

# Internal summary - Key takeaways of the High Level Conference on Effective Public Private Data Sharing for Evidence Based Policy Making

## Introduction

The High Level Conference on Effective Public Private Data Sharing for Evidence Based Decision Making took place in Montevideo and online on the 22nd and 23rd of November 2022. This event gathered senior representatives from National Statistical Offices (NSOs), public authorities, international organizations, private sector and non profit organizations from Latin America and Caribbean and Africa. It aimed at:

1. Exploring the state of play concerning access to privately held data by statistical offices and government agencies across a wide range of concrete use cases;
2. disseminating knowledge around how the public and private sector can work together and create sustainable data access models;
3. understand the legal challenges and avenues for cooperation between private and public sector;
4. presenting lessons learnt from data sharing initiatives to guide the development of more effective data sharing in the future.

The conference gathered over 60 participants, with around 40 individuals joining physically from Montevideo and the remaining online. In total, 25 countries were represented, mostly coming from Latin America but also Africa and Europe. The material from all sessions is already available on the [online conference platform](#) and recordings will be uploaded soon.

## Key takeaways from the conference

The conference highlighted the consensus of the community around the importance of using privately held data for the production of statistics, and notably in the context of the modernization efforts undertaken by National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) and considering the ongoing debate about the role of statistical offices as national Data Stewards<sup>1</sup>.

It also uncovered however the “pilot fatigue” experienced by many statistical organizations: piloting the use of privately held data for statistical production, as for instance data held by Mobile Network Operators (MNOs), is more than ten years old. In the last decade however, very few countries have managed to embed the use of such data into the production of official statistics and this despite a

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the Statistical Commission background document on “Approaches to Data Stewardship”, March 2021, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/52nd-session/documents/BG-3a-DataStewardship-E.pdf>

multiplication of proofs of concepts and pilots. The experiences on the possible statistical use of scanner data (for consumer price indexes for instance) and MNOs data (for mobility, tourism, household purposes) nonetheless have already sufficiently proven clear on the value of these data sources and their relevance for NSOs.

Participants felt it is [now the right time to discuss what it takes to move from pilot use of privately held data to use of this information in routine statistical production](#). From this perspective and in order to operate this transition effectively, three main questions were identified as requiring further work and notably:

1. How to ensure NSIs/NSOs are seen as (even more) trustworthy by the private sector and the broader society as to smooth concerns around their access to privately held data.
2. Which strategies are the most successful for establishing win win situations for all partners involved and make data sharing with the public sector more appealing for private stakeholders.
3. How to grow the skillset of NSIs/NSOs' officials so that they become better equipped to work with the private sector around data sharing.

### Strengthening the perceived trustworthiness of NSOs

National Statistical Offices have enormous experience in ensuring confidentiality of information, protecting privacy of individuals and addressing data ethics challenges. Their mandates bind them to work within a very clear perimeter of rules which should ensure their trustworthiness and independence. Nonetheless, in the context of private public partnerships, lack of trust and concerns around data safety, liability and security still hampers NSOs chances to get privately held data. In this context, participants in the conference particularly highlighted the importance of :

- Ensuring NSOs are seen as trustworthy partners by the private sector / private data holders who need to be reassured about NSOs ability to maintain confidentiality (even trade secrets), to treat the data safely and to respect the highest data protection standards; and
- Ensuring NSOs are seen as (even more) trustworthy by the broader public, which is growing increasingly nervous about use of data for any purpose, including statistical purposes, as the resistance linked to the use of MNOs data for statistical production during Covi19 suggests.

There is no one fits all strategy for strengthening the perceived trustworthiness of NSOs towards private stakeholders and towards the public. Legislation and clear rules on NSOs mandate, liability and confidentiality approaches are one way of addressing this issue. Having a clear legislative framework from the perspective of NSOs' independence as well as in terms of data protection has been compared to ensuring that the kitchen is clean before starting to cook, otherwise the risk of contamination of food - or data, can never be excluded.

Engaging more with private partners to better explain NSOs working methods and develop trusted relationships is also a relevant option. As one of the speakers put it, NSOs need to get closer to the private sector and involve them in more activities and discussions. Multi stakeholder partnerships and greater involvement of civil society organizations in data sharing initiatives is also a strategy which can help increase transparency and accountability towards citizens. Ultimately, formal mechanisms (such as

legislation, code of conducts and rules) and informal mechanisms (such as consultations, meetings, for and others) can be combined.

### Distributing value from data sharing

It is now clear that the old “you get nothing for nothing” proverb applies to the question of access to privately held data by the public sector. Private sector stakeholders in the past few years have become increasingly vocal about wanting compensation when requested to share data, which they see as key companies assets. This has brought certain legislators, such as the European Union with the Data Act, to draw a line between different types of privately held data, some of which should be provided for free or at a marginal cost, for instance in the context of exceptional circumstances such as humanitarian emergencies.

Paying private operators to share data with NSOs for the production of official statistics is a very controversial topic. Some NSOs accept to remunerate data providers and others do not, or simply cannot afford it. All NSOs however agree that finding win-win partnerships with the private sector constitutes the best way forward and many are trying to understand what private operators can get in return for their data and collaboration, outside direct remuneration. In the last few years, very interesting approaches have emerged, based on a concept of reciprocity and on the understanding that long term partnerships require a different and more balanced value distribution than pilot approaches. A few countries for instance experimented with the idea of providing aggregated data analysis back to the private sector partners. This works well in Finland in the context of scanner data and has been discussed in Uruguay for MNOs data. Other alternatives to the monetary compensation approach can also be the delivery of training services to the private partners or the provision of other NSOs data.

Mandatory data access schemes (either through legislation - i.e. by adapting the Statistical Act - or via partnerships with regulators - such as Telecommunications Regulatory Authorities) are also on the rise. These mandatory schemes however are not always viable and some countries might struggle to implement them due to the time it can take to walk the legislative route or the different bargaining power and relationships between regulators and regulated entities. Even when mandatory schemes are in place however, the question of the distribution of value does not become irrelevant. Private sector is much less resistant to collaboration and much more compliant in providing good quality data when convinced that benefits go both ways and that there is an interest for them too. Advocacy efforts and convincing private stakeholders of the value of data sharing for all partners involved is therefore important also in the context of existing access rights for NSOs or public sector more broadly. As some speakers put it, it is a matter of explaining to the private sector that better private public data sharing is in the national interest.

What the last few years have highlighted clearly is that distributing value is not simple and nobody has found the perfect formula. While legislation can play a role in attributing direct access rights to NSOs, maintaining sustainable and effective partnerships with private sector data holders will require the public sector to continue the discussion on what can be given in return for data, although not necessarily from a monetary perspective.

## Diversifying the portfolio of skills of NSOs officials

The skills required for establishing successful data sharing partnerships are diverse and span across legal, organizational, management and technical expertise. Traditionally, statisticians have never been asked to negotiate access to data, to carry out ethical risks assessments on third parties data nor to work with information which can be as unstructured and biased as some real world privately held data are. Furthermore, certain privately held datasets, such as for instance Call Detail Records (CDRs) held by MNOs, require an understanding of mobile network engineering technologies to be put to use. This means that NSOs must establish specific strategies for acquiring new needed skills, either by recruitment or by training officials.

While the lack of technical skills (i.e. related to data management) has been acknowledged as a challenge by many and has always been in the spotlight, management and data governance skills are particularly lacking across NSOs but also increasingly important. The new role of NSOs as data stewards in fact requires an understanding of the end-to-end data life cycle involving expertise in areas such as privacy (managing people's consent for repurposing data), liabilities, cybersecurity etc. There is a need to further invest in training and capacity building in these areas in order to shape the statistician of the future.

## **What's next: a call for more regional and cross-regional collaboration and exchanges**

Access to privately held data is high on the agenda for NSOs across all continents. The time has come to move from a piloting and testing mindset to the institutionalization of the use of these data for statistical production. This requires the consolidation of the existing knowledge in concrete guidelines and approaches, increased knowledge exchange between organizations as well as strengthened efforts deployed into training and capacity building.

Countries are keen to collaborate further in these areas and learn from each other's experiences and successes. International organizations and particularly ECLAC and UNECA have an important role to play in translating the importance of this topic into more concrete convenings, trainings, guidelines and methodologies, so that all countries, notwithstanding their current level of experience with the use of privately held data, can rise to the challenge. As a concrete example, ECLAC and participant countries of the conference agreed to integrate the topic of accessing privately held data in the Statistical Conference of the Americas' agenda.

## About the organizers

### INE Uruguay

The [National Statistical Institute](#) (INE) has the mission of generating and providing quality statistical information to society, as well as leading and coordinating the National Statistical System, establishing technical standards and verifying their compliance. INE's vision is to be a leading and benchmark institution in Latin America. INE has begun a process of modernization of management and production of statistics in order to fulfill its [strategic plan](#), based on four fundamental pillars: human resources, quality of statistics, intensive use of technology and statistical use of administrative registers both from the public sector and privately-held data.

### The Global Partnership

[The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data](#) (The Global Partnership) is a fast-growing, dynamic international partnership bringing together over 600 organizations including governments, UN agencies, private companies, civil society organizations, and many others. GPSDD convenes, connects and catalyzes action to address the problems of poor data use, access, quality and production, and to work with stakeholders to fully harness the new opportunities of the data revolution in the service of sustainable development.