



Engaging with development partners to stand-up COVID-19 rapid assessment surveys

Five tips for National Statistics Offices

The COVID-19 crisis has generated a lot of interest from development partners and donors around the world assisting developing economies with understanding the impacts of the pandemic to assist in the recovery process. But what happens when all this best-intentioned support is not well coordinated and nationally led? Are development partners helping to build back better? In this Stats Brief, five tips are presented to empower and enable National Statistics Offices to lead the development of and deliver innovative statistical products and services such as rapid assessment surveys of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.

This Stat Brief is issued without formal editing. It is prepared by Chris Ryan, Statistician, ESCAP Pacific Office with the support of Gemma Van Halderen, ESCAP Statistics Division, Kristen Himelein, World Bank, Tite Habiakare, Elisa Benes and Peter Buwembo from the ILO, Jayachandran Vasudevan, UNICEF, Sara Duerto Valero and Cecilia Tinonin from UN Women Asia Pacific, and David Abbott and Mike Sharp from the Pacific Community (SPC). Views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect ESCAP or any UN agency.

It can be widely seen that the COVID-19 crisis is having a significant effect on data collections carried out across the Asia-Pacific region, particularly household surveys. Two issues in particular stand out:

1. The impact on existing data collections which form a core part of the ongoing business of National Statistics Offices, such as censuses, labour force surveys, vital statistics and the Consumer Price Index
2. The desire to respond to the need for trusted, public information on the social and economic impact of COVID-19.

In Stats Brief Issue No. 23, Arman Bidarbakht Nia addressed the first of these issues with his brief entitled “Surveys Under Lockdown; a pandemic lesson”¹. The brief addressed the impacts of COVID-19 on existing data collections including surveys, censuses, administrative data and newer data sources such as big data. The brief also examined responses for dealing

with the impacts both during the “lockdown” and post pandemic” period, with a focus on regularly conducted household collections.

A new Asia Pacific Stats Café series, introduced by ESCAP to share knowledge, experience and information across the Asia-Pacific statistical community, also addressed the first issue. The second Café, held on 1 June 2020, heard from the ILO, UNICEF and ESCAP on how to maintain data collection procedures, practical aspects of mixing data collection modes and provided a platform for countries to exchange their expertise and learn from each other².

This brief delves into the second issue: responding to the need for trusted, public information on the social and economic impact of COVID-19. The focus is on empowering and enabling National Statistical Offices to engage with development partners and donors working with countries to stand-up rapid assessment surveys of households or businesses.

¹ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Stats_Brief_Issue23_Apr2020_Surveys_Under_Lockdown.pdf

² <https://www.unescap.org/events/stats-caf-series-covid-19-impact-household-surveys>

I. What are rapid assessment surveys?

Rapid assessment surveys are timely tools for helping countries identify impacts of a crisis such as COVID-19 as well as priorities for building back better. They are deployed within very short timelines in response to such a crisis and are not ‘business-as-usual’.

The purpose of a rapid assessment survey is to produce timely, quantitative data for rapid assessments, planning, decision-making and nowcasting but not for estimating key indicators such as labour market indicators or unemployment. Whilst their methodological rigor may suffer slightly, for instance lower response rates or smaller sample sizes than business-as-usual surveys, they are still designed to produce quantitative data in order to inform decisions and policies and still require methodological and technical back-stopping to produce reasonably reliable results³.

The involvement of National Statistical Offices in rapid assessment surveys is part of the methodological and technical back-stopping required to build trust and confidence in the results of rapid assessment surveys, and helps makes the results of the surveys part of the official statistics suite, albeit at a different quality level as ‘business-as-usual’ surveys.

II. Advancing official statistics in Asia-Pacific

Asia and the Pacific has two regional strategies for advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A *Collective Vision and Framework for Action*⁴ by the Asia-Pacific statistical community endorsed by the ESCAP Committee on Statistics at its fifth session in 2016 and a declaration on *Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind*⁵, endorsed by the Commission at its 75th session in 2019.

Broadly speaking, the *Collective Vision and Framework for Action* focusses on strengthening the statistical capacity of National Statistical Offices to

produce, disseminate and use official statistics through five action areas, while *Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind* brings a whole of government perspective to statistics as indispensable for evidence-based decision-making and of principal value for transparency, accountability and inclusive societies.

Both regional strategies focus on the collective vision that by 2030, national statistical systems are enabled and empowered to lead development of and to deliver innovative, trusted and timely products and services for urgently needed and evolving statistical requirements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

III. COVID-19 presents new opportunities for advancing official statistics

Countries in Asia and the Pacific are already responding to new opportunities as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

National Statistical Offices, such as the Department of Statistics Malaysia, have introduced interactive maps and visuals⁶ to show where the virus has spread whilst Statistics New Zealand have a dedicated COVID-19 data portal⁷ reporting on the changing state of aspects of New Zealand’s economy since the COVID-19 outbreak. New data series are being introduced, such as a weekly payroll jobs and wages in Australia series⁸ based on administrative data sources. Many are also exploring the use of other non-traditional data sources, such as mobile positioning data generated by cell towers⁹.

The Asia-Pacific Stats Café series heard from both Australia and Thailand on 8th June 2020 about the introduction of rapid assessment business and household surveys assessing socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. The Café was very well attended by nearly 20 countries across Asia-Pacific, all wanting to benefit from the experience of others on how to introduce a rapid assessment survey.

³ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/3_ILO-COVID19_Rapid_Surveys_support_Stats%20Cafe3.pdf

⁴ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/E.ESCAP_CST%285%29.1.Rev_.1.Collective_Vision.English.pdf

⁵ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP_CST_2018_7_Declaration.pdf

⁶ https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cone&menu_id=UjJoNk9OalhZWIVHdExiaGF1OW13UT09

⁷ <https://www.stats.govt.nz/experimental/covid-19-data-portal>

⁸ <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6160.0.55.001>

⁹ <http://www.positium.com/blog/data-collection-under-lockdown-value-of-big-data>

Many questions were raised by countries during the Café covering methodological aspects, questionnaires, response rates, frequency and response from users.

Details of the questions and answers can be found on our website at <http://m.rcm-asiapacific-un.org/events/asia-pacific-stats-caf-series-rapid-assessment-surveys-impact-covid-19> and at the end of this Stats brief.

For many countries in Asia-Pacific however, support from development partners and donors will be needed to stand up a rapid assessment survey.

In most cases, development partners collaborate with National Statistics Offices in undertaking statistical activities such as rapid assessment surveys. However, despite best intentions, this may not always be the case.

In drafting the regional declaration *Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind*, countries asked development partners to consult with the national statistical office or national statistical system concerned before conducting any statistical study or survey. COVID-19 and the roll-out of rapid assessment surveys is an opportunity to (a) remind development partners of this request and (b) provide some practical guidance to national statistical offices on how to engage.

IV. What proactive measures can NSOs undertake to get involved

There are five proactive measures a National Statistics Office should look to adopt to get involved in any COVID-19 data collection activities in their country. The five points are summarised in [Figure 1](#).

1. Actively reach out to development partners and other parts of government to ensure Rapid Assessment Surveys are coordinated.

Whilst many survey-based initiatives are well on the way and some National Statistical Offices already actively involved, this isn't the case everywhere.

Even if your National Statistical Office is already engaged with Government or a development partner (public or private sector) on such an initiative, anticipate more is happening behind the scenes. Do what you can to find out about each such activity, to

effectively coordinate and manage all. If approached by another government department, development partner or donor to conduct such a survey, request information on with whom else they have been in consultation. Also be timely – respond quickly as the whole purpose of the rapid assessment survey is timely data and delays in responding are unlikely to lead to collaboration. Rapid assessment surveys are a good opportunity to demonstrate responsiveness.

2. Take some form of leadership in the process of developing and implementing a Rapid Assessment Survey.

During this time of crisis, there may be no more important task your office may be involved in than the management of a rapid assessment survey to drive strategic support and recovery. The national statistical office are the national experts on data collections and as such, if not leading the process, should be very influential in assisting determine the process through which a rapid assessment survey is conducted.

3. Oversee the content and questionnaire design to be used for any Rapid Assessment Survey.

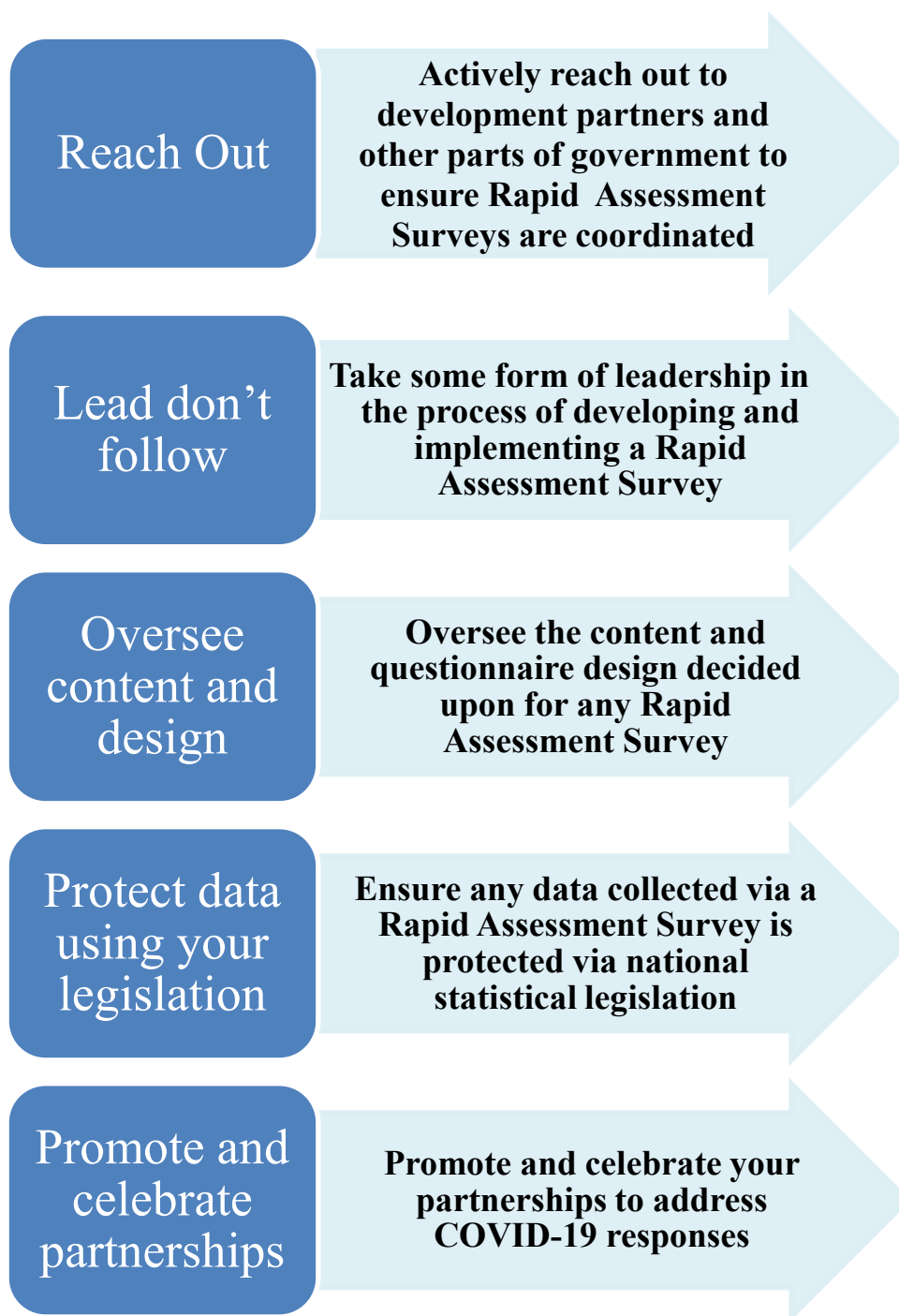
Regardless of who might be supporting such an initiative, any rapid assessment survey should be primarily based around supporting your country get back on its feet. They may also be an opportunity to address data needs for other purposes, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but remember the rapid assessment survey is exactly that – a rapid assessment survey and timeliness should be afforded a high, if not the highest priority across the various dimensions of quality: relevance; timeliness and punctuality; accuracy and reliability; accessibility and clarity; and coherence and comparability.

Based on your extensive survey experience, the National Statistical Office is well placed to coordinate with development partners and government to ensure the most appropriate content for your national circumstances is included and questionnaire design best practices implemented wherever possible.

Ideally the National Statistical Office should sign off on any Rapid Assessment Survey questionnaire before adoption to ensure it is relevant to national circumstances and data needs, and it is important that

you are able to communicate this to your development partners supporting rapid assessment surveys.

Figure 1: Empowering National Statistical Offices to engage with development partners



4. Ensure any data collected via a Rapid Assessment Survey is protected via national statistical legislation and made widely available to national and international development partners and data users.

If the National Statistical Office is leading and coordinating the data collection, access and control of the data should not be a problem. If however, private

firms and/or call centres are being hired to undertake the data collection process through the use of phone interviewing (a likely scenario), do everything you can to ensure the data is i) collected and disseminated in line with confidentiality guidelines ii) kept safe (ie, minimise the risk of individual disclosure), iii) owned

by the National Statistical Office¹⁰, and iv) shared under appropriate arrangements in line with your statistics legislation, and with the general spirit of producing data to be used widely.

5. Promote and celebrate your partnerships of successful survey undertakings to address COVID-19 responses.

Make your stakeholders aware of how your office appreciates the support and engagement with partners to assess the impact of COVID-19 and thus enhance a speedy recovery. Such partnerships need not be restricted to development partners and donors but can include engagements with private companies that may be requested or required to adopt unique collection processes during these unusual times.

For example, the Maldives recently undertook a survey measuring the impact of COVID-19 on resort employees, supported by UNDP, which was prominently featured on their National Bureau of Statistics website¹¹ also acknowledging the role of local telecommunications companies who made it possible. Similarly, UN Women partnered with 12 mobile network operators to roll out rapid assessment surveys in 11 countries and the services provided by the operators were provided pro-bono, showcasing the important role the private sector can play in promoting data availability and contributing to building back better from the COVID-19 crisis.

V. Development partners stand ready to assist

The World Bank¹² responded quickly to the need for rapid assessment surveys by supporting thirty-two economies with projects in two areas: high-frequency phone surveys and use of alternative data sources. Asia-Pacific economies identified by the World Bank to receive support include Afghanistan, Armenia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia,

Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam.

UN Women also responded quickly by launching a rapid assessment survey on the consequences of COVID-19 during the first week of April 2020. The survey was subsequently rolled out in 11 countries¹³ across Asia-Pacific¹⁴, in partnership with National Statistics Offices, Ministries of Women and Mobile network operators.

The ILO and UN Development Programme (UNDP) are also assisting countries with rapid assessment surveys. The ILO is supporting surveys in Fiji, Palau, Papua New Guinea, RMI, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tonga, Tuvalu and Viet Nam, and UNDP has partnered with the Maldives National Bureau of Statistics to launch a survey of the impact on livelihood of resort employees due to COVID¹⁵.

For the small island states of the Pacific, the Statistics for Development Division (SDD) of the Pacific Community (SPC) established a dedicated webpage on which it has published a selection of available data highlighting areas of economic vulnerability to the impacts of the pandemic. SDD has also provided the small NSOs in the region with guidance on administrative data that could be used to enhance short-term economic monitoring in the absence of timely quarter national accounts¹⁶.

Guidance on methodological and technical aspects of rapid assessment surveys is also available and has been widely distributed in Asia and the Pacific by development partners. For instance, ILO issued guidance on questionnaire design¹⁷ to promote common measurement aligned with international standards and good practices in rapid surveys aimed to capturing information on the impacts of the pandemic on labour markets and unpaid work, the World Bank

¹⁰ Data ownership may be difficult to negotiate with all development partners. For example, World Bank legal agreements stipulate any data collection activities undertaken by contractors is owned by the World Bank. The data is made available to the government but is owned by the World Bank. This requirement does not apply to initiatives by a government to which the World Bank provides financing.

¹¹ <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/#>

¹² <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/tfscbs-rapid-support-help-countries-respond-covid-19-outbreak>

¹³ Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Maldives, Samoa, Solomon Island, Pakistan, Philippines, and Thailand

¹⁴ <https://data.unwomen.org/resources/surveys-show-covid-19-has-gendered-effects-asia-and-pacific>

¹⁵ <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/>

¹⁶ <https://sdd.spc.int/disasters-data>

¹⁷ https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_745658.pdf

issued best practice guidelines on [sampling](#)¹⁸, [instrument design](#)¹⁹, and [implementation](#)²⁰ for use in the approximately 100 high frequency surveys being rolled out under their global COVID-19 response initiative, and UN Women has issued guidance particularly in relation to core and thematic questions relating to gendered impacts of COVID-19²¹

UN ESCAP is the United Nations' regional hub promoting cooperation among countries to achieve inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific. ESCAP is the largest regional intergovernmental platform with 62 members, 58 of which are based in Asia and the Pacific.

ESCAP offers countries sound analytical products that provide insights into the evolving economic, social and environmental dynamics of the region such as this Stats Brief series and the Stats Café series mentioned earlier. ESCAP, ILO, UNICEF, UNFPA and the World Bank have all collaborated in bringing Stats Café sessions to Asia and the Pacific, and future collaborations with other partners including WHO and UN Women are under development.

ESCAP's policy advisory service, capacity building and technical assistance to governments aims to support countries' sustainable and inclusive development ambitions. In this latter regard, UN ESCAP is a member of the [Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities](#) which focusses on, amongst other things, common standards and platforms, inter-institutional support and advocacy for statistics. Hearing the requests from countries at the Asia Pacific Stats Café on 8th June for greater collaboration by development partners with national

statistical offices, and in our role as secretariat for the regional declaration, *Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind*, where countries requested development partners to consult with the national statistical office or national statistical system concerned before conducting any statistical study or survey, ESCAP raised the need for NSO involvement in rapid assessment surveys at an Extraordinary Meeting of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities in June 2020.

The issue was subsequently picked up by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys²² who have agreed to promote greater coordination and information sharing among member agencies and issue guidelines to development partners and donors on standing-up rapid assessment household surveys.

UN ESCAP also raised the issue at the 14th meeting of the [High Level Group on Partnerships, Coordination and Capacity Building](#) for statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HLG-PCCB), composed of Member States and including regional and international agencies as observers. The HLG-PCCB has been tasked to provide strategic leadership for the sustainable development goal implementation process as it concerns statistical monitoring and reporting. The HLG-PCCB secretariat also brings COVID-19 issues to the attention of the Group.

This Stats Brief and the accompanying Asia Pacific Stats Café are also part of development partner's responses to build capacity and provide technical assistance to support countries sustainable and inclusive development opportunities.

For more information regarding ESCAP's work in statistics development please visit: <http://www.unescap.org/our-work/statistics>

Previous issues of Stats Brief: <http://www.unescap.org/resource-series/stats-brief>

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¹⁸ <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/742581588695955271/guidelines-on-sampling-design>

¹⁹ <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/908001588697965879/overview-of-the-questionnaire-template>

²⁰ <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/189691588696451053/guidelines-on-cati-implementation>

²¹ <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/guidance-rapid-gender-assessment-surveys-impacts-covid-19>

²² <https://unstats.un.org/iswghs/>