Report of the online HLG-MOS meeting (29 January 2021)

The main goal of the meeting was to evaluate the 2020 achievements and to approve the work programme for 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the usual full day meeting in New York ahead of the Statistical Commission was replaced by a shortened online meeting on 29 January 2021.

Summary

Despite the pandemic, the majority of the work was achieved. The Capability and Communication Group, the Sharing Tools Group and the Input Privacy-Preservation project were most affected. The Machine Learning Project was successfully completed. All workshops were changed to virtual events and where relevant, work was shifted to COVID-19 response. There was a record level of participation in 2020, with over 300 members in groups and over 1,200 in attendance of expert meetings.

The Synthetic Data Guide and the Input Privacy-Preservation projects were selected for 2021. The Sharing Tools group will be merged with the Supporting Standards group. The Machine Learning project will continue as a community led by ONS and will keep ties with HLG-MOS Executive Board.

Trust Fund is healthy and more and more in-kind contributions are being made available which makes it easier for the UNECE secretariat to manage the work.

Discussion

There was a general agreement that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot was achieved. The HLG-MOS members thanked all participants for their impressive contributions, the Executive Board for their excellent leadership and the UNECE secretariat for their strong support. There was a general support for the work programme and agencies reiterated their commitment to provide resources.

Community

- HLG-MOS should continue to build a network amongst our people and make sure more countries can benefit from our modernization outputs.
- We should reflect on the participation of other countries and let them know the value added of our work.
- The support we have been able to give each other as colleagues has been again an opportunity to share experiences and our challenges.
- Working at the international level gave us as NSOs more acceptance nationally.
- The Machine Learning project has shown the value of the community aspect as well as individual involvement.

Implementation

- Important learning from Machine Learning is how do we move it from a test basis into production and the resource required to make that happen is part of this.
- The time to market is really important and how to get ideas from experimentation to implementation should be part of all our projects and activities.

- Focus is on continuing innovation, bringing greater value and communicating and sustaining developments.

Communication of ModernStats

- Our hallmark is agility but this should not be at the expense of communication and trust.
- The outcomes of the work of the HLG-MOS need to be communicated better, as there is ever increasing value in the work we do. The role of NSOs is important as part of this communication.
- We as countries have to communicate more on our work on Machine Learning, UNECE cannot do it alone.
- Word of mouth through national and international networks is the best promotion.

Pandemic legacy

- We need a clear strategy of communicating why we need to preserve access to new data sources and how to turn precedent into regular access.
- We have always been able to do high quality work fast, but we have been able to do it now with even more agility.
- NSOs that were already on a journey of modernisation have done relatively well during the pandemic.
- We have to reflect on how COVID-19 has changed our organisation and our future products.
- We have to build on the experience gained and the headway we made during the pandemic.
- Online meetings mean that more are being able to participate, and we should consider a mixed modality of face-to-face and virtual.

Focus 2021

- The emphasis in the Synthetic Data project should not be limited to our normal survey data but on new data sources.
- Having a view on the end-to-end privacy preserving cycle from input to output would be relevant when we consider international organisations.
- Think about a trusted environment with security components, and in a modular architecture setting, that could bring together learnings from the two 2021 and earlier projects.
- To engender the trust of those that provide us with those data sets, we have to increase our arsenal of available privacy-preserving techniques to provide reassurance while still harnessing the power of that data.
- There was support for keeping the StatsBot activity going under the leadership of OECD and with support from the Executive Board.
- We need to seek sustainable funding for continuing development of the Statsbot work.
- The model of co-funding and private sector involvement, such as with the StatsBots activity, needs to be considered as it can be an efficient way of moving things forward. The role of ONS in supporting the ML community is strongly appreciated.

Reflecting

- Providing clear use cases are important for the projects and activities, especially as we try to move quicker from experimentation to production.
- We have to consider the sustainability of activities without blocking new areas of work; sustainability should be part of the conceptualisation phase.

- The key to our success is that we have clear results. Even if the outcome is not as planned, we have the lessons learned.
- Technology will always be there, but how do we make sure we adapt it and make sure that we have relevant use cases where we can make the difference.
- There is some worth in downscaling work that has been going on year after year with incremental changes and come back to it later with a fresh mind.
- We should not be afraid to conclude what worked well in the past, but that we now have different considerations.
- We should all in this room write down what keeps us awake at night and map them to our existing work programmes, or how that might influence our future work programmes as we continue to be community-driven

The Chair, Anil Arora, concluded that **the system we put in place really does work**. A good system that generates ideas and puts them to the test and for the ones that show promise, we have countries and organisations that take up the leadership mantel and then we move to toward implementation. We get balanced feedback. Diversity of the perspectives that you collectively bring are really helpful because you get strategic input, very specific input, don't-forget-kind of input, and here is the impact that we want, input. He finished with a message of gratitude: **it is a continued commitment, it is not just words, it is very real, and it is felt**.

Annex 1: Attendees:

HLG-MOS members

- Anil Arora (Chair, Statistics Canada), Stéphane Dufour (Statistics Canada, co-Chair Executive Board)
- Teresa Dickinson (ABS, representing David Gruen)
- Pádraig Dalton (CSO Ireland), Jennifer Banim (CSO Ireland, co-Chair Executive Board) and Patrick Kelleher (CSO Ireland)
- Marina Gandolfo (Istat, representing Gian Carlo Blangiardo) and Monica Scannapieco (Istat, Executive Board)
- Sergio Carrera (Executive Board, INEGI, representing Julio Santaella)
- Bert Kroese (Statistics Netherlands, representing Angelique Berg) and Barteld Braaksma (Statistics Netherlands, chair BSTN)
- Dominik Rozkrut (Statistics Poland)
- Eric Deeben and Nicola Shearman (ONS, representing Ian Diamond)
- Emanuele Baldacci (Eurostat, representing Mariana Kotzeva)
- Lidia Bratanova (UNECE)
- Paul Schreyer (OECD)

UNECE Secretariat:

- Taeke Gjaltema (HLG-MOS secretariat)
- Tetyana Kolomiyets (HLG-MOS secretariat)
- InKyung Choi (HLG-MOS secretariat)

UNECE:

- Tihormira Dimova (UNECE)
- Steven Vale (UNECE)
- Tiina Luige (UNECE)

Apologies: David Gruen (ABS), Gian Carlo Blangiardo (Istat), Julio Santaella (INEGI), Mark Sowden (StatsNZ), Ian Diamond (ONS), KeunKwan Ryu (Statistics South Korea) and Mariana Kotzeva (Eurostat)