

QUICK ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON AFRICA NSO OPERATIONS

Summary

A rapid assessment questionnaire composed of seven questions was sent to all the 54-member states of the Economic Commission for Africa to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on statistical operations. Thirty-seven (37) National Statistical Offices (NSOs) completed the survey. The main findings are summarized as follow:

- Data collection operations have been significantly affected. Twenty-five per cent (42 out of 168) of surveys planned have been halted or suspended and a further 48 surveys postponed. Additionally, even where operations are ongoing, higher non-responses rates and low sample coverage are being observed. Besides, twenty-two per cent of Population and Housing Census activities planned were halted or suspended.
- Impacts on NSO working practices limit their resource and responsiveness. Business continuity measures adopted by NSOs include new working hours, limited staff numbers in the office, remote working and methodological adjustments. However, there are remaining challenges to address despite the quick response of NSO.
- High demands for data and supporting activities. National Statistical Systems, and particularly NSOs, are overwhelmed by requests for data, statistical services and information, which include projections of affected populations, visualizing information and socio-economic impacts to support and inform responses to the pandemic.

This survey highlights a number of high-level general areas where countries need the following additional supports as a result of these impacts:

- Technical assistance and capacity building. NSOs will need to rapidly adjust their skills and methods to adapt new challenges such as new data collection methods, higher non-response rates and maintaining time series.
- Financial support. Increased demands, the halting of activities, disruptions to planned activities, and foreseen Government reallocations of budget to address COVID-19 responses mean that NSOs expect significant budget pressures.
- Support for provisions of collaborative solutions. Countries' challenges will diverge due to local circumstances, but there are commonalities that require collaborative solutions that are relevant, methodologically robust and adaptable and fulfil the opportunity to modernise National Statistical Systems, leveraging on modern technologies.

Pan African organizations and partners will need to work together to deliver the rapid and wide-ranging support required. Some actions are already in place, including the reinstatement of the African Statistical Coordination committee with a purpose to better coordinate country support.

A. Background information

The world is facing an unprecedented global health crisis ever due to novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This pandemic is ravaging core assets – the humankind - killing people, spreading human suffering, and upending people’s lives. The spread of the COVID-19 in Africa has been increasing at a fast pace since mid-March. Governments are implementing various strategies to contain the pandemic that affect data and statistics required by users because the people expected to collect, analyse and disseminate data to inform decision making processes are affected. Data suppliers are also not available to provide information. Having noted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different statistical operations, the African Centre for Statistics decided to engage Directors Generals of National Statistical Offices in Africa to discuss how the statistical operations are being impacted and how they can be mitigated.

A rapid assessment questionnaire composed of seven questions was sent to all the 54-member states of the Economic Commission for Africa to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on statistical operations. The objective of the survey was to understand how the COVID-19 outbreak impacts the activities and operations of the National Statistics Offices (NSOs) and the National Statistical Systems (NSSs) in general, the provisioning of data to inform government actions to respond to COVID19, data dissemination and release of statistical products, and the broad working arrangements within NSSs. The survey also aimed at sharing experiences on mitigation strategies being implemented by NSOs.

Three results were expected from this study namely: a summary of the issues faced by the NSSs; experiences on mitigation measures put in place by NSOs to address the problems introduced by the different rules and strategies to curve the propagation of the COVID-19; and support required by member states to continuing production of core statistics during the COVID-19 crisis.

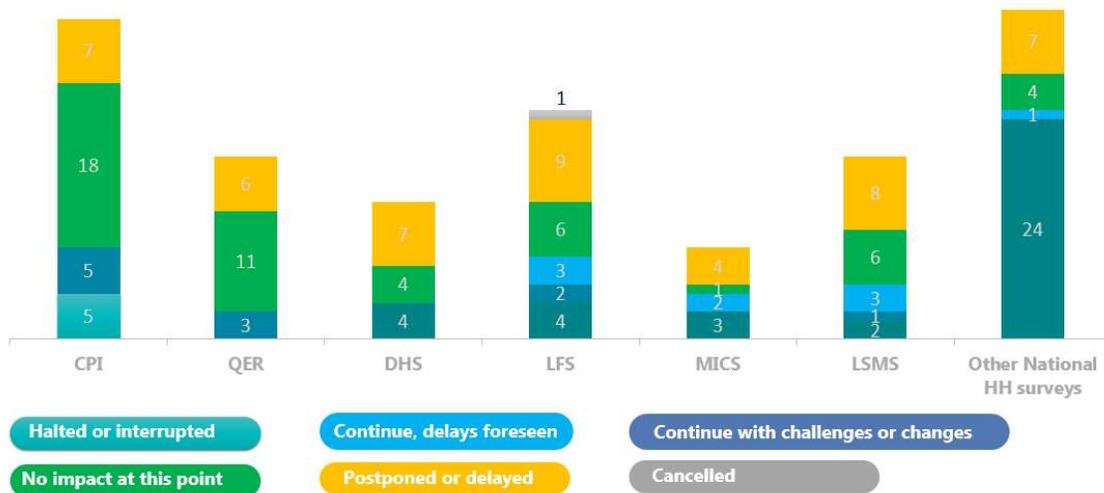
The questionnaire was sent out on 31 March 2020, and thirty-seven (37) NSOs completed the survey. The last completed questionnaire was received on 13 April 2020. The survey therefore provides the situation at this last date.

B. Key findings

1. Data collection programmes stricken

Forty-two (42) surveys have been halted or suspended in 15 countries, out of the 168 planned this year in countries that responded. Forty-eight (48) surveys are postponed or delayed in 21 countries as it is not any more possible to collect data as designed. This result is mainly due to restrictions of movement of people and social distancing in these countries. As a result, the seasonality of some surveys may be affected.

Graphic 1: Number of surveys planned for 2020 by the current status as a consequence of COVID-19



Note: CPI: Consumer Price Index; QER: Quarterly Economic Review; DHS: Demographic and Health Survey; MICS: Multiple Indicators Clusters Survey; LSMS: - Survey on poverty – Living Standard Measurement Survey; Other National HH surveys: Other National Household Surveys.

Activities of Population and Housing Censuses (PHCs) were halted or suspended in 4 countries and postponed in 7 states out of the 18 where census activities were planned this year. Some of the activities suspended are planning and mapping. This situation may have an impact on downstream processes including shifting the Census calendar, which is already the case in 5 countries. In Chad and Mali for instance, resources mobilization activities are not yet completed because of the occurrence of COVID-19.

Graphic 2: Status of Population and Housing Censuses activities planned for 2020 as a consequence of COVID-19



Similarly, the preparation of the pilot census in Botswana and census mapping in Namibia are disrupted. In Côte d'Ivoire, data collection that was planned to start on 20 April is postponed to a later date. In Burkina Faso, the post-enumeration survey of the 5th PHC is postponed while the survey has to be conducted within a reasonable time frame.

This stricken picture also includes other censuses such as agriculture, livestock, economic and enterprise where fieldwork has been suspended in four countries.

2. Resilient statistical systems despite technical and operational challenges

NSOs have adopted business continuity measures of containment as decided by their government. In the case of partial or light containment (movement on persons limited), NSOs have rearranged their working hours similarly to other government offices. In Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal for instance, the

new working hours are respectively 8 am-2 pm and 9 am-2 pm. Because of social distancing measures, visits to NSO premises are prohibited; however, they remain reachable on the phone and emails as usual.

Some NSOs have reduced presence at the office to key staff to ensure essential services mainly to senior managers like in Niger. Staff office attendance is subject to a rotation system in a some countries. In Ethiopia, only 10% of staff go to the office, while other work from home. In Benin, all planned activities or meetings that require the gathering of more than ten (10) people are cancelled or postponed.

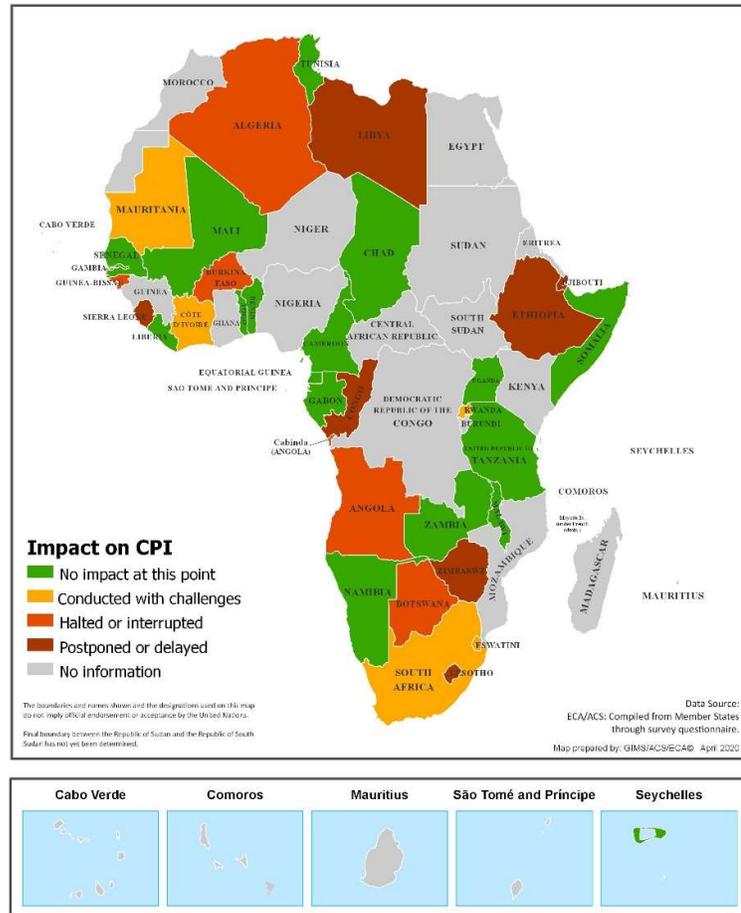
The health and safety of the population and NSO staff remains of paramount importance and take precedence in the alternatives that are availed to NSOs. Barrier measures are at the core of NSOs' responses. In Benin for instance, staff of 50 years and more have been requested to telecommute since the beginning of the crisis. Meetings are organised through different online solutions to ensure business continuity. Whenever these meetings are held in the office, social distancing rules are observed and the number of participants limited (less than 15 in Togo and 10 in Benin).

Graphic 3: Status of surveys planned for 2020 as a consequence of COVID-19



On the statistical operation side, it is worth noticing that only one survey was cancelled. Despite disruptions in the implementation of statistical programmes because of COVID-19, activities of 19 surveys have continued with some methodological adjustments and challenges, and ten of them are likely to face further delays. The latter are cyclical surveys, such as Multiple Indicators Clusters Surveys, Poverty and Labour Force surveys. Some of the surveys are at their planning stage, others at data processing or data analysis stage, and the remaining at the dissemination phase. Activities planned at these different stages are maintained but delayed or slowed down. The methodological adjustments introduced are replacement of face-to-face interviewing by phone calls in Mauritius, Senegal and Zimbabwe for Poverty and Labour Force surveys; reduction of sample size in Labour Force survey in Mauritius; and imputations for the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in South Africa. Burkina Faso and Botswana are respectively exploring alternative solutions and electronic data exchange for the quarterly economic review. Methodological challenges are mainly for CPI as several shops and markets are closed.

Graphic 4: COVID-19 impact on Consumer Price Index (CPI) data collection



Fifty (50) surveys planned this year in 26 countries have not yet been significantly affected by measures put in place by governments to contain the pandemic. Eighteen (18) of these 50 surveys are for CPI data collection. Main reasons are that data were already collected in some cases before the implementation of measures taken by governments or data collection is planned later in the year. The 26 countries were not at a stage where disruptions could significantly affect these surveys. However, data collection for cyclical or repetitive surveys such as the CPI may face serious disruptions during the current and coming months if the crisis continues. Similarly, seven (7) censuses in 6 countries have not yet been affected by the COVID-19. Out of these censuses three are economic and enterprise census and three others are related to the production of geospatial fundamental and thematic data sets.

3. High demands on National Statistical Systems

National Statistical Systems, and particularly NSOs, are overwhelmed by ever-increasing data and statistical information demands that are used in countries' responses to the pandemic, including for making projections and assessment of the impact measures taken so far. Besides, the survey showed that NSOs are leading the conduct of studies on socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 in 12 countries. NSOs also support mapping of COVID-19 in two other countries namely Namibia and South Africa. In Namibia, the support covers mapping of the propagation of the virus. Statistics South Africa is helping monitoring suspected patient trackers and analyse how unlawful movements are affecting the spread of the disease. Most of the requests from external partners and institutions are related to data and information on the impacts of the crisis.

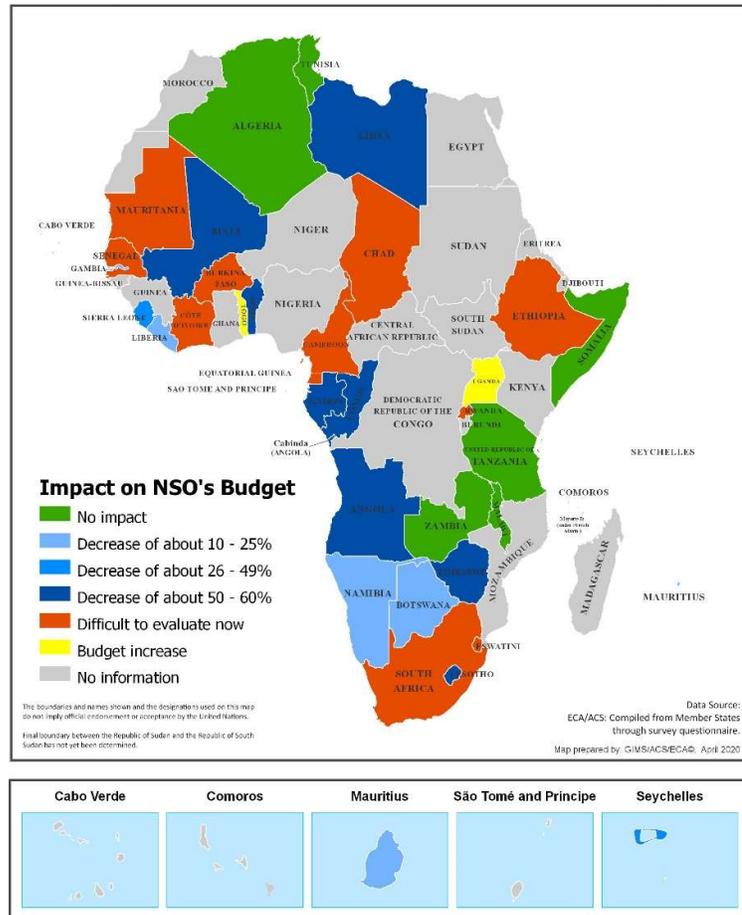
4. Various issues requiring adaptation to ensure quality of statistics during COVID-19

Methodological and financial implications due to interruption of statistical operations at a crucial stage of data collection. In Burkina Faso, the post enumeration survey was about to start when it was halted. This survey should be done in a specified timeframe after the end of PHC data collection to ensure the quality of census data. Because of the nationwide curfew imposed since 20 March, the survey may no longer take place in the period defined per requirements. This foreseen methodological challenge adds to eventual possible financial costs generated by training or upgrading the capacity of field workers as teams' composition may change at the end of the pandemic. This financial implication is also expected for the PHC in Côte d'Ivoire as data collection was about to start when it was stopped. In Malawi, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey that was at more than 70-75% complete as well as the Integrated Household Survey that was about to finish when data collection was halted. The country is now reflecting on different options to produce the final results based on data already collected or to complete the surveys as soon as the situation settles.

Higher non-responses rates and low sample coverage. Non-responses rates have increased for surveys that have shifted from face-to-face interviewing to phone calls mainly because of difficulties to reach respondents. The key issue for traditional face to face surveys is related to concerns about safety issues as respondents protect themselves against the virus. Sample coverage issue is mostly observed for CPI data collection as several outlets are closed, and it is challenging to collect data on all the items in the basket.

Increasing budgetary tension in NSOs. Four countries have expressed budgetary constraints not linked to COVID-19 that have affected five surveys and censuses. These cash tensions may considerably worsen this time as a result of COVID-19 with negative consequences for other statistical operations in those countries. Eleven (11) Heads of NSOs don't envisage budget cut this year, and 15 predict budget reallocation at the level of the government that will reduce NSO resources in a range of 10 to 60 per cent. Besides, few Heads of NSOs expect a budget increase for statistical activities due to the high demand for and epidemiological data by governments necessary to inform planning and decision making.

Graphic 5: Foreseen COVID-19 impact on NSOs' budget



5. Specific supports requested by countries

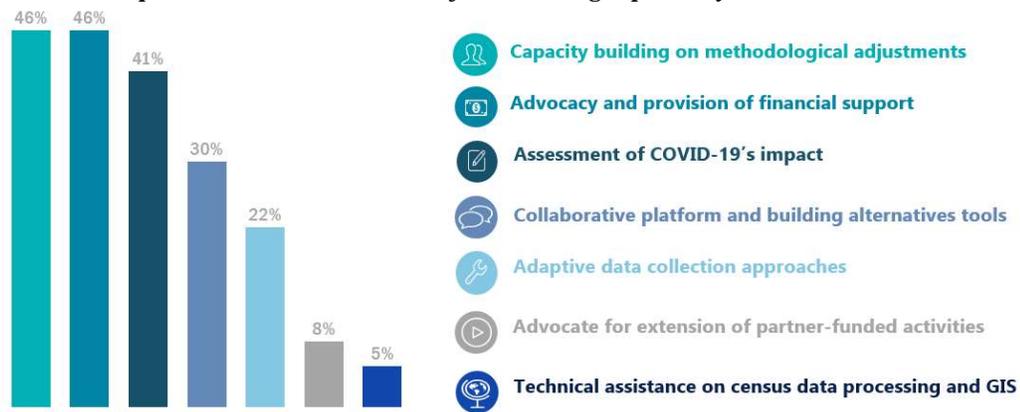
Technical assistance and capacity building are of paramount importance. The COVID-19 crisis came so quickly that countries did not have time to prepare for the changes imposed. The situation has put many national statistics offices in need to rapidly adjust their skills to adapt to the new working frameworks. The adaptive solutions will need to be rolled out for their effective up-take. On the other hand, countries require guidance on ways to adjust statistical indicators to changes brought by the crisis and ways to realign their programmes. Technical assistance support from Pan-African organizations and development partners is also expected to go into providing guidance on techniques to assess the social, environmental and economic impacts of the COVID-19. Initiatives such as strengthening administrative data sources need advice and support to be successful in countries.

Financial support is essential. The economic slowdown that goes along with measures to contain the COVID-19 spread will result in the shrinkage of public revenue and general government capacities to live up to planned budgetary spending. Statistical offices will consequently suffer this very fact while undergoing the need to disburse financial resources for specifically anti-COVID expenses such as on sanitizers, gloves, transport requirements, shift to other methods. The new working conditions require infrastructures that are yet to be acquired, such as laptops and good access to the internet. Countries envisaging to set a call centre to conduct telephone interviewing will need to invest in the necessary materials. As for some countries, external financial aid can help complement government action, others see it as an essential investment for more robust and modern statistical production systems, including

the development of administrative sources of data and harnessing modern technologies and data science.

Support for provisions of collaborative solutions is vital. These solutions comprise designing and availing an online platform for exchange, organizing and leading relevant discussions and working toward the constructions of methodological responses to challenges faced by national statistics offices. While countries' challenges might be diverse due to their national circumstances and patterns, they have commonalities that would require joining efforts to finding solutions that are suitable for African countries conditions and that are methodologically robust and adaptable. Moreover, expectations are that these solutions should leverage on modern technologies.

Graphic 6: Countries' needs to face challenges posed by COVID-19 crisis



6. Conclusion

Statistical systems were not prepared to face the situation generated by the COVID-19 crisis, which has disrupted statistical activities everywhere. Despite the situation, several national statistical systems in the continent have shown high resilience through new working arrangements and methodological adjustments. As the crisis is still ongoing, countries need to be supported in their initiatives more than ever.

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has created an online platform for knowledge exchange and experience sharing for the African statistical community. The platform is a discussion forum on topics of interest and solution exchange for helping gather solutions on how to handle specific issues and methodological challenges. The platform will have information on best practices from other statistical systems in the world. ECA is exploring partnering with research institutions to respond to data demands through specific estimation methods in the absence of a Population, and Housing Census. The Commission is organizing, in collaboration with other pan African organizations virtual meetings with countries to discuss adaptation to the changes introduced by the COVID-19 and to sharing experience. ECA is also preparing guidelines in collaboration with key stakeholders on how to address challenges brought by the pandemic on CPI data collection and other areas. Besides, a Forum of exchange also include discussion experiences and practices of using the telephone- and web-based surveys, including data collection for CPI.

In the same vein, the African Union Commission has organized a virtual meeting with Maghreb countries to share challenges and good practices on data collection and computation of CPI during the lockdown. The African Development Bank initiated a discussion proposing a solution to continue the production of quality International Comparison Price data. The International Labour Organization

developed technical note guidance for national statistics offices on the methodological approach to be adopted in case of field operations disruptions caused by different measures taken to curtail the COVID-19. Lastly, an extraordinary meeting of the African Statistical Coordination committee was held in mid-April 2020 to coordinate pan African organizations and partners' support to countries for more efficiency.

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C. Annexes: Summary tables

Annex 1: The current status of surveys planned for 2020 as a consequence of COVID-19 (N=37)

Survey Status	CPI	QER	DHS	LFS	MICS1	LSMS	Other National HH surveys	Number of surveys
Halted or Interrupted	5	0	4	4	3	2	24	42
Continues with challenges or methodological changes	5	3		2		1		11
Continues, but delays foreseen				3	2	3	1	9
No impact at this point	18	11	4	6	1	6	4	50
Postponed or delayed	7	6	7	9	4	8	7	48
Cancelled				1				1
Not declared		3	1	1			2	7
Total	35	23	16	26	10	19	38	168

Note: CPI: Consumer Price Index; QER: Quarterly Economic Review; DHS: Demographic and Health Survey; MICS: Multiple Indicators Clusters Survey; LSMS: - Survey on poverty – Living Standard Measurement Survey; Other National HH surveys: Other National Household Surveys.

Annex 2: The current status of census activities planned for 2020 as a consequence of COVID-19 (N=37)

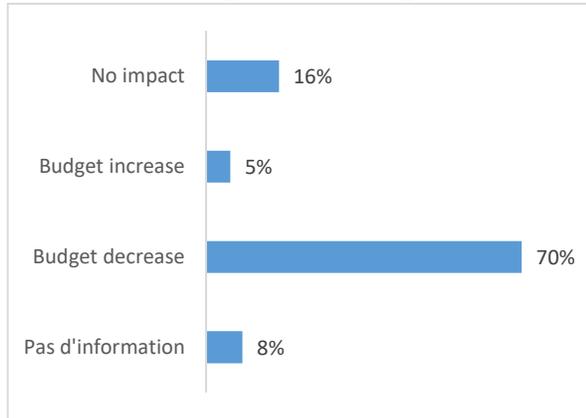
Census activities status	PHC	Economic/Entreprise Census	Agricultural Census	Livestock Census	Geospatial	Education census	Number of Censuses
Interrupted	4	4	2				10
Continue, but foreseen delays	5						5
No impact at this point	1	3			3		7
Postponed or delayed	7	11	1	1	1	1	22
Not declared	1	3					4
Total	18	21	3	1	4	1	48

Note: PHC: Population and Housing Census

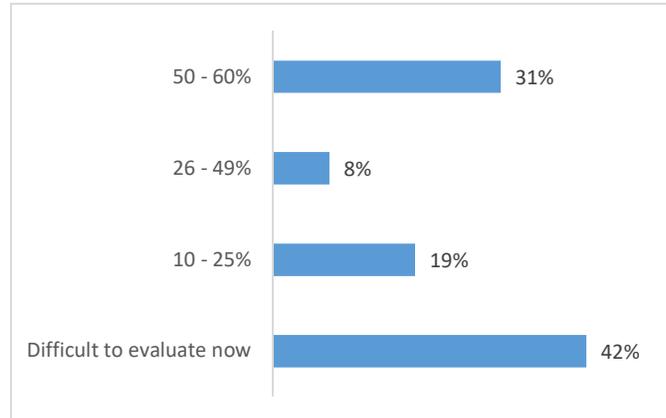
Annex 3: Countries and their needs (N=25)

Type of support needed	Requesting countries
Adaptive data collection approaches, including internet-based and telephone interviewing	Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa
Advocate for, or provide financial support to purchase adaptive supplies and services	Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Senegal, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zimbabwe.
Technical assistance / capacity building: Methodological adjustments, including for censuses	Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, the Gambia, Lesotho, Libya, Mauritius, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe,
Social and economic impact assessment	Gabon, Mauritania, Tanzania, Uganda

Annex 4: Changes in NSOs budget



Foreseen change in budget allocation (N=37)



Foreseen NSO budget decrease (N=26)