIs will continue to update the methodological notes on emerging issues and enhance communication. Timely update of the guidelines is essential for ensuring comparability and avoiding that the countries drift apart in finding practical solutions to the issues caused by the pandemic.

On the relevance of the ESS under the pandemic and the recovery period

New information demands have arisen in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. They will continue to emerge at national and European level in the coming months and years, as European economics and societies gear up to recovery.

At the current stage, the information demands at the EU and national level suggest the following themes that the ESS has to reflect on to see what could be done further to meet better these demands:

- Faster and more frequent provision of comparable key economic indicators (i.e. new flash estimates or more frequent data releases);
- Statistics on weekly deaths disaggregated by age, sex and regions;
- The COVID-19 impact on EU businesses based on new and supplementary questions to the existing surveys highlighting the most affected sectors such as tourism and transport;
- More frequent data release on labour market and working conditions based on complementary indicators to the main LFS statistics;
- COVID-19 impact on the income situation of households;
- Changing education under the confinement measures and its implications for the various social groups;
- Enhanced statistics on public health system.

In addition, the ESS will need to accelerate its methodological work on statistical treatment of fiscal measures aimed at overcoming the economic slump caused by COVID-19 and their implications on governments' debt and deficit.

It is also essential for the ESS to look forward, anticipate data requirements and provide a swift ESS reply, thus, be even more relevant in the combat against the pandemic and its economic and social repercussions.

Leveraging the national efforts and dissemination of some experimental statistics at the EU level

The Eurostat survey conducted in early May 2020 described in brief the national initiatives aimed at better measuring the COVID-19 impact. The survey covers flash estimates, new statistics and statistical products that have been launched, statistics that have started to be published more frequently and dedicated COVID-19 businesses and households surveys that have been initiated or planned for the coming months.

The survey also summarises information about new data sources the NSIs have gained access to, specifying whether the data are aggregates, confidential or anonymised microdata. It also indicates for how long the access has been granted (e.g. for the period of lockdown, until the end of the pandemic, permanently) and whether it has been free of charge.

The survey has shown that during the COVID-19 crisis all NSIs have accelerated their work on 'experimental statistics'. These experiments have included the use of new data sources, both the administrative and privately held ones, as well as the production of flash estimates and more frequent data dissemination. Very often the dissemination of new statistics has included statistics produced by other public authorities and trusted private partners.

The results indicate that there is a concentration of new flash estimates in several domains, including: earlier flash estimates of GDP and sector economic indicators, weekly and daily death reporting, weekly bankruptcies, weekly energy consumption, weekly trade statistics and weekly/daily transport indicators.

Most of these results have been possible due to getting an augmented or completely new access to administrative and privately held data.

Most of the statistical offices have launched short dedicated surveys among enterprises to measure the impact of the pandemic on various sectors and regions or added a few questions to sentiment and consumer surveys. In particular those surveys or dedicated set of questions measure the impact of the crisis on the level of business, workforce and organisational changes, access to finance, and availing of Government support schemes.

Some of experimental statistics could be promoted at the EU level, especially those that generate a great users' interest in comparing countries or are of particular importance for the design of the EU recovery policies. Those experimental statistics will be promoted further at EU level published on a voluntary basis. The guiding principle in dissemination should be the current users' view that availability and timeliness are more important than precision of the published statistics. Demonstrating the comparability of methods and sources, and hence of final experimental statistical product, is essential.

As regards publishing more frequently some statistics at the EU level, the following concrete areas prevail among countries initiatives and thus, have emerged as candidates to be published and promoted at the EU level: weekly death reporting, weekly bankruptcies, weekly transport and energy consumption indicators.

The ESS Directors' group foreseen by the end of June will reflect on the practical ways to respond to the needs in the domains described above. They may also consider possibilities for ex-ante coordination and ensuring comparability of dedicated surveys and supplementary questions planned at national level for the coming months. A continuous exchange of good practices will play an important role in this process.

Retaining access to data granted during the pandemic

Under the COVID-19 crisis the NSIs got access to a number of new data sources, both public and privately held. Additionally, a key aspect of the COVID-19 statistical actions relates to the new partnerships on data cooperation. Examples include telecom data, health data, barcode data from supermarket chains, data on compensation measures, bankruptcy data and transport data. A newly created Task Force at Directors General level on access to new data sources for statistical purpose started its work at the beginning of June 2020.

Lessons learned and way forward after the crisis

The COVID-19 outbreak has imposed long-lasting effects on the scope of statistics and the way they are produced. These effects will not go away soon. Some of them have transformed the business model for years to come. For example, the ESS will not come back to the same level of using face-to-face interviews as before the COVID-19 outbreak. Changes in the modes of data collection imply adjustment of questionnaires and ensuring comparability under new circumstances.

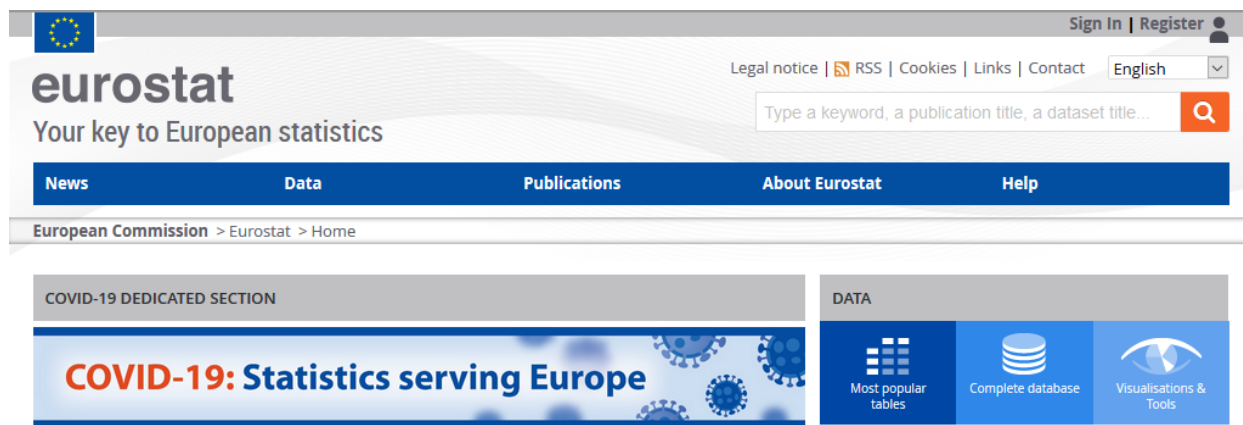
More generally, the ESS has to analyse which practices adopted under the pressure of the crisis could be kept or are likely to be kept. The identification of all innovative solutions that have been designed to address the reduced or non-availability of some data sources during the pandemic should also be part of the analysis.

The crisis has tested the resilience of the ESS. The reflection on lessons from the current crisis should serve as an input to the task of building the resilience of the ESS and its capacity to react faster to the crises in the future.

4. Eurostat contribution in terms of communication, guidance and data

Statistics serving Europe

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/covid-19/overview>



In this section of Eurostat website, a wide range of statistics and data related to COVID-19 are displayed. This gives a baseline against which the impact of the crisis can be measured, providing the wider background and/or helping see the evolution of the crisis.

The information offered in this section cover a range of topics related to the economy, society and work, population and health as well as agriculture, energy, transport and tourism. For each topic, latest releases, an interactive data visualisation, links to more in-depth information in Statistics Explained as well as a list of relevant datasets is provided.

Due to the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the ability of statistical authorities to collect and process data in the traditional manner, Eurostat is also providing practical guidance for official statisticians on the issues triggered by COVID-19. The section 'Support to statisticians' (presented in the next paragraph) brings together in one place all the new guidelines and methodological notes and will be regularly updated as new guidelines are developed.

Support to Statistician

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/metadata/covid-19-support-for-statisticians>

Eurostat and national statistical authorities in the European Statistical System have been working together to elaborate guidelines and notes on how to address the methodological issues caused by changes in statistical production as a consequence of the pandemic. This ensures that European statistics continue to be based on sound foundations. The intention of Eurostat is to focus on solutions and thus be of direct help not only to official statisticians in Europe and around the globe.

In the section 'Support to statisticians', guidelines are provided on statistical domains affected by the pandemic; the section also includes a note on challenges faced and actions taken by NSIs in response to Covid-19 in terms of communications.

Guidelines and methodological notes in the context of the COVID-19 crisis

- [PDF Guidance on time series treatment \(26/03/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on the compilation of the HICP \(03/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on the EU-Labour Force Survey data collection \(Updated version - 24/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Draft note on statistical implications of some policy measures \(09/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on the 2020 EU-SILC data collection \(14/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on estimation and imputation of missing data for short-term business statistics \(20/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance note on labour costs statistics \(24/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on quarterly national accounts \(including flash\) estimates \(24/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on publication and transmission of national accounts data and metadata \(27/04/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on the compilation of statistics on intra-EU trade in goods \(05/05/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Clarification on the implications of COVID-19 measures on the statistical treatment of existing PPPs and concessions \(12/05/2020\)](#)
- [PDF ESS strategic communication during the COVID-19 crisis \(18/05/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on statistical processing for health and safety at work \(ESAW and EODS\) \(20/05/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on statistical processing for public health statistics \(COD and HCnE\) \(20/05/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Annex to guidance note \(COD and HCnE\) – WHO international guidelines \(20/05/2020\)](#)
- [PDF Guidance on non-market output \(25/05/2020\)](#)

Since the end of May, no needs for new methodological notes or update of the existing ones have been identified. Nevertheless, the Directors Groups have kept in their June meetings the question about the need for more guidelines and methodological notes or update of the existing ones in the coming months.

Support to policymakers

In a constantly developing situation, Eurostat is giving particular attention to the statistical implications of policy measures aimed at tackling Covid-19 economic consequences

Recently, national governments have launched a number of policies to support businesses and households facing economic difficulties caused by Covid-19. Some of them aim at keeping employment and supporting self-employed and small businesses, others relate to fiscal policies (e.g. deferral of tax deadlines). An increasing number of measures involve national promotional banks (NPBs). Examples of measures channelled through the NPBs include delays in debt servicing for loans granted by NPBs, granting of new loans or credit lines at non market conditions, purchase of debt and rolling over of debt, covering operating costs of SMEs and self-employed, provision of guarantees and support in financing issues arising from the crisis.

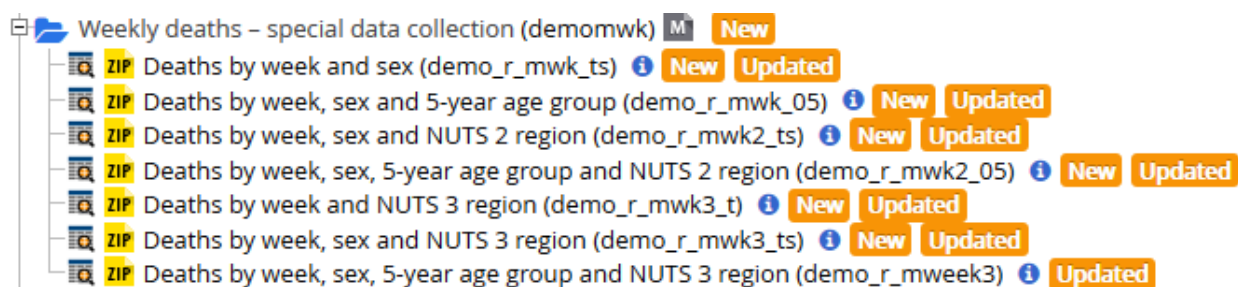
There is growing interest in the accounting consequences of these operations on public finances, in particular on the debt and deficit. In this context, it will be very important to examine closely all such operations, in order to apply the rules included in the latest version of the Manual on government deficit and debt (MGDD), in the context of the forthcoming Government Finance Statistics reporting in the coming months. Eurostat is currently using available sources in order to conduct an overview of all operations.

New data collection – weekly deaths

In April 2020, Eurostat set up an exceptional temporary data collection on total weekly deaths to support policies and research efforts related to Covid-19. By means of this demographic data collection, Eurostat's efforts are concentrated on providing quickly statistics that show the changing situation of the total number of weekly deaths due to the pandemic.

Never in Eurostat a data collection – voluntary, under the leadership of Eurostat – was developed and delivered results in such a short time and for a so short reference period ("weekly" data).

Data are transmitted by NSIs to Eurostat broken down by week, sex, age group and NUTS3 region:



A News items (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20200624-1>) and a Statistics explained article (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Weekly_death_statistics&stable) have been released on 24 June on the website on this new data collection on weekly deaths. The data analysed concern March-April 2020 on 21 European countries that provided complete enough data, this time span corresponding to weeks 10 to 17 - the peak of additional deaths in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. These articles provide a first demographic analysis of data – including analysis of excess mortality.