

Monitoring the State of Statistical Operations under the COVID-19 Pandemic

August 2020

Highlights from the second round of a global
COVID-19 survey of National Statistical Offices

Key Messages

- Since the last survey in May, most NSOs have gradually moved towards office reopening and returning to face-to-face data collection, but working from home has become the new normal for many. New protocols are needed for operating more efficiently under this new environment, and some of the best practices and lessons learned should be scaled up.
- Remote work, training, data collection, and data storage are vital for NSOs to operate during the pandemic but many, particularly in low and middle-income countries, are constrained by inadequate ICT equipment and infrastructure. This calls for more decisive investments in digital technology.
- Short-term statistical production, which heavily rely on traditional face-to-face methods, continues to be affected, with low and middle-income countries impacted the most. Reliance on alternative data sources requires smart investments to build the right spectrum of skill sets amongst NSO's staff and NSS data producers.
- National and international coordination in the collection of data on the COVID-19 pandemic has been inadequate in some cases, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. New institutions, or repurposing of existing institutions, with strong local ownership, may be needed to address these coordination problems and enhance effectiveness of individual efforts.

Overview

This report presents the results of the second round of a global survey on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operation of National Statistical Offices (NSOs). Compared to the first round¹ that provided a snapshot of the situation in May 2020, shedding light on office closures, disruptions to data collection and statistical reporting, and the readiness of national statistical agencies to respond to the increasing demand for data, the second round of the survey looks at the extent to which restrictions and disruptions have receded or become more widespread. In doing so, this report presents a closer look at concrete support needs and how they may best be addressed. A comparison of the response rate of the two survey rounds is available in the box below.

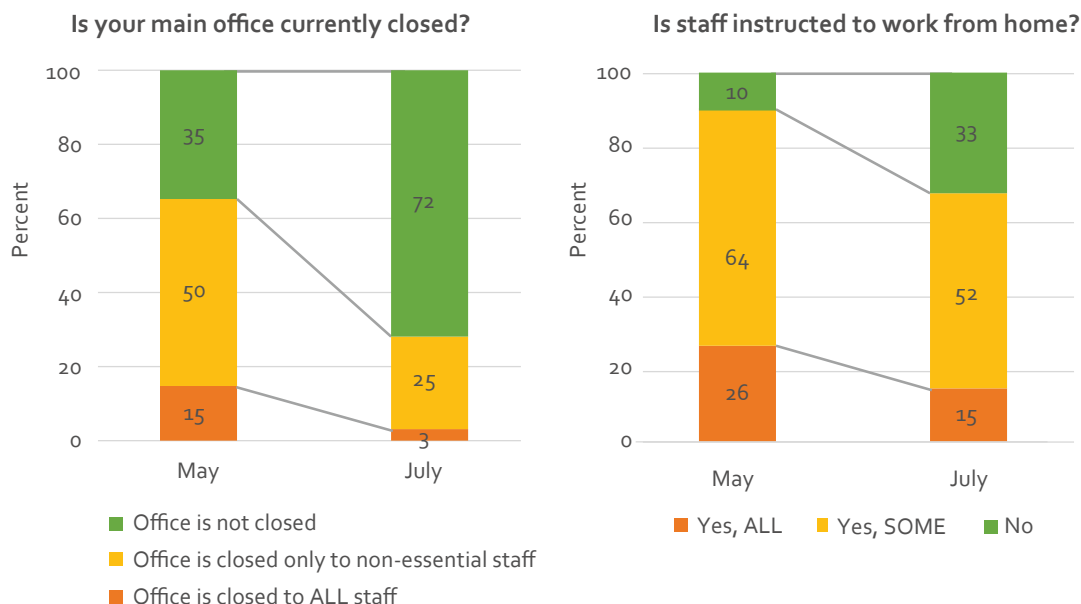
Survey coverage and response rate

A total of 122 NSOs responded to the first COVID-19 Survey to National Statistical Offices took place in May, while 112 responded to the second round in July. Ninety-three NSOs have participated in both rounds, while 29 participated in only the first round and 19 participated in only the second round. Broken down by geographic region, survey participation has been as follows: Central and Southern Asia (6 offices in Round 1 and 8 in Round 2), Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (12 and 12), Europe and Northern America (39 and 34), Latin America and the Caribbean (17 and 16), Northern Africa and Western Asia (14 and 17), Oceania (4 and 3), sub-Saharan Africa (30 and 22).

¹ <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/covid19-response/covid19-nso-survey-report.pdf>

While many offices have reopened, the majority still operate in emergency mode with some or all of their staff working from home

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic:



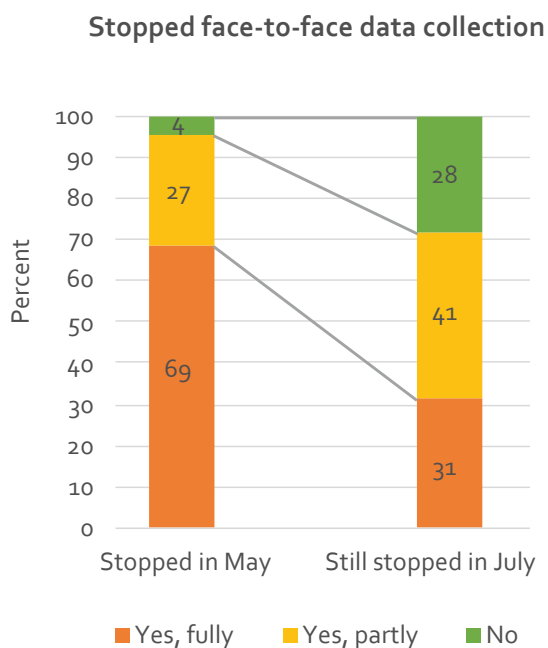
In July, when the second round of this survey took place, a large majority of NSOs (72 per cent) was allowing at least some staff to physically access their premises, with only 3 per cent of having their main office building closed to *all* staff. This has been a great improvement from May 2020, when only 35 per cent of the office premises were fully open and 15 per cent were restricting access to *all* their staff.

Regionally, the gradual opening of NSO main office building to staffs was noted in 2 out of every 3 NSOs in Central and Southern Asia. In contrast, NSO buildings in about 1 in every 4 countries in Europe and Northern America and in Latin America and the Caribbean (23 and 25 per cent, respectively), and in one third of countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia, have remained partially closed to staff between May and July 2020.

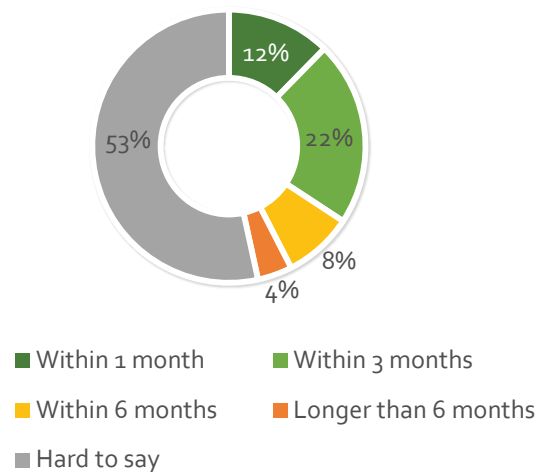
In May 2020 the vast majority of NSOs (90 per cent) were instructing at least some of their staff to work from home. Two months later, operations are still far from returning to normality with still two-thirds of NSOs instructing some or all their staff to work from home.

Fieldwork data collection is also gradually resuming. The percentage of offices reporting they had fully halted face-to-face data collection went down from 69 percent in May to 31 in July.

In addition, 28 percent of the NSOs indicated that they had no restrictions in place for field data collection, against just 4 percent two months earlier. The trend is clearly one of easing of restrictions, reopening of offices and a gradual return to face-to-face data collection. While approximately half the respondents reported that their offices were planning to restart normal field data collection operations within the next 6 months, the other half still were uncertain and not able to indicate an estimated timeline for the full resumption of face-to-face interviews.



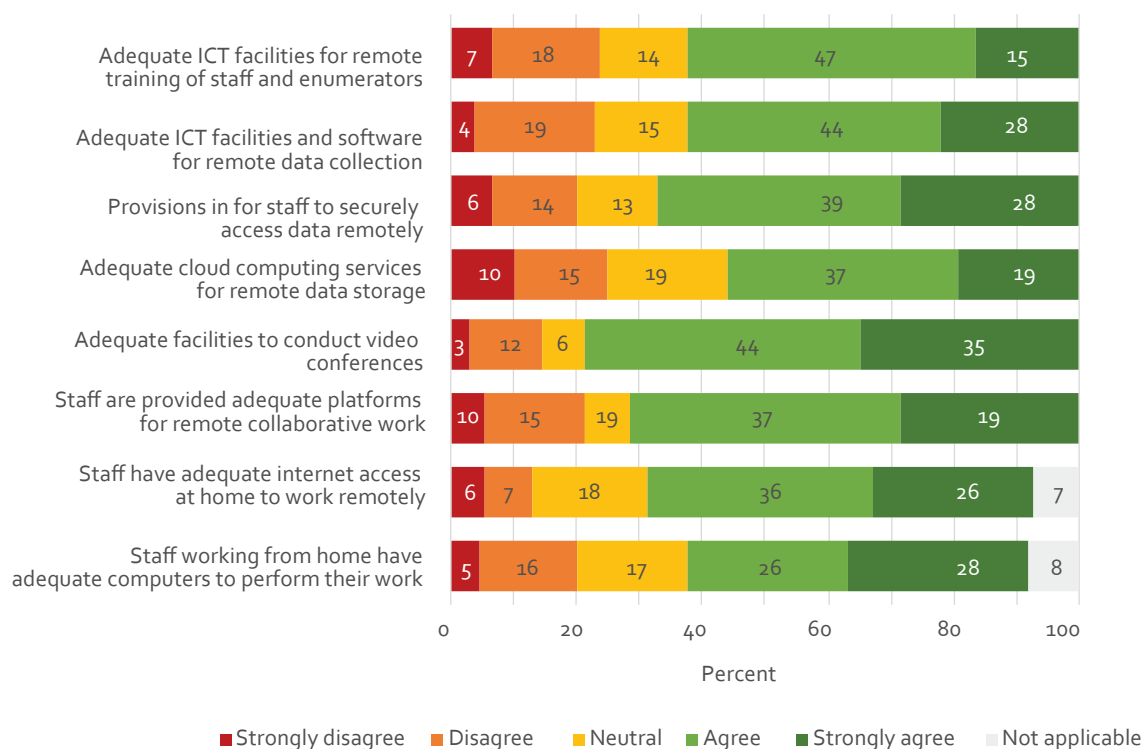
When do you expect to be able to resume face-to-face interviews in full?



For 15 to 20 percent of offices, working from home is constrained by inadequate ICT equipment or infrastructure

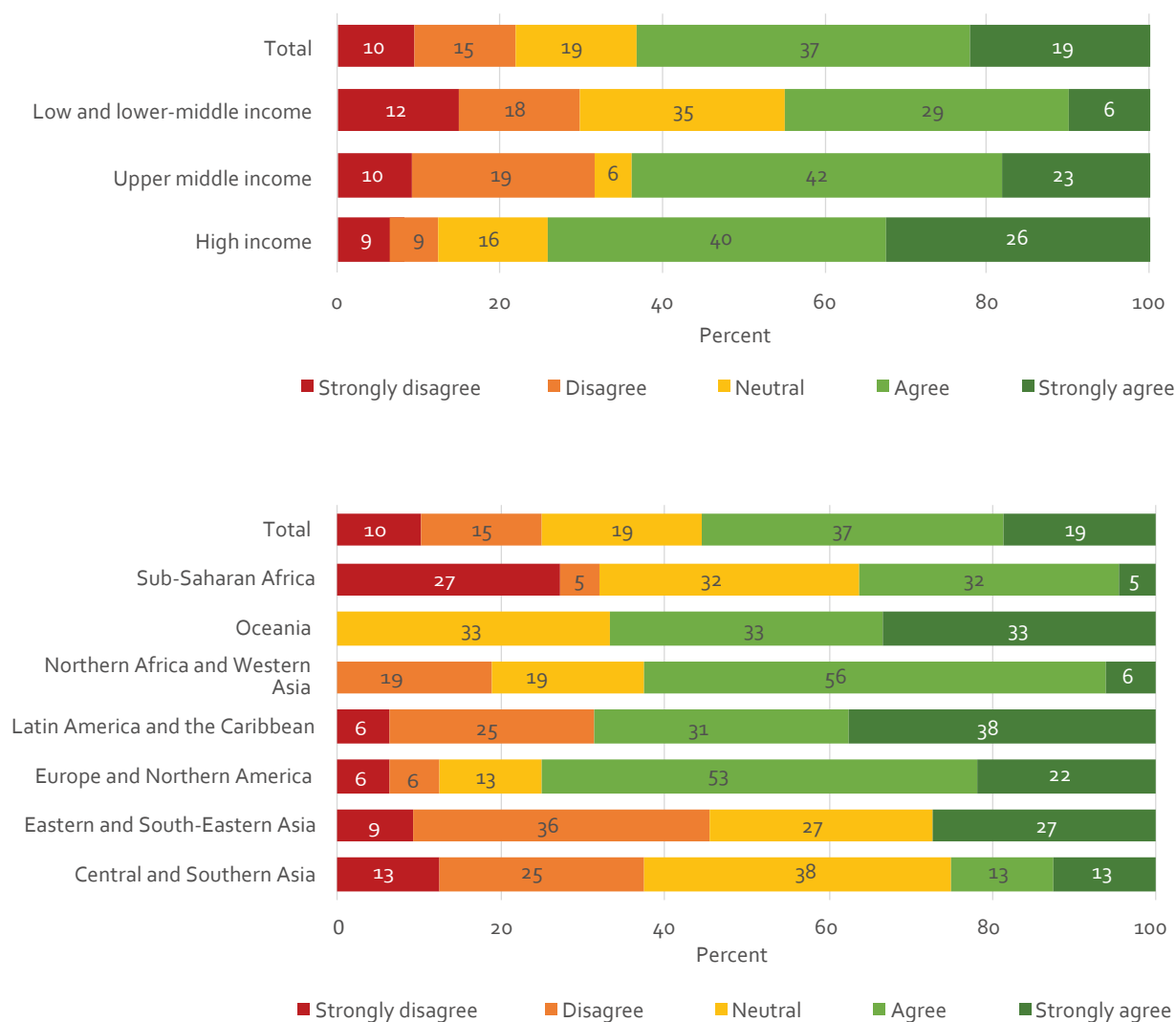
The survey also investigated the readiness for working from home in National Statistical Offices. Between 13 and 25 percent of offices signaled inadequate equipment, software and IT infrastructure impeding efficient working from home, with the most common issues being around access to cloud computing services for data storage and exchange, the suitability of facilities for remote training, and the availability of adequate computers for staff to perform home-based work.

ICT readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic



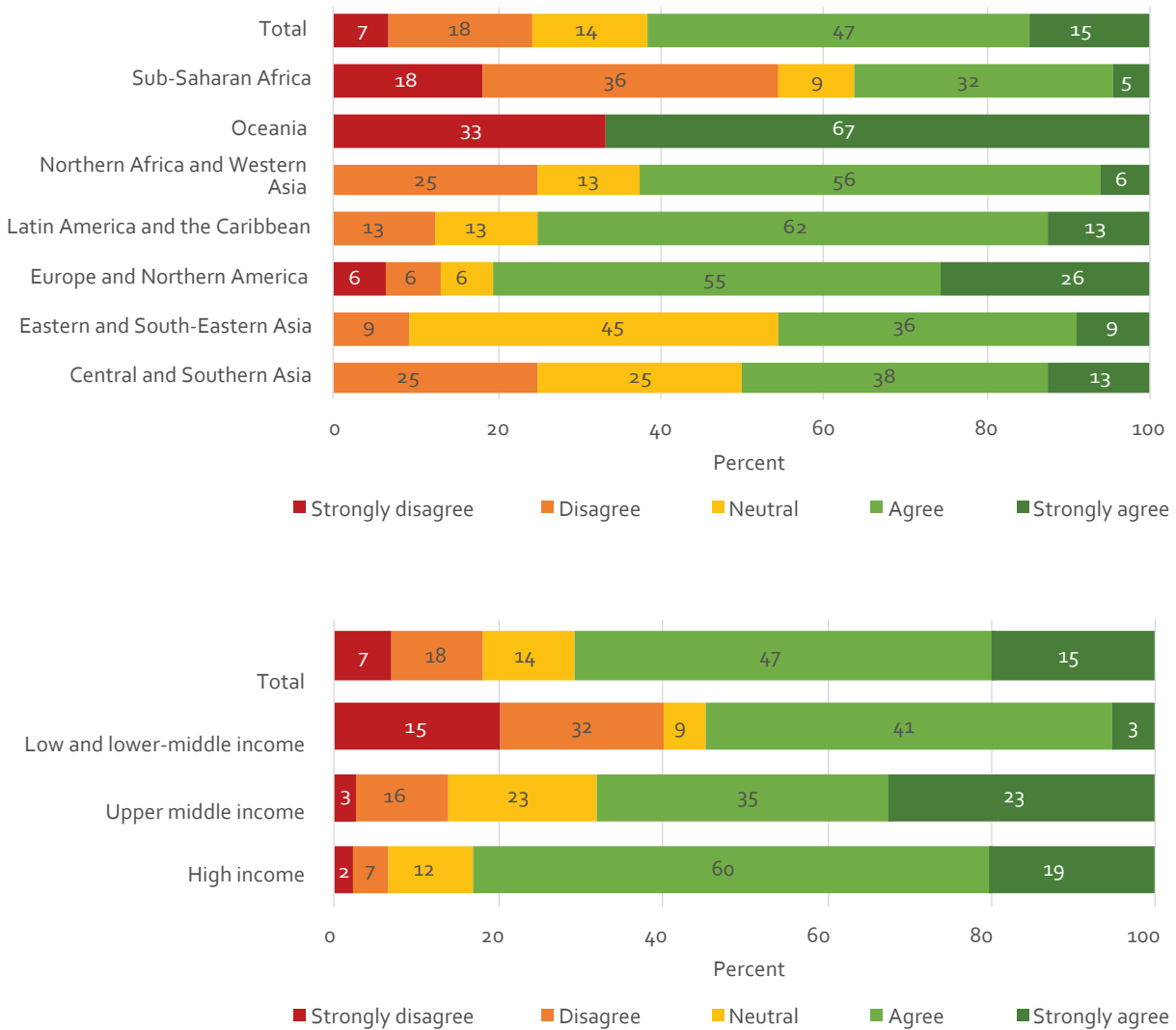
There are, however, marked differences across income levels and regions. Issues around cloud computing for data storage and exchange are more pronounced in low-income and middle-income countries, where around 3 in 10 NSOs reported inadequate access. This is the case for 45 percent of offices in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and 38 percent in Central and Southern Asia.

**The office has access to adequate cloud computing services
for remote data storage and data exchange**



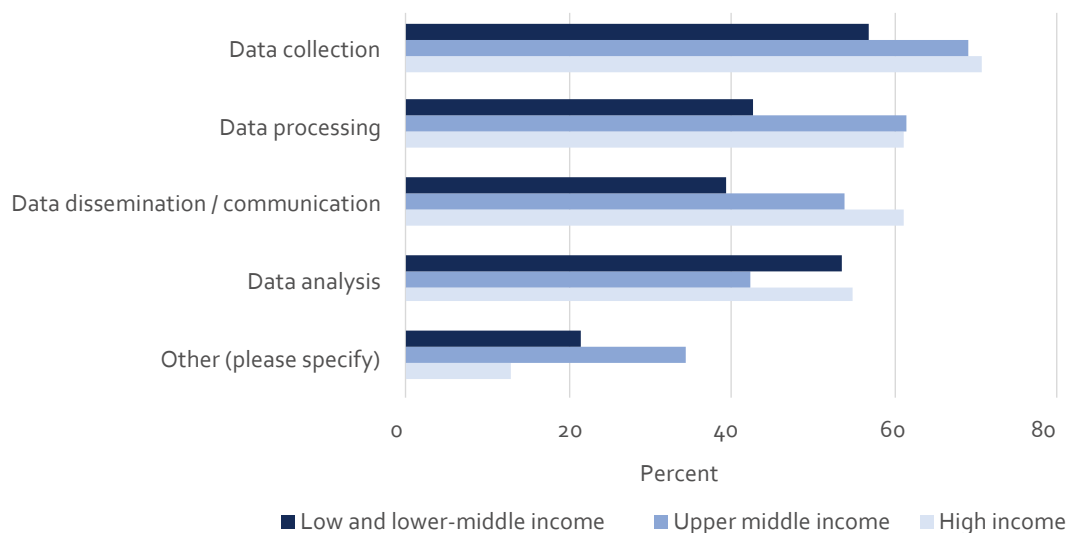
In addition, infrastructure for remote training of staff and enumerators is considered inadequate primarily by respondents from offices in low and lower-middle income countries (47 percent) as well as in sub-Saharan Africa (54 percent).

The office has adequate ICT facilities for remote training of staff and enumerators



In spite of these infrastructural issues, remote training of NSO staff has become widespread in countries of all income levels, although low and lower-middle income countries lagged somewhat behind.

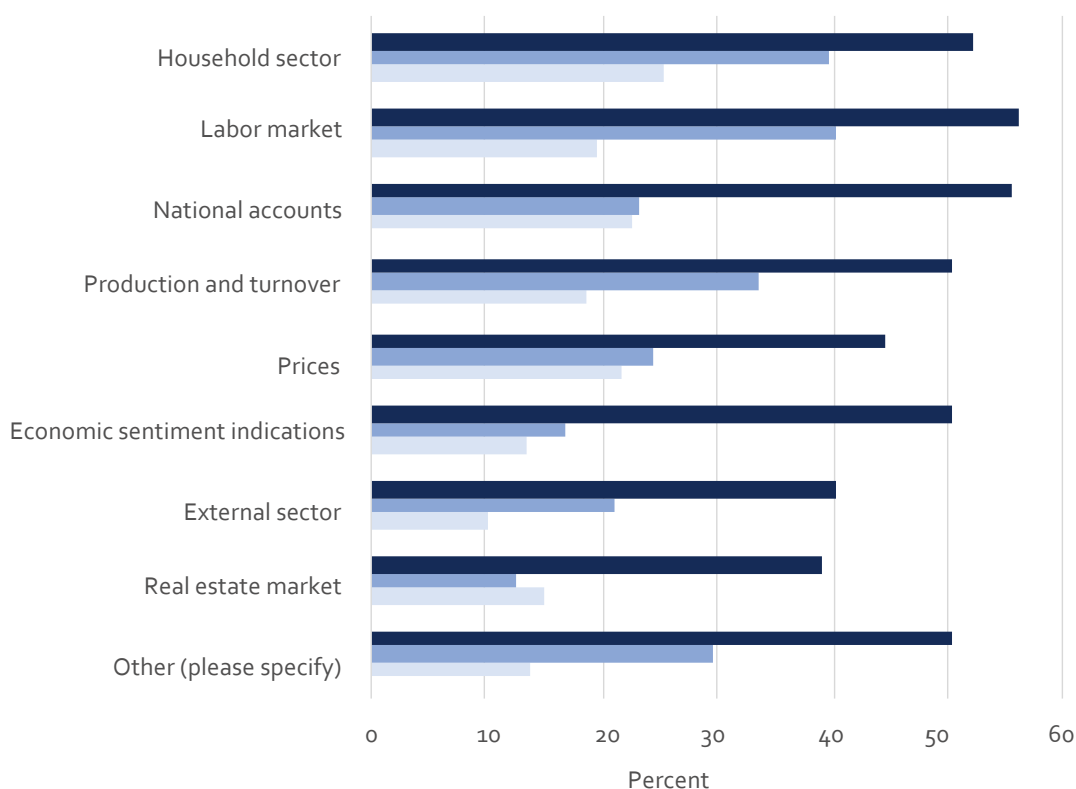
Did NSO staff participate in remote trainings amidst the COVID-19 crisis covering any of the following topics?



Short-term statistical production continues to be affected, with low and middle-income countries impacted the most

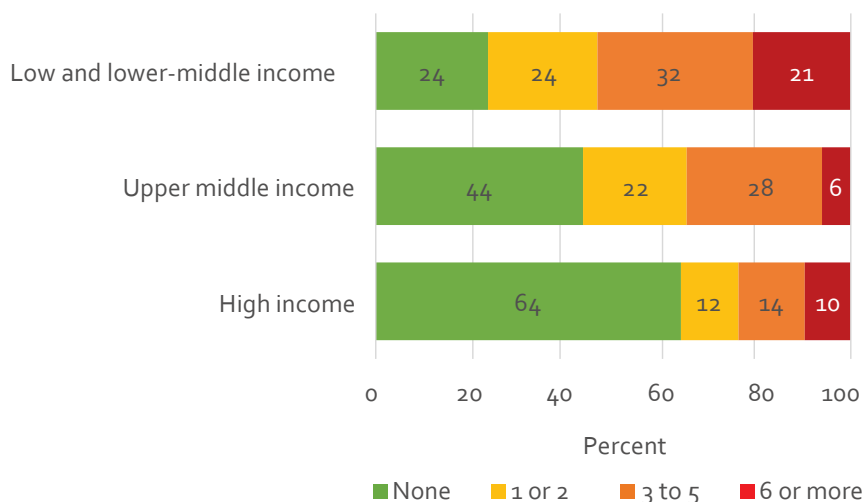
Half of the responding countries reported that their production of monthly or quarterly statistics has been affected for at least one domain category. Household sector and labor market statistics were the most affected domains, as one-third of the respondents noted that the pandemic had affected their ability to produce this type of short-term statistics.

Proportion of countries where the current COVID-19 pandemic is affecting NSO's ability to produce essential monthly/quarterly statistics, by type of statistics



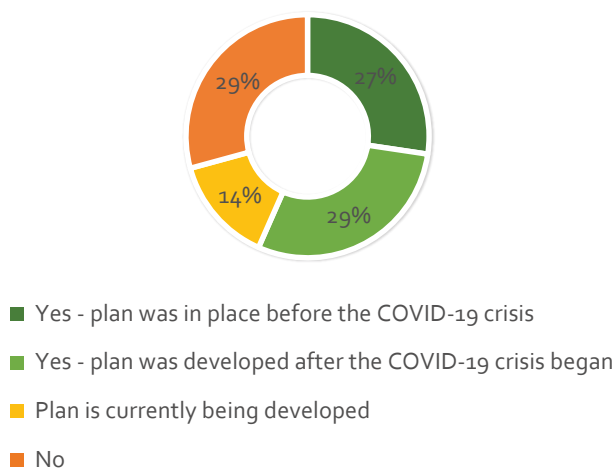
The ability to produce short-term statistics was most affected in low and lower-middle income countries. Three in four countries in that income group reported that their production of monthly/quarterly statistics had been affected for at least one domain, while one in five countries recorded that production was affected in six or more domains. In contrast, two thirds of the respondents in high-income countries reflected that the production of short-term statistics remained completely unaffected.

Proportion of countries reporting production of monthly and quarterly statistics being affected, by number of domains



As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, NSOs have improved their emergency preparedness. Before the pandemic, less than a third of offices (27 percent) had a crisis management plan in place. In July 2020, the situation had reversed, as only 29 percent of national statistical offices either did not have or were not preparing their own crisis management plan.

Does your office have a crisis management plan?

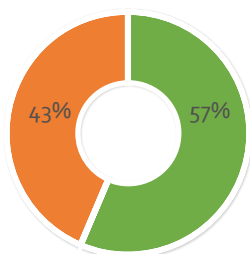


NSOs are playing a major role in governments' COVID-19 response

NSOs have been playing a major role in government response, both by participating in government committees (57 percent of responding offices) and by producing data through COVID-19 pandemic-related surveys (63 percent). The proportion of NSOs that implemented COVID-19 surveys is highest in sub-Saharan Africa (86 percent) and among low and lower-middle income countries (69 percent).

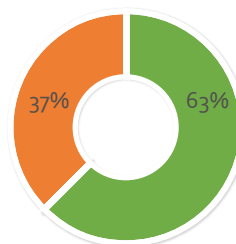
Proportion of NSOs serving on a government committee managing the crisis and implementing a COVID-19 pandemic-related survey

Has your office been called to serve on a government crisis response group or advisory committee at the national level due to COVID-19?



■ Yes ■ No

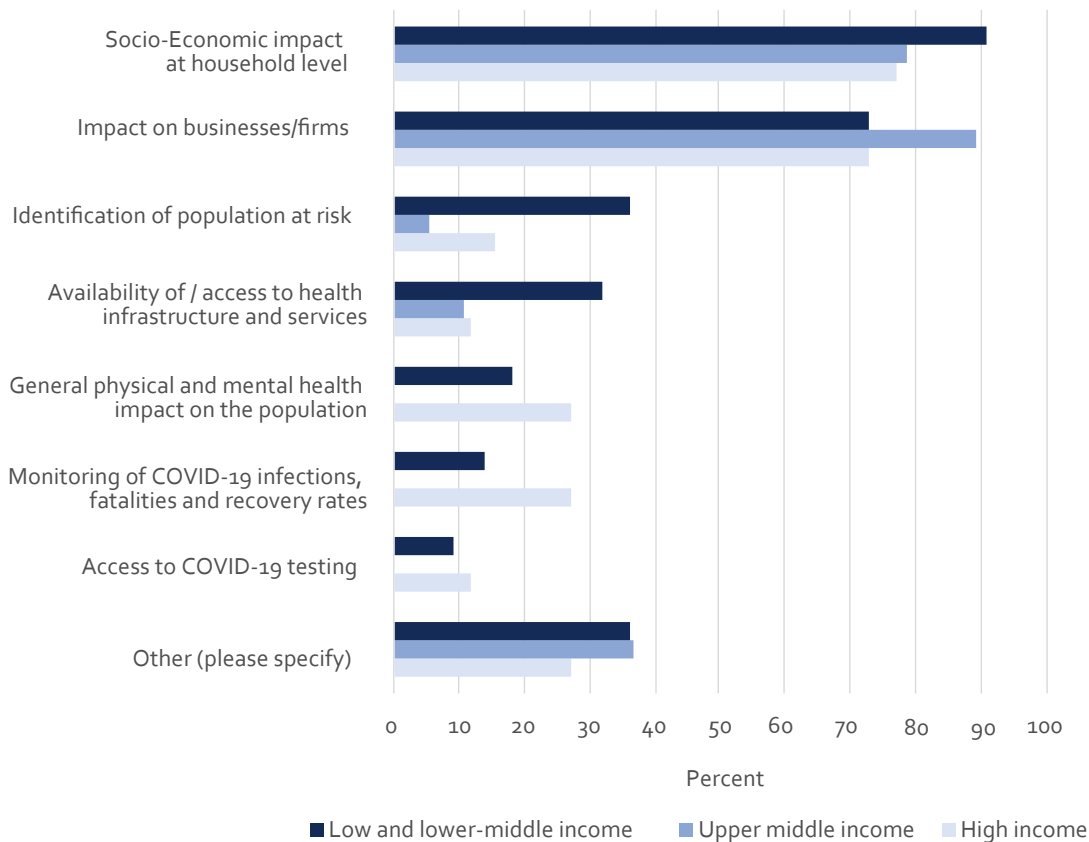
Is your office currently implementing any survey on COVID-19 and its impacts?



■ Yes ■ No

More than three quarters of the COVID-19 surveys implemented by NSOs measure the socio-economic impact on households and businesses. This is the prevalent focus of these surveys in countries across all income levels. Less common objectives of national COVID-19 surveys include identifying population at risk, measuring access to health services, determining the impact on physical and mental health and examining access to COVID-19 testing, as well as monitoring COVID-19 infections, fatalities and recovery.

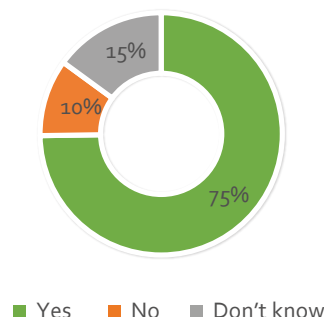
What is the focus of the survey on COVID-19 and its impacts?
(by income group)



Other players are also involved in COVID-19 data collection efforts

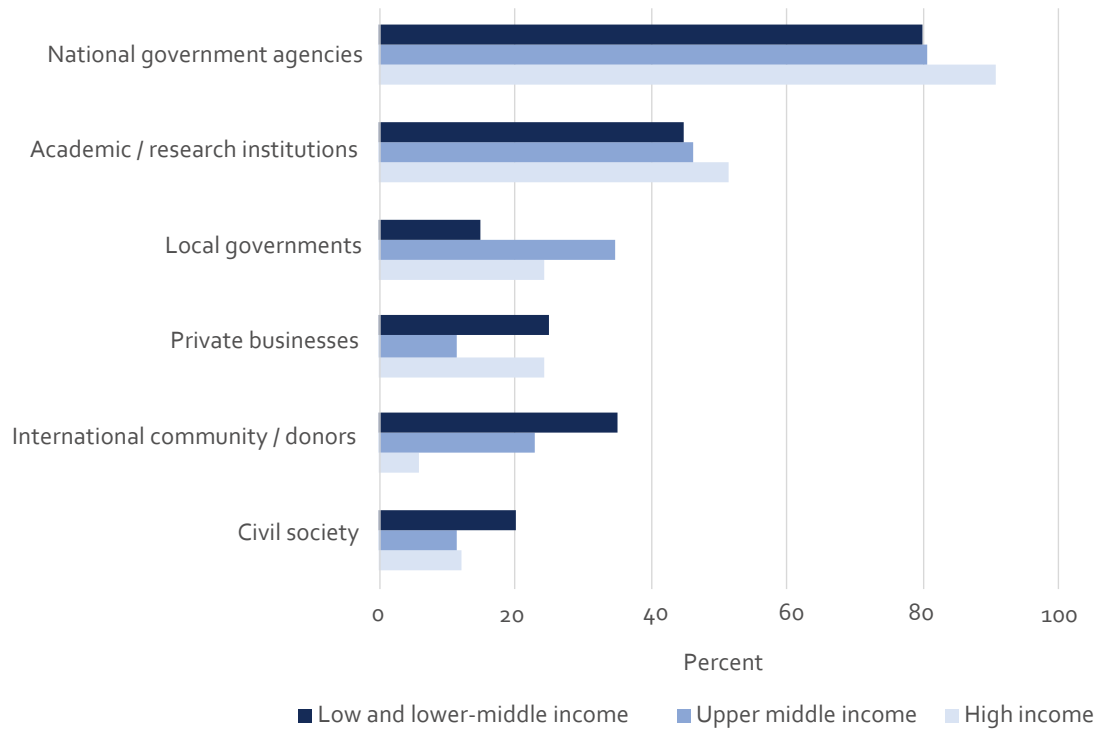
In three quarters of countries in the sample of this survey, additional COVID-19 data collection efforts outside of NSOs were identified. In the countries where COVID-19 data collection efforts are taking place outside of the NSO, these are predominantly led by other government agencies, although academic and research institutions also play an important role. The international community or donors have also been leading COVID-19 surveys in one third of lower or lower-middle income countries.²

Is there any other COVID-19 related data collection efforts
in your country being led by institutions other than your office?



² More information on how the international community works with countries on COVID-19 surveys is available at <https://unstats.un.org/iswghs/task-forces/covid-19-and-household-surveys/COVID-19-impact-surveys/>

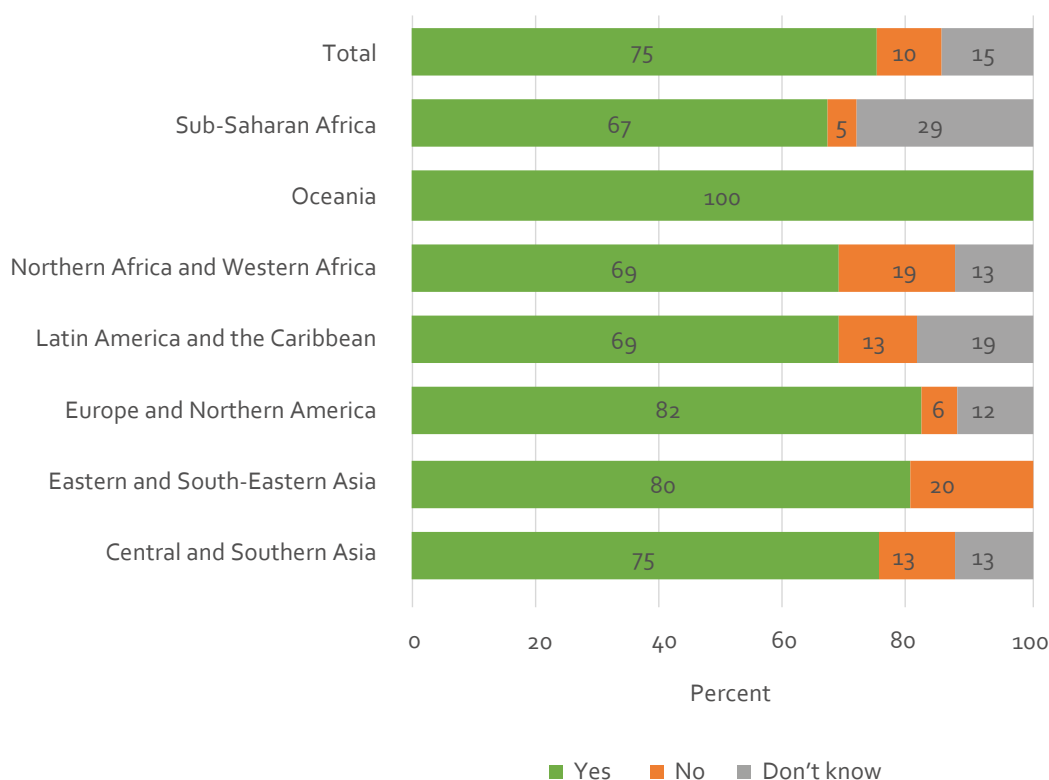
Who is leading other COVID-19 related data collection efforts?



In about 60 percent of cases, NSOs are to some extent involved in national data collection efforts led by other organizations, and plan to use their results. However, a coordinated national statistical system for COVID-19 pandemic-related data collection has been lacking in some regions.

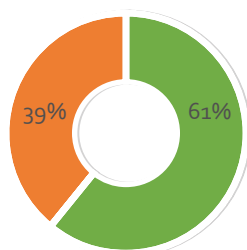
A well-coordinated national statistical system is crucial for harmonized concepts and definitions across different data sources within a country and for efficient data collection and dissemination to meet the needs of policymakers. In 15 percent of the countries surveyed, NSOs did not know whether there were any other COVID-19 pandemic-related data collection efforts in the country. This percentage was much higher for sub-Saharan African countries, at about 30 percent.

Is there any other COVID-19 related data collection efforts in your country being led by institutions other than your office?

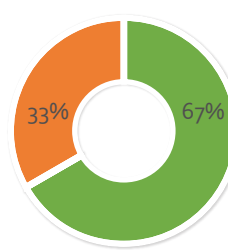


Even when NSOs were aware of COVID-19 data collection activities outside of their offices, only about 61 percent indicated that they were involved in data collection; and 67 percent indicated that they would use the results of COVID-19 pandemic-related data collected by other agencies.

Is your office involved in any of these data collection efforts?

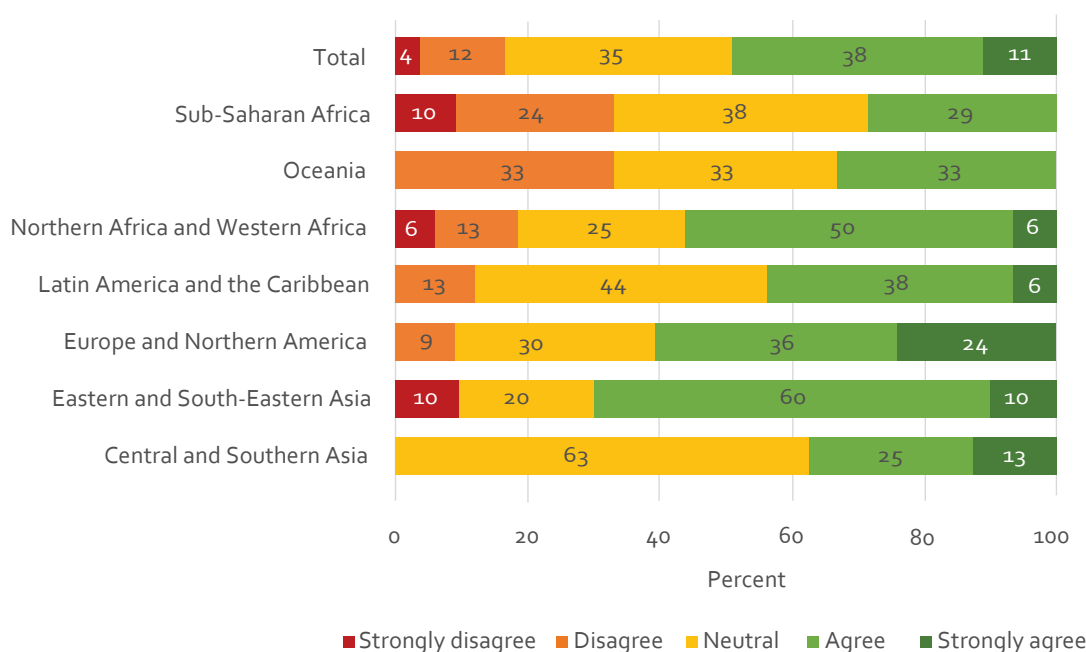


Are you using or planning to use the results of any of these other COVID-19 related data collection efforts for your reporting purposes?



When asked about the overall sentiment on whether survey efforts on COVID-19 were well coordinated within the country, around half of the NSOs responded positively (agree and strongly agree); and 16 percent reported poor coordination (disagree and strongly disagree). Coordination seemed to be more challenging in Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa, where only around one third of the reporting countries showed satisfaction with the current level of coordination.

Current efforts to collect data on COVID-19 and its impact
in my country are well coordinated

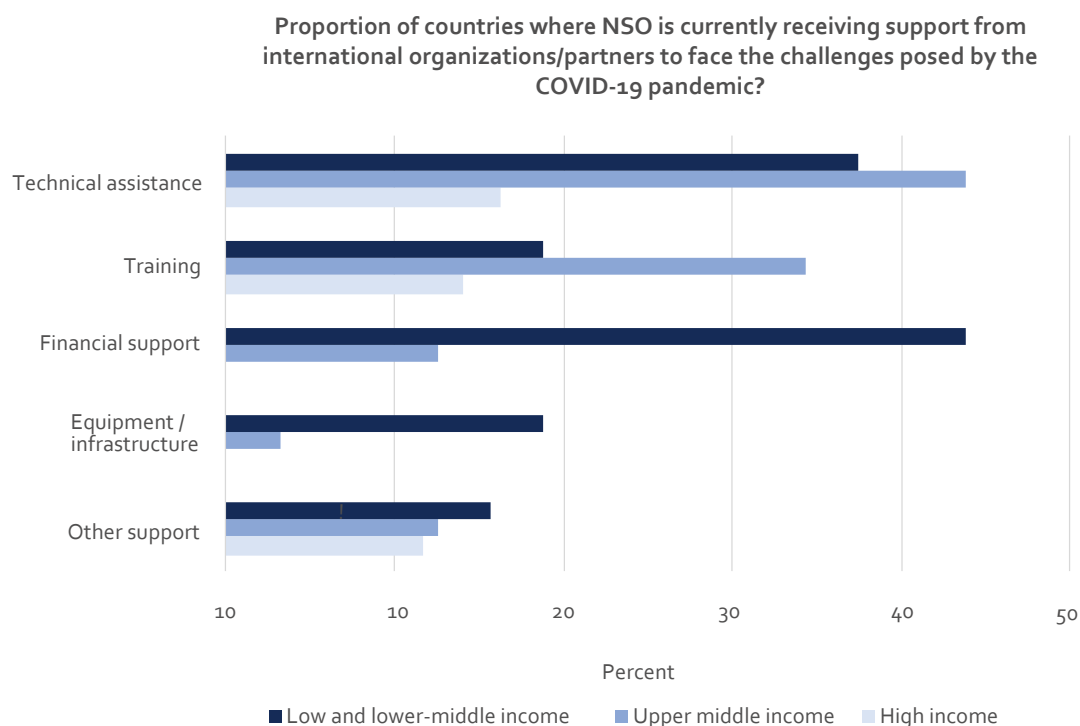


To improve the coordination of efforts to collect data on COVID-19 and its impact, NSOs offered a number of suggestions. These include:

- Establishing a coordinating technical committee on COVID-19 at a higher level to work with all relevant government offices and holding regular meetings for coordinated efforts;
- Making all data collection efforts transparent and carrying out mapping exercises of all data collection activities to avoid duplication;
- Involving key private sector players as well as local governments for countries with a decentralized system;
- Improving collaboration among government agencies for better access to administrative data;
- Investing, both financially and technically, in the NSOs to improve their capacity in quickly responding to crisis. Technical areas that were highlighted as requiring assistance included non-person-to-person survey methods and data storage;
- Encouraging all other stakeholders to consult with NSOs for any data collection to ensure that the data collected are fit for purpose and followed proper anonymization processes to protect the confidentiality of individuals;
- Investing in an overall data storage structure and data dissemination platform for COVID-19.

Countries in different income groups reported receiving different types of support

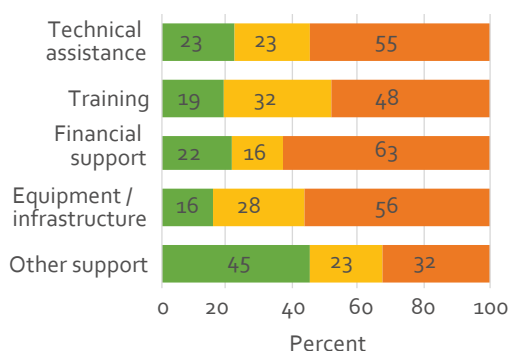
Almost half of low and lower-middle income countries received financial support (44 percent), followed by technical assistance (38 percent). Upper-middle income countries most often received support in the form of technical assistance (44 percent), followed by training (34 percent). High income countries most often received support in the form of technical assistance (16 percent), followed by training (14 percent).



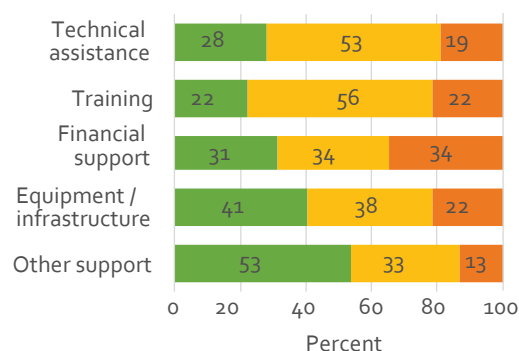
While international organizations and partners have provided technical or financial support to many countries, more assistance is needed to help mitigate the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic.

More than half of the countries indicated that more assistance is greatly needed for each type of support – financial, technical, training and infrastructure. There was a significant difference by income group in terms of the extent and type of support needed. Whereas few high-income countries were in need of any kind of support, two-thirds or more of upper middle-income countries reported that they required technical assistance, training and financial support. For low and lower-middle income countries, most voiced a stronger need for every type of support. Financial support, equipment and infrastructure support, and technical assistance were the most needed types of support in countries in this income group.

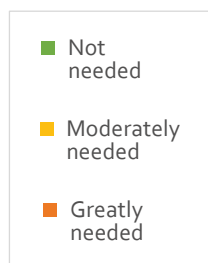
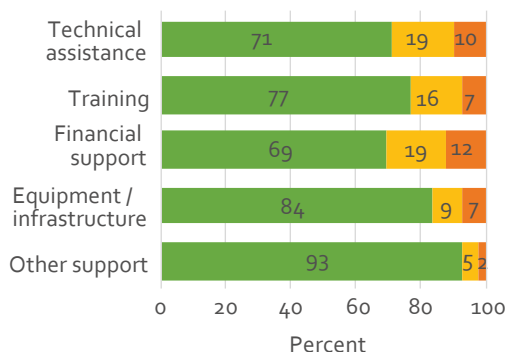
**Need for additional support to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic:
Low and lower middle income countries**



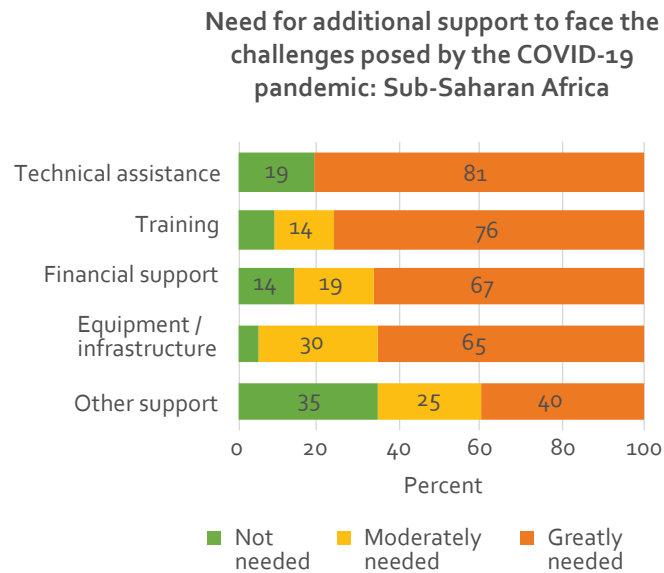
**Need for additional support to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic:
Upper middle income countries**



**Need for additional support to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic:
High income countries**



Respondents in sub-Saharan Africa revealed a lack of support systems more than any other region. At least three out of four respondents in that region reported that both technical assistance and training were greatly needed, and two thirds expressed great need for financial support and equipment and infrastructure.



The COVID-19 survey of NSOs - Round 2

- Mode: Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), programmed in Survey Solutions
- Launched on 7 July, questionnaire accepted through 25 July 2020
- Questionnaires sent to 195 NSOs, 112 responses received
- Sections: Monitoring of operations under COVID-19; COVID-19 Response and coordination
- This work was carried out under the aegis of the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD), in partnership with World Bank's Development Data Group and in coordination with the UN Regional Commissions. The Team who worked on the survey and the report was led by Francesca Perucci (UNSD) and Gero Carletto (World Bank), and consisted of Faryal Ahmed, Daniel Eshetie, Jonathan Gessendorfer, Luis G. González Morales and Habibur Khan (UNSD), Haoyi Chen (Inter-secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys) and Ivette Maria Contreras Gonzalez, Sergiy Radyakin, Zurab Sajaia, Philip Wollburg and Alberto Zezza (World Bank).