

TACKLING COVID-19: MITIGATING THE IMPACT ON NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEMS IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

A Road-Map for a PARIS21 Action Task Force

1. COVID-19 and national statistical systems in low-income countries

In January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency. By early March, it upgraded the status to global pandemic. While the timing and scope of national responses are not homogenous, by mid-March many countries had imposed lockdowns and declared a state of emergency. Travel bans, closure of national frontiers and various regulations to encourage “social distancing” are now being implemented by many countries. These containment measures have disrupted the everyday lives of citizens worldwide, precipitating major shocks in the global economy.

Although the pandemic has predominantly affected high- and middle-income countries thus far, it is now reaching the developing world (WHO). As OECD countries work to “flatten the curve” at home, the challenge is just beginning in states where the virus is expected to prove an even more durable threat. As COVID-19 continues to spread, national statistical systems (NSSs) find themselves facing unprecedented challenges. In the middle of a census year, many national statistical offices (NSOs) now struggle to conduct their usual statistical activities while maintaining the safety of their staff. At the same time, policymakers, development partners and multilateral institutions need more and better data to monitor the spread and impact of COVID-19.

Within OECD countries, disruptions to planned statistical activities are already emerging. The United States Census Bureau has announced a postponement of

2020 census activities, and the UK Office of National Statistics has pre-emptively informed the public of anticipated delays in regular data publication in the wake of the crisis.

However, early indications show that COVID-19 will affect national statistical systems (NSSs) in developing and least-developed countries with lower coping mechanisms in unique ways. Moreover, these effects are expected to last for longer time periods for these institutions than for OECD counterparts. In particular, least developed countries and fragile contexts with poor infrastructure, weakened health systems and limited institutional capacity are more constrained in their options for response, raising concerns about the prospects of containment. As NSSs in developing countries comply with lockdowns and other mitigation policies, immediate challenges associated with remote working conditions and limited capabilities will begin to impact national statistics in the short-, medium- and long-term. In addition to disruptions to field-based data collection, available data on socio-economic conditions and prices may rapidly fall out of date due to evolving conditions on the ground, even as demands for new data rise. Furthermore, the pandemic will exploit existing structural challenges related to coordination, governance and financing, adding layers of complexity for NSSs during the crisis.

1.1. Why does this matter?

In the short-term, a number of direct effects of the outbreak are shaping statistical activities at the national level. NSSs face calls for timely, ad hoc data to track the outbreak and to inform containment and mitigation efforts, while operational space to conduct their work is becoming more constrained in the following areas:

- Full or partial closure of NSOs and other NSS institutions due to lockdowns and other mitigation efforts:

- While statistical services in OECD countries may be capacitated to move to remote working arrangements to sustain their activities, NSOs in these contexts often lack critical IT infrastructure to telework effectively.
- Reduced or closed access to survey and census respondents:
 - Ongoing or pending data field-based data collection is already suspended in a number of cases. In the absence of functional technology-based solutions (e.g. phone- or web-based tools), these critical statistical products could be delayed indefinitely.
- Disruptions to technical assistance and capacity development programming:
 - Unlike their OECD country counterparts, many NSOs in these contexts rely on external interventions to support data collection and analysis, increasing risks of delayed or limited release of updated statistics.
- Pressures to improve coordination with other key stakeholders in the NSS:
 - As other government agencies engage in their own efforts to respond to the outbreak, their availability to engage with NSOs on regular data production activities will decline.

Early examples include:

- In Rwanda, the government took immediate measures to close schools and non-essential businesses following detection of the first infected case. In this cautious environment, the NSO has now discontinued all ongoing household data collection, and planned capacity development initiatives have been cancelled or postponed.
- In El Salvador, prior to a localised outbreak, the government declared a month-long closure of key NSO activities which disrupted progress in

ongoing field-based data collection and the planning cycle for the new national strategy for the development of statistics (NSDS).

In the medium-term, indirect effects of the crisis threaten the supply of national statistics. NSSs play a critical role in informing policy and programmatic interventions to respond to the crisis, despite disruptions in their workflows, including the following:

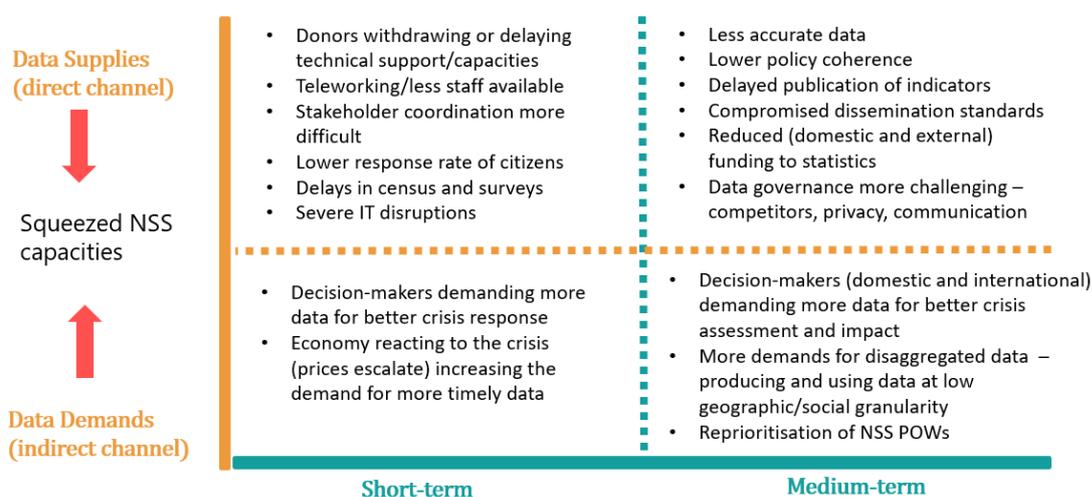
- Demands for timely dissemination and communication of essential statistics:
 - Ongoing challenges of limited data frequency and disaggregation common to NSSs in these contexts will become exacerbated in the context of this crisis as the situation evolves over time.
- Pressures to harmonise standards for data governance and openness across the NSS:
 - As concerns around misinformation and trust in statistics from other sources increase, the NSO has a key role to play in offering guidance and standards for data quality. This dimension of NSS coordination in developing contexts poses a challenge for many NSOs under normal conditions. However, monitoring and responding to external data sources will become increasingly complex during the pandemic and its aftermath.
- Disruptions to policy and financing cycles to support statistical development:
 - As governments and development partners turn their attention to funding the response to the outbreak and subsequent recovery, limitations in support and policy alignment in national statistics may constrain activities and reshape priorities.

Early examples include:

- In the Philippines, the national government proposed a cash transfer to poor households for the duration of the COVID-19 lockdown. The Philippines National Statistical System will now need to provide data to identify poor households and define the programme threshold to compute the amount needed to finance the cash transfer.

These short- and medium-term effects are outlined in the figure below:

Anticipated effects of COVID-19* on low-and middle-income country NSSs



* Assuming COVID-19 outbreak leads to 1) government lockdowns in the short-term, and 2) economic recession in the medium-term

Looking beyond the crisis to its aftermath, a robust supply of high-quality, disaggregated statistics will be essential to interpret and respond to the long-term effects of COVID-19 for all citizens, particularly those at risk of being left further behind. Implications of past pandemic events, such as the Ebola outbreaks in West and Central Africa, demonstrate differential long-term effects on women and girls, displaced people and other vulnerable populations (CGD). It is therefore essential to support NSSs and statistical development as the pandemic response continues to support evidence-based approaches to mitigation and recovery.

1.2. The PARIS21 response

In advance of its Annual Board session in April, PARIS21 has convened a Task Force to engage and support our NSS partners across the globe, aiming to mitigate the effect of the evolving global crisis on their daily operations, their medium-term activities and their long-term development.

The Task Force will focus on three central questions facing national statisticians and their staff:

1. How will the global COVID-19 crisis affect the operational activities of NSOs in low-income countries?
2. What challenges do NSSs face in responding to the increased data demand due to the effects of the emergency at the sub-national and national level?
3. What possible solutions exist to mitigate the negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for statistical development and operations?

Initial findings will be presented during the 2020 PARIS21 Board Meeting in a special webinar (8 April 2020), followed by the publication of a policy brief later that month and continued work to develop new approaches to support statistical development in crisis contexts.

2. What PARIS21 partners are doing

As part of a vibrant data for development community and the larger international development ecosystem, the PARIS21 contribution will complement and bring value to the action plans of several key partners. To date, these include:

- [Open Data Watch](#) has curated a dynamic resource bank and organised it by various stages of the data value chain: availability, openness, dissemination, use and uptake. This highlights important questions surrounding opening and sharing data, as well as the challenges associated with data use.

- The [Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data](#) has created a list of Data Sources, Research and Analysis, Visualisation and Maps among others to share credible information.
- [The GovLab](#) has launched an open “Call for Action” on #data4covid, calling upon major stakeholders to take key actions to leverage the potential of data collaboratives in addressing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and to improve preparedness for the future. Some of these actions include:
 - Developing a Governance Framework
 - Building Capacity
 - Establishing Data Stewards
 - Unlocking Funds
 - Promoting Technological Innovation
- The OECD has set up a [Covid-19 Pandemic Policy Platform](#), which analyses the pandemic through its different angles and consequences on the economy and our societies and the policy tools that can be used to mitigate the effects of the crisis.
 - The OECD also plans to launch a tool, the Covid-19 Policy Tracking Initiative to provide a single entry point for countries and to track policies that national governments are putting in place in light of the pandemic.
- The Development Cooperation Directorate (DCD) of the OECD is developing a policy brief to look at how development co-operation can best support developing countries to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.
 - Additionally, the DCD is mobilising donors (within the DAC) for an urgent and co-ordinated development co-operation commitment/response to support developing countries affected by COVID19.

- The DCD also plans to administer a survey of DAC members to ask the following questions:
 - What contributions have you made, or plan to make, to multilateral funds for the COVID-19 response?
 - Are you using, or do you plan to use ODA or any other development co-operation instrument (including blended finance) for COVID-19 related activity, including for health, economic or social development, fragility prevention, humanitarian assistance?

Given the ongoing scale of efforts and information deluge, it is then critical for PARIS21 to have a specific and meaningful focus that is relevant for our core constituency.

3. Guiding Questions

In the attempt to join efforts and support PARIS21 partner countries in understanding and tackling the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, the Task Force will answer the following three questions:

1. How will the COVID-19 crisis affect the operational activities of NSOs in low-income countries, particularly in light of an ongoing/planned census and ongoing/planned NSDS activities?

The first part of the analysis will collect evidence on the different channels through which the crisis affects the daily operations of our partner NSOs. Factors such as a lack of workforce due to illness, or less available domestic funding for statistical activities might alter the supply of data and statistics in the crisis context. Therefore, it is important to understand which core NSO activities will be stopped, post-poned and maintained in 2020.

2. How have data demands on NSSs changed due to the effects of the emergency at the sub-national and national level?

The second part of the analysis will look into the capacity challenges related to increased demand for data, and the potential lower supply due to constraints in data collection. It is crucial to understand which statistical capacities are needed most and where. In this light, it is fundamental to understand how official statistics contribute to adequate policy making and societal behaviour in times of crisis.

3. Which strategies exist to mitigate the negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis?

The third question will lead the Task Force to collect a set of strategies on how to mitigate the negative consequences of the crisis together with our partner NSOs. The Task Force aims to provide a toolkit for short- and the longer term crisis reaction.

Moving forward, the Task Force will analyse structural effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on societal, economic and institutional aspects.

- Acceleration of structural trends: Forecasts hypothesise that the crisis might accelerate structural trends such as the application of digital technologies in data collection and production processes. This, in turn, might increase inequality in various dimensions, creating capacity gaps between NSSs in more developed countries and those lagging behind.
- Re-prioritisation of planned statistical activities away from “leave no-one behind” (LNOB): The COVID-19 crisis might force NSSs to re-prioritise their planned statistical activities throughout the year. Experts fear that topics related to the LNOB agenda, such as data on vulnerable communities, might be pushed back.

- Long-term economic effects on funding for statistics/data: The economic aspects of the crisis will affect the spending priorities of donor countries, and this may affect the level of funding to statistics and data.
- The role of NSOs in crisis situations: NSSs have a fundamental role in influencing policy making and societal behaviour in crises and situations of fragility.

4. Planned outputs and timeline

The following outputs and timelines are planned:

1. Conceptualising a framework for COVID-19 impact on NSO operations –
25 March 2020
 - 1.1 Review literature and news articles related to/published by NSOs coping with COVID-19
 - 1.2 Consolidate findings from web scraping NSO websites, social media and other platforms to assess COVID-19 related items
 - 1.3 Analyse and illustrate the channels through which COVID-19 affects NSO operations
2. Collecting country anecdotes via strategic outreach to partner countries –
25 March 2020
 - 2.1 Establish first email contact with partners in ongoing projects (Phase 1)
 - 2.2 Conduct brief phone/Skype interviews (Phase 2)
 - 2.3 Establish a systematic email outreach to PARIS21 partners (Phase 3)
3. Collecting lessons learned from our NSO partners including short-, medium- and long-term coping strategies to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 – *25 March 2020*
4. Drafting a short policy brief (5-7 pages) to document the evidence collected – *3 April 2020*

5. Preparing a webinar to discuss specific country mitigation strategies –
4 April 2020
6. Establish a coherent social media channel on the activities – *ongoing*