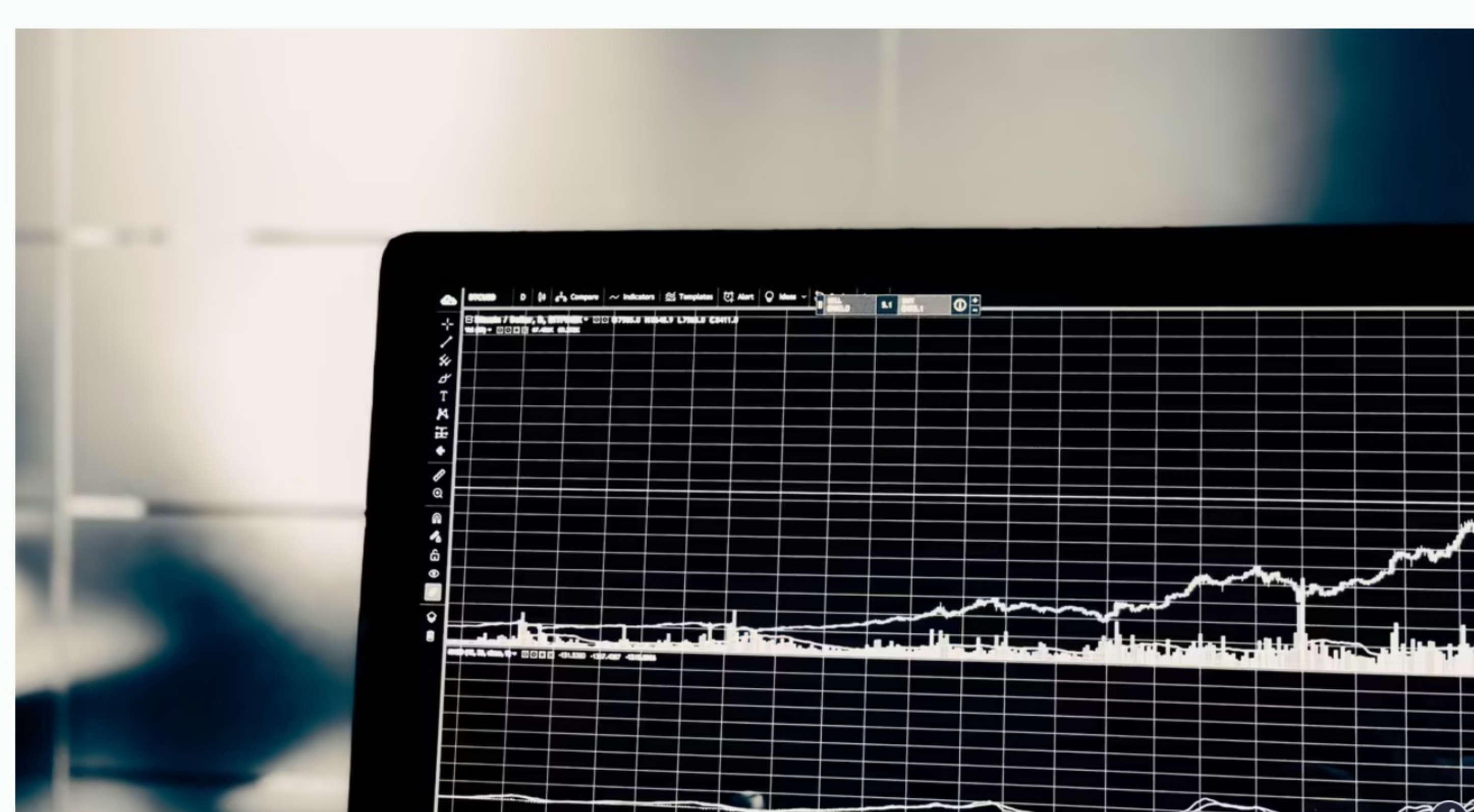


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# European statisticians reach consensus on using private data for official purposes

By [Liv Martin](#)



Imagine living in a society where there is no way to take metrics of progress — or lack thereof. What if we didn't know how many Covid-19 cases there are, how quickly the planet is changing due to climate change, any given country's level of inflation, or even, how many people there are in the world? It's hard to envision a world without data.

"National statisticians... the work that we do, it's the kind of thing that when you have it, you don't realise you have it. You'd only appreciate the value if it wasn't there," said Pádraig Dalton, director general of Ireland's Central Statistics Office.

"Sometimes we can be seen as the 'back office', or like the engine room," he added.

At the 70th plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES), chief statisticians representing 57 countries gathered to develop shared standards. This June, they met in Geneva for the first time in-person since 2019. The conference marked 30 years since the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's (UNECE) [Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics](#) were first adopted in 1992. (The principles were recognized and adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2014.)

As the world is confronted with crises like the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, calls for more data have grown in the international community. This has pushed the field of statistics to evolve and expand.

## Going beyond the numbers

More now than ever, statisticians are pushing themselves to go beyond the numbers and lend insight. The high-level official statistics of the 21st century combine multiple sets of data and are increasingly granular. Policymakers want the data boiled down into different age groups, genders, ethnicities, regions and other specific metrics.

"If you compared how official statistics are reported today to 15 years ago, I think we do a much better job extracting insight, and saying, 'Look, this piece of information is useful for this, and not useful for this,'" said Dalton, who chaired the 70th CES. "We spend a lot of time on that interpretation."

What does that look like in practice? It can mean including more powerful visuals, like infographics and geospatial data, and synthesising the most important takeaways from large data sources for media, Dalton told Geneva Solutions.

## The question of private data

A major decision that came from the conference was an [official statement](#) agreeing to use private data for official statistical purposes. It sets a new precedent to allow official statistical bodies to use data generated by existing private sources.

The move to include private data is a contested subject in the field; official statisticians have built a strong reputation for being ethical and impartial. Detractors have raised questions about cost, long-term use and public opinion. Waning trust in the government and fears about data privacy are also high.

"There is a risk that the world will say, 'You're just doing a massive data grab. You're 'Big Brother', and you want everything,'" said Fiona Willis-Nunez, a statistician at UNECE. "We want to make sure that national statistical offices can get hold, in a structured and sustainable way, of the data that they need without people thinking that we're now moving towards some kind of surveillance state."

## A public good

"Official statistics are a public good," said Dalton, who has been working in the field for over three decades. "Our only agenda is public service."

This idea is baked into the [Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics](#) — a holy grail document for statisticians. It includes the 10 principles of relevance, impartiality and equal access, standards and ethics, accountability and transparency, prevention of misuse, sources of official statistics, confidentiality, legislation, national coordination, international standards and global cooperation.

Equal access is a major tenet of the document. Dalton takes seriously his commitment to citizens to live in an informed society. In 1992, the fundamental principles were written to include a line about how statistics should be "made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information".

During the height of the Covid-19 crisis, decision-makers relied daily on new official data metrics to inform their next moves. So did members of the public, who gauged their own safety and decisions based on the same data and analysis. Other major geopolitical challenges — such as climate change or the ongoing conflict in Ukraine — that are consistently at top-of-mind for the international community, will continue to require the most accurate, impartial and independent data.

"The world is evolving and we need to measure it accurately," said Dalton.

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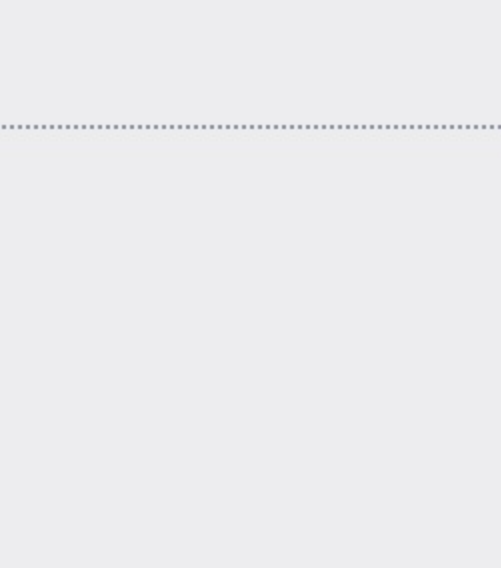
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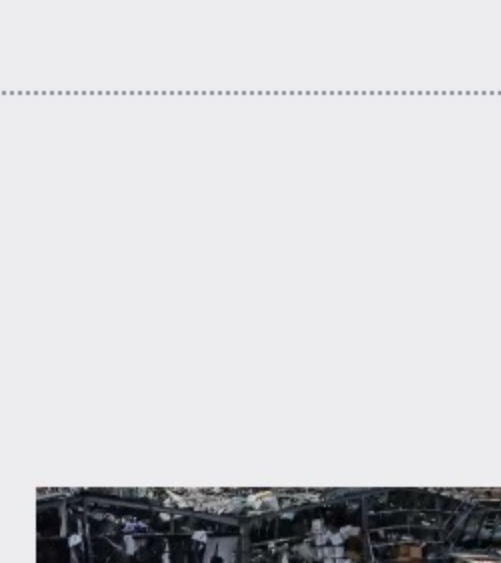
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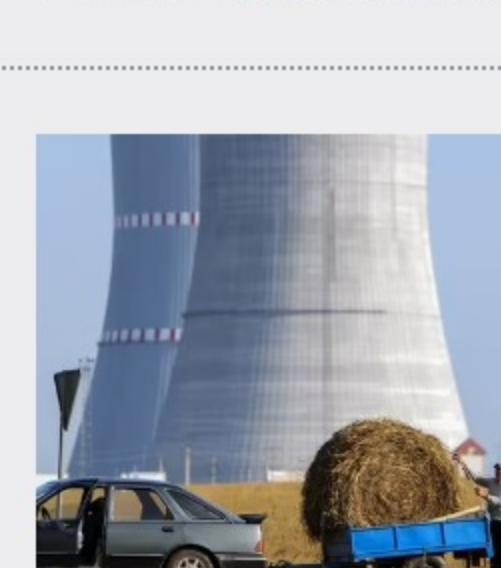
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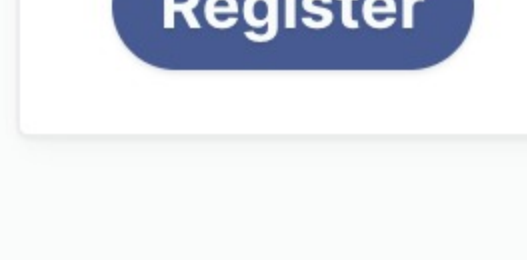
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