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Covid-19 impact on Labour Force Surveys and other household surveys in Caribbean countries

June 03, 2020, via Webex

Summary of the meeting

In the context of the videoconferences "Conectados RTC", the National Statistics Institute of Chile, Statistics Canada, ECLAC Statistics Division and the ILO convened the National Statistical Offices of the Caribbean to a videoconference to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Labour Force Surveys and other household surveys.

1. Presentation of the International Labour Organization (ILO)

Kieran Walsh indicated that the organization has released 4 notes on the impact of COVID-19 on labor market statistics, and that this presentation is based on note 3, on the different options available to countries to maintain their labor force survey data collection.

Face-to-face interviews were suspended by most countries, which had to implement telephone interviews. The challenges posed by this new context depend on existing systems, infrastructure and availability of contact details (e.g. published telephone numbers).

He presented a scheme with the possible alternatives and their main challenges. In the case of data collection through telephone interviews, the main challenges were the recovery of contact details, the authorization to do the telephone interviews, and the questionnaires for such interviews. Likewise, among the methodological challenges, he mentioned the low response rates and possible biases, which required adjustments in the weighting of the survey data.

In the particular case of contact details and sampling frame, he pointed out that it is advisable to keep the current sample design, if possible. Some countries are reusing old samples for which contact details are available. However, regardless of the option chosen, coverage and potential biases need to be assessed.

He added other challenges, such as reducing the content of the questionnaire; maintaining the response rate; assessment of biases; review of weighting approaches; quality evaluation and deciding the dissemination strategy, among others.

2. Presentation of ECLAC Statistics Division

Andrés Gutiérrez presented the recommendations for the publication of official statistics from household surveys in the middle of the COVID19 pandemic, published in two ECLAC documents. These refer to



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gathering labor market information through household surveys, paying particular attention to the sampling strategy (the combination of sampling design and estimators) required for this purpose.

The suspension of face-to-face data collection for household surveys has led to changing the collection modality to a telephone-based modality. To this end, the recommendation is to select a sample of households from a previous period for which contact details are available.

Nevertheless, this process may be subject to different biases (of selection, coverage and non-response). They originate from situations such as: not all the households in the original sample provided their telephone contact information; some households provided their contact information, but at the time of the interview they do not live at the selected address; some households provided their contact information, but they have changed their contact telephone number; and not all households that provided their contact information are willing to answer the survey questionnaire

In this situation, the ECLAC representative showed some exercises to estimate the effect of bias, and correct non-response bias through the propensity score and two-stage calibration methods.

3. Presentation of Belize

Diana Castillo began by summarizing the characteristics of the Belize Labour Force Survey (LFS). She noted that it comprises a sample of 2,800 households; has a duration of 4 weeks; and the data is collected using CAPI, via face to face interviews; among others.

She indicated that currently there is a relaxation of some requirements for social distancing. However, the country remains in a state of emergency. In that sense, there is considerable uncertainty about possibility of face to face surveys for the rest of 2020 and possibly 2021.

For the LFS of September 2020, data collection is scheduled by CATI, with a sample of 3,000 households. Among the necessary adjustments, she noted: sample frame with telephone numbers; shortening of questionnaire; setting up of infrastructure for data collection by telephone; revision of training material with a focus on telephone interviewing; and monitoring of quality and progress remotely.

They explored 3 options as an alternative Data Collection Method for LFS, namely: i) constructing sample frame using administrative data from telephone companies; ii) use computer programming to create a frame consisting of all possible telephone numbers for Belize, then using an automated process try to contact each number and eliminate non-existent numbers; and iii) develop a own sample frame by conducting a listing exercise, during which telephone and email contact information will be collected, which is the method finally selected.

Among the challenges, she mentioned the lack of experience in data collection by CATI; expected higher than usual non-response rate; LFS questionnaire needs to be shortened to facilitate shorter interview times; managing workplace social distancing requirements in a call center setting; among others.

She also highlighted the opportunities of this new context, such as building capacity in a new modality of data collection; and the possibility of conducting other short surveys by telephone, to capture pertinent and relevant indicators on the impact of COVID-19 on the country.



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4. Presentation of Grenada

Halim Brizan noted that the conduct of the Labor Force Survey has been adversely affected. They have been grappling with how to resume operations given the physical distancing protocol. For now, they are not conducting face-to-face surveys. They already were unable to apply the LFS for the fourth quarter of 2019 normally, having to resort to telephone surveys. In the case of the survey corresponding to the first quarter of 2020, they will have to estimate broad indicators. For their part, they are vigorously planning to conduct the second quarter survey.

In relation to the second quarter survey, they carried out an adaptation, where the questionnaire was modified. They removed some questions and added others related to COVID-19. One of the challenges is that it is still extensive.

Along with that, he made reference to the change from the CAPI model to CATI. He noted that while a higher non-response rate is normally expected in telephone surveys, their experience in the fourth quarter of 2019 was good. They achieved a relatively high response rate from the numbers they had available. As for the sample selection, a previous sample in which the phone numbers were captured was used.

Among the challenges, he indicated that they do not have access to the World Bank Survey Solutions Server due to sudden changes in bank's policy; so the availability of local servers and timeliness in setting up becomes relevant. On the other hand, there are risks of data security, where an own server is needed so this can be effectively managed. He added that the same level of monitoring of interviewers since the survey is done remotely via telephone cannot be applied.

5. Comments

In the round of comments, technical questions from the participants regarding the presentations were resolved, and some recommendations were made. In this regard, the ILO representative referred to the challenges presented by telephone surveys, insisting on the need to maintain the sample design as much as possible, and try to use all available resources to cover the sample. He suggested that all available data be used to access telephone numbers, and sending letters may also be useful to obtain contact information from households.

ECLAC highlighted the complementarity of the work undertaken in cooperation with the ILO in the region, with ECLAC focusing on topics such as the design of surveys and how to address potential biases, and ILO addressing the conceptual aspects of the measurement of employment and the modifications of the questionnaires.