United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Online expert meetings on measuring poverty and inequality
2-4 December 2020

Report of the Online Expert Meetings on Measuring Poverty and Inequality

Note by the Secretariat

I. Attendance

1.   The UNECE Expert Meetings on Measuring Poverty and Inequality were held on 2-4 December 2020 in reduced online format. In light of travel restrictions and health protection measures, a physical meeting was postponed until further notice. The online meetings were attended by participants from Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark. Estonia, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, Mongolia, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, and Uzbekistan.

2.   The European Commission was represented by Eurostat. Representatives of the following organisations participated in the meeting: Eurasian Economic Commission, European Free Trade Association (EFTA), Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-Stat), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). Experts from Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) Cross-National Data Centre, International Movement ATD Fourth World, Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), Keio University and University of Oxford also participated.

3.   The organization of the expert meetings was financially supported from the United Nations Development Account.

II.   Organization of the meetings

4.   The event included two meetings. The first meeting, on 2 December, chaired by Mr. Andres Vikat of UNECE, focused on countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (EECCA), and included substantive sessions on the following topics:

   a)   Indicators on poverty and inequalities, SDGs 1 and 10
   b)   The impact of the pandemic on the measurement of poverty and inequality in countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia

5.   Mr. Rafkat Hasanov (UNECE consultant) led the discussion on item (b).

6.   The second meeting, on 3-4 December, chaired by Ms. Trudi Renwick of the United States Census Bureau focused on poverty and inequality measurement in the entire UNECE region. The following substantive topics were discussed:

   a)   Data collection on poverty during the pandemic
   b)   The urgent need for data during the pandemic
   c)   Disaggregated poverty measures for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
   d)   Urban and rural poverty
   e)   Work under the Conference of European Statisticians

7.   The following participants acted as Discussants and shared their reflections: for item (a) Ms. Trudi Renwick (United States Census Bureau), for item (b) Mr. Federico Polidoro (ISTAT, Italy), and for item (c) Ms. Elena Danilova-Cross (UNDP) and for item (d) Mr. Andrew Heisz (Statistics Canada).

8.   The discussion at the meeting was based on abstracts and presentations available [on the UNECE website.](#)[1]

III.   Summary of the main issues discussed

A.   Measuring poverty and inequality in countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (2 December)

i.   Indicators on poverty and inequalities, SDGs 1 and 10

9.   The session consisted of contributions from UNECE and CIS-STAT.

10.   Presentations in this session provided an overview of poverty indicator data available in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, and reflected on early impacts of the pandemic on data collection and statistical production across the region. A summary of data availability for poverty indicators based on data reported to Global SDG Database (as of 19 November 2020) revealed good coverage at the population level, with recent data (2017 or 2018) available for a majority of EECCA countries for all indicators. For certain indicators, data disaggregated by sex, age, and other recommended characteristics are still unattainable while the availability of social protection items (SDG indicator 1.3.1) varies across countries. These pre-pandemic data will serve as a baseline for measuring the impact of the pandemic on progress towards poverty-related SDGs.

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[1] https://unece.org/statistics/events/unece-online-meetings-measuring-poverty-and-inequality

11.   CIS-STAT described the impact the pandemic has had on data collection and statistical production in the region, including delays in field surveys, the transition of employees to remote work and associated training required, the transition to telephone-based surveys, modifications to existing survey programmes, and new online surveys. CIS-STAT also presented preliminary data examining the impact of COVID-19 on unemployment, income and household expenditure. The number of officially registered unemployed persons increased from August 2019 to July 2020 in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova and Russian Federation, but decreased slightly in Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. The share of household expenditures on food increased in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same quarter of 2019 in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, while the share of expenditure on services, entertainment, and restaurants and hotels decreased. CIS-STAT also shared plans around the development of a system of poverty indicators for monitoring SDGs in the CIS region and the translation into Russian of the new Classification of Individual Consumption by Purpose (COICOP).

ii.   **The impact of the pandemic on the measurement of poverty and inequality in countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia**

12.   The session consisted of contributions from Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Mr. Rafkat Hasanov (UNECE Consultant).

13.   Presentations in the session reported on the challenges EECCA countries have encountered and the innovative approaches they have taken to respond to the demand for timely data on poverty and inequality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The countries represented in the session shared experiences in the deployment of new or modified survey instruments and the transition to telephone-based interviewing and remote work for staff in statistical offices. Some countries were also able to share preliminary data on the impacts of the pandemic on household expenditures and standards of living.

14.   In July 2020, UNECE took first steps in gathering practices of national statistical offices in adapting their household surveys to the COVID-19 crisis situation with respect to poverty measurement. The study, available in English and Russian, covered 25 national statistical offices participating in the UNECE work on poverty measurement. In some countries, surveys were postponed or cancelled, while the large majority (91%) of those who did take the surveys switched from face-to-face interviews to remote survey methods. About half of countries covered in the study indicated they altered existing questionnaires or developed new questions or modules to capture impacts of COVID-19 on households and individuals. The statistical offices in the region cited limited technical skills and equipment among survey respondents, ill personnel, and funding limitations as the main challenges associated with conducting surveys in this new environment.

15.   Country presentations provided first-hand accounts of the impact the pandemic has had on the measurement of poverty and inequality. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine shared experiences and results from household budget and living condition surveys conducted during the pandemic period. Difficulties obtaining household phone numbers, competing household demands on ICT resources, new training of staff, and adaptations to sample design and complex weighting were among the common challenges that countries faced during field surveys. Despite these challenges, most countries represented managed to collect and report timely and relevant data on the impact of COVID-19 on household expenditures and living conditions.

16. Discussion during the session raised questions around the comparability of data collected via new instruments and methods with past and future data. Needs on capacity building and technical assistance and the value of private-public partnerships were also considered. It was acknowledged that the pandemic has driven innovation that will benefit the measurement of poverty and inequality in the long run. The countries represented have seized opportunities to make better use of existing data sources, implement technological and methodological advancements, and improve remote-work capabilities.

B. Measuring poverty and inequality (3-4 December)

i. Data collection on poverty during the pandemic

17. The session consisted of contributions from Eurostat, ECLAC and Mr. Rafkat Hasanov (UNECE Consultant).

18. The presentations of the three international organizations showed that the pandemic has significantly influenced the work of the statistical offices around the world. The lockdown has affected the ongoing fieldwork in most of the countries as they were not able to conduct face-to-face interviews. The challenges were numerous: restrictions to physical access to the households, interviewers' lack of experience in phone interviews, increased non-response rate, necessity to adjust to remote work and prepare various instructions for interviewers to work in the new conditions, additional costs for the purchase of protective equipment, etc. Most countries adopted ad-hoc measures, including changes in the fieldwork period, mode of data collection, sample, questionnaires, and reference period for some variables. Some used additionally administrative registers and historical data.

19. In April 2020, Eurostat has issued recommendations in order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 crises on the EU-SILC data collection, including moving to more innovative tools of data collection (CATI or CAWI). Several new COVID-19 related variables have been suggested: on change in income compared to previous year and its main reason, on benefits from COVID-19 related support schemes, on work from home during the pandemic, on health and mental health, etc. In October 2020, Eurostat launched a second survey to review the outcomes of the changes to the EU-SILC data collection across the countries. The results are currently being collected.

20. ECLAC's recommendations included conduct of telephone surveys using a probabilistic sample, based on the most recent survey sample with available contact information and application of design-based adjustments for the correction of selection and coverage bias. In addition, ECLAC used existing modelling techniques to nowcast the impact of COVID-19 on poverty. They proposed the use of nowcasting models in the absence of household survey data, e.g. for developing experimental statistics.

21. Among support needed to tackle the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants in the UNECE survey indicated expertise for using new data sources, software for remote data collection, staff training for remote work, and teaching respondents to work online. With funding from the United Nations Development Account, UNECE is addressing these new needs for capacity-building and is supporting national statistical offices in their quick response to the pandemic.

ii. The urgent need for data during the pandemic

22.   The session consisted of contributions from Austria, Canada, and United States.

23.   The speed of the economic and social developments during the pandemic gave rise to job insecurity and unpredictability, which in turn had called for more rapid statistics to quickly assess the situation and direct the government response to those who are most in need.

24.   Asked about the main pressures on data collection amplified by the pandemic, the experts did not hesitate to point out the issue of timeliness. In an attempt to address the demand for quickly providing critical information to government and the public, several statistical offices developed experimental statistics aiming to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on poverty and inequality. Austria and Canada, for example, highlighted new methods designed to measure the impact of the pandemic on month-by-month family income trends long before detailed annual statistics become available. Other dimensions of the crisis in addition to income, have been also considered. Researchers from several U.S. government agencies launched COVID-19-related survey to assess how population is being able to adapt to what many see as the "new normal," including food security, maintaining education, and impacts on health and well-being. Similarly, the statistical office of the Republic of Moldova developed an additional module in their household budget survey to study these effects.

iii. Disaggregated poverty measures for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

25.   The session consisted of contributions from Mexico, Spain, UN Women, and University of Oxford.

26.   The session demonstrated that the need to disaggregate is truly receiving the required attention in statistical offices. The variety of types of disaggregation that were presented covered among others income, gender, age, disability, geographic location, and reassured that both countries and institutions are taking action to respond to the pledge of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of leaving no-one behind.

27.   Spain has used for the first time a combination of data sources (census and tax registers) to provide income indicators at municipal level ensuring a real evidence-based decision-making. Currently, the project is still in experimental phase, the figures are expected to be officially published from 2022 onwards on an annual basis.

28.   The 2020 National Survey of Household Income and Expenditure survey in Mexico has been the largest in its history, with a sample of more than 100 thousand households. It made a strong emphasis on data collection on vulnerable groups, such as children, youth and elderly people, recent migrants, disabled or ethnic minorities, and allowed estimates for urban and rural domains. This survey would also play an instrumental role in identifying the implications of the COVID-19 crisis on the Mexican population, and those in risk groups.

29.   Countries have shown increased interest in developing multidimensional poverty measures at national level. Data used to produce these measures are usually based on surveys, therefore potentially missing marginalized groups, e.g. people in the move, people leaving in institutions, homeless people, etc. To help better coverage, the experts encouraged the use of larger samples and reaching out to hard-to-reach groups.

30.   Looking towards future up to 2030, the participants called for more investments in data collection on poverty at individual level by sex and age. It was stressed that the issue of poverty should be looked down in tandem with labour market inequalities, access to labour market and unpaid work. In this context, visualization and communication of findings using evidence-based and simple language is extremely important. UN Women informed about completing a project with UNSD on capturing inequalities between women and men in assets ownership.

iv.   Urban and rural poverty

31.   The session consisted of contributions from Luxembourg Income Study Data (LIS) Cross-National Data Centre and UNDP.

32.   Highly segregated regions and uneven access to social, financial and environmental resources may affect educational attainment, earnings, employment, quality of housing, health and safety significantly across neighbourhoods, settlements or urban and rural areas. To understand regional disparities, the drivers of these constantly changing developments need to be closely studied.

33.   With examples from Central and Eastern European countries, the speakers highlighted the regional differences in terms of income inequality and poverty, as well as earnings inequality along the urban-rural dimension and over time.

34.   In many countries, like in Kazakhstan, more and more citizens are choosing to live in cities. This brings complex challenges of pollution, congestion, threats to public health, overburdened infrastructure and public services. Statistics are much needed to support good governance, which can help secure social welfare and equity, mitigate environmental impact, and support economic growth despite growing urbanisation.

35.   In Republic of Moldova, while income inequalities are relatively low, new non-income inequalities are emerging such as inequalities in accessing food and energy, particularly in the urban settlements throughout the country, and especially in the capital city, and degradation of the environment.

36.   The presented studies showed the use of multiple indicators to measure regional disparities, such as relative earnings data of individuals and households (LIS Centre); Human Development Index and Habitat Commitment Index (UNDP-Kazakhstan); mobility, pubic transit, energy use, micronarratives (UNDP-Republic of Moldova). The data sources comprised use of multiple datasets, multi-country survey data, administrative data on energy use and intercity mobility, as well as micronarratives.

v.   Work under the Conference of European Statisticians

37.   Ms. Dawn Snape (United Kingdom), Chair of the UNECE Task Force on Measuring Social Exclusion presented the report prepared by the Task Force. The discussion noted the importance of the intersectionality lens when looking at social exclusion: for example, an intersection of gender identity, ethnicity, location and many other socio-economic characteristics can combine lead to social exclusion. Germany, which has just finalised a large disability survey, was given as an example of improved accessibility of survey questionnaires. The meeting participants were invited to provide further examples and sharing of good practices, for example on the groups at risk of multiple disadvantage. The next step in this work will be country consultations with all members of the Conference of European Statisticians in spring 2021.

38.   A UNECE Task Force, chaired by Austria worked through 2018 and 2019 to develop the *Poverty Measurement: Guide to data disaggregation*. The CES country consultation in spring this year was highly appreciative. Forty-five countries and organizations responded to the consultation and supported the Guide. The CES endorsed the Guide in June 2020. The Guide is currently in preparation for print in English and Russian and the hard copy is expected to be available in early 2021.

39.   UNECE provided an overview of ongoing and future work on poverty and inequality statistics under the Conference of European Statisticians. The work for the coming year will include finalization of the work on measuring social exclusion; capacity development, collection and sharing of information on statistical response to COVID-19 with regard to data on poverty and inequality; and the preparation of the 2021 Expert meeting. Meeting participants expressed support for the work plan. The Steering Group will elaborate the call for papers for the 2021 Expert meeting and invite volunteers to organize the sessions.

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