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## Conference of European Statisticians

**Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses****Nineteenth Meeting**

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Item 7 of the provisional agenda

**Cooperation models among countries****The International Census Forum – One Example of a  
Cooperation Model****Note by the United States Census Bureau <sup>1</sup>***Summary*

National Statistical Offices (NSOs) working together is essential in this era of changing census methodologies and technologies, the uniqueness of our work, and limited funding. Times have changed and we need to broaden our vision of collaboration with a renewed commitment to working with and contributing to the international statistical community. Sharing best practices learned through experience and then communicating these across the organization holds great potential for both the United States Census Bureau and our international partners.

Below is a description of the development, objectives and functionality of the International Census Forum (ICF), one cooperative model in which the Census Bureau actively participates. The ICF was established in 2003, currently, with members from the NSOs of United Kingdom (Great Britain, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland), the Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. The forum serves as the mechanism for the participating NSOs to conduct annual census information exchanges on current work and to strengthen rapport and cooperation between our NSOs.

<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Arona L. Pistiner, International Cooperative Programs Officer, Policy Coordination Office



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## I. A Brief History<sup>2</sup>

1. There has been some debate concerning the exact origins of the ICF. At various times the United Kingdom and Australia, both claimed to be the initiators of the forum. Others have suggested the beginnings were with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), as the current ICF countries, are all UNECE members where the English language is one of the country's primary languages.
2. In the early 2000's, a series of bi-lateral meetings were organized by Paul Williams, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Nancy McBeth, from Statistics New Zealand, as both countries were getting ready to introduce their first internet census in 2006. These regular census meetings were viewed as "frank and fearless." Shortly thereafter, Anil Arora, from Statistics Canada, got involved, in the meetings, as they were also introducing an internet census. There had been long standing trilateral exchanges between Australia, Canada and New Zealand, though not specifically focused on censuses. Paul, Nancy and Anil were the census managers for their respective NSOs and worked out the logistics for the first meeting. They agreed that the Australian Bureau of Statistics would host the first forum.
3. One thought is the origins of the ICF were at an East-West Center<sup>3</sup> Conference. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States participated in these meetings. There was a side discussion at one of these conferences and the ICF was proposed. Up until this point of time, it had been difficult to engage the United States in any way and this was seen as a break through. The United Kingdom had just completed their 2001 Census to much criticism and was looking for answers – since they were in regular contact with Australia, Canada and New Zealand on their census, an invite to them seemed logical.
4. Another perspective is that the idea for the ICF came from Brian Pink. At the time, Brian was the Government Statistician for New Zealand and Chief Executive of Statistics New Zealand. His concern was that Australia, Canada and New Zealand were all introducing their first internet censuses, in 2006. There was recognition that all of these NSOs needed to work together to learn from one another for their internet censuses to be successful.
5. While there may not be agreement on the exact origin of the idea for the ICF, most agree, the first of the recent series of international census meetings was held in Canberra, Australia in February 2003, in response to a general desire from census areas, within NSOs, to learn from each other and from the just completed 2000 round of censuses. The meeting was very informal, with presentations, over four days, from each country around particular themes with extensive discussions and sharing of experiences.
6. In 2005, the United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics (ONS) offered to host a forum as an international review panel for their 2011 Census. Their willingness to use the ICF to conduct that first technical peer review was an important step in giving the ICF international creditability. This meeting was the initial forum for Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Republic of Ireland joined the forum in 2007.
7. The value of the first forum was immense for the participating countries and it was quickly followed by three more forums over the next 12 months covering specific aspects

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<sup>2</sup> With input from Peter Benton and Garnett Compton, Office for National Statistics, Deirdre Cullen, Central Statistics Office, Ireland, Tracy Moore, Statistics New Zealand and Paul Williams, formally of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Nancy McBeth, GCC-Stat, formally of Statistics New Zealand. My thanks to them for their contributions to this document.

<sup>3</sup> The East-West Center was established by the United States Congress in 1960 to promote relations and understanding between the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through research and cooperative study. Today, the Center is an independent, public, non-profit organization.

of census operations and management. Over time, the ICF has taken on a strong methodological focus, while in earlier times, the driver was to enable census managers to reflect and think about the bigger issues of managing a census. The underlying principle of the forum remains a constant – to have completely open and honest discussion. We share our successes and our failures.

## II. Membership

8. The current members are from the NSOs of the United Kingdom<sup>4</sup>, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

9. However, in the beginning, as the meetings have rotated around the world, other nearby NSOs have often attended, including France, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Republic of Ireland (who are now regular attendees). Around 2011/2012, the ICF membership stabilized to include the seven NSOs listed above.

10. During the 2013 ICF meeting, there was extensive discussion on opening up the membership. The decision was made to limit the number of countries participating. The consensus was the limited number of NSOs enabled greater interaction and discussion at the forum meetings. At the moment, the number of participating NSOs has been held constant. This goes back to the underlying principle of the forum – in order to maintain an informal and open discussion, there needs to be an element of personal familiarity among the participants and this is facilitated by keeping the group small and consistent. Observers are not encouraged and tend to be limited to invited speakers or staff from the host NSO.

## III. Timing of Meetings and Hosting

11. The ICF has met every year since 2003, except for 2006 and 2011, when many of the countries were conducting censuses.

12. Originally, the forum met every 18–20 months, then the meetings started to be held every 15 months. In the last two to three years, the ICF has started meeting every year.

13. Hosting responsibilities rotate among the ICF countries. The chair of an ICF meeting is usually the census manager/director for the current host country. Among their responsibilities, they are responsible for securing the meeting location of the next ICF. Sometimes, countries will approach the current chair and offer to host the next meeting or a specific upcoming meeting. Other times, the chair will look back at past meetings and negotiate with countries who have not hosted a meeting over the past few years. At present, a number of countries volunteered to host upcoming meetings; hosting responsibilities are set for the next few meetings.

14. The U.S. Census Bureau is the host for the 2017 ICF, in September 2017.

## IV. ICF Liaisons

15. Starting with the 2013 ICF, each NSO selected an ICF Liaison. The role of the liaison is to be the point of contact for the ICF. They received preliminary information on the coming year's ICF. The liaisons also serve as the conduit for general communication

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<sup>4</sup> Scotland although a part of the United Kingdom, sends their own representative to the ICF and is considered the seventh country in the ICF. Usually, but not always, Northern Ireland also sends their own representative(s) to the forum meetings.

between the NSOs census areas. They may be contacted for data and/or information requests and are responsible for ensuring effective ICF communications across the NSOs.

16. These communications go beyond specifically planning for future meetings. One country might request information from the other countries at any point in time. The ICF Liaisons are a key source of obtaining that information from the respective countries.

## **V. Planning and Preparations for an ICF**

17. Each year, before the ICF concludes time is spent to discuss the agenda items for the next year. Through discussions that have occurred behind the scenes, the location of the next meeting is also announced. There is a hand-off from the current host to the host of the next meeting.

18. Hosting a forum, as with any conference, requires extensive planning. Planning and preparations can take between 9–12 months. It begins with organizing a planning committee and identifying committee members from the host NSO. This is followed by selecting the meeting dates and confirming availability with the ICF NSOs. The logistics for the meeting, including venue, hotel accommodations, food, and so forth is the focus and responsibility of the planning committee. For a successful ICF, attention to detail is key, a committed and engaged planning committee, and flexibility.

19. The development of the agenda occurs collaboratively among the countries beginning with list of topics prepared at the end of the prior years' forum. Once topics are agreed upon, countries volunteer to present on selected topics and presenters are selected. Chairing responsibilities of the sessions is shared equally among the countries.

20. Every year, the host country adapts the ICF model to add their own variations. Some of these changes are now a part of the ICF culture; others are unique to the country hosting the meeting. For example, during the 2012 ICF, hosted by Statistics New Zealand, a whakatau, a Maori welcoming ceremony took place; in 2016, participants learned to paddle a waka. At the 2014 meeting, in Canberra, participants got an up-close view of a mob of kangaroos.

21. During the 2014 meeting, in Canberra, futurists gave a presentation on technological advances that may impact census designs. This led to a panel of journalists, the following year, in Ottawa, to talk about the media and the census.

22. Over the past couple ICF meetings, following opening remarks, most of the first day is devoted to countries providing updates on their census since the last meeting. With the participants' panache to discuss their censuses, group dinner reservations are usually made for each evening of the meeting for continuance of the day's discussions.

23. At the end of the meeting, before adjourning, there is a hand-off from the hosting country to the country hosting the next meeting. At last year's meeting, the United States (the host country for the next ICF) prepared "thank you" bags for the 2016 planning committee. The bags consisted of items, brought by each of the other NSOs, unique to their country.

## **VI. Structure of the Forum Meeting**

24. The average meeting size is between 20–30 participants, generally participants are Census Directors, their managers, ICF Liaisons and other senior staff involved in the NSO's census operations. Participation is limited to only people seated at the table (often a "U" shaped table arrangement to aid in discussion). On average, each country sends one to four participants. Neighboring countries, for example Canada and the United States or Australia and New Zealand, may send additional staff, but usually as observers. Staff from

the host country may attend as observers, however, their number is limited and they tend to come to a specific session based on the topic under discussion. Typically, observers do not participate in discussions or ask questions.

25. The goal is to have open and honest communication about the state of each country's census, in an informal environment. The informal social side of the program has been as valuable as the formal agenda, with many detailed discussions continuing into the evening. Discussion can be intense; sometimes from breakfast to after dinner. The emphasis is on sharing information and discussion.

26. There are usually no documents for the meeting, only presentations for each topic contributed by the various countries, coordinated in advance by the host country. There is also no formal record of proceedings – each country takes away its own notes of the points important to them.

27. Since English is the primary language of the member countries, the meetings are conducted in English.

28. Copies of the presentations are usually not distributed during the meeting. Presentations are posted following the meeting.

29. In general, meetings have evolved to the following general format with variations created by the host country. Meetings last for three and a half days with full days from Tuesday to Thursday and a half a day on Friday. Based on requests for a day or two before and after the ICF, the host country may set-up meetings for ICF participants with the staff of the host NSO. Some forums have included discussions with futurists, university researchers, and the media's view of the census. There have also been visits to data capture centers or a cultural event specific to the host country.

30. Here is a general outline of an ICF meeting:

Tuesday:

Welcome and opening remarks

Country updates – each country is given time to provide an update on their census planning or implementation since the last ICF meeting.

Wednesday:

Two to three topics – each topic has two to four presentations with sufficient time for discussion.

Conference dinner

Thursday:

Two to three topics – each topics has two to four presentations with sufficient time for discussion.

Friday:

Possibly one topic in the morning

Discussion of previously discussed topics that the group feels needs additional time

Summary of the meeting

Generate list of action items from the meeting.

Discussion of agenda topics for the next meeting.

Announcement of next meeting's host and potential timing for the meeting.

Hand-off to the next host.

Adjournment.

## **VII. Communication between Forums**

31. There have been some efforts to share documentation between meetings via a dedicated website, apart from a few very specific requests for information, these have tended to fizzle out – it is the times when we meet up that the real information sharing happens.

32. Following the 2013 meeting, the U.S. Census Bureau proposed and developed an extranet site that provides limited access to ICF participants to shared information. Since 2014, ICF presentations are posted on this site. The site is password protected. The Communities of Practice (see below), each have their own library on the site, and are encouraged to post their agenda and shared documentation.

33. On occasion, there have been quarterly teleconferences for NSOs to provide updates on census matters between ICF meetings.

## **VIII. Communities of Practice**

34. In May 2014, at the last ONS International Review Panel, the ICF participants discussed setting up international working groups with members drawn from ICF countries. At that meeting nine technical workings groups were established and a Coordination Group, comprised of all the chairs. The initial working groups were:

- Pre-registration;
- Online questionnaire design;
- Enhancing address registers using administrative data;
- Household structures using administrative data;
- Use of administrative data in person/item imputation;
- Data linkage methods;
- Sharing source software/collaborating on system development;
- Use of social media;
- Field follow-up methods;
- Coordination Group, comprised of all the group chairs;
- Content;
- Data Dissemination and Disclosure; and
- Testing.

35. The working groups meet via teleconference with the frequency determine by the group, usually monthly or quarterly. These informal groups exist as long as there is a need and the groups chose to meet. New groups are also formed as needed. Their main function is information sharing and a sounding board for new ideas.

## **IX. ICF – Administrative Data Research**

36. As more and more countries are moving away from a traditional census to a register based census or incorporating administrative data into their censuses, at the 2016 ICF, there was a proposal to explore an ICF offshoot meeting focusing on the use of administrative data. With the 2017 ICF meeting, planned to be in the Washington, D. C. area, Statistics Canada offered to host the first International Census Forum on Administrative Data Research (ICF– ADR), in Ottawa, the week immediately following the 2017 ICF.

37. The ICF – ADR will focus on topics related to the register-based and combined census models using administrative data. The meeting is an opportunity for ICF NSOs to share their experiences, discuss and initiate collaborative projects based on each country's research into the potential benefits of adopting a register-based or combined census model.

38. Planning for the meeting is underway with details forthcoming.

## **X. Conclusion**

39. The model is working. The countries who are a part of the ICF – the United Kingdom (Great Britain, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland), the Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, while sharing a common language, also are similar in their census methodology and technologies.

40. The forum meetings have enabled the individual countries to choose the best census methods and practices from among the ICF participating countries. As a result for each of our census designs, although unique as a whole, contains no major components that have not in some way been successfully implemented by at least one other country. A willingness to openly and honestly share our lessons learned has strengthened all of our censuses. The relationships built have enabled quick access to expertise on particular issues as they arise. Most of our census issues are similar, how the issues are resolved will be tailored for the specific country. The result is improvements to all of our censuses and the building of effective partnership within this segment of the international statistical community.



## Annex

### Dates, Locations and Main Focus of Past ICFs

<i>When held</i>	<i>Where / Host NSO</i>	<i>Main focus</i>
February 2003	Canberra, Australia  Jointly hosted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Statistics New Zealand	Issues surrounding conventional census operations, field operation in particular. Reviewed 2001 lessons and started looking forward to next census.
July 2003	Titchfield, UK  Office for National Statistics	Reviewed the ONS 2001 “One Number Census experience”, in response to numerous requests from other countries to come and discuss it. For the ONS, it also served as an ‘expert review’ feeding into their 2001 evaluation.  Also spent time reviewing the French rolling census.
November 2003	Ottawa, Canada  Statistics Canada	Internet collection system development, including front end design, security, testing, integration with field.  Also covered communications and outsourcing.
February / March 2004	Christchurch, New Zealand  Statistics New Zealand	Program Management focus. Covered project management approaches, governance, risk management, testing and evaluation, outsourcing and contract management.  Also covered administrative data linkage, outputs, disclosure control and security.
November 2005	Titchfield, UK  Office for National Statistics	International Peer Review of the UK 2011 Census Design.  Arranged so that ONS could get expert input into their proposed design for the 2011 census – resulting in wider ranging discussions about all kinds of census issues.
2006		Did not meet, quinquennial census countries in the midst of their censuses.

<i>When held</i>	<i>Where / Host NSO</i>	<i>Main focus</i>
February 2007	Melbourne, Australia Australian Bureau of Statistics	Very wide ranging – lessons from 2006 round of censuses, plans for 2010/11 censuses.
May 2008	Ottawa, Canada Statistics Canada	A range of issues, with a field focus – coverage, hard to count groups, managing field operations, communications, competing in the labor market, internet, and contracting
September 2009	Malahide, Ireland Central Bureau of Statistics, Ireland	Lessons from recent tests and rehearsals, and output dissemination
2010	Alexandria, Virginia U.S. Census Bureau	Testing, innovations in technology, developing options for future censuses and data dissemination.
2011		Not held due to the number of countries conducting censuses that year.
February 2012	Wellington, New Zealand Statistics New Zealand	A varied collection of topics: results of the UN 2010 Census Program Review; changing data collection methods, including internet use, communication strategies, eCensus technologies, processing efficiencies, data dissemination, business transformation models and outsourcing.
May 2013	Titchfield, UK Office for National Statistics (replaced Scotland as the host)	Combined with an International Peer Review of the UK's 2021 Census Design.  Improving field designs and internet data collection, including preregistration, address registers, test plans for 2020/21 censuses and content.
September 2014	Canberra, Australia Australian Bureau of Statistics	Online questionnaires, dissemination, maximizing self-response, occupancy and coverage, social media, mixed modes, and the future role of the census.
October 2015	Ottawa, Canada Statistics Canada	Online collection developments, social media and data dissemination, external demand models, census from a media perspective, and operating in a changing environment.
October 2016	Wellington, New Zealand Statistics New Zealand	2016 Census updates, sex/gender and other content issues, future census thinking, census transformation models, testing for upcoming censuses.

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<i>When held</i>	<i>Where / Host NSO</i>	<i>Main focus</i>
September 2017	Suitland, Maryland U.S. Census Bureau	Being finalized at the time of the document submission.
2018	National Records of Scotland – Proposed	To be determined.
2019	Central Bureau of Statistics, Ireland – Proposed	To be determined.
2019	Central Bureau of Statistics, Ireland – Proposed	To be determined.

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