United Nations

ECE/CES/GE.42/2015/2

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General

Original: English
25 November 2015

Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Group of Experts on Business Registers

Fourteenth session
Brussels, 21-23 September 2015

Report

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present document is the report of the meeting of the Group of Experts on Business Registers, which was held on 21-23 September 2015. This report is provided to inform the Conference of European Statisticians of the organization and outcomes of the meeting. The meeting is included in the UNECE Statistical Programme for 2015, which was approved by the Conference of European Statisticians at its plenary session in June 2015 (see documents ECE/CES/89, para. 76 and ECE/CES/2015/15, Annex I, para. 18).

I. Introduction

1.   The fourteenth meeting of the Group of Experts on Business Registers was held in Brussels, Belgium from 21 to 23 September 2015. It was organised in cooperation with the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with the support of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

2.   The meeting was attended by Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Columbia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Libya, Lithuania, Mexico, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, State of Palestine, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States of America and Uzbekistan. The meeting was attended by representatives of Eurostat, OECD, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD).

3.   Mr. Gaétan St-Louis (Canada) chaired the meeting. Ms. Caterina Viviano (Italy), Mr. Nadim Ahmad (OECD), Mr.Arturo Blancas (México), Mr. Amerigo Liotti (Eurostat) and Ms. Kati Heikkinen (Finland) acted as session chairs for the regular sessions. Mr. Norbert Rainer (Austria) chaired the special sessions on the Guidelines on Statistical Business Registers and country progress reports.

II. Organization of the Meeting

4.   The meeting was divided into the following sessions:

a)   Session I: Producing entrepreneurship statistics by combining statistical business registers (SBR) with other data sources;

b)   Session II: Linking of statistical business registers and trade statistics;

c)   Session III: Use of geo-spatial information and other sources – matching methods and practices to improve the SBR;

d)   Special session: Guidelines on Statistical Business Registers;

e)   Session IV: The role of statistical business registers in the modernization of the statistical production and services – GSBPM, GSIM, data warehouse, use of new data sources, including big data;

f)   Session V: Outputs of the statistical business registers – visualization, spatial information, SBR apps, open data;

g)   Special session: Country Progress Reports;

h)   Round table discussion: 'Is the SBR in line with current and future challenges: with regards to user requirements and the competition of commercial data provider?'

i)   Future work.

III. Summary of discussion and the main conclusions reached at the meeting

5.	Recommendations for future work are given below. The main outcome and summary of the discussions are presented in the annex. The proceedings of the meeting are available on the UNECE website http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=37896#/.

IV. Recommended future work

6.	The following topics were proposed for discussion at the joint meeting of the Group of Experts on Business Registers in 2017, subject to the decision of the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians:

a)	*Further work on linking the SBR to geo-spatial information*

Establishing sustainable solutions, increasing cost-efficiency, sharing good practices and addressing implementation problems.

b)	*Production of business demography statistics and entrepreneurship statistics by linking the SBR with other data sources*

What is required from the SBR to produce high quality business demography statistics? How can longitudinal analysis be conducted? How can current practices be extended to integrate dimensions such as ownership or age?

c)	*Quality measurement and quality management frameworks*

Impact of budget reductions and organisational changes on quality of SBRs, optimisation of resource allocation, cost/benefit analyses, quality management for profiling of large/complex units, examples of quality management frameworks

d)	*The role of the SBR in the modernisation of the statistical production process*

Further discussion of the role of the SBR in data collection and integration as the backbone in the statistical production process, developing business architecture to improve efficiency and coherence of statistical products.

e)	*Making better use of administrative data sources*

Cooperation with owners of administrative registers, cooperation with other entities (such as central banks) to ensure correct coding, setting up sustainable and cost-efficient solutions and improving data linking routines.

f)	*Continued discussion of the use of micro data*

What challenges arise when micro data become more easily accessible? Discussion of practical issues, linking of micro data, modifying micro data to be used for publication and sharing of good practices.

g)	*Issues related to globalisation*

Handling of FDI data, linking of export and import statistics to SBRs and issues with international comparability. Report on the Global Legal Entity Identifier System.

h)	*Further work on statistical units*

Collaboration with main users of the SBR on definitions and maintenance of statistical units, follow up on ongoing work on units (for example, the work of the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts Task Force on statistical units led by OECD).

i) *Follow up on the implementation of the Guidelines on Statistical Business Registers and its future work agenda.*

Annex

Summary of the discussion

A. Session I: Producing entrepreneurship statistics by combining statistical business registers (SBR) with other data sources

7. Integrating other data sources improves the quality of the SBR and adds information not already available, which allows for the measurement of new dimensions of entrepreneurship. Many administrative sources are increasingly accessible in a number of countries. One highly relevant type of administrative data is tax data, which cover both businesses and individuals. These data, when linked to the SBR, can provide insight into how business performance can be affected by the personal characteristics of the business owner.

8. The use of self-employment data to measure entrepreneurship was also discussed in this session. Many countries conduct their analyses by linking entrepreneurs to their businesses via population survey data or carrying out ad hoc firm-level surveys, which are costly. While the exploitation of tax data for information on self-employment can overcome these issues, it calls for the development of specific methods for processing these data and linking them to the SBR.

9. Questions arose during this session related to problems that occur when integrating data that have different periodicity and coverage. Questions also touched upon the use of sources such as Labour Force Surveys for assessing quality (in terms of both coverage and accuracy). The issue of tracking changes that occur in firms by using tax data was also raised, as was the need to clarify continuity rules for enterprises. The need to improve timeliness of entrepreneurship statistics continues to be a challenge for statistical offices to deal with by e.g. improved (quicker) access to data sources and by optimizing compilation processes. Trade-offs between timeliness and quality and level of detail need to be considered and weighed against user needs.

B. Session II: Linking of statistical business registers and trade statistics

10. The Session focused on linking the SBR with trade statistics, but also dealt with the use of profiling for identifying enterprises with international activities. The problems discussed mainly concerned the challenges of data integration (existence of large enough intersection of responding units; unique identifier or, alternatively, reliable matching processes; data confidentiality; differences in statistical units), the use of administrative sources, and the construction of historical series (because of decreasing matching rates for old data).

11. The question of how to measure the international activity of independent enterprises as distinct from that of enterprise groups was also investigated.

12. The context of the discussion in the Session was that granularity of information is key to address the heterogeneity of firms. The works presented, building on the experience of different countries, highlighted that important insights can in fact be obtained from just a few enterprises, e.g. the largest 10% of enterprises. This could have interesting implications on how data analysis is organized in order to produce findings for policy making. The

Expert Group could also be involved in testing the forthcoming Handbook on Linking Trade Statistics.

C. Session III: Use of geo-spatial information and other sources – matching methods and practices to improve the SBR

13.   Discussion addressed the importance of geo-coding information in the SBR in order to improve coverage and allow for more detailed analysis, which in turn supports the development of public policy. Linking information with other administrative registers in order to improve the SBR was also addressed. It was noted that major challenges persist in the area of strengthening SBRs by using geo-spatial information.

14.   The need to develop sustainable and cost-efficient methods for regular use of geo-spatial information in the statistical production was highlighted. To this end further exchange of practical experiences and e.g. sharing of methods and software will be useful. The potential usefulness of international guidelines or standards was also mentioned.

D. Special session: Guidelines on Statistical Business Registers

15.   In this session a short presentation on the elaboration and structure of the Guidelines on Statistical Business Registers was given. The guidelines are the outcome of the collaborative work of a task force of SBR experts of several countries and were endorsed at the thirty-six plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in June 2015. Printed copies of the guidelines were distributed to meeting participants.

16.   The session chair reported further that the CES plenary session encouraged the Expert Group to address the proposed topics for future work and research that are described in Chapter 12 of the guidelines.

17.   The Expert Group was also requested to promote the guidelines and follow up on their implementation. A first step could be to identify issues and milestones relevant for an implementation assessment. A questionnaire on implementation status and problem areas could then be carried out. One option that was widely supported was to use the country progress reports that were introduced by the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers. The common template for the (annual) country progress reports could be further elaborated to include questions on implementation of the guidelines and efforts made on topics for future work and research. Countries already fill in the annual progress reports, so expanding them would not impose an excessive burden on respondents.

18.   Another important issue is to select relevant topics for the Expert Group meetings in order to promote exchange of experience. In addition to the Expert Group meetings, the creation of a wiki or other electronic discussion forum could also be considered. The importance of communication and coordination with other relevant international expert groups was stressed.

E.   Session IV: The role of statistical business registers in the modernization of the statistical production and services – GSBPM, GSIM, data warehouse, use of new data sources, including big data

19.   In this session, the role of the High Level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics was discussed. Australia, Estonia and Montenegro shared their national experiences with modernization and discussed lessons learned.

20.   Eurostat discussed the EuroGroups Register's functions and components in the context of the general modernization of the European Statistical System (ESS). A unique identifier is used for legal units in the ESS.

21.   Also discussed was the role of statistical business registers in the framework of the UNSD's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development and the related Global Conference on the Transformative Agenda for official statistics (in January of 2015).

22.   The session concluded that modernization of statistical business registers is an on-going process in many statistical offices, which follows international standards and principles. Modernization enables countries to address challenges and improve quality, efficiency and consistency. Needs of users and potential users should guide the modernization process. The modernization of business registers must be well-integrated into the general modernization of official statistics.

F.   Session V: Outputs of the statistical business registers – visualization, spatial information, SBR apps, open data

23.   Discussion in this session centred on issues related to open data in the case of business registers. SBR output data released to users are tabulated data and may not adhere to a strict definition of open data. The question of how to fulfil different user needs for output from SBRs was raised. Participants stressed the importance of comprehensive metadata.

24.   Data visualization was also discussed – should visualization be done by the national statistics office or by users? There may be new possibilities for open data and visualization based on linked data in SBRs.

25.   One of the challenges identified was how to make data available while respecting confidentiality principles and national legislation.

G.   Special session: Country Progress Reports;

26.   In this session an overview of the results of the 2014 country progress reports was given. In total 54 country progress reports were collected, of which two were from international organizations. Most of the reports came from countries in Europe, Asia and North America. The reports are based on a template that covers four topics: organization and main characteristics of the national SBR, progress and developments in the past year (2014), future plans (2015 and later) and main challenges.

27.   The country progress reports were introduced by the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers many years ago. The results of the country progress reports has a direct impact on the agenda of the Wiesbaden Group meetings, at which countries are also invited to make a short presentation on their work. While the reports are conducted annually, the Wiesbaden

meetings take place only every second year, so it was decided to devote, for the first time, a session on the results of the progress reports in the Expert Group meeting.

28.   The areas where progress was reported and the areas where future work is planned were often the same:

   a)   Extended use of administrative data;

   b)   Statistical units and profiling (especially enterprise groups and enterprises);

   c)   Classifications (implementation of the latest international activity classification as well as the revised classification of institutional sectors);

   d)   Establishing georeferencing;

   e)   Use of the SBR for measuring response burden;

   f)   Various methodological topics, such as improving updating procedures, data matching routines, integration of new sources, etc.;

   g)   Improvements in the provision of common business survey frames;

   h)   Development or further extension of business demography statistics;

   i)   Review, adaptation, extension or creation of IT applications;

   j)   Quality of the SBR.

29.   It should be noted that work on measuring, assessing and improving SBR quality is an important task in many countries and covers improvement of the coding, improved register coverage, register quality surveys, SBR surveys, training and guidelines, etc.

30.   Nearly half of the countries reported that the use of administrative data is one of the most important challenges, especially concerning the quality of administrative data. Delineation of statistical units and profiling were also reported by many countries as one of their main challenges. Problems with insufficient human and financial resources were also reported.

H.   Round table discussion: 'Is the SBR in line with current and future challenges: with regards to user requirements and the competition of commercial data provider?'

31.   The main questions raised in the roundtable discussion were as follows:

   a)   Should the SBR store more information in order to help understand and analyse globalization phenomena?

   b)   Should the SBR link to other statistical registers (population, building inventory etc.)?

   c)   Should the SBR be a longitudinal source of information on businesses in order to produce high-quality demographic statistics or simply act as a cross-sectional source of information for survey programs?

   d)   Does the EGR meet the needs of the European countries and should it contain subsidiaries outside of European countries?

32.   Many countries report similar issues, and the majority use administrative data to create, maintain and upgrade their SBRs. Better and more extensive use of administrative data and other statistical registers are called for, including close cooperation with the

owners of such data sources. The use of a unique key to link all administrative data is in varying stages of implementation. An issue for some countries is that they still cannot gain access to administrative data.

33.   The SBR plays a key role in linking information from available data sources. Developing the role of the SBR as the backbone in the production of economic statistics will help in ensuring an integrated approach and improving coherence across statistical domains.

34.   SBRs in general do not yet meet all user needs, in particular in areas related to globalization, global production processes and trade. Globalization will have an impact on the content of the SBR in the future, and NSOs will be looking at SBRs to provide more detailed information on multinational businesses. There is also growing user demand for geo-spatial information and visual geographical presentations of statistics, which calls for NSOs to investigate geo-spatial data sources and develop methods/tools to link these with information from the SBR.

———————