

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Third meeting of the 2004/2005 Bureau
Geneva, 15 June 2005

NOTE ON SOCIAL STATISTICS

Note prepared by the UNECE secretariat

BACKGROUND

1. As follow-up to a discussion during the meeting of the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians in October 2004, the Bureau decided, at its meeting in February 2005, to organize the first joint UNECE-Eurostat-OECD meeting on social statistics back-to-back with the September 2005 meeting of Eurostat directors of social statistics. An Organizing Committee was created with the participation of Australia, Italy, United States, Eurostat, OECD and UNECE. The objective of the Group was to develop a concrete agenda for the meeting and identify possible outcomes. The United States was elected as the Chair of the Organizing Committee and, from March to May 2005, the Group exchanged views on the development of a UNECE programme of work for regular meetings of directors of social statistics in the region.
2. After several consultations, the Organizing Committee agreed on the need to organize the first meeting of UNECE directors of social statistics as a starting point for developing a UNECE programme on social statistics. The Committee also agreed that part of this work should focus on developing common survey questions to be used in the region to collect data on specific social-related topics. The Committee, however, could not agree on the level of detail of the meeting and therefore it developed two proposals (see below): one from Eurostat (supported by OECD) and one from the Chair (based also on comments by Australia and Italy). The proposal by the Chair suggests that the meetings should have a technical focus, while the proposal by Eurostat suggests a more strategic focus. Between the time that this note is written and the meeting of the Bureau, the members of the Organizing Committee will continue to work to find a common proposal and the results will be communicated during the meeting of the Bureau.

CHAIR PROPOSAL

General matters

3. This is an opportunity for those who are actively engaged in the collection and production of official statistics, i.e. those on the front lines of official data collection, to establish a Working Group to examine specific problems and determine if there are solutions that go beyond single countries. It is also an opportunity to work towards common core questions in surveys. The primary membership is proposed to be the Heads of Social Statistics of countries in the extended UNECE region, including Australia, Japan, New

Zealand, Mexico, Mongolia and Republic of Korea. Certainly representatives from Eurostat and the international agencies will be members of the Working Group.

Organization

4. The meetings of the Working Group will be no longer than two days. Meetings should be scheduled at the same time as some other function such as the Eurostat meeting of directors of social statistics. This will give a chance to put placeholders in calendars. However, meetings will not be held unless sufficient work has been done ahead of time to justify the cost of the meeting. The focus will be on discussion and resolution of problems. To that end, there will be a minimum of presentations. At each meeting, a member will be invited to prepare a paper on a topic in one of two areas (see below). Two or three countries will be invited to prepare papers on possible ways to ameliorate the conditions described in the first paper. The papers will have to be distributed sufficiently far in advance to allow for digestion by the members. Any of the members of the Working Group may submit background papers for information.

Focus

5. The focus will be on surveys rather than on registers or censuses. Two general areas will be covered by the Group. The first general area should be concerned with methodological problems. At the previous meeting, the Working Group will have decided on a theme (e.g. sexual orientation, alcoholism, collection of DNA) and, within that theme, a particular problem that presents itself. This may be response rate, respondent bias, imputation methods, etc. The Working Group will determine if there is sufficient agreement to develop a best practices paper and make assignments to produce that paper.

6. The other area is improved international comparability through core questions and/or references. Again, a member will develop a proposal prior to each meeting. Once more, a theme – such as crime statistics – will have to be decided upon in advance. It is likely that subgroups will be necessary to work on these topics between meetings and bring their work back to the Working Group.

Outputs

7. The outputs from the methodological problems will be a series of “best practice” papers to be submitted to the CES. The output from the second would be an agreement among countries to use a core set of questions and/or references.

Upcoming meeting

8. It would be best if two days were allowed for the meeting but this is not possible because of the Eurostat meeting that will precede this. If there is a one and one-half day meeting, this implies that there will be three sessions. The first session could be devoted to the organization of the Working Group. Specifically the group would have before it the proposal of the Organizing Committee for amendment and ratification. The second half of the meeting would be substantive. We could concentrate on either of the areas proposed above. If the first is chosen, then perhaps Italy could lead with a paper on measurement problems in non-traditional forms of households, including same sex couples living together

but also couples living apart but considering themselves a unit and households where there is high mobility of the members. The United States will volunteer to be one of the discussants for the paper.

9. A second possibility is combining the first two areas. For example, a topic such as voluntary work, crime victimization, or time use could be chosen and both measurement issues and the need for improved international comparability through development of core questions or methodologies could be explored. Perhaps Australia could help with a paper if this topic is chosen. Again, the United States would volunteer to write one of the discussant papers.

EUROSTAT PROPOSAL

Background

10. The development of a UNECE/Eurostat/OECD forum on social statistics responds to two different needs expressed by countries and international organizations:

- to provide an environment where different countries can exchange experiences and ideas on newly emerging areas in social statistics,
- to develop common (survey) modules in the sphere of social statistics as well as to define a number of key statistics based on these modules that are both relevant from the national point of view and internationally comparable.

The forum offers an opportunity to work towards common core questions in surveys. All parties seem to agree that the forum will continue to exist only if concrete outputs are produced. The Bureau of the Conference of European Statistics agreed on the organization of such a forum.

Objectives

11. The main objective of this UNECE/Eurostat/OECD initiative is to provide a forum where directors of social statistics can:

- identify emerging issues in societies that affect the content and methods of data collection;
- discuss strategies used in different countries to address the emerging issues;
- provide an umbrella framework for:
 - developing guidelines/best practices to help countries to address the emerging issues;
 - developing common data collection methodology (survey modules) to collect data on the emerging issues (the term “survey module” is to be understood in such a way that non-survey sources are included if they can provide comparable results)
 - developing a set of key statistics based on the above data collection methodology that provide users with internationally comparable results.

For the above sub-items, the forum may:

- discuss the on-going work in existing specialised groups with similar geographical coverage; and
- set up appropriate new structures in the framework of the forum, define their mandates and overview the progress made.

The focus will be on surveys rather than on registers or censuses. The first general area should be concerned with methodological problems.

Structure of the meetings

12. The forum is structured through annual meetings organized in conjunction with meetings of, for example, the Eurostat Directors of Social Statistics. The meetings will be no longer than two days. The focus will be on discussion and resolution of problems. To that end, the number of presentations will be limited. Once this forum is firmly established, the meetings are structured as described below.

13. The first part is in the form of a seminar, where one emerging issue is discussed with the view of exchanging concerns, practices, challenges, solutions, open questions. Based on an invited paper and discussant papers, discussions will be organized around a selected topic. At the end of the seminar, participants decide if there is the need to develop further work on the topic on the range of developing common methodologies, provide best practices or only bring it to the attention of the CES (organizing one of the CES seminars for example).

14. The second part focuses on practical aspects of the collection of data on the issue discussed in the earlier parts of the meeting. This could be in the form of reviewing the work of existing task forces whose objective is to develop harmonized survey data collection or variable sets (for example, health or crime-victimization modules) or create new task forces in areas where there is the commitment of Eurostat and other countries to implement common modules. This part could also be in the form of a seminar. The final part of the meeting will also dedicate time to the reporting of existing task forces and on the discussion of proposals made by the Organizing Committee on the new topics to be covered the following year.

15. The meetings will be organized for a duration a maximum of two days, with the balance between the two parts being determined according to needs. The duration of the first meeting will be for one and a half days.

16. The output from the meetings will be a series of papers, mainly focussing on best practices, to be submitted to the CES. The agreement on the best practice and discussion on a core module could lead to agreement between countries to jointly use a specific module for a certain period.

Governance

17. For the time being, the Bureau of the CES agreed only to one meeting. The Organizing Committee for this first meeting currently includes Australia, Italy, US (chair), Eurostat, OECD and UNECE. UNECE provides the secretariat. The Committee makes a proposal for the issues to be discussed at the first annual meetings, decides on the speakers and finalizes the agenda. It also oversees task forces created to develop common modules. When the initiative proves to be successful, the Organizing Committee could be transformed into a more permanent Steering Group.

The first meeting

18. In addition to the general structure of meetings as outlined above, a part of the first meeting should be dedicated to a discussion on how to structure the work of this forum, and how to select the topics that could be put into the agenda of the development work for international comparisons (participants should be provided with a proposal by the Organizing Committee). The seminar part of the first meeting could deal in a seminar way with a cross-cutting issue of social statistics that is relevant for international comparisons in the region. More precisely:

Day 1 – afternoon

UNECE-Eurostat-OECD Work on Social Statistics: objectives and mode operandi. Presentation of a paper prepared by the Organizing Committee and approval of a structure able to advance the work on social statistics in the region. The group should also discuss and approve a list of priority topics that they would like to tackle. Policy demand for social statistics, presentations from policy makers / users of social statistics; discussion.

Day 2 – morning

Seminar on a methodological issue that is of particular importance in ensuring international comparisons of results across UNECE countries (to be decided by the Organizing Committee). The objective is to exchange experiences and ideas on a key methodological issue common to many areas of social statistics. An example for this discussion could be the methodological issues in surveys on living conditions, what is measured and how. Second session: results of surveys on living conditions.

Day 2 – afternoon

Development of a common survey module and of key statistics based on this module. Presentations by Eurostat, US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada on their methods to measure (the topic). Discussion on how to organize the development work in this area (this discussion may have to be finalized through consultations by e-mail after the meeting).

POINT FOR DISCUSSION

19. The Bureau is invited to consider the two proposals and decide on future action.

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