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UNECE-Eurostat Expert Group Meeting on Censuses Using Registers

Geneva, 22-23 May 2012

Report

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. The joint UNECE-Eurostat Expert Group Meeting on Censuses Using Registers was held on 22-23 May 2012 in Geneva, at the Palais des Nations, back-to-back with the UNECE-UNFPA Workshop on Censuses Using Registers (21 May) and the joint UNECE/Eurostat Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses (24-25 May).
2. The meeting was attended by participants from Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States of America and Uzbekistan. The European Union was represented by participants from Eurostat. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-Stat) were also represented. The meeting was also attended by a number of experts invited by the Secretariat and by UNFPA.
3. UNFPA financially supported the attendance of a number of participants.

II. Organization of the meeting

4. Mr Eric Schulte Nordholt (Netherlands) was elected as Chairperson of the meeting.
5. In the opening of the meeting, UNECE gave a short presentation on the 2010 round of population and housing censuses in the UNECE region, with focus on the use of registers.

6. The following substantive topics were discussed at the meeting:
 - a) Experiences with the use of registers in censuses
 - b) Should we use registers for our census?
 - c) Availability, completeness and quality of data from registers and other sources
 - d) Methodology for estimating information missing in registers.
7. The discussion at the meeting was based on 17 papers submitted by the participants. The papers are available on the UNECE website at: <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2012.05.census1.html>
The presentations were posted on the same web page after the meeting.
8. The summary of the main items discussed in the substantive sessions is presented in the next section.

III. Summary of the main items discussed in the substantive sessions

A. Experiences with the use of registers in censuses

Documentation: Papers submitted by Estonia, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey.

9. In the discussion that followed the presentations, some questions were asked on the paper by Spain. Data were taken from registers (“padron”), but there was no information on families in the padron. Family structures are recreated based on a relationship question included in the census form. When there is no answer to that question, the family structure can be recreated using information on name, surname, sex and age. Data collection in the field lasted for 8 months, allowing for a reduction of costs. As multiple channels were used to collect responses, there were cases when data on the same dwelling were received through different channels. These multiple responses are detected easily because each dwelling has a unique identifier. In these cases, the responses are analyzed and the one that is most complete is used.

10. In Estonia, data are taken from registers, and integrated with data collected via the internet. A significant over-registration was reported, due also to frequent cases of persons with multiple residences, or couples living apart being placed together. Since there are no longer face-to-face interviews, it is more difficult to deal with these cases.

... In Poland, a new methodology and technology was developed to produce statistical registers from administrative registers. It is an interesting approach that could serve as a model for other countries. Once statistical registers are created, another important step is data integration. The experience of Poland is described also in another paper presented at the UNECE-Eurostat Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses (24-25 May).

11. In Turkey, registers were used for the census although they were established very recently (only 5 years before the census). However, it is believed that the large majority of the population is registered, otherwise they could not obtain health care or education. From the pilot census, it emerged that less than 1% of the population was not registered. Information on education is not available for part of the population.

12. Some of the issues with register-based censuses were discussed, including: lack of data on de facto marital status or same-sex marriages, incorrect registrations, population in institutions, students studying abroad, and illegal migrants.

B. Should we use registers for our census?

Documentation: Papers submitted by Canada, United Kingdom, Eurostat.

13. Whatever method is used for the census, it is important that attention be paid to quality. In the discussion for this session, many questions referred to quality in various methodological approaches to censuses.

14. In the United Kingdom, various options are being considered for the 2021 census. User requirements will be central in taking decisions about the methodology to use. Data from various registers could be used, and linkage made using common identifiers. However, there will not be one central database.

15. In Canada there are no registers. Internet response rate was very high in 2011 (54%). In view of the 2016 census, work is conducted to create a “virtual census”, in collaboration with ONS. The content is determined by the Government, which could impact on which method is adopted, as was the case for the long form in the 2011 census.

16. At the EU level, there is the risk that same persons could be counted in two countries. To avoid this it is important that countries implement the recommended definition of usual residence. Countries using registers will have to conduct coverage assessments and send the results to Eurostat, but they will be available only in 2014. An EU task force has been working on dimensions and indicators for quality assessments.

C. Availability, completeness and quality of data from registers and other sources

Documentation: Papers submitted by Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Slovenia.

17. Given the increasing use of registers for censuses under different methodological approaches, it is important to measure the quality of registers in a systematic way, and increase the knowledge about registers.

18. Registers should be compared with external independent sources to check quality. However, in the LFS, population is not totally independent if population registers are themselves used to create the LFS sampling frame.

19. For unemployment data, data provided by registers may differ in some cases from LFS data. For example, for a working student, in registers the main activity could be either student or employed, whereas LFS can cover the situation more accurately.

20. From the experience of Finland, register data is lagging on timeliness. When LFS and register based data are compared at the individual level for 2010 figures, an interesting finding was that persons unemployed but expecting to be employed have responded that they would be employed in a certain time period. For many of them, this proved to be correct.

21. The experts discussed whether it is possible to use the same framework for different kinds of registers, or adapt the same framework in different countries? The framework developed in Austria allows comparing the quality of sources in a structured way, and monitoring every year the quality changes of sources. This framework could be useful also for all countries.

22. Eurostat appreciates the work done by Austria and the Netherlands, and informed the meeting that a project is planned on the assessment of administrative data sources. Eurostat thinks it is important that there is harmonization of assessment but it doesn't mean

that a unified framework is needed as it may not be practical. There should be a toolbox to assess quality which could be applied to those registers considered. Harmonized quality assessment is becoming more important.

23. In Norway, originally there was no framework for quality, but only a quality check. Later it was realized that it was important to have a framework, to communicate with register holders on quality issues. In addition to registers, surveys should play a key role in monitoring data quality.

24. Some participants noted that it would be useful if UNECE and Eurostat could develop recommendations, methodology, and typology of approaches based on use of registers. This material could help countries to decide if and how registers could be used for their census.

25. In some countries there can be problems with using data from registers when households divide into two, or the reference person leaves the household. In Slovenia if the reference person leaves the household, another person from this household becomes the reference person. If a person from one household creates a new household at the same address, then the new household receives a new identifier. For cohabiting couples, when a person declares the household, (s)he also declares the relationship to the reference person of the household.

26. In Slovenia, the population register is updated by the Ministry of the Interior. The NSO doesn't track changes but takes data as they are in one point of time. Cooperation between the data keeper and the NSO is important to have good quality, which is a common goal. Cooperation aims at improving data quality by detecting aggregate-level errors. Errors are not detected at the individual level.

27. In Italy, the register data used for the census could be used in the future, for example for rolling censuses and for sample surveys. During the census Italy printed the name, surname and address of the head of household on the questionnaire. These data were collected from registers.

28. In Germany, because of strict legislation and public concern about data confidentiality, personal id cannot be used and is not recorded in the population register. This makes it difficult to combine different sources. Nevertheless, population registers are used to get demographic information and census variables. Creating the register of addresses and buildings is a process which consumes huge resource, also because there is no common address standard. German law stipulates that the address register should be deleted six years after the census date.

29. Portugal expressed concern about using registers to replace the traditional census, as register data are not yet sufficiently complete and updated. Portugal has many people changing occupation, industry and residence. How can all these changes be followed, to be sure that reality is reflected correctly in registers? How are registers able by themselves to measure a changing society?

30. Some participants believed that registers are not perfect but can be accurate. In fact, no perfect census method exists, and there are always some errors. But if a country opts for register data, then the quality of registers must be ensured, and suitable instruments should be put in place to measure the quality.

31. Slovenia noted that it matters whether the population follows the legislation regarding the correct and timely reporting of their addresses. In Slovenia 90 per cent of the population lives at the declared address. For the others, the majority lives at another address within the same city.

32. Italy mentioned that work is planned to improve the quality of registers. However, sample surveys will still play an important role in measuring the quality of registers.

33. Germany argued that sample surveys are not necessarily better than registers. For instance, the type of residence is recorded accurately in registers, while the people may not provide the correct information to surveys. Moreover, surveys take time. Accuracy of registers can be improved, but they are good enough for statistical purposes.

D. Methodology for estimating information missing in registers

Documentation: Paper submitted by the Netherlands.

34. In the Netherlands, the switch from traditional censuses to register-based ones was the end of a long process of preparation during which fundamental questions were resolved, including how to assess the quality of existing registers, what quality improvements were needed, and the legal framework allowing access to registers.

35. There are limitations to what data tables can be produced through register censuses where survey data has been used to impute variables that are not obtainable from registers, especially for multiple variable cross-tabulations, and low administrative territory levels. Limitations also appear with researchers' requests for micro-data access, which usually need strict rules to be dealt with. Nevertheless, to satisfy data requests, statistical tables can be computed by using calibration methods.

36. It was noted that registers might have more accurate information than respondents' self-declarations during the census or survey, as can be the case for employment occupation or status in employment. Nevertheless, to maintain the quality of registers, they need to be actively monitored and adjusted when necessary. The overall objective guiding these activities should not be perfection, but to seek how to improve the current situation in the light of what is desirable. Knowledge sharing can help in that view and Statistics Netherlands expressed availability to advise countries that would require it.

IV. Future work

37. Future joint work by UNECE-Eurostat in the field of population censuses was discussed during the joint UNECE/Eurostat Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses (24-25 May). The proposal on future work can be found in the report of that meeting, available at: <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2012.05.census2.html>

V. Report

38. The present report of the meeting was finalised after the closing session and distributed to the participants by e-mail.