

Economic and Social Council – Integration Dialogue 2

“Building back better towards inclusive, sustainable, and just economies for recovery: Re-designing the contract between people and planet”

3 June 2021, 9-10:30AM Eastern, remote

Talking points of the Vice-Chair of the UN Statistical Commission, Mr. Julio Santaella (Mexico)

- The topic today is very important: having a just, resilient and strong economic recovery and I think the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is very ambitious and basically tackles in an integrated way all the aspirations of the international community of trying to build this better world, better welfare and leaving no one behind.
- However, in order to achieve the goals of the Agenda, we have to take decisions not in the darkness but with a solid, clear evidence of where we stand.
- We heard, for instance, from Mario Cimoli, about asymmetries. He requested an analysis of causal relationships in order to find where and what to integrate.
- We heard from the ILO about the new working arrangements and we heard from UNEP about the importance of the environment.
- These are very important topics, but we need to know how far are we from the goal that we have set for ourselves.
- José Antonio talked about the impact of COVID, but we need to measure it, so I am advocating in favor of having data and statistics and that is where the statistical community and the Statistical Commission come in.
- The reality is that before the pandemic we were not in a very good shape in order to achieve the SDG agenda because many National Statistical Systems did not have the capacity to produce all the different indicators that were needed to understand and to monitor the progress towards the goals and we are working very hard in the Commission to adopt standards and methodologies for providing more data and more statistics in order to clear the picture and provide evidence to make well-informed decisions and we were in this not very good point of our situation when the pandemic stroke.
- Of course, the pandemic brought a lot of new phenomena and impacts, as José Antonio mentioned. That has been very difficult for the National Statistical Offices and the impact of the pandemic on the NSO’s has not been heterogeneous.
- Let me report that the UN/DESA undertook a series of surveys of NSO’s with the World Bank with the objective of monitoring the impact of the pandemic on operations and the evolving statistical needs that have emerged in different countries and there are very stark findings from these surveys:
 - Globally, about 75% of NSOs had restrictions to undertake face-to-face data collection, so we were in a very poor shape and suddenly we had the pandemic and this limited the capacity to collect data that was very necessary to make policy decisions for the SDG Agenda.
 - 73% percent of NSOs had a Population and Housing Census planned in 2020 or 2021 before the pandemic hit.

- In the case of low and lower-middle income group, 68% of the NSOs that were planning a Census had to postpone it, so a very important source of information for policy making was not available in almost two-thirds of the countries.
- This is very important and we need to improve the capacity. Some of these asymmetries that Mario was talking about are reflected in the capacity of producing and collecting high quality statistics and data, so this lack of data is in the middle of the pandemic and we are facing right now urgent demands for more data in terms of the impact on health, labor markets and the environment, and without high quality data it is going to be very difficult to reply to these urgent demands for more data.
- The Statistical Commission has taken a step towards adapting its work and trying to provide additional responses. Fortunately, the community was able to undertake the UN World Data Forum in a virtual format in October 2020, where we had a collection of good practices on how different agencies are responding to the demands of additional information.
- For example:
 - The Ghana Statistical Services leveraged call-detail records to assess the effectiveness of lockdown measures.
 - Chile's National Statistical Office -the INE- launched a geostatistical data platform to identify active COVID-19 cases within the context of sociodemographic data.
 - In our country, Mexico, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) developed a microsite in order to integrate statistical and geospatial information to inform decisions regarding the pandemic on how to target specific programs, such as vaccination and lockdowns.
 - In the UK, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) is carrying out the Coronavirus Infection Survey, in order to inform decisions.
- Let me conclude making another very important comment. In the recent session of the Statistical Commission we adopted the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting – Ecosystem Accounting (SEEA EA). This is a very important methodology because we are trying to know the interlinkages between these two different domains and break the silos between the economy and the environmental impact of some of the economic decisions that we undertake.
- The SEEA EA can provide some examples of how the relationship between these two domains is happening.
- Let me just give a brief example of the Netherlands, because this can lead to better management decisions. Land is a very valuable resource for dairy farming, including the production of the famous Gouda cheese. Peatlands, which cover 8% of the country's area are often drained for farmland causing large carbon emissions. Peats comprehend carbon collections, so the cost of these carbon emissions is usually absent in the national balance sheet when we rely on standard GDP measures, but the SEEA EA carbon accounts helped expose the true cost of Gouda cheese. Researchers have used carbon accounts to show that the profit from converting peatlands to farmland was smaller than the monetized cost of carbon emissions from draining the peatlands. In essence, the carbon accounts helped expose and quantify the negative externality, and a law was proposed to incentivize farmers to stop draining peatlands.

- I want to conclude this example by saying that we need data and ECOSOC should be aware of these important initiatives. Thank you.