International Labour Organization

Communicating new labour statistics standards implementation

Tips for an effective communication strategy

November 2024

Department of Statistics

▶ Communicating new labour statistics standards implementation

Tips for an effective communication strategy

The effective communication of statistics is nothing short of challenging, but it is the key to getting the best out of the data. Especially in times of change, including methodological changes such as those linked to the implementation of new standards through a labour force survey, effective communication drives the success of statistical results. Once measurement and technical challenges are solved and new methodologies are implemented, communicational challenges can be the obstacle to taking full profit of the efforts, if not properly addressed. Implementing the required changes for the labour force survey to be in line with the latest international statistical standards[1] will have an impact on the results, leading to breaks in series of key labour market indicators such as the employment-to-population ratio and the unemployment rate. The extent of this impact (and of the breaks) depends on the country context (for instance, a larger subsistence agricultural sector will imply a higher impact) but in any case, it is crucial to accompany the methodological change with a proper and inclusive communication and dissemination strategy preventing the misinterpretation of the breaks. The new standards improve our knowledge of the labour market and the world of work by more adequately reflecting people's participation in employment and unpaid work, but these information gains are only materialized via carefully designed communication and dissemination processes highlighting the analytical value added and explaining the breaks.

This document provides some tips and summarizes possible actions and activities to undertake from the communications side in relation to the implementation of new standards in the labour force survey. It builds on the knowledge accumulated by ILO experts in the conduct of the ILO Labour Force Survey pilot studies and on the experiences of diverse countries and agencies. Some of these experiences were shared in a special event during the 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 2018 (including those of Rwanda, Brazil, EUROSTAT, and Data2x) and in a round table during the 21st ICLS.

A sound communication and dissemination strategy cannot be an afterthought. It must be purposively planned (and budgeted for –something sometimes overlooked-), underlying every step of the process. Given that communicating is a constant

[1] Notably the *Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization* adopted by the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) which implied a full reset of the base for labour statistics with the introduction of a forms-of-work framework, a statistical definition of work (covering paid and unpaid work), and a narrower definition of employment compared to previously (referring to work done for pay or profit), but also standards adopted by subsequent ICLSs.

endeavour, this document covers the entirety of the new standards implementation process, from the initial decision-making to the release of results.

Before the implementation of changes – design stages

- From the moment the decision is taken to implement (or even to explore possibilities for implementing) the new standards in a core data collection such as the national labour force survey, the team leading these efforts in the National Statistical Office must **start identifying key partners, users, and stakeholders concerned by the decision,** such as:
    - All relevant units and colleagues within the National Statistical Office who use labour force survey estimates in one way or another, for example as inputs for System of National Accounts (SNA) estimates.
    - Relevant government entities who are regular users of labour statistics or deal with labour-related issues, including but not limited to those typically involved in a labour market information system. This can comprise the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Industry, the Ministry of Public Works, and Social Security Institutions.
    - Social partners, that is, the main workers' and employers' organizations who regularly use labour statistics to inform their negotiations and decisions.
    - Key members of the academia (people and institutions), conducting labour market research and analysis.
    - Key members of the press usually reporting on world of work issues and citing labour statistics.
    - Key international partners, including those who may provide support to the process, such as the ILO.
- Inform the identified key partners, users, and stakeholders of the plan to implement new standards from the get-go, including:
    - **Clearly explaining to them the rationale** of the methodological changes and the resulting **improvements in knowledge**.
        - For example, pointing out that the standards adopted by the 19th ICLS enable the measurement of all forms of work carried out by people, including paid and unpaid work, therefore bringing to light people's participation in different forms of work (also simultaneously). Additionally, the narrower employment definition referring to work done for pay or profit allows to pinpoint those who are indeed doing paid work for others and distinguish them from those doing unpaid work for own use. This distinction is crucial for our understanding of the world of work (including policymaking) given the strong differences in working conditions of people in these two forms of work. This distinction also greatly enhances the relevance of labour statistics for particular groups such as women, youth, and people living in rural areas, whose labour market situation was often misunderstood or concealed in the previous standards.
        - The 19th ICLS standards also improve our understanding of labour underutilization, introducing a stricter definition of unemployment (people not in employment, currently available and seeking) to complement with the measurement of time-related underemployment and that of the potential labour force (those who are not in employment but available or seeking -but not both simultaneously-). Thus, information can be produced on those with the most pressing and explicit need for employment, but also on those with a weaker labour market attachment.

- Being open about the **expected implications, especially regarding the impact on key labour market indicators and breaks in series**, but also on survey costs, respondent burden, etc.
- Sharing any estimation available of the predicted extent of the breaks in series, that is, the **predicted impact on the value of key labour market indicators** based on the country context and the characteristics of the local labour market, or at least the direction of expected change where the scale is unclear.
    - For example, where subsistence agriculture is prevalent and a large share of those considered employed according to the previous employment definition were subsistence foodstuff producers (without a paid job), there will be an expectation of a significant drop in the employment-to-population ratio. If those subsistence foodstuff producers were typically not looking for a job, the drop in the employment-to-population ratio will be accompanied by an increase of the inactivity rate (rather than one in the unemployment-to-population ratio). Even though the number of persons unemployed and the unemployment-to-population ratio may not change much, the unemployment rate may change considerably due to the change in the labour force associated with the new employment definition.[2] Where possible, these forecasts of impacts should be quantified.
- **Preventing future misinterpretation of breaks** in series by pre-emptively communicating on them, alerting on what is comparable and what is not, and explaining which complementary indicators can be used to provide a fuller picture clarifying the reason for the breaks.
    - For example, where subsistence agriculture is prevalent, the new employment definition will result in a considerable drop in the employment-to-population ratio. However, this is actually not a drop: it cannot be considered one because the ratio following the new standards is not comparable to the ratio following previous standards. To explicitly show this, and to prove that those people previously considered employed have not "disappeared", the employment-to-population ratio should be disseminated and interpreted alongside the subsistence foodstuff production rate.[3]
- Presenting the **new indicators** which will be produced thanks to the implementation of the new standards, highlighting their **analytical value added** and how they complement other key labour market indicators.
    - For example, indicators on forms of work other than employment (such as the subsistence foodstuff production rate or the volunteer rate) or the four complementary headline labour underutilization indicators introduced in the 19th ICLS resolution.

- Understanding the new standards implementation process, including its rationale and implications, requires some level of statistical skill, which is why the National Statistical

[2] The unemployment-to-population ratio expresses the share of unemployed in the working-age population, while the unemployment rate expresses the share of unemployed in the labour force. The unemployment-to-population ratio is not a renowned indicator, in fact, it is hardly used. The unemployment rate is the unchallenged, most widely used indicator on unemployment, and it would be confusing to use the two. However, when studying the composition of the working-age population by labour force status (and the changes in it related to the implementation of new standards), the unemployment-to-population ratio gains relevance. The working-age population is distributed across three labour force categories: employment, unemployment, and those outside the labour force. The share of employed in the working-age population (employment-to-population ratio), the share of unemployed in the working-age population (unemployment-to-population ratio) and the share of people outside the labour force in the working-age population (inactivity rate) add up to 100%.

[3] The 19th ICLS standards enable the measurement and analysis of participation in several forms of work simultaneously (for example, people in employment also doing subsistence foodstuff production). Depending on the data needs and purposes, it may be valuable to produce information on everyone doing subsistence foodstuff production, whether also in employment or not. However, whenever using the subsistence foodstuff production rate as a complement to the employment-to-population ratio to approximate the "old" employment-to-population ratio, only subsistence foodstuff producers not in employment should be covered. Indeed, producing the subsistence foodstuff production rate disaggregated by participation in employment provides relevant information for analysis and policymaking.

Office may wish to **consider providing some statistical capacity building to the key partners, users, and stakeholders**.

  - The National Statistical Office could design workshops, training sessions, or webinars for (non-technical) counterparts to acquire basic statistical and analytical skills to understand the methodological changes being implemented, their rationale, and impact. This can be beneficial in the longer term, for everyone involved.
  - The press is a crucial stakeholder and a key ally for the general public's good understanding of the revision of the labour force survey. Workshops with members of the press would give them the knowledge and tools to grasp the methodological changes and their implications, allowing them to eventually convey to the general public an accurate interpretation of the results.
  - Beyond the specifically targeted key counterparts, the public at large should also be able to learn about and understand the new standards implementation process. To this end, the National Statistical Office should create clear and simple explanatory materials (technical and non-technical ones). Some National Statistical Offices also use social media for this communication.
    - An example of this is provided by the social media posts of the Statistical Institute of Jamaica and the videos by the National Statistical Institute of Spain and the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies of France.

- Communication with these key partners, users, and stakeholders should be open and continuous. **Follow-up meetings or other means of sustained communication** should serve to keep them abreast of progress in implementing the new standards, informing them of advances in each of the key stages of the process, including survey planning, survey design, data collection, data processing, and finally, dissemination.
- **During the design stages, it is also necessary to look ahead and think of the future release of results**. While methodological changes are still new, it would be advisable to produce and disseminate two sets of estimates: one based on the new standards, given primary focus within the publication, and, if considered necessary under national circumstances, one based on the old standards. Applying this duplication strategy to all indicators would be too laborious and even confusing, but if it is applied at least to the main headline indicators, it could greatly ease understanding of the methodological changes. This duplication strategy is meant to last only during the transition. Once the new standards have been fully assimilated, it is not recommended to continue to refer to the old ones unless there are strong national reasons to do so. **There are different possible methods for producing labour force survey estimates both according to new standards and previous standards, with different levels of complexity. Their feasibility depends on planning and the resources available. That is, this should be considered at the design stages, so that the necessary steps are taken to enable later on the production of such estimates**. These are technical statistical decisions, but they relate to the communication strategy since the choice of series and indicators released is at the core of the public's good understanding of the statistics.
  - One option is to revise and update the labour force survey questionnaire to align with new standards, but still allowing to produce statistics according to previous

standards. The way in which the 19th ICLS definitions were developed should enable this to be done without creating additional respondent burden, but this requires good planning and implementation. Available ILO guides and model questionnaires are a good reference point to support this process.

  - Another option is to conduct an additional parallel survey alongside the main one. The parallel survey should align with new standards if the main survey aligns with previous ones, and vice versa. The benefit of this approach is that it allows for an in-depth comparison of the results of the old survey and the new survey in a way which would not be possible through the updated questionnaire alone.
  - Statistical methods such as back-calculation or back-casting are useful to estimate historical series for the new definitions (or possibly to continue to produce estimates based on previous definition) after an important methodological change. Parallel surveys, where national resources allow, are particularly useful to support these types of series linking efforts.
  - Parallel surveys and linking of series are generally only relevant where regular surveys are undertaken. Where the survey is periodic (for example, conducted once every five years) it is unlikely that it would be justified to invest the resources required for a parallel survey. Rather, analysis could focus on data from the new survey, identifying the degree of impact but not attempting to make historical recalculations.

During the implementation – conduction of survey

- Some National Statistical Offices take the opportunity of the survey's field work to share with the public via social media the importance of participation in the survey and the enumerators' work, as well as to remind about the changes being implemented.
    - Examples of communication with the public on survey participation and field work include these social media posts by the National Statistical Institute of Uruguay, National Statistical Institute of Spain, and these two by Statistics Canada.
- Revised survey questionnaires with proper clarifications and explanation for relevant questions can be shared with key partners, users, and stakeholders. They can also be put at the public's disposal in the official website of the National Statistical Office.

After the implementation – release of results

- **Dissemination and communication go together**, especially in an endeavour such as the implementation of new standards in the national labour force survey. The dissemination and communication strategy can cover the choice of key indicators, series, and disaggregations published, the creation and release of methodological and analytical notes, data visualizations and infographics including interactive ones, a news release, a press conference, social media communications, etc.
- The dissemination strategy should promote transparency and the accurate interpretation of the statistics by users.

- This implies making **easily available to the public relevant methodological information alongside the statistics**. In-depth methodological papers are relevant and necessary for technical users and to document the work of the National Statistical Office, but these should be complemented with other formats better fitted for non-technical audiences. Brief information notes could outline the main methodological changes implemented, their rationale, and their impact, using intuitive graphics and visual cues. Also, every statistic released should be accompanied by the relevant metadata.
- **Transparently communicating on methodology is necessary, but not enough**. We cannot expect every data user to take the time to review methodological documents to fully understand a given indicator, we must make the indicator as easy to understand as possible through the choice of data visualizations, its release alongside complementary indicators, the use of telling disaggregations, etc. The communication of breaks in series deserves particular attention. Breaks in series must be clear, evident, and almost self-explanatory in the tables and data visualizations published. Dissemination of complementary indicators to make the changes evident will ease users' understanding of the impact of the methodological changes versus actual labour market variations. Brief analytical notes or other analytical outputs can convey the accurate interpretation of the statistics though insightful data visualizations.
  - For example, the employment series according to new standards can be presented alongside the employment series according to previous standards and the subsistence foodstuff production rate (covering only producers not in employment), making it plain and unequivocal that there was not an actual drop in employment, but rather people who were previously considered employed were actually doing an unpaid form of work.
  - Also, where a relaxed definition of unemployment[4] was previously used, the new (stricter) unemployment series can be presented alongside a series for unemployment and the potential labour force.

- In relation to the previous point and to the last point of the design stages, during the transition (while methodological changes are still new) it can be beneficial to produce and disseminate estimates based on the new standards alongside estimates based on the previous standards for selected headline indicators. The feasibility of this will depend on the survey design and methods available, but in any case, it would greatly ease the understanding of the statistics and minimize the chances of misinterpretation.
- The **release of results of the revised labour force survey is part and parcel of the communications strategy**. It must be planned in advance, thoughtfully considering the **different audiences** the National Statistical Office wants to reach, and the best **communication channels** for each of them. The communication channels available to the National Statistical Office may be numerous and varied, including posting items on its official website (a full report, an executive summary, or a news release), sending

[4] The relaxed definition of unemployment typically refers to people not in employment but currently available for employment (not applying the additional criterion of seeking employment). This was the preferred unemployment definition in some countries, but the 19th ICLS standards establish that its use is no longer accepted. Instead, complementary measures (the potential labour force and its subcomponents) will provide additional information on other types of labour underutilization that unemployment, enabling a more detailed analysis.

out a press release, holding a press conference, posting on social media, recording a podcast, etc. Each of these requires devoted efforts, meaning not all content is well-suited for all channels, and for greater impact, content should be specifically designed for each chosen channel.

  - The National Statistical Office being the producer of the data, it is well placed to understand the data (more intuitively perhaps than external users). Thus, it is important that the National Statistical Office take ownership of the narrative, not disseminating the results on their own but making sure to put in the limelight their accurate interpretation. Some core labour market indicators like the unemployment rate or the informality rate tend to trigger public debate, and it is crucial to get ahead of the debate by broadcasting sufficient content to ensure the debate is well-informed.
  - Workshops with members of the press ahead of the official release of results may be a good way of promoting the good understanding of the breaks in series and statistics.

- As stated before, one of the key benefits of implementing the new standards is the improved knowledge on the world of work it enables, but these information gains are only materialized if the improved statistics are indeed used. Data, analytical, and communicational materials can bring to light new and improved indicators to ensure that policymakers and labour market stakeholders make the most of the information.