

The need for timely official statistics: the pandemic as a driver for innovation

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Abstract

In this abstract an overview is given of how Statistics Netherlands managed to respond quickly with a range of new outputs to the sudden increase in the need for statistical information following the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, working from home became the new normal and all activities were set up digitally. This resulted in:

- i. Delivery of output based on surveys without Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). All resulting statistics were solely based on Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) and Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing.
- ii. Producing output in the form of dashboards to address the need for more timely statistics, at a regional level, on specific topics (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/dossier/cbs-cijfers-coronacrisis>).
- iii. Faster and more frequent (weekly) delivery of mortality and morbidity statistics.
- iv. More timely statistics on the labour market and the economy (retail, bankruptcies) were produced, by including register data and speeding up the statistical production process.
- v. A stimulation of innovation by an intensified collaboration with other governmental and private institutes. This gave a new impetus not only in timeliness, but also in new and detailed statistical output. For example, weekly statistics on mobility and electronic payments. Statistics Netherlands also assisted the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (in Dutch: RIVM) in a study on the spread of the Corona virus using sewage data enabling publication at a more local level.

Let it be clear that not all ideas worked or could be successfully implemented quickly. From the combination of the positive and the negative experiences, it can be concluded that an NSI is able to timely respond to new needs during a crisis when it is flexible, produces output in a transparent way, is able to deal with policy questions, has an ecosystem that includes both public and private national and international partners and uses state of the art technologies. The crisis has highlighted continued challenges in terms of data access, data processing and IT infrastructures. A lot more output could have been produced if high value data sets from privately owned data sources would be available. A continuous investment in data acquisition and processing, the public image of the trustworthiness of an NSI, state of the art IT infrastructures and an even more flexible statistical process and output program are some of the challenges for the future. The covid-crisis has also thought us that the best and quickest way to produce a completely new statistic is by i) using a new, readily available, data source that provides the required information and ii) calibrating this with an already existing traditional statistic that measures the same or a very similar concept. The latter is needed as we found that creating a new statistic from scratch is nearly impossible in a limited timeframe. For new data, it just takes a lot of effort and time to understand the way the data is generated and the kind of errors it contains.

The full paper is available at: <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji210825>