

Meeting on Compilation of Price, National Accounts, and Foreign Trade Statistics in the Context of the COVID-19 Health Emergency

May 7, 2020. By Webex

In the context of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, ECLAC has organized regional meetings to address the main problems and challenges faced in the statistical field for compiling prices, national accounts, and foreign trade statistics. This meeting was devoted to price statistics and covered all the Caribbean region.

This is the second meeting organized by ECLAC with the Caribbean region in the context of the sanitary emergency due to the virus COVID-19. Four previous meetings were organized with the Latin American region covering price, national accounts, and foreign trade statistics. A draft note has been prepared including summaries of the exchanges, main conclusions, and recommendations. The exchanges and conclusions achieved during this meeting will be incorporated as an annex into the document *Producing the consumer price index (CPI) and the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean*, which is part of the ECLAC's reports about COVID-19 on the statistical production.

All materials produced during these meetings are being placed on the website of the Knowledge Transfer Network (KNT) as part of the Statistical Conference of the Americas.

Opening of the meeting

Rolando Ocampo, Director of Statistical Division welcomed the participants. On behalf of STATCAN, Mr. Claudio Perez welcomed and thanked the participants, and finally Ms. Marissa Ramotar from CARICOM thanked ECLAC for organizing this meeting.

The objective of the meeting was to know the situation faced by the countries during the health crisis and to share some methodological guidelines from the meeting already held with the Latin American countries

The meeting was structured in four topics: CPI price survey and data processing; Challenges observed in the implementation of alternative collection modalities; Imputation methods according to international CPI methodological criteria and calculation process; and recommendations. The representatives of each country were invited to discuss and exchange their opinions on each topic.

CPI price survey and data processing

During the meeting the main aspects of the CPI price data collection as of April 2020 were presented. In this regard, the Latin American region reported a price collection of around 60 and 80 percent of the sample. The effects of the health emergency consist of restrictions of the movements of the price collectors; establishments closed and temporarily unavailable products. The sectors affected by the health emergency are those where the price collection is face to face and are not considered as essential

activities, for example recreation services, cinemas, theaters, sports events, food away from home services, and hotel services.

ECLAC highlighted the importance to ensure enough data in compiling the CPI, considering the usual missing prices observed in each country, during the current situation, at least 50 percent of the information should be observed monthly to calculate and publish the CPI.

The Caribbean countries closed their borders and only the essential activities are working. Specific cases were consulted during the meeting and were related to how to tackle with the situation of the air tickets sold but not used and some hotels that temporally changed their main activity receiving sick people.

Challenges observed in the implementation of alternative collection modalities

Due to restrictions implemented by the Governments, the national statistical offices have been implementing new price collection modalities. These are telephone or email; Internet (some data sources have websites or social media accounts, which facilitates direct research); e-commerce websites, as well as updated catalogs (printed or digital); and price and product information provided by official institutions as a result of personal purchases.

For Latin America, these new modalities impacted the coverage in around 10-30 percent by March and were applied in specific to cover the data gaps because of the health emergency. The imputation methods applied should be in line with the methods set out in their methodologies and implemented by each country.

About the new modalities of data collection, in the case of food markets some countries have used telephone, email, and websites to try to improve the coverage. In other cases, it has not been possible to collect the information in the last two months due to the total quarantine imposed. In the countries where consumer price index is calculated quarterly, it will be possible to introduce new options for data collection. In other cases, the face to face collection has been changed to email but the response rate has been low.

Imputation methods according to international CPI methodological criteria and calculation process

The imputation rules are applied in ascending order from the elementary aggregate (variety-outlet) to the higher levels of aggregation (product). The traditional imputation mechanisms were presented, and it was referred to as the examples introduced in the report on prices in the context of COVID-19.

Recommendations

The recommendations provided emphasized the importance of guarantee consistency and quality in the CPI compilation. Some of the most important are: maintain the adequate coverage and quality of the CPI; adapt data collection as the first approach to overcome the health emergency; build capacities in

the CPI teams as far as possible to implement remote collection modalities using digital technologies instead of traditional methods based on face to face interviews; reinforce the implementation of the new modalities of data collection due to the needed time to incorporate them, and; introduce flexibility into the price collection and imputation methods, but be careful in not replace outlets or expand the survey.

STATCAN highlighted the importance of being transparent about the changes made in compiling the CPI during this health emergency and in the dissemination process by explaining the imputation methods applied.

Next steps

The conclusions achieved during this meeting will be incorporated as an annex of the report *Producing the consumer price index (CPI) and the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean*, currently placed on the website of the Knowledge Transmission Network (KTN) of the Statistical Conference of the Americas.

An online survey on the new modalities of data collection was conducted and the results are going to be published on the website of the KTN.

As part of the regional meetings on the effect of the COVID-19 on the statistical production, a next meeting on National Accounts and Foreign Trade Price statistics will be conducted for the Caribbean subregion.