Now is the Time to Close Gaps in Governance Statistics – And the Praia Group is ready for the challenge

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Investing in another type of vaccine: The value of governance statistics in a crisis such as COVID-19

After more than two years of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it's nearly impossible to overstate the importance and unprecedented need and demand for governance data. "Is testing and medical treatment for COVID-19 accessible to everyone without discrimination?" "What are the most common justice problems created or exacerbated by the pandemic for which people need help?" "To what extent are patients resorting to paying bribes to receive medical care before those unable to pay?" These headline-grabbing questions confronting leaders across the world can only be responded to if timely and reliable governance statistics are available – and often, they're not.

Few national statistical offices (NSOs) have invested in the production of governance statistics lately, for a host of legitimate reasons. For one, they struggle to find internationally accepted methodologies to produce official statistics on a range of governance issues. They also wrestle with severe budget cuts, which can make it more challenging to start producing new types of statistics. This is creating a dangerous 'blind spot' in our information landscape: if we don't have the *statistical* means to know whether our public institutions are serving the public equitably and whether they are responsive to the needs of everyone, if we don't have a *statistical* sense of whether people feel they have a say in public decision-making, and whether they trust their leaders to govern with their best interest at heart (both of which are essential for securing public support for emergency measures and recovery policies), how

can we ensure that the trillions of dollars currently being spent on COVID-19 recovery will not go wasted?

Thus blindfolded, policymakers have been slow to detect flashpoints that quickly degenerated into civil unrest and violence, for example in reaction to the stark inequalities laid bare by the crisis or to emergency powers overreach. Meanwhile, the media, national oversight institutions and civil society groups have been ill-equipped to hold their government to account on its commitment to assist the most in need and to 'build back better'.

We must address this blind spot if we want to come out of this crisis with improved institutions. Even in a time of fiscal constraint, investing in the expertise and systems needed to collect more and better data on prime-time governance issues is a smart long-term investment. Strengthening national governance data infrastructures will serve us now and will also prepare our systems to better respond to future shocks.

This is the utmost priority of the Praia Group on Governance Statistics[1], which is the only existing global platform on governance statistics specifically dedicated to NSOs. Created in 2015 by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) "to contribute to establishing international standards and methods for the compilation of statistics on the major dimensions of governance," the Praia Group published in March 2020 the first-ever Handbook on Governance Statistics[2], which provides guidelines on producing and compiling official statistics on eight dimensions of governance, namely: non-discrimination and equality; participation; openness; access to and quality of justice; responsiveness; absence of corruption; trust; and safety and security.

In September 2020, the Praia Group published a sequel to the Handbook that looks specifically at the governance challenges posed by COVID-19 in each of these areas. In a set of eight thematic briefs, this new Guidance Note on Governance Statistics in the COVID-19 Era[3] provides advice to statisticians on what specific statistics could be useful to produce to help address the governance questions most likely to arise during this pandemic or similar crises. This Guidance also keeps in mind the acute operational constraints faced by NSOs and other governance data producers – such as their greatly reduced mobility for data collection and declining funding for statistical production. This makes the resource applicable not only to the current COVID-19 pandemic, but also to other multidimensional crises that may arise in the future, and that will require a similarly robust governance response.

A new resource for statisticians: How to provide policymakers battling the COVID-19 pandemic with the governance data they need

The Guidance Note on Governance Statistics in the COVID-19 Era was developed by the Praia Group to assist NSOs and other governance data producers in meeting the governance information needs most likely to arise during the pandemic and its aftermath, while keeping in mind the operational and financial constraints placed on traditional field-based operations. National oversight institutions, civil society groups and the media can also use this Guidance Note to demand more governance statistics and to hold the government to account on its response and recovery strategy, at a time when many normal oversight and accountability processes have been severely disrupted.

Each thematic brief – one for each of the eight dimensions of governance covered in the Handbook on Governance Statistics – starts by outlining illustrative policy questions that can provide a useful starting point for discussions between statisticians and prospective data users, such as national COVID-19 Taskforces and other stakeholders on the frontline of the response. These questions will help statisticians identify which information might be most needed in their context. A first set of questions point to likely governance data needs of national actors to inform the *immediate* response to COVID-19. In the area of justice, for instance: What are the most common justice problems created or exacerbated by the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, for which people need help? Are people able to resolve their problems using the new modes of delivery of the justice system in a satisfactory way – such as the electronic filing of cases, the use of video- or teleconferencing for conducting trials, etc.?

A second set of questions point to *medium-term* data needs likely to arise as a country transitions from the immediate response to the recovery phase. For instance, how is the demand for justice services changing over time, as the public health emergency translates into an economic, employment and financial crisis? How prepared are governments to conduct justice proceedings through electronic means in the longer term?

Practical measurement guidance is then provided to help generate the information needed to respond to these questions. In the area of justice, for instance, guidance is provided on how to leverage administrative data to get a good overview of the demand placed on the justice system at any point in time, and to help manage priority caseloads effectively, such as cases of violence against women and children. With justice services moving online, guidance is also provided on how to conduct user surveys to assess the accessibility and navigability of online legal services for various population groups.

The following section of each thematic brief outlines readily available data sources (national, regional or international) that could be considered, when time is of essence and if options to collect new data at country level remain constrained. For instance, advice is provided on how data compiled by legal aid providers – for instance, on changes in requests received over time – can be used by the justice sector to anticipate what lies ahead and organize itself accordingly. Previous legal needs surveys conducted by NSOs or other actors are also highlighted as a readily available source to review the justice problems faced by people in normal times, and to identify those that are likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19.

The next section invites NSOs to consider engaging with non-official data producers (private sector, civil society, research organizations, etc.), either to help them improve the quality of the data they are already producing (recognizing that some of these actors are best placed to produce certain types of data, due to their proximity to certain communities, etc.), or to seek their inputs in the design of methodologies that the NSO intends to implement itself. In the area of justice, for example, NSOs can gain important insights from partnering with civil society legal service providers when designing and running legal needs surveys, given their proximity to vulnerable communities and their first-hand understanding of the obstacles they face in accessing justice.

The last part of a brief compiles a few recommended indicators, which are also aligned with the illustrative policy questions considered at the outset of each brief. In the area of justice, for instance, specific indicators are proposed to monitor changes in the demand for justice, in the accessibility and quality of justice services, and in the legal capability of justice users.

The Praia Group's second term: Translating international guidance into action on the ground
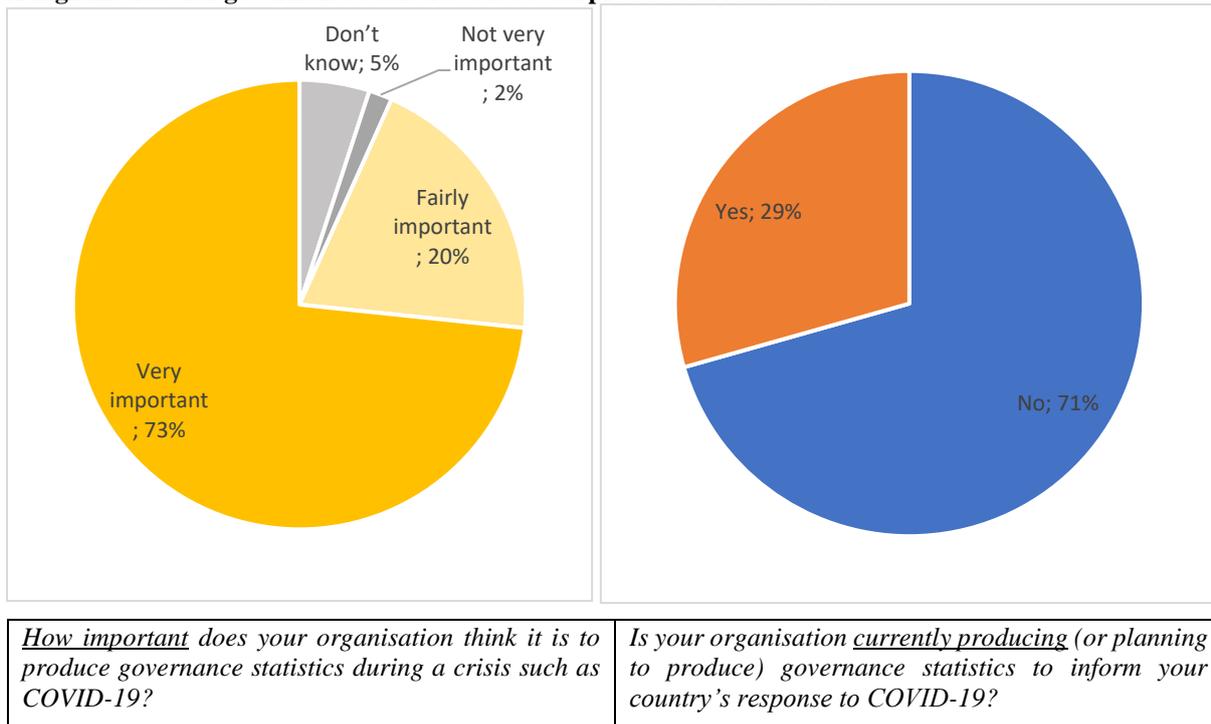
For its second term, running from 2020 to 2025, the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) has requested the Praia Group to "further develop the conceptualization of governance statistics, further improve methodology and standardization, [and] add practical experiences."[4]

In October 2020, the Praia Group Secretariat launched an extensive consultation of its members and other relevant actors in the field of governance statistics to collect views and recommendations on potential 'key deliverables' that the Group could produce over the next four years to address this request by the UNSC. The consultation asked governance data producers what they thought would be most useful for them, given the challenges they are currently facing and given available instruments and guidance on governance statistics.

In total, 24 organisations were consulted[5], including NSOs, research organizations, UN agencies, international organizations, regional organizations and other relevant working groups under the UNSC. Preliminary findings from this consultation were presented at the 3rd Membership Meeting of the Praia Group (held on 11 November 2021), which was attended by 97 participants, including NSOs from all regions, government agencies, international and regional organisations, research institutes, civil society and independent experts. The feedback provided by members at this meeting also informed the Praia Group's workplan for its second term, as well as the results of a short survey completed by the meeting's attendees. This survey confirmed the high interest of Praia Group members in producing governance statistics, but their inability, by and large, to produce such statistics (see Figure 1). It also served to establish their own prioritization of possible 'deliverables' by the Praia Group during its second term (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

A high interest for governance statistics but actual production remains low[6]

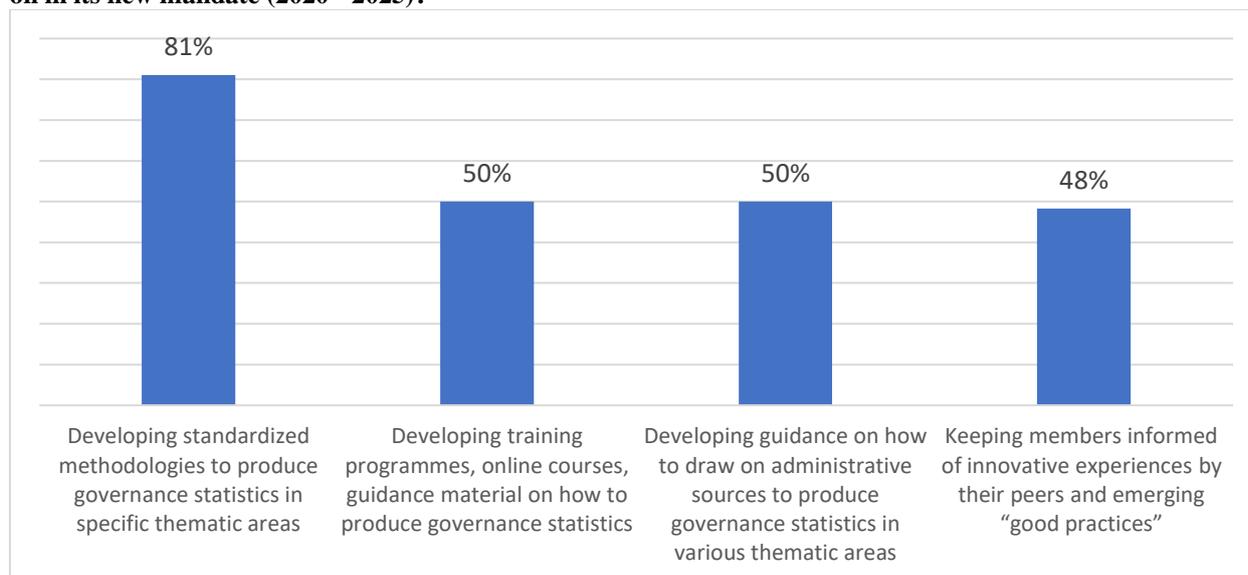| *How important does your organisation think it is to produce governance statistics during a crisis such as COVID-19?* | *Is your organisation currently producing (or planning to produce) governance statistics to inform your country's response to COVID-19?* |

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[4] See UNSC 51/117/c, 51st Sess, March 2020.
[5] Namely: the NSOs of: Cabo Verde, Colombia, Mali, Malawi, Mexico, Mozambique, Norway, Pakistan and the United Kingdom; the following research organizations: IRD, Prio, University of Oslo, World Justice Project, Pathfinders; the following UN agencies: UN Statistics Division, UNDP, UNODC, UNOHCHR, UNWomen; the following international organizations: OECD, Paris 21; the following regional organization: AfDB; and the following existing working groups under the UN Statistical Commission: the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys and the Collaborative on Administrative Data.
[6] Survey participants (71) consisted in 51% of NSOs, 26% of international organizations, 8% each of civil society organizations and regional organizations, 5% of government agencies, and 2% each of independent experts and research institutions.

Figure 2

The demand from members: What do you see as the most important priorities for the Praia Group to focus on in its new mandate (2020 - 2025)?

As shown by Figure 2, members consulted unanimously identified the further development of standardized methodologies to improve the production of governance statistics in specific thematic areas as the no.1 priority for the Praia Group going forward. Many shared the view that the Praia Group was in a strategic position to support a transition from scattered governance measurement experiments by countries applying methodologies of varying quality, to a more coordinated approach to governance statistical production, based on harmonized methodologies.

Members recognized the Handbook as a key achievement of the Praia Group's first term, but also pointed to some limitations of this resource that the Group could try to address in its second term:

1) *The Handbook did not map out relevant national experiences for individual dimensions of governance:* Drawing mainly from available international guidance, the Handbook lacks the concrete national illustrations that members find most convincing. Going forward, they recommended that extensive mappings of national experiences be conducted as a starting point for any methodological work to be undertaken by the Praia Group. Useful national innovations can thus be identified and can inform future methodological developments.

2) *The Handbook did not develop nor promote the use of specific methodologies, for each dimension of governance:* The Handbook directs users to a range of existing methodologies on any given dimension, but these methodologies often address only partially the key sub-dimensions of interest. NSOs interested in publishing comprehensive statistics on any one dimension are therefore left to assemble survey questions and indicators from various instruments on their own, with no guarantee that the resulting questionnaire or administrative data collection instrument will produce reliable statistics. Going forward, members recommended that the Praia Group should develop standardized data collection instruments, especially in thematic areas where methodological developments are less advanced.

3) *The Handbook did not undertake any piloting exercise at country level:* Members noted that on-the-ground testing across various national contexts would have strengthened the evidence base for some of the recommendations made in the Handbook, and in turn, enhanced their legitimacy. While this may not have been necessary in the first phase of the Praia Group's mandate, which was aimed at "providing *a foundation* for the development of international statistical guidance and standards", members made clear that this would be a necessity in the next phase.

4) *Finally, the length and 'somewhat academic style' of the Handbook can be overwhelming for time-pressed statisticians:* Several of the NSOs consulted admitted not having read the Handbook yet, largely due to its sheer size and unavailability in languages other than English. Members advised that future guidance produced by the Praia Group should have a more operational focus and should focus on individual dimensions of governance: members will find more convenient to draw from smaller bite-size resources on specific topics than having to sift through a single, all-encompassing publication.

To help NSOs translate the Handbook's guidance into real action on the ground, dedicated "Task Teams" have been established to advance the development

of international statistical guidance, standards and instruments to measure each one of the eight dimensions of governance reviewed in the Handbook. Specifically, each dimension-specific Task Team aims to develop two products: a model survey questionnaire (with core and optional modules) and guidance on the collection of administrative data to produce statistics on the dimension of interest.

In November 2021, the Praia Group launched its first two Task Teams which aim to break new grounds in the measurement of Non-Discrimination and Equality and Participation in Political and Public Affairs. Led by the Peruvian and Finnish NSOs on Non-Discrimination and by the Norwegian and Tunisian NSOs on Participation, these Task Teams will bring together national statisticians and other governance data practitioners to design the first internationally harmonized survey modules on these two topics. Importantly, these two survey modules will enable the production of comprehensive survey-based statistics on discrimination and participation that are comparable across different cultures, languages and contexts, and across time. This will be an important contribution as existing datasets produced by private- or civil society-led international and regional survey programs focus on different subsets of issues and apply very different question formulations, which affects the comparability of the data produced.

The dimensions of discrimination and participation have been prioritized this year because these two thematic areas registered the highest demand from Praia Group members for more readily available methodologies and practical guidance. Not only do they represent central pillars of a resilient recovery from COVID-19, but existing international and regional questionnaires often do not capture important emerging issues, such as the extent to which political spaces in countries around the world are opening to younger generations, or the impact on digitally excluded populations of the growing number of public services and participation channels moving online. Task Teams will be mapping these gaps in current survey instruments and crafting new questions to better respond to emerging information needs.

The severe limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on face-to-face surveys has also highlighted the urgency of increasing the use of administrative data sources for producing governance statistics. In addition to making the production of governance statistics more resilient in times of crises, the high disaggregation potential of administrative data and its accessibility at any point in time are also key advantages, especially in the area of governance. As such, the two Task Teams will also be developing guidance on various types of administrative data that can be used to produce official statistics in these two thematic areas, as well as recommendations on data quality assurance, on linking with other sources, indicator calculation, etc.

COVID-19 and the responses to it have brought to the fore urgent human rights and governance concerns, which must be monitored if they are to receive attention, and to be addressed effectively. The Praia Group prioritized in 2021-22 the two dimensions of Non-Discrimination and Participation and will look to support Task Teams on other dimensions of governance that require further methodological work in the coming years.

There has never been a more opportune time to push the frontiers of governance statistics – and the Praia Group is ready for the challenge.