

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Meeting of the 2014/2015 Bureau
Geneva (Switzerland), 21-22 October 2014

For discussion and
recommendations

Item 2 (a) of the Provisional
Agenda

COMMENTS ON THE IN-DEPTH REVIEW OF POPULATION PROJECTIONS

Prepared by the Secretariat

The note provides the comments from UNECE as input to the in-depth review of population projections. The Bureau is invited to consider the recommendations presented in the in-depth review on population projections in view of the comments below.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The document “In-depth review of population projections” (ECE/CES/BUR/2014/OCT/2), prepared by Office for National Statistics, UK and Statistics Canada presents an accurate and comprehensive overview of issues and challenges related to national and international statistical activities in the field of population projections.

2. The document concludes with two key recommendations:

(a) Setting up of a joint committee to consider the elaboration of an international “best practice” guide for population projections, providing guidelines around some of the issues and challenges that projection makers face (paragraphs 6 (a), 67 and 72)

(b) Setting up a UNECE database of information about projections. The database would contain basic information about sets of projections and how they are made to help inform users (paragraphs 6 (b), 68-70).

3. In view of the discussion on this topic by the CES Bureau, some preliminary comments by UNECE on the in-depth review document and in particular on the two recommendations are presented in this note. The UNECE comments take into account the currently ongoing work in the UNECE Statistical Division under the CES work programme.

II. RECOMMENDATION (A): SETTING UP A JOINT COMMITTEE TO ELABORATE A “BEST PRACTICE” GUIDE FOR POPULATION PROJECTIONS

4. This proposal is not new to the CES Bureau. Already in 2007-2008 the CES Bureau proposed to set up a task force composed of national experts, in order to prepare a collection of good practices in the field of population projections¹. However, at that time only few

¹ The proposal emerged from the in-depth review of population statistics carried out in February 2007 based on a paper prepared by UNECE (ECE/CES/BUR/2007/FEB/3). The CES Bureau supported the production of a

countries showed interest in joining the new activity, and the Bureau eventually decided not to set up the task force.

5. Given the increasing interest recorded recently in several countries about issues related to population statistics and demographic projections, the proposal to start work on the preparation of a collection of good practices on population projections could be considered again. In line with UNECE practices for similar activities, such work could be carried out by a newly established Task Force coordinated by UNECE and composed of national and international experts.

6. With regard to the type of practices to be considered, the focus could be on the impact of projections on policy decisions, and the communication between projections makers and users, in particular concerning the communication of uncertainty. This is identified in the document as an emerging and particularly important area related to population projections, where research is progressing but there is not yet consensus on what are the best ways to proceed. As a result, countries could benefit from a collection of good practices.

7. Alternatively, the collection of “good practice” could focus on technical issues and challenges related to projection making. However, it should be noted that a large amount of material is already available on this. For instance, the large majority of the papers presented at the joint UNECE/Eurostat expert meetings on projections which are regularly organized every 2-3 years deal with technical issues. (However, it would not be easy to select what are “best practices” among them.)

8. Among the many relevant issues mentioned in the in-depth review paper, consideration should be given to the increasing importance of sub-national projections, and the important links between projections making and migration statistics and policies.

9. The work of the Task Force would have clear links with ongoing activities carried out by the UNECE Statistical Division and Population Unit in the fields of demographic projections, migration statistics, population censuses, and others. Moreover, the establishment of the Task Force and its activities could benefit from the extensive networks of national experts developed by UNECE in these areas.

10. Concerning the possible membership of the task force, based on information available at UNECE and participation in recent activities related to projections, the following countries and organizations could be interested in joining the Task Force: Canada (possible chair), Italy, Norway, Russia, Turkey, United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, UN Population Division, Eurostat.

11. The in-depth review paper recommends in para. 67 that “*National statistics institutes and international organisations that make projections should form a joint working group to periodically discuss approaches and review assumptions*”. It should be noted that the joint Eurostat-UNECE meetings on demographic projections which are organized regularly every three years (the last one was organized in Rome in October 2013) seem to serve the purpose of the recommendation. However, if a Task Force to develop a “best practice guide” is established, these joint meetings could be convened more often than every 3 years to provide a forum where the Task Force’s recommendations could be discussed.

III. RECOMMENDATION (B): SETTING UP A UNECE DATABASE OF INFORMATION ABOUT PROJECTIONS

12. From the practical point of view, UNECE has the technical capacity to set up and maintain a database of the type described in the in-depth review document. However, in order to take a decision whether such database should be set up at UNECE, a number of issues should be considered, including:

- (a) The actual usefulness of such database should be discussed, taking into account the resources required for setting up, maintaining and updating regularly the database;
- (b) The priority of such activity should be assessed, as its implementation would require scaling down or ending some of the other UNECE ongoing activities;
- (c) It should be verified whether any similar database has ever been produced by national or international organizations, in order to avoid possible duplication. For this purpose, the main producers of projections at the international level identified in the paper (the UN Population Division which produces the World Population Prospects, and Eurostat) should be contacted.

13. In case the CES Bureau recommends the setting up of the database by UNECE, feedback would be appreciated with regard to the information proposed to be included in the database.

IV. PROPOSAL

14. The Bureau is invited to consider the comments and proposals made by the UNECE secretariat with regard to:

- **setting up a Task Force to develop a “best practice guide”;**
- **using and strengthening the Joint Eurostat/UNECE expert meeting as the forum for further discussion on issues related to demographic projections;**
- **setting-up a database on population projections and its possible content.**

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