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Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses

Twelfth Meeting
Geneva, 28-30 October 2009
Item 8 of the provisional agenda

**REPORT OF THE GROUP OF EXPERTS ON POPULATION AND HOUSING
CENSUSES**

Note by the Secretariat

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The meeting of the joint United Nations Economic Commission (UNECE) and Eurostat Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses was held on 28-30 October 2009 in Geneva. It was attended by participants from Albania, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America and Uzbekistan. The European Commission was represented by Eurostat. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) and the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) were also represented. The meeting was also attended by a number of experts invited by the Secretariat and by UNFPA.

2. A number of participants attended the Meeting thanks to financial support provided by UNFPA.

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3. Mr Aidan Punch (Ireland) was elected as Chairperson of the meeting.

II. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

4. At the beginning of the meeting UNECE presented a paper on the main results of the survey on 2010 round of population and housing censuses conducted by UNECE and United Nations Statistics Division. The paper generated significant discussion particularly about census cost comparison information. It was emphasised that any publication of cost information would need to have a clear explanation of the methodology used.

5. The following substantive topics were discussed at the meeting:

Item 2. Compliance with Conference of European Statisticians (CES) recommendations

Item 3. Enumeration of homeless people

Item 4. Census quality and disclosure control

Item 5. Census output to meet users needs

Item 6. Online data collection

6. The discussion at the meeting was based on invited and supporting papers. The papers and the presentations are available on the UNECE website at the following address:
<http://unece.org/stats/documents/2009.10.census.htm>

III. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN ITEMS DISCUSSED AT THE SUBSTANTIVE SESSIONS

Item 2: Compliance with Conference of European Statisticians' recommendations

7. Documentation: Invited papers presented by United Kingdom, Italy and Portugal.
8. The United Kingdom outlined areas where they may not fully comply with the CES 2010 recommendations and described how alternative data sources can be used to meet the need for information. Challenges include ageing, homelessness, increased migration, complex family structures, and increased mobility. The United Kingdom has included a number of new topics which were selected on the basis of a number of specific criteria.
9. Italy is moving away from a traditional census adopting a number of innovations. They are planning to use conventional field data collection with a register supported census (complementary information from municipalities). They will mail out questionnaires, have a multi mode collection system and evaluate undercounting using alternative data sources or a capture/recapture model. Different questionnaires will be used depending on the size of the municipality. For large municipalities a long form/short form strategy will be used.
10. Portugal presented information about third level students and issues they had in complying with the 2010 census recommendations. The recommendations give priority to the usually resident population, which causes issues for third level students. Portugal sees inconsistencies in the recommendations between treatment of workers and students living away from home and returning on weekends. Portugal is proposing to treat third level students living

away from home but in Portugal in the same way as they treat workers. That is, they will be counted at the family place if they return home on weekends.

11. Eurostat was pleased that countries were making significant efforts to comply with the CES recommendations. There was particular interest in persons who have ever resided abroad (particularly persons who were born in the country of enumeration), education qualifications and employment status of the last job for the unemployed, which were particularly problematic for member countries.

Item 3: Enumeration of homeless people

12. Documentation: Invited papers by FEANTSA, United Kingdom. Supporting papers by Finland, France.

13. FEANTSA presented results of a study on homelessness in 2006 and some recommendations for measuring this phenomenon.

14. Many countries do not have strategies how to count homeless in their population censuses. The census is important for policy work as this work is evidence based and the census is a primary source of data on the homeless.

15. Different issues apply to different data collection methodologies. Primary homelessness is only identified in a few countries with a specific methodology. For the secondary homeless, many temporary accommodation places do not separately identify the homeless persons. Homeless people living temporarily with family and friends are often not identified in the census as such. For register based censuses there are a number of issues. Two case studies were conducted in Slovenia and Germany and these highlighted problems with identifying homeless people from registers.

16. The United Kingdom described how they intend to count the homeless. The homeless will not be separately identified if staying with relatives or friends. People sleeping rough on census night will be approached on the evening of the census. There were significant field issues with the count in 2001. The United Kingdom is working more effectively with the voluntary sector for 2011. Local knowledge and expertise is important to get more effective results. The issue of counting the homeless and getting their age is a big challenge and it is difficult to balance coverage with cost.

17. In France, there are other agencies than the National institute of statistics and economic studies (INSEE) who collect information on the homeless. The French census has been a rolling census where not everyone is enumerated at the same time. Attempts are made to collect information on homeless people. France does not separately identify homeless persons temporarily living with family or friends in their census.

18. Finland provided an alternative approach as they use registers. Tests have been done on the Finnish registers to see if estimates of the homeless can be made from the registers. The population register is a good framework for surveying homeless people. The population register and other registers (employment, unemployment, subsidies, income etc.) can be used to identify

the homeless. There is the possibility to do both cross sectional and longitudinal studies from register data. Registers provide a potential sample frame to do in-depth surveys on the homeless.

19. Registers tend to use a “top down” approach to identifying homelessness by eliminating those who are not homeless whereas traditional censuses use a “bottom up” approach by trying to find homeless people in the field. This makes international comparisons difficult.

Item 4: Census quality and disclosure control

20. Documentation: Invited papers by Netherlands, Italy, Slovenia and Israel. Supporting papers by Serbia, Eurostat.

21. Netherlands distinguished a number of different types of tables including magnitude tables, frequency tables and hierarchical tables. Particular issues pertain to sensitive topics. In the Dutch approach for frequency tables, consideration is given to the number of respondents in sensitive vs. non sensitive categories. It is necessary to set table release criteria on data disclosure but this can be difficult. Where cells are suppressed care needs to be exercised so that suppressed cells cannot be derived from other tables or totals.

22. The European Union (EU) program for 2011 census results includes a series of detailed multi-dimensional tables (hypercubes) specified by the regulation. Testing of census tables was conducted, focusing on cases when cells needed to be suppressed. A model exists to suppress further cells to deal with recalculation risks. It is also necessary to ensure that the usefulness of tables is not diminished by suppressing too many cells. The disclosure risk is higher for smaller regions than for bigger regions. The EU program acknowledges the different levels of risk by proposing much less detailed hypercubes for the detailed regional level. EU countries will have to make sure that the data they provide respect national legislation in terms of confidentiality. However, this may affect international comparability of the results. Further work is required on this issue. Eurostat will facilitate knowledge exchange.

23. Italy presented the results of their studies on the accuracy of census data at NUTS 2 level. Italy plans to introduce sampling techniques for some items through the use of short and long forms. This introduces sampling error to the census for some items. Different strategies are proposed for municipalities with different population sizes. The impact of sampling error on the dissemination hypercubes has been estimated by evaluating a number of hypercubes using 2001 census data. The adoption of a sampling strategy does not reduce accuracy except for cells with low frequencies. Further testing will occur.

24. Slovenia has changed its methodology from field enumeration to registers, using a household and dwellings (real estate) register and various other registers and data sources. Administrative obstacles derive from legislation, compliance with statistical concepts (e.g. usual residence), inconsistent data and missing data. Statistical obstacles include the complexity of household relations, comparability of results with previous census and surveys and “broken” households. The quality of registers in Slovenia is good but attempts are made for further improvements. Slovenia is using the same concepts as the Nordic countries for statistical formation of consensual unions.

25. Israel provided details about the quality assessment its 2008 integrated Census. It has a population register and they check for under and over count with two independent samples which also collect additional information. Detailed quality checks were undertaken for the surveys.
26. Serbia presented information about a pilot Post Enumeration Survey conducted after their pilot census. The sample for this survey was small and not random. Therefore it was not possible to estimate coverage error. However, useful information was collected to help improve tools and operations of the 2011 Census PES.
27. The meeting discussed the fact that different countries will use different strategies for disclosure control and this could lead to inconsistencies with international data. A number of countries (e.g. United States) intend to use pre-tabular methods to avoid disclosure. The issue of disclosure, while important, needs to be kept in perspective as many census variables are not sensitive.
28. Post enumeration surveys are important for registers as well as traditional censuses in that they have the potential to test the quality of registers and census coverage. There is an issue as to how registers are kept up to date over time.

Item 5: Census output to meet users needs

29. Documentation: Invited papers by United Kingdom and Eurostat. Supporting paper by Minnesota Population Center.
30. The United Kingdom evaluated extensively the 2001 census and has taken into account the changing requirements of society and users as an input into their 2011 census. There has been a wide range of user consultation with government and others. Continuity in consultation is an important component. The demand for questions is greater than what is possible in a census. The United Kingdom will make data available for a number of different output areas. Data will be available for free on the web together with any printed reports at cover price and commissioned tables at marginal costs.
31. A private sector perspective from the United Kingdom was given by a user (Demographic Decisions Ltd.). The United Kingdom has three census offices with slightly different questionnaires. For output, the greatest demand is for small area data. This needs to be supplemented by appropriate mapping data. Demand also exists for commissioned data and anonymized records. The first principle of the United Kingdom statistics act is to meet user needs. The user community has been growing over time with census specialists, mainstream analysts and occasional and new users. Census data is important for commercial companies, so that they can make better business decisions. Commercial users analyse local markets, profile households and individuals, and design surveys to target particular areas.
32. While there is a market for hypercubes, many commercial users are interested in simple aggregated data at the smallest possible geographic level.
33. Eurostat presented their plans for dissemination at the EU level which aims at harmonised

and comparable data. There is an expectation of a common dissemination platform at the European level. The topics required are equivalent to the core topics in the Recommendations for the 2010 Censuses. Hypercubes have been designed to meet major policy needs of the EU. A good compromise has been found between the number and the size of the hypercubes. A Census Hub is being developed to facilitate transmission of data to Eurostat none of which should be confidential data.

34. The Minnesota Population Center has developed a programme to make anonymized census microdata and metadata available to researchers and policy-makers (IPUMS-International). The data base presents data and metadata in a harmonised way. It represents a best practice for a data repository on international statistical data. There is currently a special focus on Europe and Asia. Data on 12 European countries are available through the Integrated European Census Microdata (IECM) portal at the Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics. Data for all countries are available through IPUMS- International. The Minnesota Population Center invited more countries to add data to their data base.

Item 6: Online data collection

35. Documentation: Invited papers by United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Supporting paper by Poland.

36. The United Kingdom spoke about the use of the internet in completing the census online in a Scottish dress rehearsal. The questionnaire was designed for ease of online completion taking into account information provided and making sure some unnecessary questions were not asked. This made some questions (e.g. family relationship) much simpler online. Respondents have the option of checking online answers. Around 25 per cent of online respondents provided feedback about their experience of completing the questionnaire online. A number of questions need further testing and will not necessarily follow paper format.

37. Italy described their online system for 2011. It is only one of a number of options of completing the questionnaire. It is expected that fewer enumerators will be required. A test is currently under way for the whole system. The online questionnaire system will be outsourced in the actual census. There is a sophisticated management system to be used by all those involved in census collection. It has a web application framework and is platform independent.

38. Spain provided an analysis of the use of the internet from a theoretical and practical perspective. In the Spanish 2001 census about 1 per cent of households used the internet to complete the census. Spain contends that use of the internet will provide greater efficiency and more accuracy than the use of paper methods while allowing for more timely dissemination of results. The internet is also more cost effective. The number of households with internet connectivity is four times larger now than it was in 2001. Spain obtained almost 25 per cent of web responses in the non paper method without any publicity.

39. Portugal described their development of an e-Census system. Portugal does not have accurate registers of home addresses and the internet is considered essential. There are two ways of completing the census; paper forms and the internet. The internet form has been designed as close as possible to the paper questionnaire. Portugal uses cell phones to notify enumerators when forms are completed by internet. The population that responds online is relatively young

with most of the responses occurring in the evening time.

40. Poland has a mixed model for its census using registers, surveys, and online data collection. Enumerators use Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) with electronic questionnaire and geocoding. They plan to use no paper at all in their census and will use an extensive media campaign and issue letters to households.

41. All countries that made presentations were happy with their testing of the use of online forms and expect good results in their actual censuses. The time taken to develop the various systems for testing was in the range 6 to 12 months. Countries would have preferred more time. The legislative processes caused no issues as paper and online were being done simultaneously. Generally there is no capacity to check information back to the 2001 census although one country gave an example where they intend to do this. Proxy interviews are encouraged for the disabled and the computer illiterate. Care needs to be taken in relation to coverage checks in order to avoid over enumeration. Publicity campaigns have not been used in tests but will be important for the actual census response rates. Data protection processes such as firewalls for the online form and the data storage are important to protect individual privacy.

IV. FUTURE WORK

42. The meeting recommended the following plan for future work on Population and Housing Censuses in the UNECE region.

43. The next meeting is proposed to be held in 2010, tentatively in June. The proposed topics include:

- a) Census communication and dissemination, including the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS);
- b) Plans for census quality evaluation;
- c) Draft questionnaire to collect information on practices in the 2010 census round (to be submitted to countries for completion tentatively in 2012);
- d) Beyond the 2010 census round: Plans for the 2020 round.

44. The meeting requested the Secretariat to investigate the possibility of organising the 2010 meeting in conjunction with the UNECE Work Session on Communication and Dissemination of Statistics, to be hosted by OECD in Paris from 30 June to 2 July 2010. This could allow organising a seminar on census communication and dissemination jointly for the two groups of experts, as it was done with success in Geneva in May 2008. If this will not be possible, the meeting may take place in Geneva at a date to be identified depending on the availability of conference facilities.

45. The following activities were also proposed:

- a) 2010: A specific meeting for countries using registers, including countries intending to adopt a register approach for their 2020 censuses;
- b) 2011: No meetings (break for census-taking period);

- c) Early 2012: UNECE to conduct survey on national practices and a study on census costs in a selected number of volunteer countries;
- d) Late 2012: Meeting on lessons learned from the 2010 round and the start of preparatory work for the 2020 round;
- e) 2013: Meeting to discuss preparation of new recommendations for 2020 round of censuses.

V. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

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