

Summary report
Fourth Meeting of the Friends of the Chair Group on the Future of Economic
Statistics
Virtual Meeting, 29-30 June 2020

Introduction

1. The fourth meeting of the Friends of the Chair (FOC) Group on Economic Statistics took place via WebEx on 29 and 30 June 2020. The agenda comprised the following items: ensuring a user-centered focus; affirmation of Friends of Chair Group’s objectives following COVID-19; work plan for remainder of year 2; and next steps. The following is a summary of the discussions and conclusions for each agenda item.

Summary report and key observations

Ensuring a user-centered focus

2. Mr. Elliott Harris, Assistant Secretary General and Chief Economist, Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Mr. Serge Dupont, Senior Advisor, Bennett Jones, and former Deputy Clerk of the Privy Council and Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, gave keynote remarks on how national statistical systems can ensure an integrated and user-centered approach to tracking sustainable development in the light of COVID-19. Both underlined the need for a broad statistical framework for the future system of macroeconomic and microeconomic statistics for evidence-based advice to inform the multidimensional and interrelated aspects of globalization and supply chains of MNEs, digitalization and technological innovation, location and urbanization, climate change, demography, and inequality. In addition, Mr. David Gruen, Australian Statistician, presented a case study on how the Australian national statistical office (ABS) had to rapidly adjust to new user requirements in the light of the pandemic. An example included the conduct of new rapid surveys to gauge the impact of the pandemic on businesses and households. He also emphasized that the ABS swiftly redirected its statistical production processes to release new high frequency statistics and indicators to meet the new user demands. This rapid response was made possible by providing permission to the newly established ABS teams to innovate, to network, to engage with users and to seek new data solutions.
3. Given that the global impact of the COVID-19 are likely to last for a prolonged period of time, participants agreed to use the statistical response to the pandemic as a use case to challenge the system of economic statistics centered on a whole-of-system approach (“in networking the system”) featuring broad consultations and assessment with users (“in engaging the user”).
4. Under this approach, national statistical offices (NSOs) should adopt the role of a data steward in addition to being data producers and actively establish partnerships across the public and private sectors. Such networking partnership could include exploring new and innovative data solutions in the use of alternative data sources or conducting more frequent surveys to produce granular

indicators beyond the traditional economic, social, financial and environment indicators for a rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19.

5. The whole-of-system approach may also warrant a better understanding of how regional and international agencies responded to COVID-19 and whether the newly emerged business model warrants trusted co-investments in statistical infrastructure through shared technology offered by global cloud-based platforms, shared central global repository of big data from global agreements with private sector owners, shared method libraries of algorithms, and a global register of MNEs in support of building responsive and resilient national statistical systems.
6. Given the multi-faceted impacts of COVID-19, they observed that the statistical response to COVID-19 should be framed in a holistic and integrated measurement framework for evidence-based policy making. Indeed, this multi-dimensional framing of the statistical response on our interrelated economies, societies and the environment was clearly demanded by users.

Affirmation of Friends of Chair Group's objectives following COVID-19

7. Participants confirmed that the objectives of the FOC Group have, in fact, become more relevant and critical in the light of the pandemic. To ensure a consistent and comparable approach to tracking the multi-dimensional impact of COVID-19 across countries, there was a convergence of views on an emerging new statistical business model comprising of three inter-related and mutually reinforcing building blocks.
8. The first is the new operational principles of the business model that NSOs have adopted in their COVID-19 response. Elements of this building block include the institutional and operational environment in which NSOs should operate (for example, data stewardship and user-centric approach); compiling iterative and experimental measures in a timely manner; balancing the various data quality aspects in the statistical production processes (for example, timeliness, accuracy and granularity), and adopting and promoting a whole-of system-approach (for example, establishing increased collaboration within and between the national, regional and global levels).
9. The second is pivoting to a new statistical infrastructure and the adoption of innovative data solutions. These new statistical infrastructure and data solutions extend to applying new technologies for new data sources and new data collection methods, using alternate data sources, cultivating an enduring networking relationship with data providers (both administrative and private data); integrating high frequency data and structural information, and making decisions on when to discontinue the collection and compilation of traditional timeseries.
10. The third is deciding on the use of the appropriate statistical framework in which to present the statistical and data products in an integrated and coherent manner. The national statistical responses to COVID-19 seem to merit a broad framework for the future of economic statistics, which goes beyond measuring GDP to measuring social, environmental and well-being (for example, health) dimensions, both at the macro and micro levels. Adopting this broader measurement framework would necessitate the need for collaboration with other partners to get timely access to microdata and statistical registers to produce the relevant granular indicators which would provide a more holistic picture of sustainable development.

Work plan for the remainder of the year

11. Mr. Greg Peterson: Assistant Chief Statistician of Statistics Canada gave a presentation on the work plan for the remainder of 2020. Elements of the work plan included documenting and streamlining the working methods of the statistical groups operating in the system of economic statistics, creating networks, challenging the system, and engaging broadly with regional and national stakeholders and users.
12. Participants agreed with the broad objectives of the work plan. However, they noted that since the effects of COVID-19 were likely to be long-lasting, it might be useful to give less emphasis to the actions to be undertaken in the post-COVID-19 environment. Rather, the FOC Group should spend more time and resources supporting the national statistical system in sharing and formulating nimble short-term statistical responses to COVID-19, while facilitating the global initiative in the medium term to update international statistical standards of the system of economic statistics such as the international classifications, national accounts, balance of payments. In this regard, participants underscored it might be useful to consider building a global and regional response system and infrastructure that is capable exchanging best practices and lessons learned between countries from their individual national responses and in assisting countries with less mature statistical systems to build on best practices in formulating their national responses.
13. To do so, they suggested sending a stock-taking questionnaire to national statistical agencies to get an initial assessment of how their statistical systems were coping with the crisis. The questionnaire could be modelled on the United Nations-World Bank global online survey form to monitor the nature, scale, and scope of the impact of the pandemic on statistical agencies, as well as to better understand and analyze the new emerging business model and its components of statistical operations, statistical infrastructure and data solutions, and statistical conceptual framework of macroeconomic and microeconomic statistics in support of integrated and coherent multidimensional analysis. In addition, they proposed organizing a second round of regional consultations in partnership with the regional commissions through regional webinars to consult countries on the work and forthcoming recommendations of the FOC Group and how its initiatives could benefit their national work on formulating statistical responses to the pandemic.

Action: Update the work plan to incorporate the comments of the participants.

Next steps

14. Participants agreed to meet again in August/September and October/November 2020 to discuss the progress of the work plan regarding the streamlining of working methods of statistical groups building on the lessons learned from the global, regional and national statistical response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were also requested to indicate their preference for which areas of the work plan they would like to work on.

Action: Follow up with participants to seek their collaboration on implementing the work plan.