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Will Official Statistics Become Obsolete?

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ABSTRACT

As new data actors arise and data become more accessible, official statistics' role as the primary creator of statistics and distributor of information for policymaking is being tested. A data actor can be any entity involved in production, manipulation, and analysis or dissemination of any type of data. The need for more resources grows. New technologies enable a level of recording, integration, and analysis that have never been possible before. This article addresses National Statistical Offices' changing role, taking into consideration a lack of investment in data and outdated data, out-of-date legal frameworks and data-access laws, and privacy restrictions.

Keywords: National Statistical Offices (NSOs), sustainable development goals (SDGs), High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HLG-PCCB), modernization, UN-Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, data stewardship.

Main Summary

The global COVID-19 pandemic is affecting crucial operations all over the world's statistical system. According to a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on National Statistical Offices (NSOs), conducted by the [United Nations Statistics Division](#) (UNSD) and the [World Bank](#) in May 2020, 96% of NSOs had partially or fully stopped face-to-face data collection. National and international statistical agencies must respond quickly to ensure the continuity of critical statistical compilation activities and the continuous availability of data to guide government and all sectors of society's emergency mitigation efforts. Official statistics must also review its operations and systems to learn from experiences and improve operations.

Figure 1. Organizational structure of the international official statistics system.

An Overview

In 2015, the [UN-General Assembly](#) adopted the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which aims to “leave no one behind,” and governments all over the world started the journey of navigating ways to readjust national strategic plans to enable the adoption of the new global plan with its targets, goals, and measurement indicators. Governments, therefore, needed the assistance of a strategic player in the readjustment phase, which was to be their National Statistical Offices (NSOs).

National Ownership

In Palestine, the [government](#) issued a decree to form a National Team that was mandated to follow up the implementation of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in cooperation with all related stakeholders, including representatives from NGOs and the private sector. The establishment of the [SDG's National Team](#), its steering committee, and the [12 SDGs working groups](#), including: Disability Organizations team, United Nations Agencies team, Civil Society team, Private Sector team, Government Institutions team, Workers Union team, Women Organizations team, Youth Organizations team, Academic and Research Institutions team, National Statistics Team, National Sustainable Development Forum, and National Steering Committee team. The team’s mandate was based on lessons learned from the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs) to allow different partners to participate in the monitoring and implementation of the SDGs during all stages of the process, including prioritization, implementation, and evaluation. The working groups are composed of

representatives from NGOs, the private sector, and academic institutions with expertise in the relevant SDG. Each working group is tasked with one of the SDGs with the exception of two working groups, one of which merged SDG 1 “No Poverty” and SDG 10 “Reduced Inequalities” and one of which merged the environmental-related SDGs (12, 13, 14, and 15). SDG 17 “Partnerships” concerns all groups and therefore is included in the mandates of all the working groups while being led by the prime minister’s office.

The responsibility of the team is to determine sustainable development priorities in Palestine and to integrate them within the national framework for planning and budgeting processes, as well as to lead and coordinate the preparation of [voluntary national reviews](#) of progress toward the SDGs. The decree also mandated the [Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics](#) (PCBS) as the NSO to lead the efforts on modernizing and monitoring the SDGs’ indicators in cooperation with all partners including Line Ministries ([Ministry of Education](#), [Ministry of Health](#), [Ministry of Labour](#), and others), government bodies, and members of the National Statistical System (Private Sector Organizations, Civil Society Organizations, and International Representatives and Donors). PCBS was requested to provide the statistical data for the indicators, build the national system to monitor progress in this regard, and create technical plans to provide missing data in order to achieve the ambitious requirements of the 2030 Agenda, including the need for data integration from various sources, capacity building, reassessing quality and instilling trust of data, modernizing processes, and reassessing the legal and institutional structures of NSOs to best serve the local community.

The Need for Change

The modernization process is vital to NSOs’ survival and involves changes to NSOs’ traditional roles and mandates, including the role of the chief statistician. Such changes aim to develop a leader who shall lead the change and enforce the new role of NSOs. The development of IT infrastructure is also a key priority for NSOs to help keep up with developments in the data ecosystems and meet the need for a more vital communication strategy. Also required are partnerships with the private sector as part of the development of data stewardship and data systems management, as well as the classical mandate of technical statistical topics. Chief statisticians should be leaders in terms of taking new initiatives and thinking out of the box. I think creativity and having an open mind in accepting trying new solutions is becoming ever more essential.

This entails a new era of NSOs’ roles, including not only being data producers and managing the statistical and information system but also being monitors and managers of data. This involves a wider range of partnerships and transformation from partnering with inline ministries and government organizations to partnering with the private sector, universities and academic institutions, and research centers. NSOs should also ensure data interoperability, which addresses the ability of systems and services that create, exchange, and consume data to have clear, shared expectations for the contents, context, and meaning of that data. This is vital to make the best use of administrative data, especially in developing countries where administrative data sources are still fragile and in need of capacity building.

A Global Challenge

On a global scale, the [United Nations Statistics Commission](#) (UNSC), at its [46th session](#), created [the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) (HLG-PCCB). The group is composed of member states and included regional and international agencies as observers. This group aims to establish a global partnership for sustainable development data. This partnership refers to the need for cross-sector and cross-country collaboration where policies [align, for example the group invites actors within the global data ecosystem to participate in open meetings and consults regularly with these partners to ensure best results.](#)

What Are the Main Strategic Areas of the Cape Town Global Action Plan?

This partnership has the role of developing a global action plan for sustainable development data, later named [Cape Town Global Action Plan](#) (CTGAP), which proposes six strategic areas, each associated with several objectives and related implementation actions to achieve those goals. The main strategic areas of the CTGAP are: coordination and strategic leadership on data for sustainable development; innovation and modernization of national statistical systems; strengthening of basic statistical activities and programs, with particular focus on addressing the monitoring needs of the 2030 Agenda; dissemination and use of sustainable development data; multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development data; and mobilizing resources and coordinating efforts for statistical capacity building.

This action plan presents a compass for NSOs to move forward. Moreover, the UNSC also created [the Inter-Agency and Expert Group](#) (IAEG-SDGs), which addressed the technical part and was tasked to develop and implement the global indicator framework for the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. The group includes several subgroups that work on addressing Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX), geospatial information, and measurement of development support formulating the face of the new statistical systems.

Traditional NSO cultures, structures, and approaches to statistics production may not be well-suited to meet the new demand of the new data sources. In these structures, a vertical value chain is operated by a single entity that designs and operates the process of collecting data and transforming it into a final product for dissemination to all users. This is considered a major challenge to NSOs to adjust to the new reality and keep up with the latest developments to remain relevant, and some offices have already started to do so. The scarcity of skills to deal with technology, open data, and big data sources is also a major challenge to NSOs.

The good news here is that NSOs have a lot to offer, they are in a natural position to create and manage data strategies, and they already have strong connections to form global partnerships with data producers and connect the players of the private sector and policymakers to the rest of the data actors.

Modernization of Official Statistics

As referred to earlier, the idea of modernization of official statistics was not a sudden process. It stemmed from the need to cope and adapt to new developments, especially the 2030 Agenda, health pandemics, rapidly changing societies, and the new world of open and big data. The adjustments brought about are vital for official statistics to avoid becoming obsolete.

This process of change entails requirements at all levels since the core methodologies that work today will not work in the future because the way NSOs work today limits their ability to cope with rapid data demands. NSOs must expand data sources to include big data, open data, and data science tools to utilize statistical projects (data mining, AI, etc.). This means expansion and development of IT infrastructure, and NSOs will require financial support to implement these changes. Complementary roles of members in the data ecosystem are vital to making this change.

Changes are also required in legislation, where an update to the [UN-Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics](#) (FPOS) is needed to keep up with developments while ensuring implementation of the core 10 principles. An update to the fundamental principles would mean an update in the code of practice and eventually the statistical law. These efforts ensure that any part of the Global Data Ecosystem (all stakeholders, including data users and producers) have not been forgotten while moving in steady steps for a better and clearer future for statistics and NSOs' roles, keeping in mind that people are the target by making their lives better through better data that meets those principles. The new data actors require a complete review of the FPOS to take into account all types of data, the unprecedented speed of data generated, and the unprecedented need for disaggregated data.

NSOs Embracing Modernization

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of data that travels at a faster pace than disease. To keep us safe from today's diseases and epidemics, as well as the new and complex health dangers of tomorrow, we need an integrated, high-speed health data system.

As important as it is for NSOs to keep up with developments, they should be conscious to adopt big data into official statistics and to take advantage of these innovative sources, including their application to monitor and report on SDGs. However, we should be careful, and we need to adequately address issues of methodology, representativeness, quality, technology, data access, legislation, privacy, management and finance, and providing adequate cost-benefit analyses. I think that one of the major roles of official statistics is to re-promote official statistics' importance in reflecting reality through mapping policies that help change lives as a sole source of constantly reliable data. This calls for the need to be more open to data users to help better understand how official statistics work and the life cycle of a statistical project. It also calls for improved communication with users of all segments.

To capitalize on the global efforts of engaging new data sources, at PCBS we launched a new initiative in partnership with a local university to start a dialogue on data science in Palestine. The initiative includes a training course on data science given to eligible candidates from all sectors, with a focus on newly graduating students and the unemployed. Additionally, a festival and an exhibition were organized in October 2019, which started this dialogue on data science in Palestine. In these times of a global pandemic, the world is witnessing a subsequent demand for data, and the need for governments, companies, researchers, and data users of all types to monitor progress using real-time disaggregated data is more vital than ever. This has created an opportunity for NSOs to prove that they can retain their status as producers of trusted statistics in the face of misinformation and competition. So, as I see it, official statistics will not be obsolete at all and statistics will gain more importance in the future, but this needs hard work, large adaptability, and an open mind.

Official statistics assist us in comprehending who we are, have been, and will become. Official statistics on population, health, crime, and the economy illustrate the tales of our countries. Better official data lead to better decisions and, thus, better results. The issue of trust is vital and it is only possible by reliable official data. Official data also assist in the promotion of equality, since the right to know is a democratic and fundamental right. An open and transparent system of public data can assist citizens from all walks of life in becoming more empowered.

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