

ONE YEAR INTO THE PANDEMIC:

Monitoring the State of Statistical Operations Under COVID-19

June 2021

Highlights from the fourth round of a global COVID-19
survey of National Statistical Offices (NSOs)

Key Messages

- Just over one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects on global statistical operations are still extensive, despite improvements in many critical areas including data collection modes and information and communication technology readiness.
- One third of the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) remain closed to non-essential staff or to all staff in May 2021, reversing the downward trend that had been observed until last October 2020.
- Sixty eight percent of the NSOs included in the fourth round of the global COVID-19 survey of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) reported having fully stopped face-to-face data collection in the field at some point during the pandemic, and in May 2021 only 72 percent of all NSOs were conducting to some extent this type of data collection.
- The enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has varied across NSOs operations. Surveys and censuses have been most affected, while the maintenance of statistical registers has been the least affected operation.
- Globally, the ability to meet international reporting requirements of official statistics and the ability to produce essential short-term statistics is still being negatively impacted by the pandemic in more than half of NSOs at the global level, with sub-Saharan Africa as the most affected region.
- Particularly in low-income countries, many NSOs have been squeezed between increases in costs of data collection and declining budgets. In Sub-Saharan Africa, NSOs report a decrease in funding from both government (71 percent) and donor resources (59 percent), with 61 percent lamenting an increase in the costs of data collection.
- Collecting data on population groups of special interest – such as migrants, internally displaced populations, persons with disabilities – remains a challenge for many statistical offices, including in high-income countries. Reduced phone and internet coverage for these groups was cited as the main reason for these difficulties as a consequence of the pandemic.
- The survey confirms that NSOs have been reacting to the challenges presented by the pandemic by accelerating the process of modernization: Six in ten reported improvements in their information and communication technology (ICT) readiness in the six months preceding the survey. Yet, as the survey reveals, much remains to be done, particularly among lower-income countries.

Overview

This report presents the results from the fourth round of a global survey on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of National Statistical Offices (NSOs), conducted between 16 April and 10 May 2021. The survey, in addition to a general monitoring of the status of statistical operations among the global pandemic, focused on how NSOs continue to adapt to the new reality one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire included sections focused on technological challenges, funding and costs of statistical operations and on issues related to the collection of data on population groups of interest. Earlier rounds¹ of the survey addressed office closures and the disruptions to data collection caused by the pandemic (May 2020), the extent to which restrictions and disruptions had receded or became more widespread (July 2020), and how the NSOs adapted to the new reality by implementing new surveys, developing new protocols for face-to-face data collection, investing in the modernization of their IT infrastructure, and building new partnerships (October 2020).

Survey coverage and response rate

A total of 118 NSOs (61 percent of target countries) participated in the fourth round of the COVID-19 survey, including: 14 NSOs from Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (88 percent); 33 NSOs from Europe and Northern America (73 percent); 16 NSOs from Northern Africa and Western Asia (67 percent); 18 from Latin America and the Caribbean (53 percent); 26 from sub-Saharan Africa (52 percent); 7 from Central and Southern Asia (50 percent) and 5 from Oceania (36 percent). The number of respondents for the previous rounds were: 122 in May, 112 in July, and 125 in October 2020.

With the second wave of the pandemic hitting many countries, the number of NSO's whose main offices were fully or partially closed increased between October 2020 and May 2021, reversing the downward trend observed between June and October 2020.

Globally, the number of NSO's whose main offices were fully or partially closed increased from 24 percent in October 2020 to 33 percent in May 2021, reversing the downward trend observed in the in previous rounds of the survey (Figure 1). While the extent of office closures was still much lower than at the beginning of the pandemic, when only 35 percent of NSO had their main offices open, the more recent situation reflects the impact of a second wave in the spread of the disease and points to a situation where the return to the pre-COVID normalcy is slow and setback always possible.

¹ Information and documentation on all rounds is available via the [UN Statistical Division](#) and [World Bank](#) websites.

The setback has been most dramatic in Latin America, where only 39 percent of offices were at least partially open in May, down from 71 percent at the time of the previous survey round (Figure 2). Other regions, too, experienced an increase in office closures, with the exception being Sub-Saharan Africa (where 92 percent of offices are now fully open) and Oceania (where all offices remain open since October 2020).

Figure 1. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic: is your main office closed?

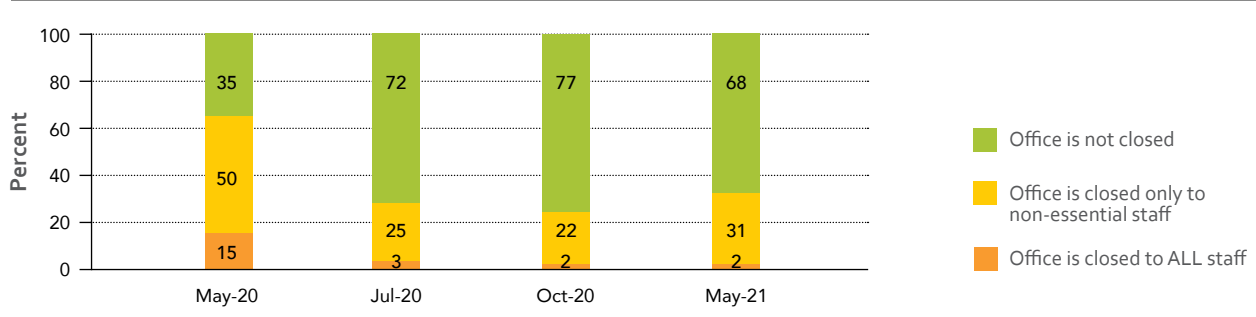


Figure 2. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is your main office closed?

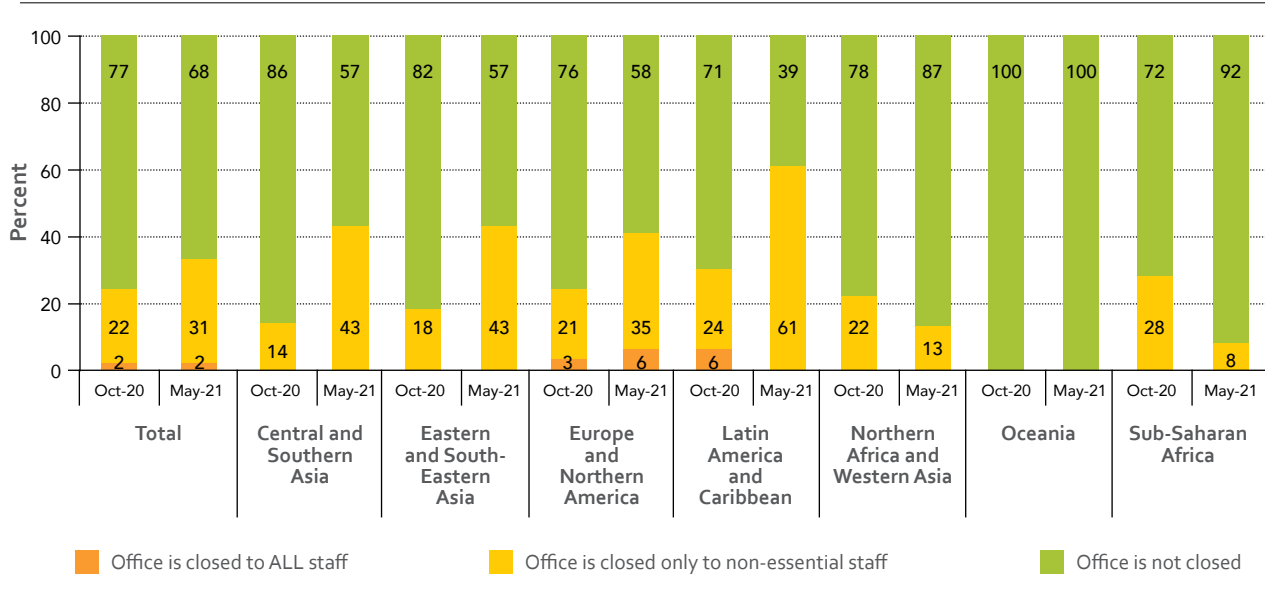
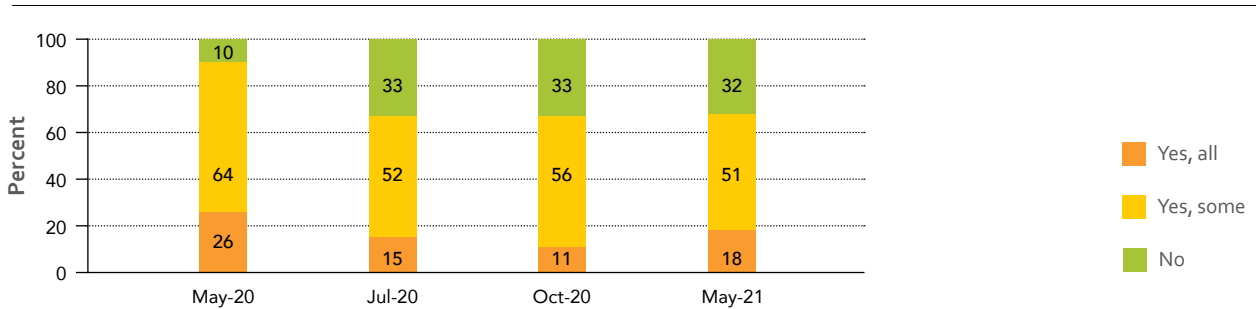


Figure 3. Is staff instructed to work from home?



Two thirds of NSOs continue to rely on remote work. In May 2021, 69 percent of NSOs participating in the survey indicated that at least some of their staff members were instructed to work from home, a slight increase with respect to October 2020 (Figure 3). Since July 2020, the share of NSOs that had not instructed their staff to work from home has remained stable, amounting to approximately one third of the NSOs.

Moreover, differences remain between regions and income levels in the prevalence of working from home (Figure 4). While 94 percent of NSOs in Europe and Northern America reported to have instructed at least some of their staff to work from home, less of half of NSOs in sub-Saharan Africa reported that their staff were working from home in May 2021. The prevalence of remote work in NSOs also continues to be highly correlated with a country's level of income reflecting differences in access to ICT equipment and infrastructure necessary for NSO staff to work effectively from home²: 31 percent of high-income countries report all staff working from home compared to 8 percent in low- and lower-middle income ones.

Figure 4. May 2021: Is staff instructed to stay and work from home because of COVID-19 pandemic?

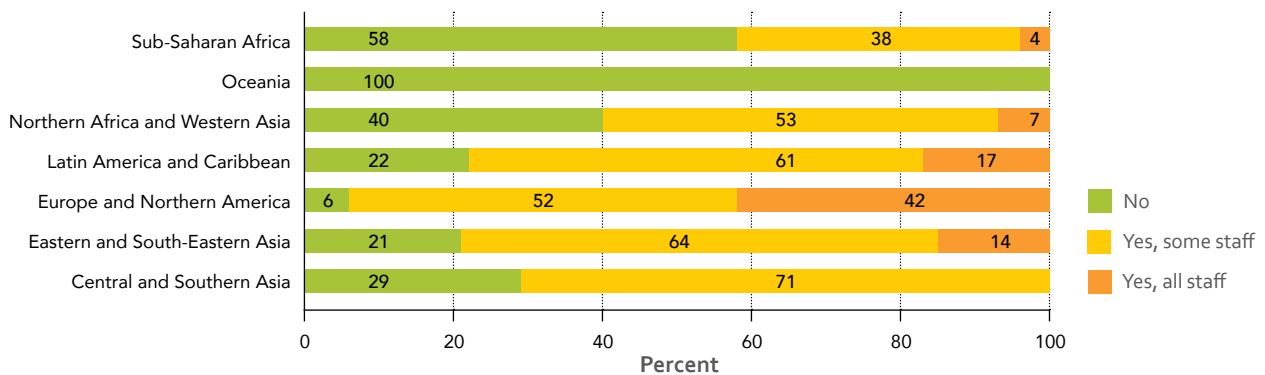
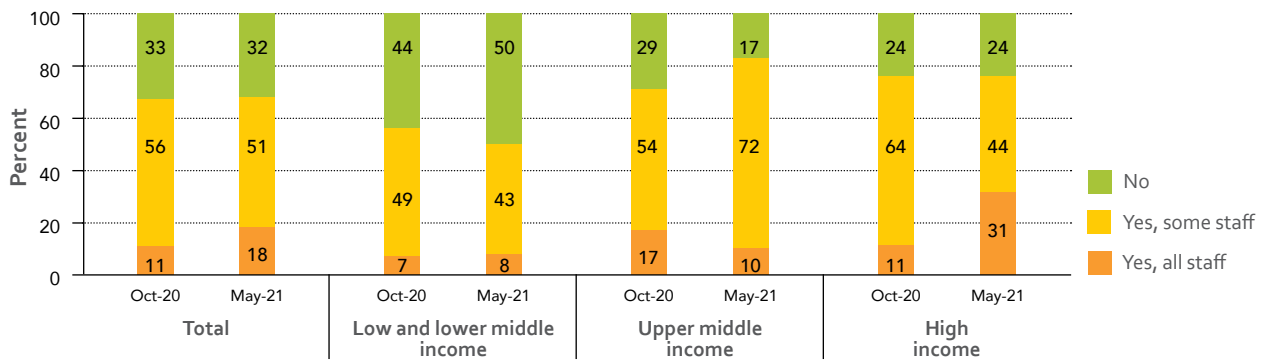


Figure 5. Is staff instructed to stay and work from home because of COVID-19 pandemic?



² See the report on the second round of the global COVID-19 survey of National Statistical Offices for a discussion of work from home, ICT equipment and infrastructure.

The first few months of 2021 saw a strong trend towards resuming face-to-face data collection, led by developments in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia.

The May 2021 round of the survey recorded a marked increase in the number of countries declaring a full resumption of face-to-face data collection activities. There was an increase globally of 18 percentage points compared to October 2020, reaching a full 44 percent, compared to just four percent a year earlier (Figure 6).

NSOs in lower-income countries have been more likely to fully resume face-to-face data collection after having suspended it fully or partially at any point during the pandemic. In contrast, in previous rounds of the survey there was no marked difference across income groups. As of May 2021, 59 percent of NSOs in low and lower middle-income countries had resumed at least some face-to-face data collection, as compared to 32 percent of NSOs in high income countries (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Stopped face-to-face data collection

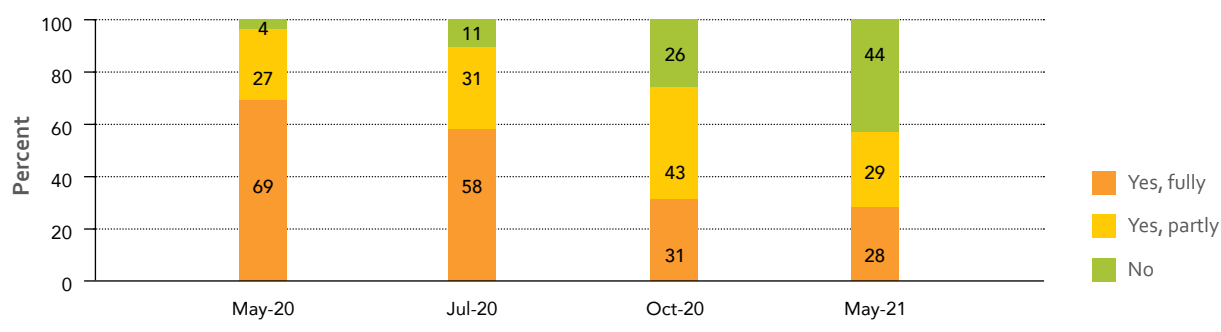


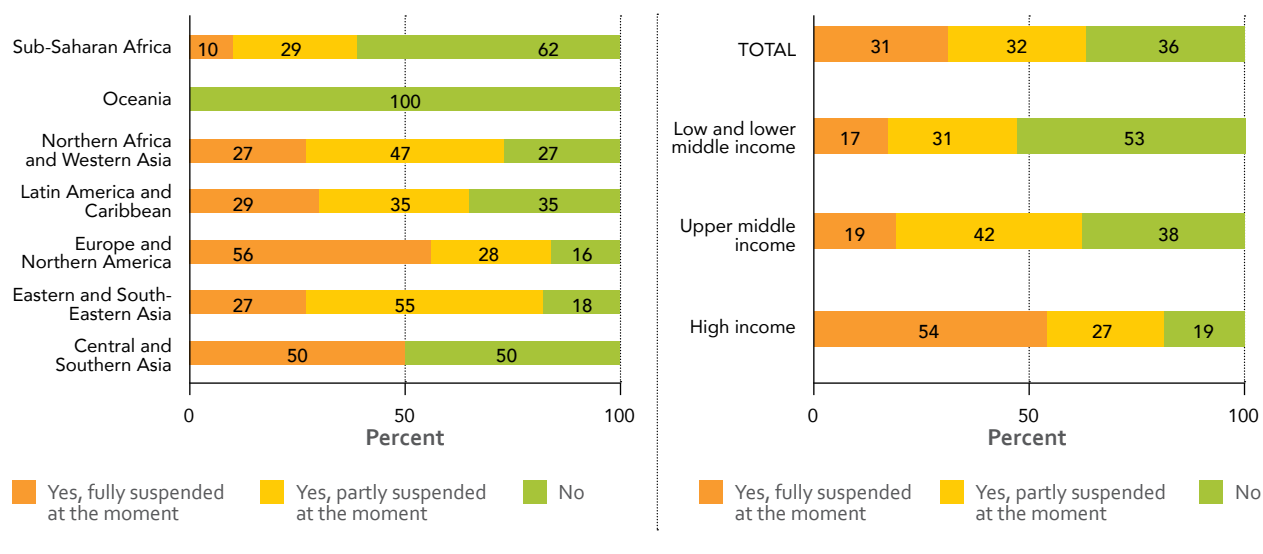
Figure 7. May 2021 - Is field data collection involving face-to-face interviews still fully or partly suspended?



Ninety percent of the NSOs included in the fourth round at least partially suspended their face-to-face interviews at some point since the beginning of the pandemic. Among them, as of May 2021, 36 percent had already fully resumed face-to-face data collection (Figure 8). However, more than 80 percent in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (82 percent) and in Europe and Northern America (84 percent) still had at least partially halted face-to-face data collection. In the case of sub-Saharan, Africa only 39 percent of the NSOs that have ever suspended their face-to-face interviews reported to have at least partially suspended face-to-face data collection in May 2021.

Figure 8. May 2021: Is field data collection involving face-to-face interviews still fully or partly suspended?

(Sample limited to respondents reporting at least partially suspending their face-to-face interviews at any point since the beginning of the pandemic)



Just over half of NSOs that were (at least partially) halting their face-to-face data collection activities in May 2021 find it 'hard to say' when face-to-face data collection may resume fully. Uncertainty levels are still high and common across income levels, but slightly lower than in October 2020, at which point 57 percent found it 'hard to say' when face-to-face interviews could be fully resumed (Figure 9). The share of NSOs expecting face-to-face interviews to resume fully only in six months or longer has grown significantly from 6 percent in October 2020 to 13 percent in May 2021, with most of the increase accruing in low and middle-income countries. 21 percent and 8 percent of NSOs expect face-to-face data collection to resume in full within the next three and six months, respectively, up from 17 and 5 percent, respectively, in October 2020. The share expecting full resumption within one month shrank from 16 percent in October 2020 to 6 percent in May 2021 (Figure 10).

Figure 9. When do you expect to be able to resume face to face interviews in full?

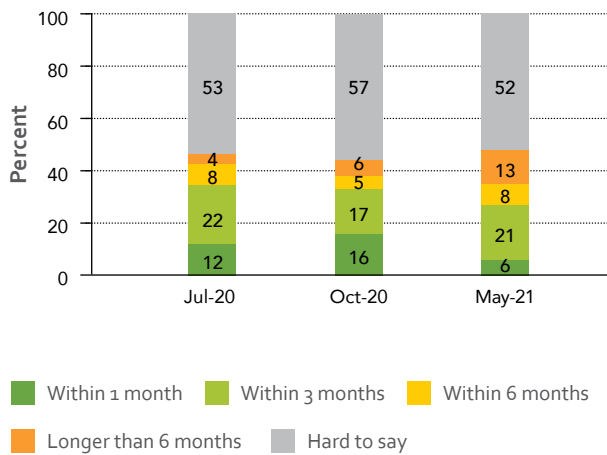
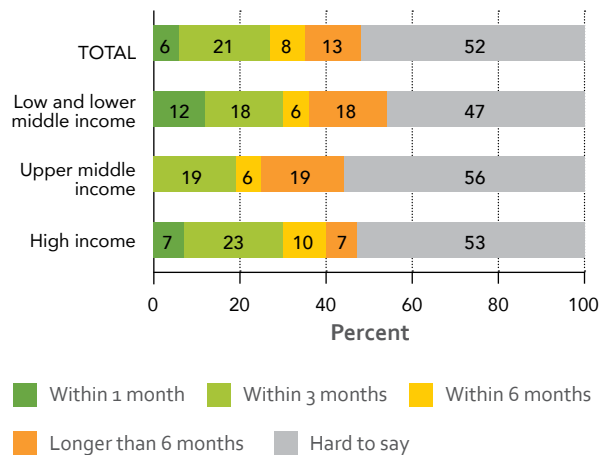


Figure 10. May 2021 - When do you expect to be able to resume face to face interviews in full?

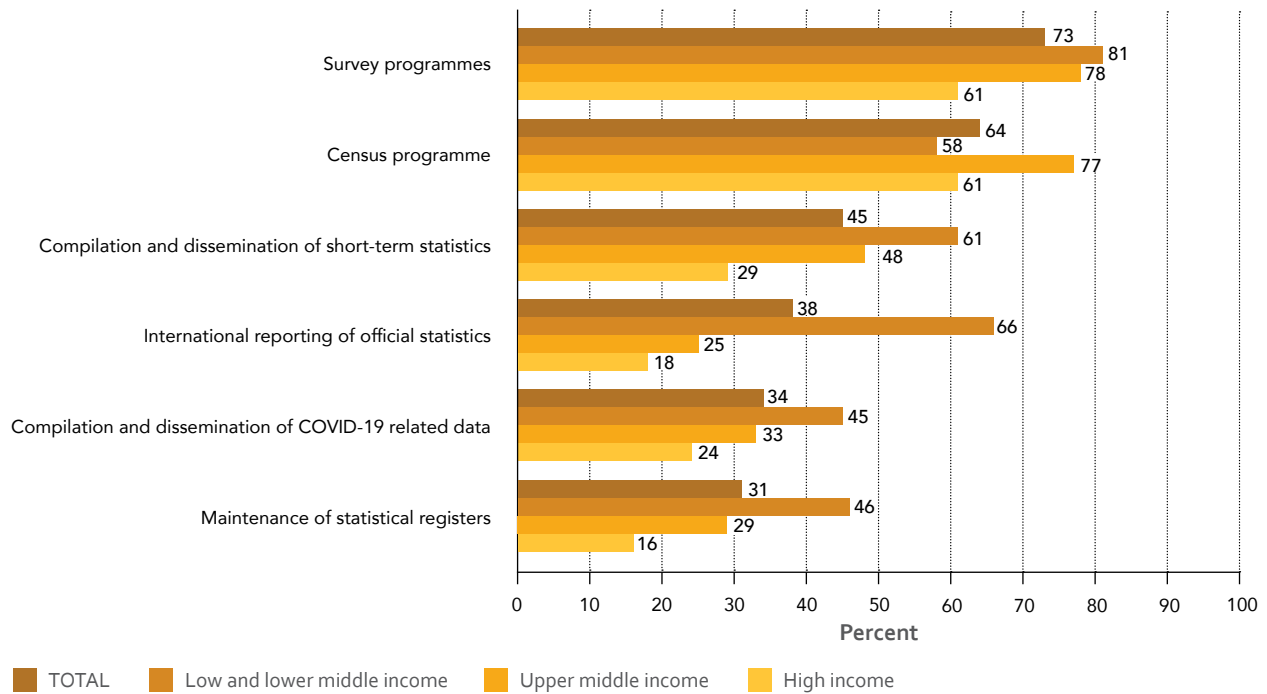


The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted statistical operations differently. Surveys and censuses have been the most affected, while the maintenance of statistical registers has been the least affected operation.

The impact of the pandemic has been felt on all statistical operations, but to a degree that varied markedly by type of operation and by income-level. Survey and census programs were affected most heavily (in 73 and 64 percent of countries respectively) and across the income gradient. Other statistical operations (short-term statistics, international reporting, reporting on COVID-19 related data, maintenance of statistical registries) were less affected on average, but also show a more marked divide in the ability to cope between high income countries and low and lower middle- income countries.

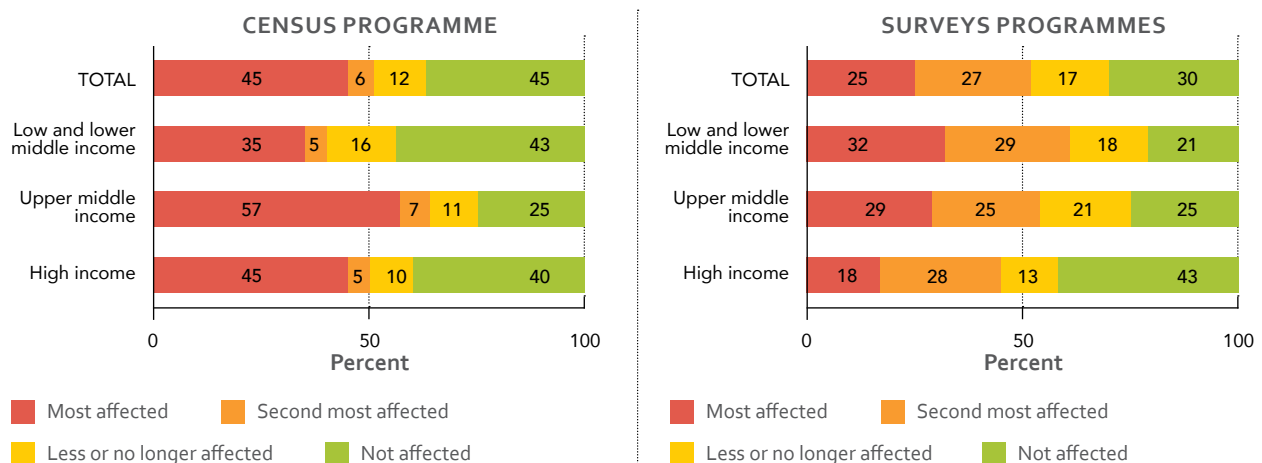
Surveys were the statistical operation that was most often affected negatively by the disruptions generated by the pandemic since its start. While 81 percent of NSOs in low and lower- middle income countries reported that surveys had been delayed or negatively affected by the pandemic, only 61 percent of NSOs in high income countries reported the same. A marked difference also appears in the case of international reporting of official statistics. Sixty-six percent of NSOs in low and lower-middle income reported a negative impact on this operation, while only 18 percent of NSOs in high income country were affected.

Figure 11. May 2021 - At any point since the beginning of the pandemic, has any of your operations listed below been delayed or otherwise negatively affected as a result of the pandemic?



Most NSOs indicated that census and survey programmes were still the most affected statistical operations as of May 2021. For census operations 45 percent of NSOs reported that these are still the most affected statistical operations, with the figure reaching 57 percent in upper middle-income countries. Surveys were identified as the most affected operation by 25 percent of respondents, with an additional 27 percent listing them as the second most affected. The impact on surveys has been still the strongest in low- and lower-middle income countries where these percentages are respectively 32 and 29 percent.

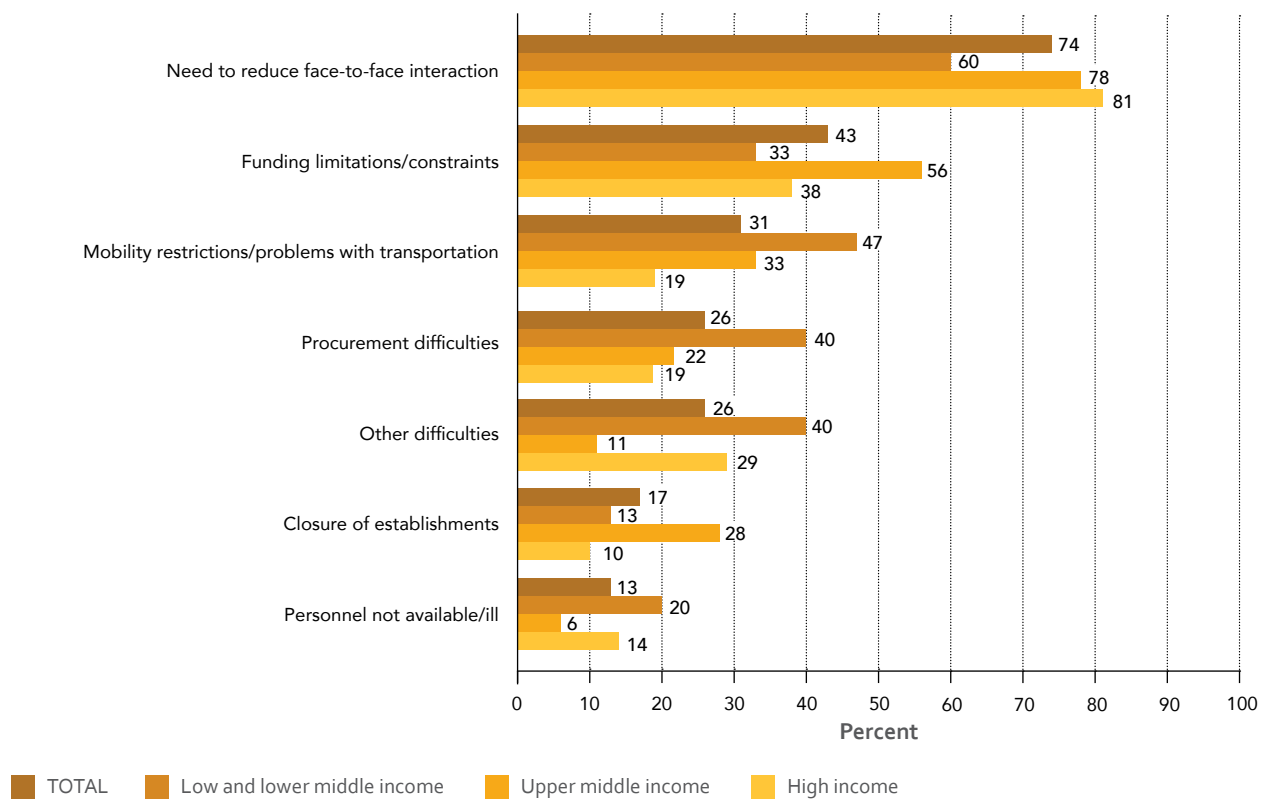
Figure 12. May 2021 - Thinking about today, what are the operations that are still affected?



The most important reason for the negative impact on census operations was the need to reduce face-to-face interactions. For upper-middle income countries another important reason was related to funding limitations.

A higher share of NSOs in low and lower-middle income countries reported reasons other than the need to reduce face-to-face interactions for the negative impact of the pandemic on census operations (Figure 13). Logistics challenges, such as to mobility restrictions or problems with transportation (47 percent) as well procurement difficulties (40 percent) played a major role for this group of countries, even ahead of funding limitations (33 percent).

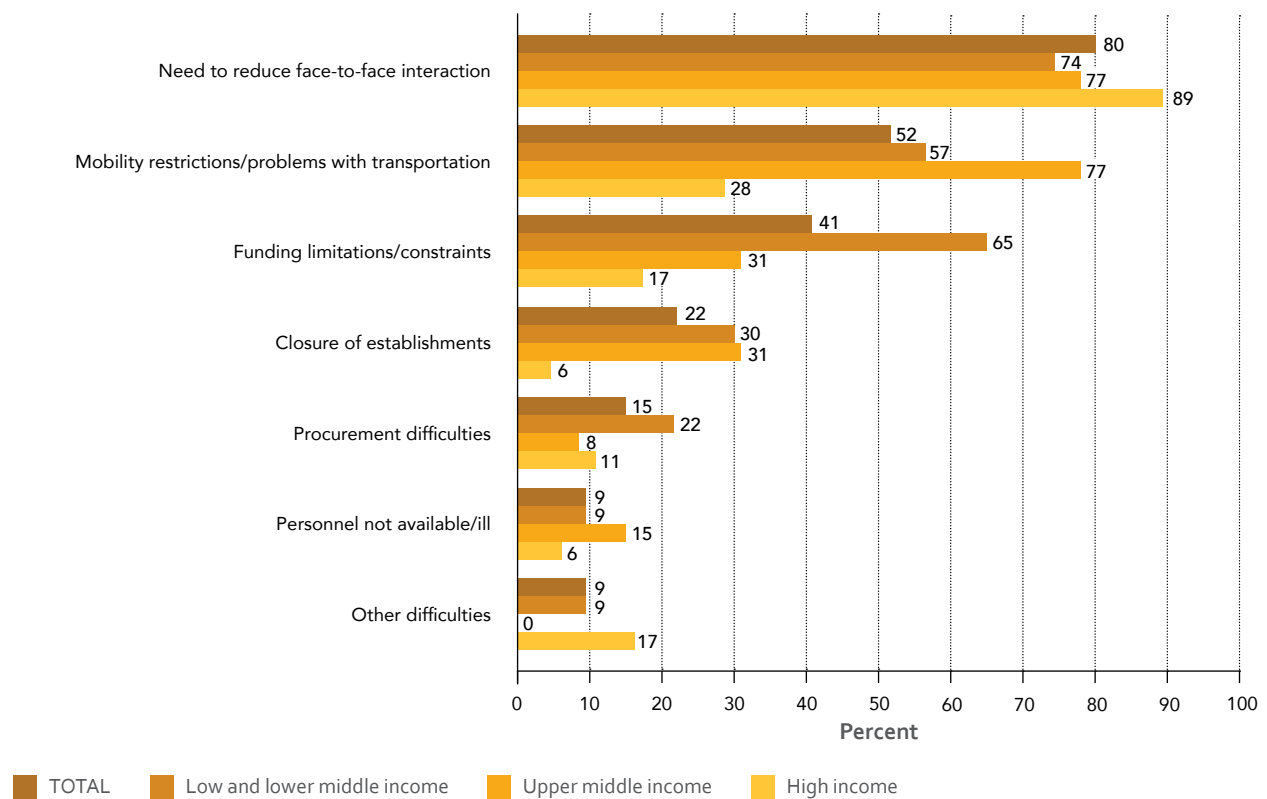
Figure 13. May 2021 - What are the reasons why census programme is still affected today?



Similar to census operations, the predominant reason for the negative impact on surveys operations was the need to reduce face-to-face interactions.

The reasons behind the negative impact on survey operations also vary across countries (Figure 14). For upper-middle income countries, mobility restrictions or problems with transportation (77 percent) were as predominant as the need to reduce face-to-face interactions (77 percent). For low and lower-middle income countries, the most common reasons were the need to reduce face-to-face interactions (74 percent), funding limitations (65 percent), and mobility restrictions or problems with transportation (57 percent).

Figure 14. May 2021 - What are the reasons why surveys programme is still affected today?



The ability to meet international reporting requirements for official statistics and the ability to produce essential short-term statistics have been negatively impacted by the pandemic in more than half of NSOs at the global level as of May 2021.

There were regional differences in the impact of the pandemic on the abilities of NSOs to meet international reporting requirements and produce essential short-term statistics. Sub-Saharan Africa (71 percent), Oceania (60 percent), and Northern Africa and Western Asia (57 percent) were the regions with the highest shares of NSOs reported having been affected in their ability to meet international reporting requirements (Figure 15). The situation was similar for the ability to produce essential short-term statistics, with only one third of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa and Western Asia reporting no negative impacts from the pandemic on them fulfilling this important aspect of their statistical mandate (Figure 16).

Figure 15. May 2021 - Is the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affecting your current ability to meet international reporting requirements, and to what extent?

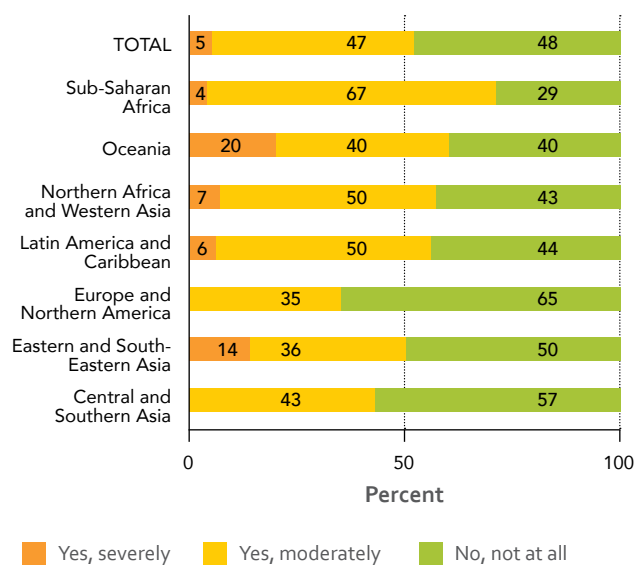
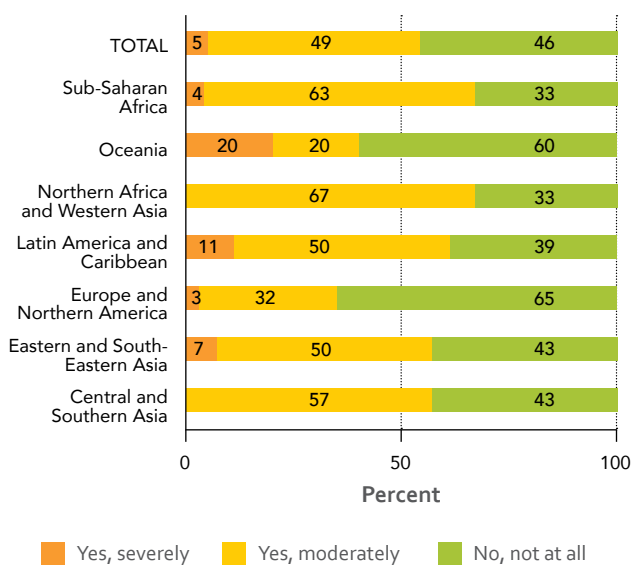


Figure 16. May 2021 - Is the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affecting your current ability to produce essential monthly/quarterly statistics, and to what extent?



The negative impacts on NSOs operations are possibly related to changes in funding from the government and donors or other sources. 48 percent of NSOs reported a decrease in funding from the government. NSOs in Sub-Saharan Africa more often reported a decrease in funding from these sources.

Almost half on the NSOs reported that their funding from the government has decreased since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 17). Approximately seven out of 10 NSOs in sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean had experienced a decrease in funding from the government. **Funding from donors and other sources have been more stable than government funding, but their changes have been more uneven across regions.** Globally, 29 percent of NSOs reported decreased funding from donors and other sources, compared to 59 percent of NSOs in sub-Saharan Africa.

Figure 17. May 2021 - Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, how has the funding in your organization from the government changed?

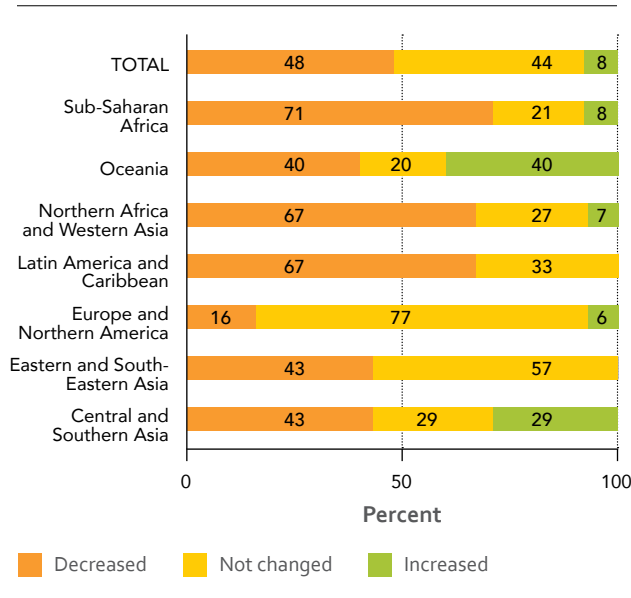
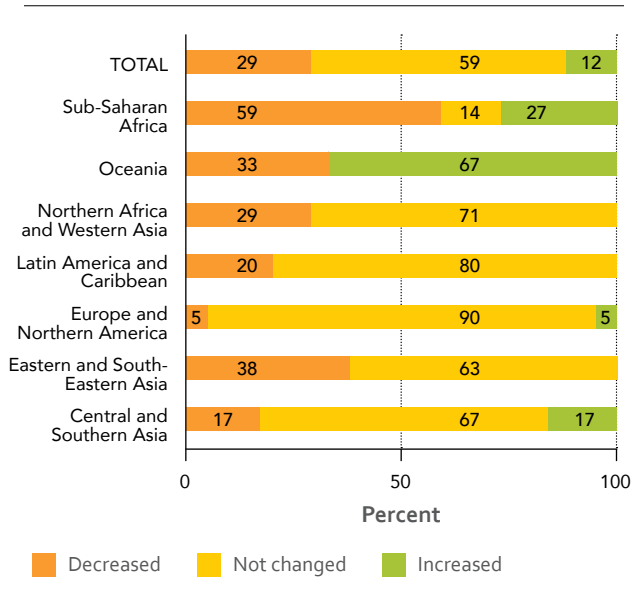


Figure 18. May 2021 - Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, how has the funding in your organization from donors/other sources changed?



Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, some NSOs have experienced significant changes in costs associated with statistical programmes.

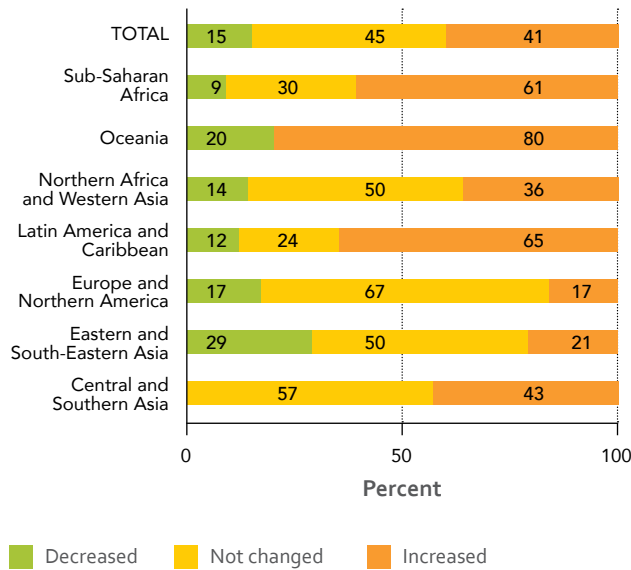
Four in 10 NSOs reported that data collection costs have increased since the beginning of the pandemic. A higher share of NSOs in the regions of Oceania (80 percent) and Latin America and the Caribbean (65 percent) reported an increase in costs associated to data collection. When analyzing the changes in data collection costs by income-level, 61 percent of NSOs in low and lower-middle income countries reported an increase on data collection costs, compared to 39 percent for NSOs in upper-middle income countries, and 33 percent for NSOs in high income countries.

Increases in costs related to administration and management were more common in sub-Saharan Africa (50 percent) and Central and Southern Asia (43 percent). Costs of data processing increased in Oceania (60 percent) and sub-Saharan Africa (33 percent).

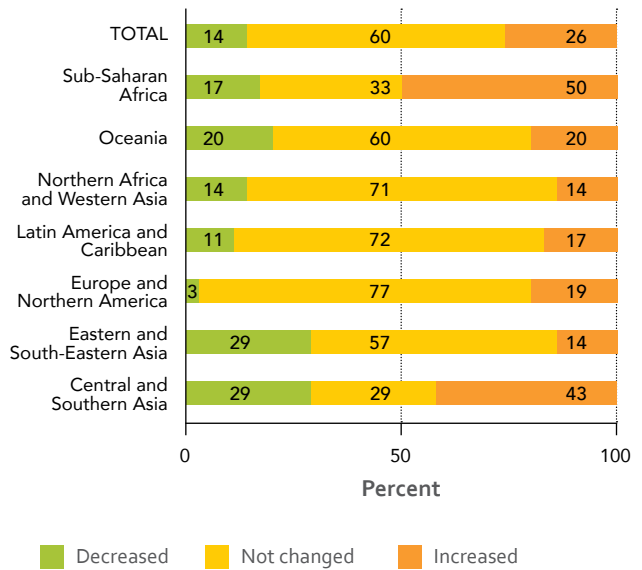
Training costs were more frequently reported as having decreased rather than increased during the pandemic, though there are some regional differences. Stark differences are present between NSOs in sub-Saharan Africa, more than half of which reported that training costs increased, and NSOs in Central and Southern Asia, of which 71 percent reported that training costs decreased.

In general, dissemination costs were frequently reported as more stable with 76 percent of NSOs reporting that this type of cost has not changed. However, 5 out of 10 of NSOs in sub-Saharan Africa reported that dissemination costs have increased.

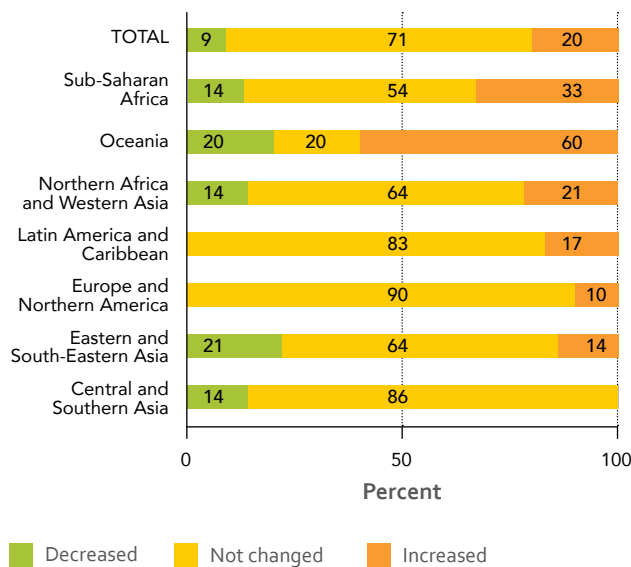
May 2021: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of data collection have...



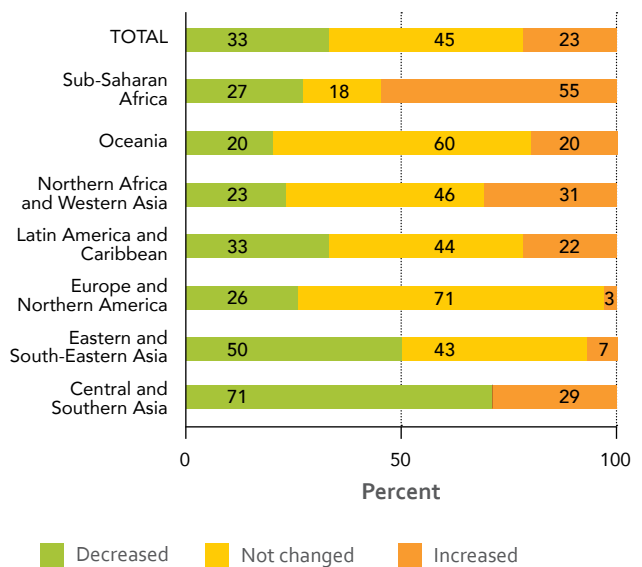
May 2021: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of administration and management have...



May 2021: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of data processing have...



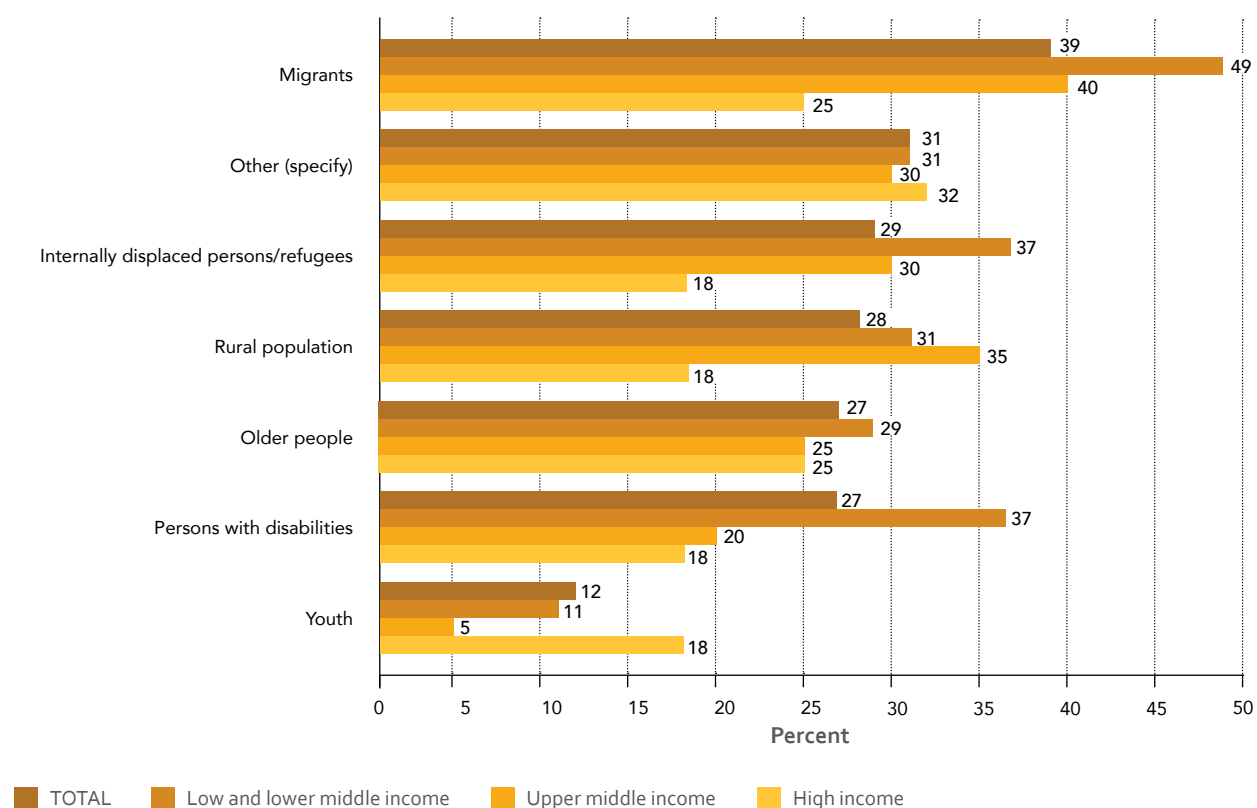
May 2021: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of training and other capacity development have...



Collecting data on population groups of special interest – such as migrants, internally displaced populations, persons with disabilities – remains a challenge for many statistical offices, including in high-income countries. The necessity to reach these groups by phone and internet as a consequence of the pandemic makes data collection especially challenging.

Collecting data on groups of special interest – such as migrants, internally displaced populations, persons with disabilities – is key to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and essential in meeting the data demands of the pandemic. It can, however be challenging under any circumstances. Adding to these challenges is the fact that during the pandemic much of data collection has been conducted remotely.

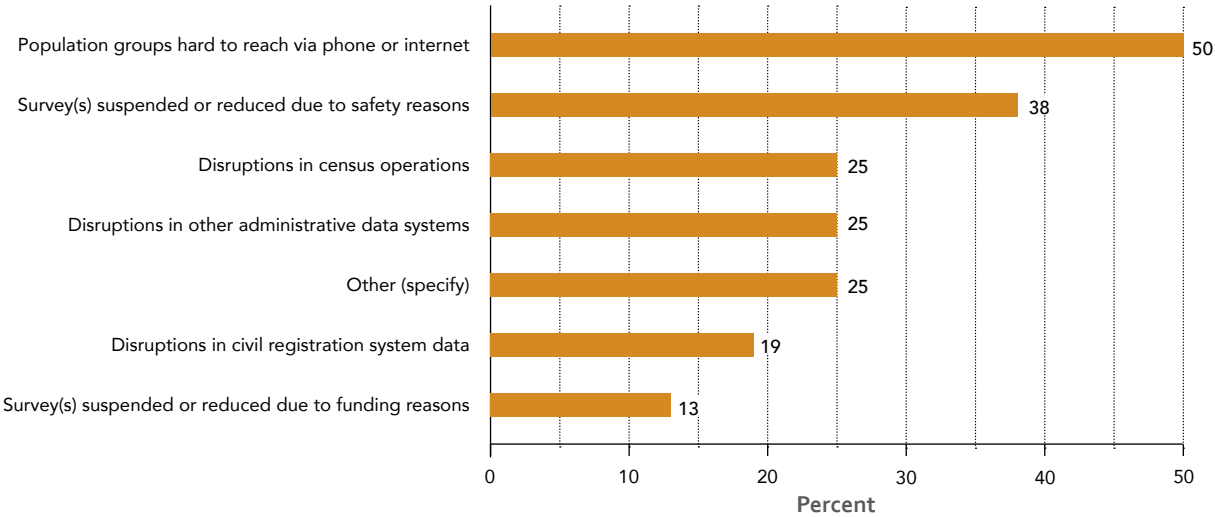
May 2021: Do you have difficulties adequately collecting data on any specific population groups of interest?



Half of NSOs from low and lower-middle income countries reported having difficulties in collecting data of migrants, as compared to only one in four NSOs from high income countries. Similarly, well over one third of low and lower middle income NSOs declared difficulties collecting data on internally displaced population and persons with disabilities, while only 18 per cent of high income countries did.

The most frequently difficulty cited in collecting data on specific population groups were challenges in reaching them via phone or internet and the fact that surveys were suspended or reduced due to safety reasons.

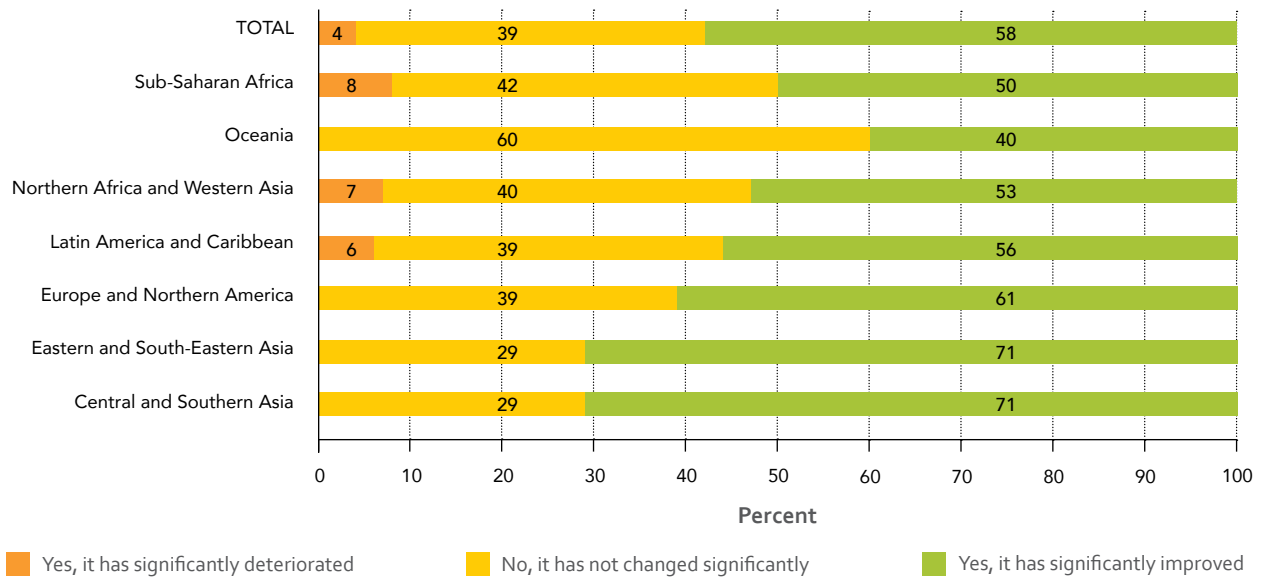
May 2021: What are the difficulties in collecting data on migrants related to the COVID-19 pandemic?



Despite these various challenges, many NSO have turned the pandemic into an opportunity to accelerate modernization, as noted already in previous reports in this series. In this fourth round, 58 percent of NSOs reported having improved their overall information and communication technology (ICT) readiness in the last six months.

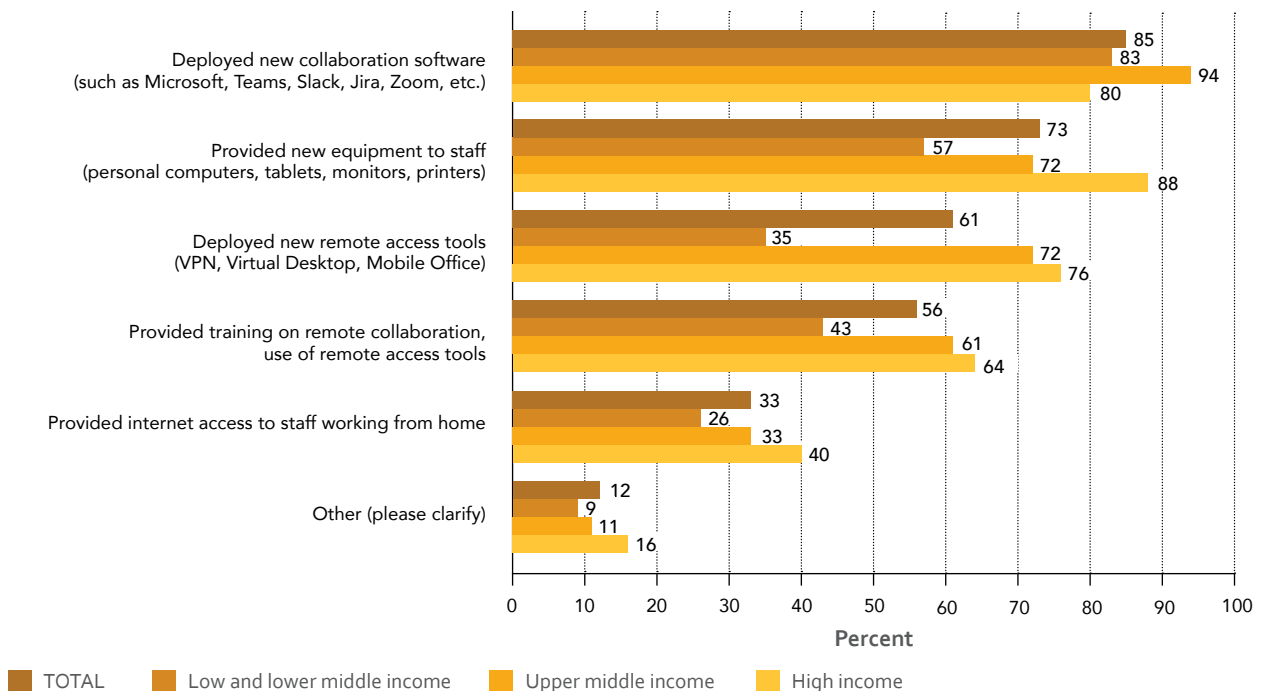
Overall, 58 percent of the NSOs reported that ICT readiness has significantly improved in the last six months as of May 2021. The greatest improvements were in Asia (Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Central and Southern Asia), where 71 percent of NSOs reported that ICT readiness has significantly improved. Globally, only four percent reported significant deterioration.

May 2021: Has the overall Information and Communication Technology (ICT) readiness of your office changed in the last 6 months?



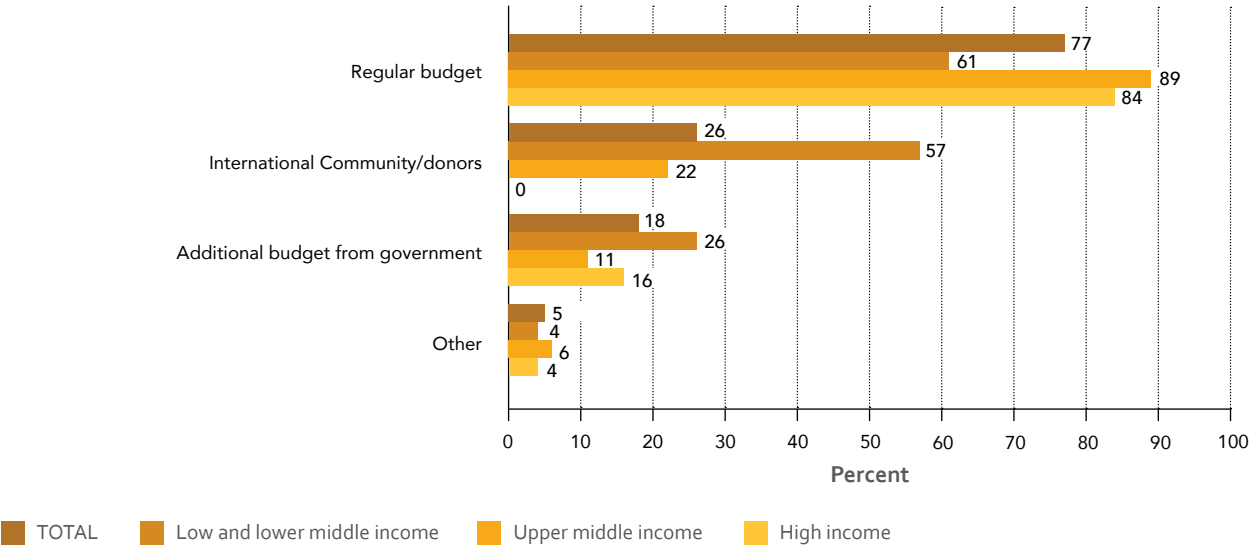
The main actions leading to improving ICT readiness were **deploying new collaboration software (85 percent)** and **providing new equipment to staff (73 percent)**. Another significant action for improving ICT readiness highlighted by NSOs in high income countries was **deploying new remote access tools such as VPN, virtual desktop, and mobile office (76 percent)**.

May 2021: What actions were taken to enhance the ICT readiness in your office?



Most of the NSOs surveyed reported that the main source of funding used to improve ICT readiness was their regular budget (77 percent). However, in the case of NSOs from low and lower-middle income countries, they also reported that international community/donors played a relevant role in funding these improvements (57 percent).

May 2021: What actions were taken to enhance the ICT readiness in your office?



The COVID-19 survey of NSOs - Round 4

- Mode: Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), programmed in Survey Solutions.
- Launched on 16 April, questionnaire accepted through 10 May 2021.
- Questionnaires sent to 195 NSOs, 118 responses received.
- Sections: Monitoring of operations under COVID-19; Technology challenges and crisis management; Statistical operations affected by the pandemic; Funding and costs; Data collection on population groups of interest.
- 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 Luis G. González Morales (UNSD), Alberto Zezza, Ivette Contreras González, Sergiy Radyakin, and Philip Wollburg (World Bank). Inputs to the design of the questionnaire were also provided by Olivier Dupriez (World Bank and International Committee on Census Coordination, ICCC) and François Fonteneau (PARIS21).