



Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

ECE/CES/GE.41/2007/2
13 July 2007

Original: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses

Tenth session
Astana, 4-6 June 2007

Report of the Meeting

Note by the secretariat

This meeting is organised jointly with Eurostat.
--

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The meeting of the Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses was held on 4-6 June 2007 in Astana, Kazakhstan, at Radisson Hotel. It was attended by participants from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Netherlands, Norway, Oman, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America and Uzbekistan. The European Commission was represented by Eurostat. The World Bank, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-Stat) were also represented.

2. The meeting was kindly hosted by the Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan. A number of participants were able to attend the meeting thanks to the financial support provided by UNFPA.

GE.07-

3. Ms. Rosemary Bender (Canada) was elected as Chairperson of the meeting.

II. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

4. The following substantive topics were discussed at the meeting:
 - A. Census planning and management
 - B. Census technology: recent developments and implications on census methodology
 - C. Outsourcing of census operations.
5. The following participants acted as Discussants:
 - A. Ms. Meryem Demirci, Turkish Statistics Institute
 - B. Mr. Ali Mahboob Hassan, Ministry of National Economy, Oman and
Mr. Jean Michel Durr, UNSD
 - C. Mr. Peter Scrimgeour, General Register Office of Scotland (GROS), United Kingdom
6. An information session was also organized where UNECE, Eurostat and UNSD reported on the ongoing activities on censuses.
7. The discussion at the meeting was based on a number of invited and supporting papers. The papers are available on the UNECE website at the following address:
<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2007.06.census.htm>
8. The participants expressed their great appreciation to the Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the excellent organization of the meeting and the social activities that were offered to the participants.

III. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

A. Census planning and management

9. Documentation: Invited papers by France, Israel, Portugal and Sweden. Supporting papers by Azerbaijan, Norway, Tajikistan, UNMIK.
10. Experiences with different approaches used and planned to be used for quality assurance during the census. The discussion dealt with different approaches including field operations and registers. The presentations and the subsequent discussion proved that there has been considerable progress in the development of formalized processes for quality control and measurement in the census data collection .

11. Participants acknowledged that every census methodology has its advantages and limitations. The choice of the methodology should be directly linked to the national context and the experience acquired at the national level. A system for quality assurance and control should always be put in place regardless of the method used.

12. For censuses involving field operations, the important role of the municipalities was emphasized. However, it was also noted that the national statistical office (NSO) has to remain in charge of quality assurance and monitoring. The active role of municipalities provides a clear advantage because they are the primary users of census data and have knowledge of the area. Municipalities can also participate in the process of quality monitoring and assurance at the lower level. However, the NSO should keep its independent role of controlling the field operations and have the last word on the population counting.

13. In many European countries, municipalities are mandated by the government to participate in the census with funding allocated directly to the municipalities with no involvement of the NSO. NSOs have the challenge of working together with municipalities while maintaining control of the overall field operations. Involving staff who report directly to the NSO as supervisors and coordinators of field operations can help to keep the control of the field operations in the hands of the NSO. The census law can also play a crucial role to reinforce the role of the NSO in controlling the census and assuring quality.

14. Many countries are considering the use of registers in their census. It was acknowledged that the preparatory work need to use administrative registers for statistical purposes takes a long time. However, once the registers are in place, they can be cost-effective. The quality of the registers is usually in the hands of the administrations that are the custodians of the registers. Some NSOs have a more prominent role in controlling the content and quality of information derived from administrative registers. However, more often than not, this is a challenge. Close contact with users can help to assess the quality of the data derived from register-based censuses. The relevance of the data produced by the registers should also be discussed with the users to make sure that the census data measure the topics that the users need.

B. Census technology: recent developments and implications on census methodology

15. Documentation: Invited papers by Canada, Italy, Kazakhstan, Netherlands and United States (two papers). Supporting papers by Brazil, Israel, New Zealand and UNMIK.

16. The presentations featured new technologies in census taking including the use of internet and handheld devices for data collection, GIS systems, scanning and record matching. Some general considerations that emerged from the discussion are applicable to different technologies. For example, evaluating and implementing a new technology requires a long time and significant investment in terms of financial, human and technical resources. This applies also to the development of an integrated system of existing registers and surveys.

17. Decisions to adopt a new technology should take into account a number of factors: i) the existence of pre-conditions; ii) cost-benefit analysis; iii) a comprehensive series of testing including some in conditions as close as possible to the “real” census. Consideration should also

be given to the potential gains and long-term opportunities offered by the technology, not only with regard to future censuses, but also for potential reuse for other purposes inside and outside the statistical agency. The experience and lessons learned by other countries are also important.

18. The implementation of new technologies is risky. While it would be preferable to introduce them in small survey environments, the census is usually the only programme with sufficient financial and human resources to plan, test and implement them.

19. In general, the expertise required to develop new technologies resides outside the NSO. Thus the implementation of innovative technologies usually requires a partnership between the NSO and external contractors. In these cases, it is very important to define clearly the respective responsibilities. The NSOs must ensure that confidentiality issues are properly addressed and develop a minimum knowledge of the technology to effectively maintain the management and the control of the operations.

20. A common element in all discussions was the importance of assuring data security and confidentiality with all new technologies. The role of advanced technologies in improving data quality was recognized as well.

21. The introduction of new technology often leads to new challenges in the overall census process. For example, data collected through innovative modes such as hand held devices and internet must be integrated with the existing processing system and coordinated with field collection operations.

22. With regard to the use of scanners, it was stressed they are impacted by the quality of the paper and of the clarity of the printed information. It was noted that Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is a sophisticated technology that requires long development in order to produce good quality results.

23. Participants discussed the effect of new technologies in the questionnaire design. Technologies can allow innovative questionnaire design, which must be balanced with the need for consistency with the paper questionnaire. Some technologies, such as scanning, can also constrain the layout of printed questionnaires. Technology should not compromise the content of the questionnaire and the respondents' needs for a user-friendly layout.

C. Outsourcing of census operations

24. Documentation: Invited paper by Slovenia and presentations by France and United States.

25. Specific methodological, organizational and financial conditions may play a role in the NSO's decision to outsource a part of census operations. In particular, some new technologies are too complex to be handled by the NSOs alone.

26. The presentations reported on positive experiences, focusing on outsourcing of activities like pre-printing of the questionnaires, data capture, automatic coding, mapping

and communication. Quality assurance was also discussed as one of the main issues in outsourcing.

27. For certain countries, partnerships with municipalities are seen as a special kind of outsourcing, since there is a provision of services (fieldwork operations) on the basis of financial contributions and/or legislations. This is more in line with the mixed approach for outsourcing, where the statistical office plays an important role in the operations and defines the criteria to be fulfilled.

28. The reasons mentioned for outsourcing were the lack of specific skills in the NSO, the fact that certain tasks are not (anymore) part of the core activities, and the timeliness of the results. The influence of the costs on the outsourcing decision was inconclusive, as the implementation of quality controls might have a remarkable impact on the costs and might compensate the initial reduction obtained with the contract.

29. The preparation of the technical specification requires detailed work and sometimes compliance with heavy administrative procedures. Specific situations like sub-contracting or secondary contracts for checking purposes also need to be well defined. The allocation of appropriate time for the tendering process is therefore a key success factor.

30. It was stressed that any successful outsourcing has to be based on clear rules of engagement, which implies a full understanding by the NSO of their needs and a general knowledge of the activities to be outsourced. It is also very important that the contractor and the NSO have a clear common understanding of the confidentiality and quality criteria to be met. A possible approach is to apply the same rules for confidentiality to the internal and contractor's staff, with penalties foreseen in case of confidentiality breach. A transparent process may also help maintain the public trust in the census operation.

31. It was made clear that outsourcing does not transfer or reduce the risks, but instead brings new ones. The responsibility of the census remains with the NSO, and any outsourcing most probably will not be perceived by the public opinion as a sharing of responsibility with other organizations/companies.

32. One recognized advantage of outsourcing is a reduction of the burden for the internal staff allowing more time for methodological work. It is important that a knowledge transfer from the contractor to the NSO takes place, as this minimizes some risks and improves the skills of the internal staff. However, it was pointed out that, important resources can be absorbed by setting up and monitoring a quality system at all stages. A real partnership with the contractor is certainly important for a successful exercise.

33. Quality assurance and contracts surveillance may be another domain for outsourcing. External quality assurance can be carried out jointly with an internal structural unit devoted to this task. It is important to create communication channels between administrative/project managers and technical staff. However, this may easily

become a complex operation, which requires important resources and management capabilities.

34. Given the complexity of outsourcing (from the contract specifications to the quality monitoring) and the existence of common needs in several countries, cooperation among countries is strongly advisable. Sharing experiences and/or combining the needs for a single call for tender can contribute to the positive outcome of the outsourcing.

IV. FUTURE WORK

35. The meeting agreed on the usefulness of exchanging experience among countries on the preparation of the forthcoming national censuses. The exchange should be of a more detailed technical nature. Possible topics include:

- a) content and coverage evaluation;
- b) quality assurance and evaluation;
- c) the use of new technologies, including the use of internet for data collection;
- d) data editing and validation;
- e) dissemination.

36. The meeting suggested that UNECE create an electronic forum (including e-mail addresses of participants) to facilitate exchange of experience.

37. The meeting agreed to hold a one-day special session on Census Dissemination, jointly with the experts of the UNECE Working Group on Statistical Dissemination and Communication on 16 May 2008. Topics that the meeting would like to propose to the other group are (in order of priority): communicating quality, microdata dissemination, dynamic systems (tabular systems on the web).

38. It was proposed that the next meeting be held on 14-15 May (eventually also 13 May) 2008 in Geneva. Suggested topics included: census evaluation for register-based censuses, quality assurance and evaluation, new technologies (i.e. use of internet and hand held devices for data collection), small area estimation, and data editing and validation. The discussion can be organized in the form of either parallel expert group meetings or a general plenary session.

V. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

39. The report of the meeting was adopted during the closing session.
