



**United Nations**

Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
Statistics



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# Monitoring the state of statistical operations under the COVID-19 Pandemic

5 June 2020

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



# The Global COVID-19 survey of National Statistical Offices

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, National Statistical Offices (NSOs) around the world have not been exempt from the massive disruptions to lives and livelihoods being caused by the novel coronavirus. Now more than ever, governments, firms, civil society organizations, and the general public require timely and reliable information to navigate, cope with, and respond to the unprecedented impacts of the global pandemic. At the same time, national statistical systems are being challenged by serious disruptions to censuses, household surveys, and other crucial data collection, processing and dissemination operations.

This report presents the results of the first wave of a global survey<sup>1</sup> on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operation of NSOs, their responses, and the ensuing needs of financial and technical support. The results provide useful information for the global statistical community, donors, development partners, and the general public to ensure that contingency plans and strategic decisions are based on evidence and the actual needs of countries. This information helps us understand disruptions in national statistical activities, towards identifying priorities for allocating resources and establishing technical cooperation in the areas of greatest need.

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<sup>1</sup> The web-based survey was e-mailed to 218 National Statistical Offices. Of these, 122 responded, representing a variety of geographic regions and income levels. The figures in this report are based on data from all NSOs that responded to each question; therefore, the denominator for each graph may vary slightly due to non-response for individual questions.



# Key findings

- About 65 percent of the headquarters offices of NSOs are fully or partly closed, 90 percent have instructed staff to work from home, and 96 percent have fully or partially stopped face-to-face data collection
- 9 in 10 NSOs in low- and lower-middle income countries saw the pandemic affect their ability to meet international reporting requirements.
- 8 in 10 NSOs in low- and lower -middle- income countries face difficulties operating during the pandemic due to funding constraints
- Phone surveys are the most commonly used approach to analyze or monitor aspects of the pandemic
- Around half of the NSOs are setting up or planning to set up national data platforms to serve governmental and public data needs
- 6 in 10 NSOs that participated in the survey, stated the need for additional external support to face the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic



## The functioning of National Statistical Offices is heavily impacted...

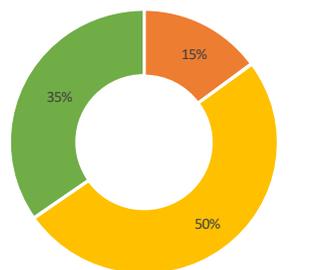
...65 percent of offices are fully or partially closed, and 9 out of 10 offices have instructed some or all staff to work from home. Nearly all NSOs have stopped or significantly reduced face-to-face data collection...

NSOs around the world have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of mid-May 2020, 15 percent of the offices were fully closed, and half were only open to essential staff. While strict closures have been relatively more frequent in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the NSOs of a dozen countries continued to open normally.

However, even in most of the offices that remain open, staff have been advised to work from home: only 12 of the NSOs that responded to the survey (10 percent) have not currently instructed any of their staff to work from home. Approximately 90 percent of NSOs have provided their staff with individual protective gear, such as face masks, gloves, and sanitizing wipes. Nonetheless, face-to-face field data collection has been impacted in all but 4 percent of responding offices, with 69 percent halting it altogether. Only 27 percent of offices are continuing some form of face-to-face data collection.

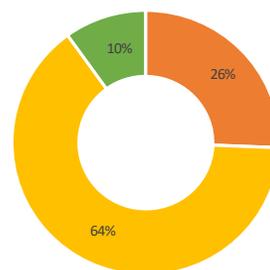
As consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Is your main office currently closed?



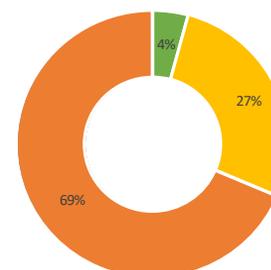
- Office is closed to ALL staff
- Office is closed only to non-essential staff
- Office is not closed

Is staff instructed to stay and work from home?



- Yes, all
- Yes, some
- No

Have you stopped field data collection involving face-to-face interviews?



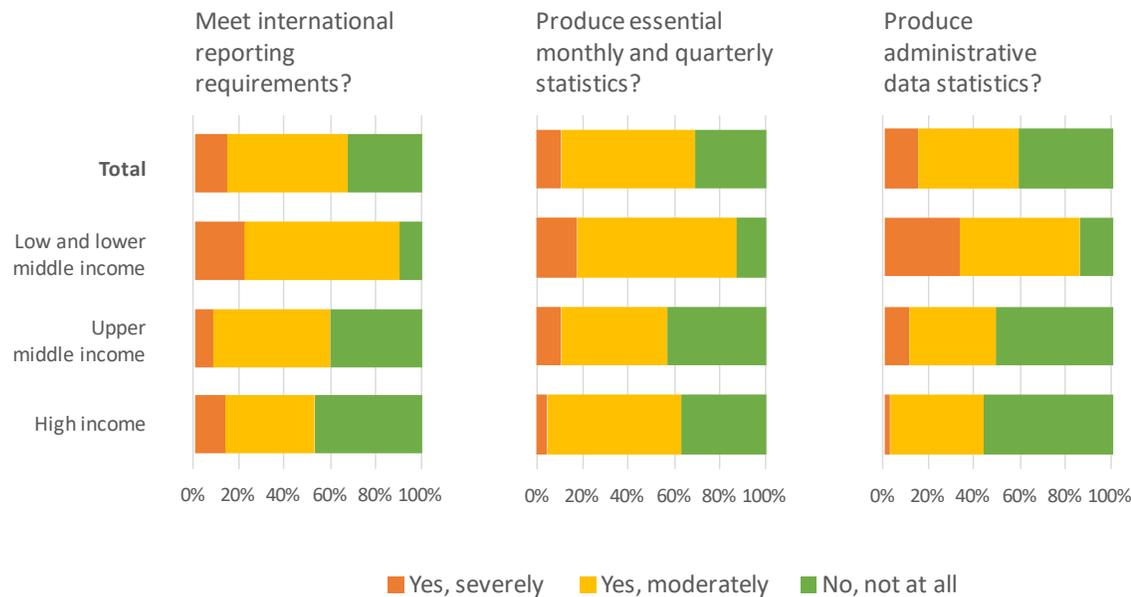
- Yes, fully
- Yes, partly
- No



The disruptions to work arrangements and data collection have severely limited the ability of two thirds of NSOs to produce essential statistics and meet international reporting requirements. Low and lower-middle income countries, and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have been particularly affected. Every single low-income country responding to the survey indicated that COVID-19 was affecting their ability to meet international reporting requirements. In comparison, 48 percent of high-income countries stated that COVID-19 did not affect their ability to meet international reporting requirements..

...and the ability to produce essential statistics and to continue publishing is being severely affected

Is the current COVID-19 pandemic affecting your ability to:



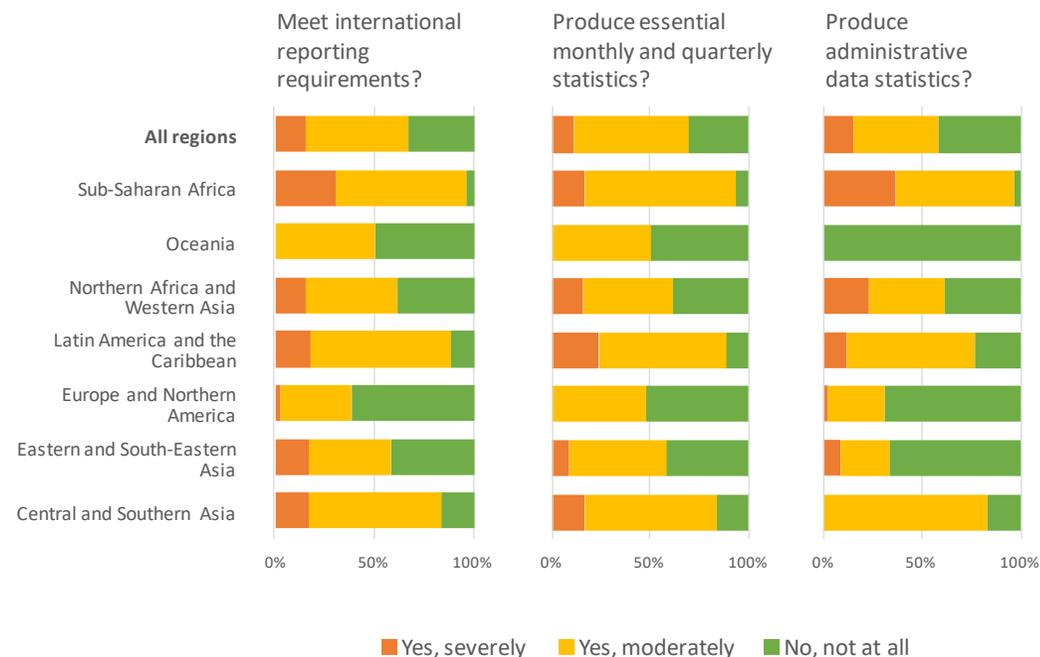


Administrative data production has been on average relatively less affected, with 56 percent of offices reporting moderate or severe impediments. This masks however a very pronounced difference in impacts across regions and income level. More resourced statistical systems in East Asia, Europe and North America have largely seen no impact on the production of administrative data, while the near totality of offices in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and two thirds of those in the LAC and MENA regions have been either moderately or severely affected.

When asking about the major challenge they faced in producing statistics based on administrative data, 54 NSOs reported that providers of administrative data were not able to collect/receive data themselves, and/or that the NSOs had difficulties in contacting them.

...and the ability to produce essential statistics and to continue publishing is being severely affected

Is the current COVID-19 pandemic affecting your ability to:



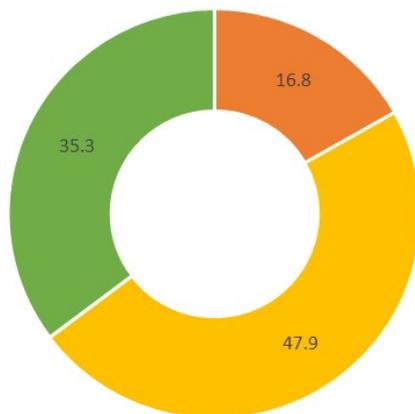


Approximately two out of three national statistical offices are also altering their scheduled calendar of publication and data dissemination as a result of the pandemic.

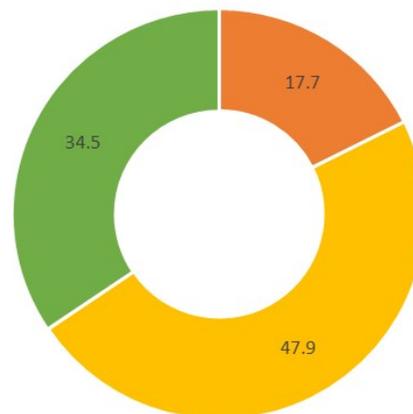
Only 28 out of 121 national statistical offices reported that new legislation or regulations specific to statistical legislation had been issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of which were in higher income countries. In most cases (22 out of 28), the new legislation or regulations were issued by the government, while in 13, the NSO issued the new regulation.

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, did you have to alter:

The scheduled calendar of publications?



The schedule of data dissemination?

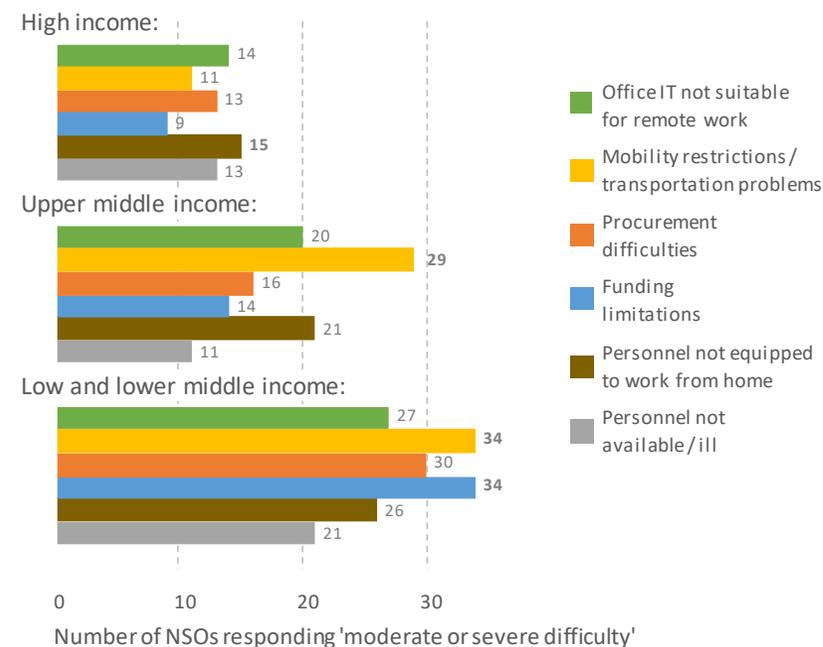
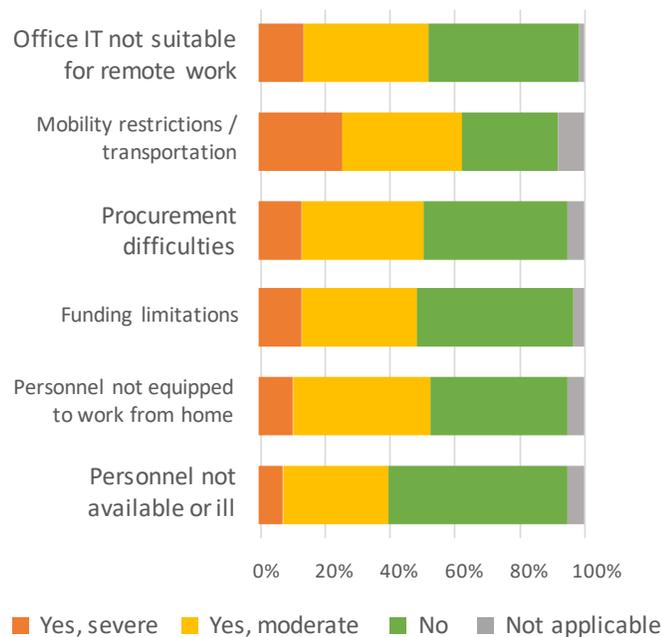


Yes, substantially    Yes, marginally    No

Mobility and transportation restrictions are particularly challenging for NSOs in low- and lower middle-income countries (34 out of 38, and upper middle-income countries (29 out of 37), but far less so for NSOs in high-income countries (11 out of 44).

The main constraints faced by NSOs are difficulties related to mobility and transport restrictions, which were indicated as 62 percent of the respondents reported to have faced moderate or severe difficulty. Many other factors, including connectivity constraints for remote work, funding constraints, and procurement difficulties, were also widely cited as areas where operational difficulties associated with the pandemic have emerged.

As consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, are you facing difficulties in operating due to:



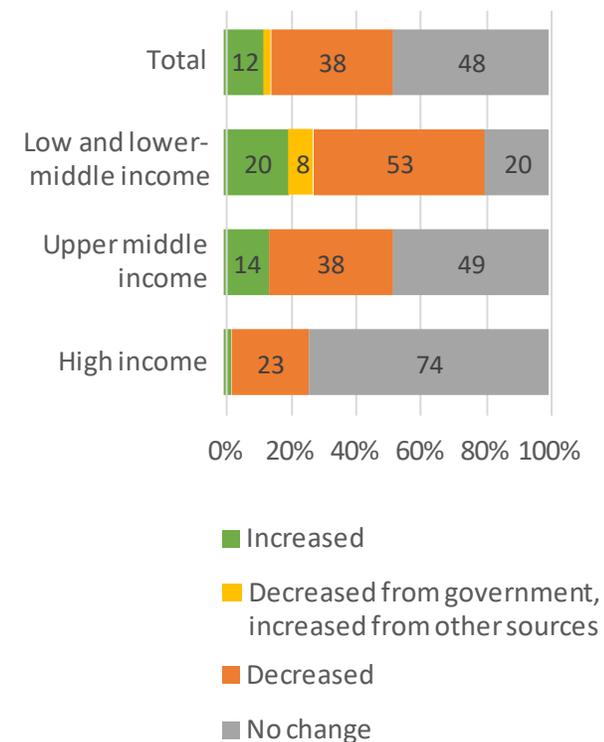


Funding has been impacted heterogeneously, as funding decreases are more frequent than increases, and funding remained steadier in well-resourced offices

The impact of the pandemic on funding of National Statistical Offices has been highly heterogeneous. About half of them report no change in funding (with the percentage ranging from 74 percent in high-income countries to 20 percent in low- and lower middle-income countries (LMIC)). Of those reporting changes in funding, the majority indicate a decline in government funding, funding from donors, and other resources.

While this affects offices across income levels, it is most common in LMICs, where more than 53 percent of offices have seen funding cuts, as opposed to 38 percent in upper middle-income countries, and 23 percent in high-income countries. Interestingly, there seems to be a dichotomy in low- and lower middle-income countries, with a non-negligible number reporting increases in funding, mostly from donors, but in some cases also from government sources. .

Has your funding been affected due to the current COVID-19 pandemic?



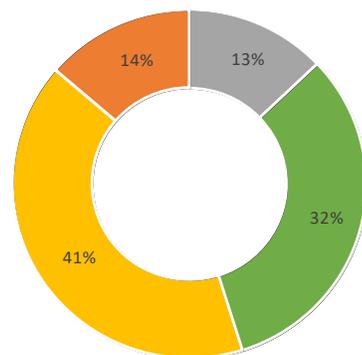


Census operations have been impacted in many of the countries that were planning the implementation of a Population and Housing, Agricultural, or Business Census in 2020.

For all censuses combined, preparatory activities were to some extent impacted in 55 percent of cases. Fieldwork had to be postponed to later in 2020 in 40 percent of the cases, and to 2021 and beyond in another 16 percent.

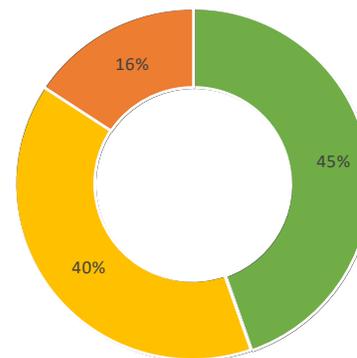
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, did you have to stop or postpone:

Preparatory activities for planned census?



- No. Activities were completed before the COVID-19 arrival
- No. Proceeded / will proceed with activities in spite of COVID-19
- Yes. Had to postpone or cancel **SOME** preparatory activities
- Yes. Had to postpone or cancel **most/ALL** preparatory activities

Field work of planned census?



- No. Neither stopped nor postponed
- Yes. Had to postpone to later in 2020
- Yes. Had to postpone to 2021 or beyond

In particular, the breakdown by type of census is as follows:

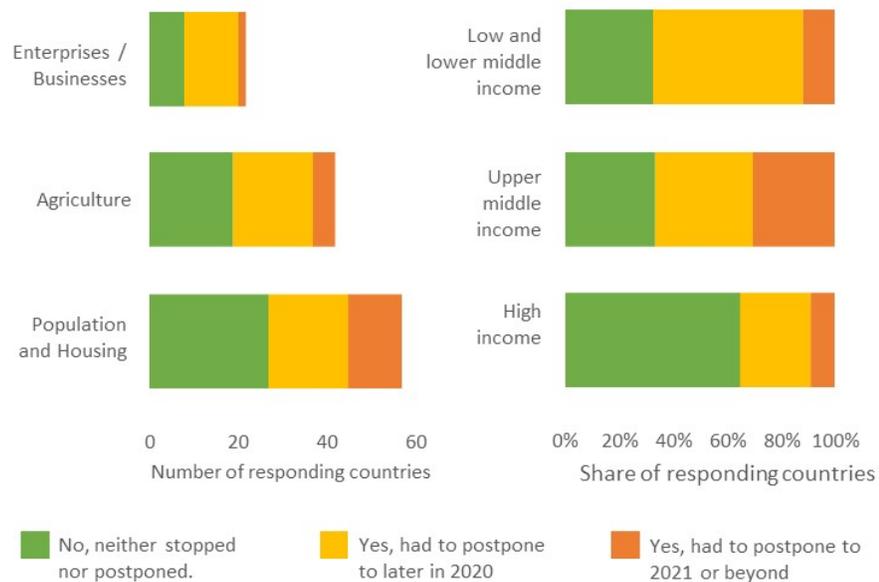
- 61 countries were planning a Population and Housing Census in 2020; 58 percent of countries responding saw an impact on preparatory activities, and 53 percent of those which responded had to postpone fieldwork to later in 2020 or to 2021 or beyond. .
- 44 countries were planning an Agricultural Census in 2020; 50 percent of countries responding saw an impact on preparatory activities, and 55 percent of those which responded had to postpone fieldwork to later in 2020 or to 2021 or beyond.
- 26 countries were planning a Business Census in 2020; 57 percent of countries responding saw an impact on preparatory activities, and 64 percent of those which responded had to postpone fieldwork to later in 2020 or to 2021 or beyond.



Well-resourced offices have been better able to continue census operations without major disruptions. It will be critical to monitor the ability of less well-resourced offices to resume census activities in 2020.

The main reasons for the impact on census operations as identified by respondents were the need to reduce face-to-face interviews, followed by mobility and transport restrictions. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and Oceania were the most affected, with no offices able to carry on with census activities according to their original plans.

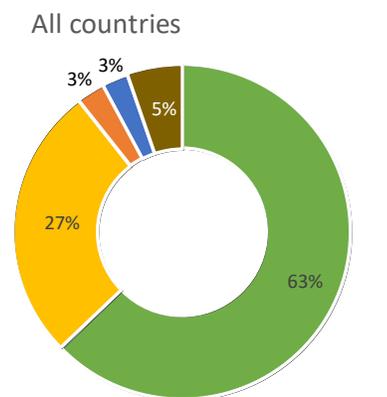
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, did you have to stop or postpone the field work of planned census?



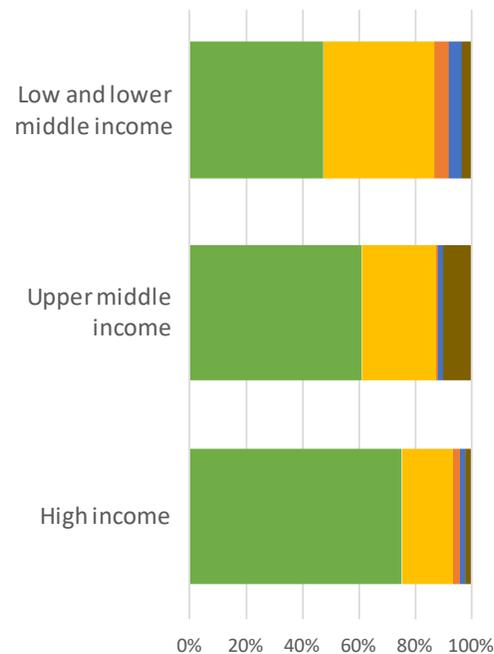


Official survey operations have been impacted in 4 of 10 countries. High-income countries have been better able to continue survey operations, with three quarters of survey operations continuing without postponement, compared to just half in LMICs.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, did you have to stop or postpone the field work of planned survey?



- No
- Yes. Postponed to later in 2020
- Yes. Postponed to 2021 or beyond
- Yes. Stopped indefinitely
- Yes. Had to skip wave(s)

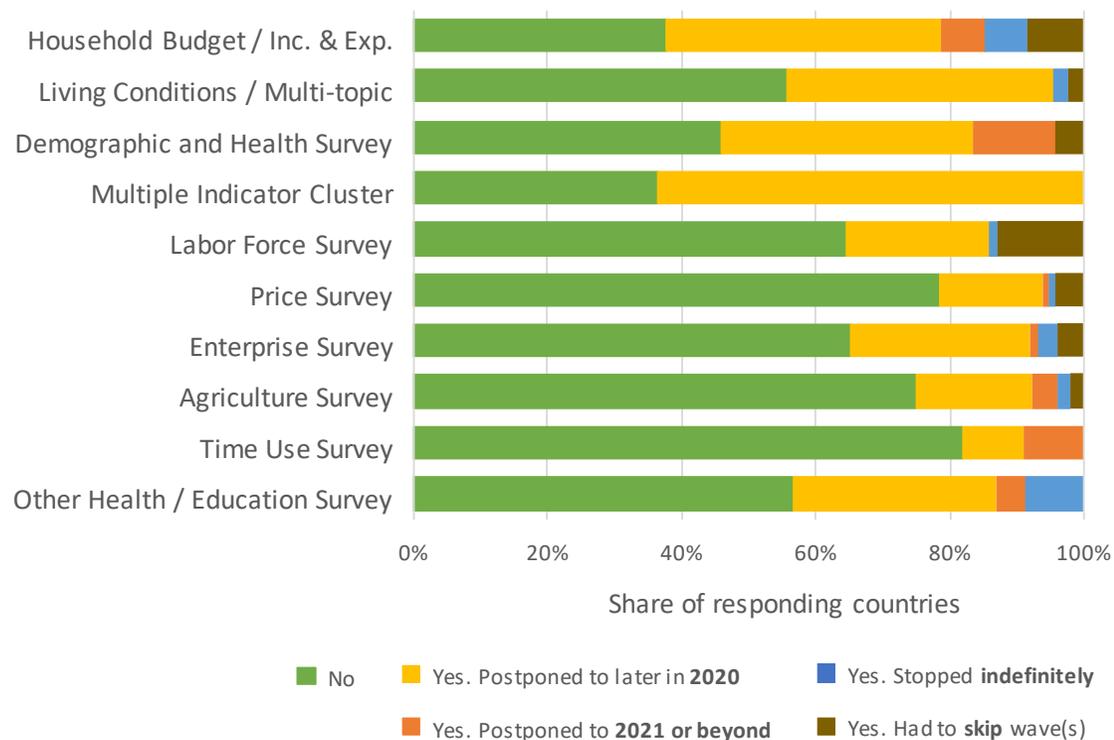


Survey operations have also been impacted



Of the various types of planned surveys, time use and price surveys were the most likely to continue.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, did you have to stop or postpone the field work of planned survey?



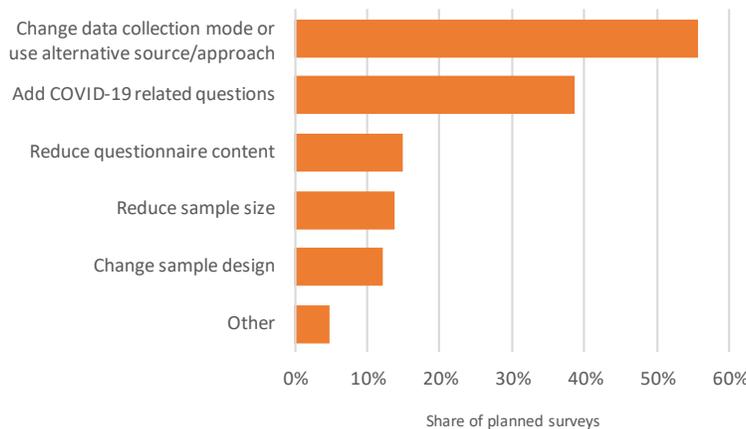


# Many NSOs are adapting and responding to the new data needs and demands of the COVID-19 pandemic

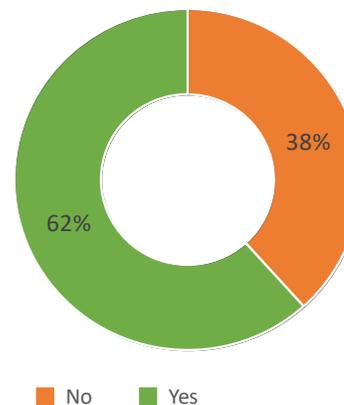
Statistical agencies are adapting their survey operations by relying on alternative data collection modes, in addition to adding questions about the pandemic to ongoing surveys.

Notwithstanding the disruption caused by the pandemic, agencies are responding to new needs and demands in various ways. 62 percent of responding NSOs have begun working on new data collection efforts to monitor and assess the impact of COVID-19 – and in more than half of the cases, these efforts follow a request from the government. Meanwhile, around half of responding NSOs are setting up or planning national data platforms to serve public data needs during the pandemic.

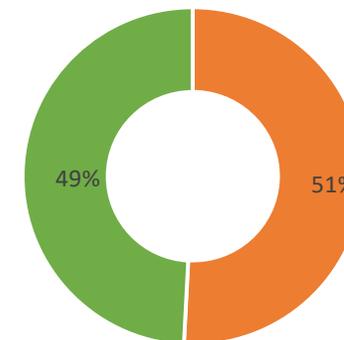
If you had to alter a planned survey because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which changes did / will you introduce?



Has your institution planned any survey on COVID-19 and its impacts?



Are you currently setting up or planning to set up any national platform to respond to data needs of the government/ public?

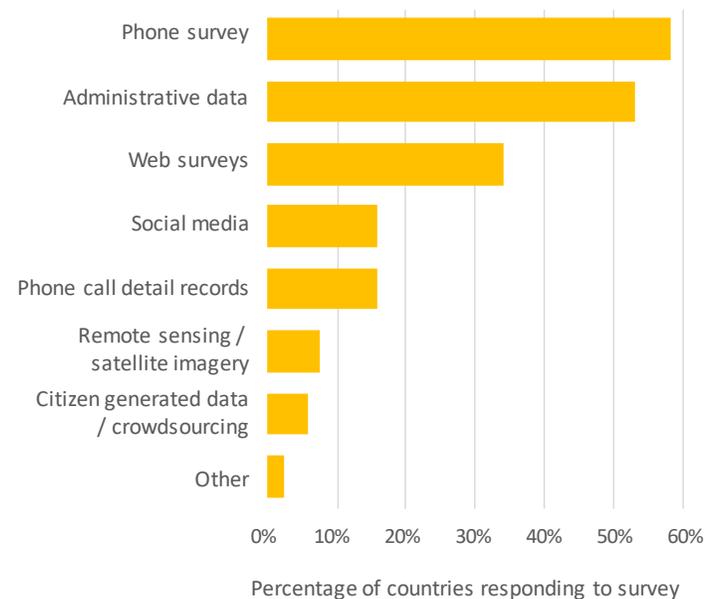




In monitoring the impacts of COVID-19, statistical agencies are using alternative data sources

Fifty-eight percent of countries that responded to the survey are relying on phone surveys, 53 on administrative data, and 34 percent are relying on web surveys. These three alternative sources are used commonly across income levels. The use of administrative data is most common in high-income countries, while LMIC countries are much less likely to use web surveys, most likely due to a lack of online infrastructure.

Is your institution using alternative/nontraditional data sources/approaches to analyze or monitor aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic?



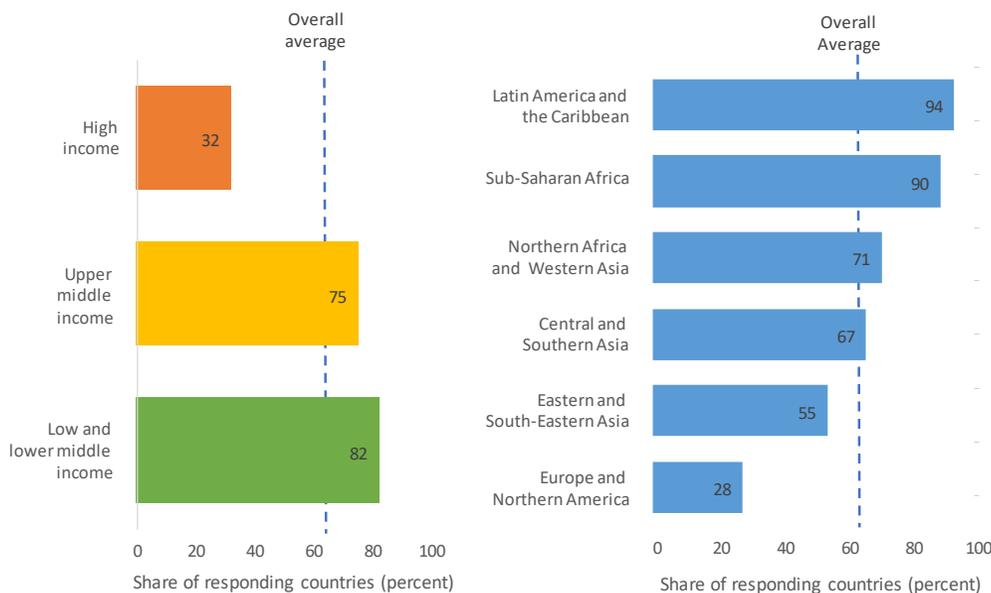


# Many agencies need support to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis

In facing these new challenges, NSOs are in need of additional support for several reasons. Globally, 6 in 10 agencies reported needing additional external support to face the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, with NSOs in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean in particular expressing the need for such additional support. While NSOs in 82 percent of LMICs need additional support, nearly a third of NSOs in high-income countries are also looking for additional support for their operations.

So far, most of the external support in implementing alternative, non-traditional data sources and approaches to data collection in relation to the COVID-19 impact have come from the donor community (27 of the 37 offices that received support).

Proportion of national statistical offices that need additional external support to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic

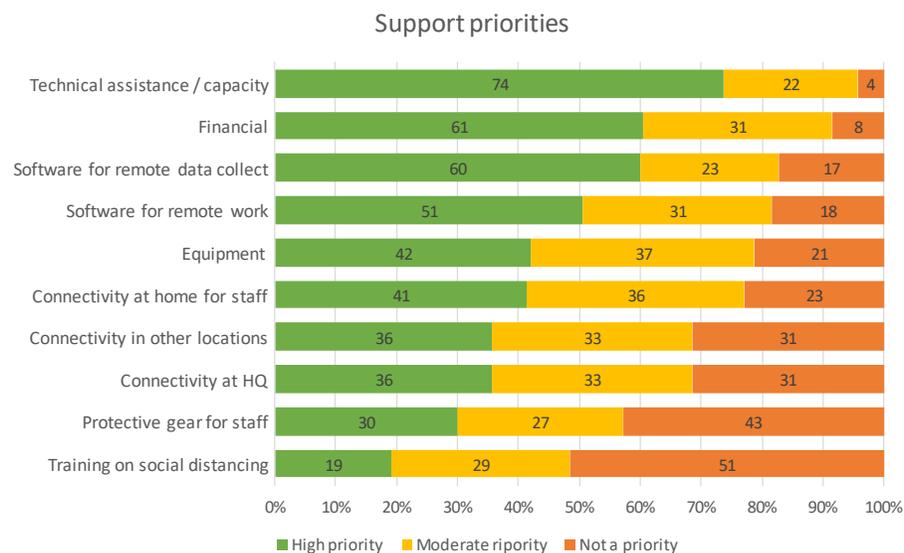




Seventy three NSOs stated the need for additional external support

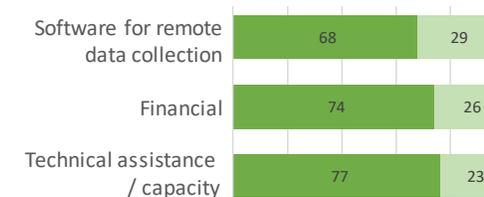
The most critical support needs are technical (96 percent high or moderate priority), financial (92 percent high or moderate priority), and software for remote data collection (83 percent high or moderate priority).

Technical assistance is a high priority for nearly 6 out of 10 NSOs in high-income countries, 8 out of 10 NSOs in upper middle-income countries, and three quarters of NSOs in LMICs.

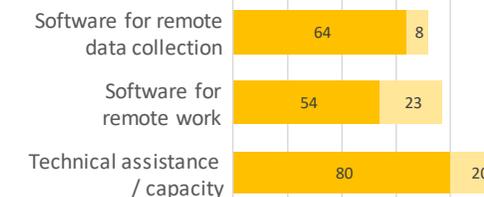


### Top three support priorities by income group

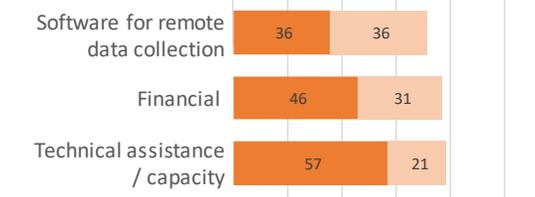
#### Low and lower middle income countries:



#### Upper middle income countries:



#### High income countries:



Share of responding countries

High priority Moderate priority

### The COVID-19 survey of NSOs

- Mode: Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), programmed in Survey Solutions
- Launched on 5 May 2020, questionnaire accepted through 17 May
- Questionnaires sent to 218 NSOs, 122 responses received
- Sections: General impacts on NSO functioning; Status of main statistical operations (Censuses & Surveys); Response and support needs; Open-ended questions on impacts, responses, and support needs
- First wave: 5-17 May, 2020
- 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, and Luis G. González Morales (UNSD), and Sergiy Radyakin, Zurab Sajaia, Philip Wollburg and Alberto Zezza (World Bank).