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## Economic Commission for Europe

### Conference of European Statisticians

#### Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses

##### Twenty-fifth Meeting

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Item 4 (a) of the provisional agenda

##### Revising the Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses for the 2030 round:

##### Emergency preparedness and contingency planning

## Preliminary progress report of the Conference of European Statisticians Census Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning

### Note by the Conference of European Statisticians Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning\*

#### *Summary*

The Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning, with representatives from Canada (Task Force lead), Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom (UK) and United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), reports good progress towards the development of content for the Recommendations for the 2030 Censuses of Population and Housing. Considerable country experience with Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning has been shared within the Task Force, who are as a result developing the necessary expertise to develop a new chapter in the 2030 document.

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\* Prepared by Geoff Bowlby.

*Note:* The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.



## **I. Introduction**

1. The Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning, with representatives from Canada (Task Force lead), Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom (UK) and United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), reports good progress towards the development of content for the Recommendations for the 2030 Censuses of Population and Housing. Considerable country experience with Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning has been shared within the Task Force, who are as a result developing the necessary expertise to develop a new chapter in the 2030 document.

### **A. Defining the scope of the work and developing a framework for Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning**

2. The work of the Task Force is rooted in a need for guidance in the development of emergency and contingency plans to be used in the planning and implementation of traditional, register-based or combined censuses. The need for such guidance has become apparent recently, the result of the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak and other disasters as well as other phenomena, such as cyberattacks.

3. The 2020 Recommendations contain very little reference to the topic of emergency preparedness and contingency planning. The few references in the current Recommendations refer to: the need for building in contingencies in case of unscheduled delays in legislative processes (paragraph 243); unexpected additional costs or price increases (para. 328); and the need to conduct continuous quality assurance and correction processes during operations (Annex III para. 14).

4. As a result, the Task Force will develop advice and guidance to countries. Early in their work, they approved the following framework, to structure their work and potentially for use in the 2030 Recommendations document:

(a) Effective documentation of inherent risks to the conduct of a census, and their possible mitigations (Risk registry);

(b) Proper emergency management, governance and decision-making (Emergency management plan);

(c) Use of practice sessions such as ‘table-top exercises’ to condition staff on how to react in the event of a crisis to a census (Team conditioning);

(d) Effective techniques for quick changes to census planning (Flexibility and lean management);

(e) Development of multiple contingencies in the event of main plan failure (Census planning ‘insurance’);

(f) Other topics as required.

### **B. Country experience with Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning for censuses**

5. Task Force members shared their recent experience with emergency preparedness and contingency planning, in a series of short weekly sprints, held virtually in early 2023. The goal of these sprints was to develop the expertise needed for effective international questionnaire and recommendation development on the topic.

6. Canada presented first, providing a presentation on the risk management and contingency planning programme with that country’s census. In Canada, prior to field operations in 2021, risks were identified early and entered into a risk registry, which required adaptation in early 2020 as COVID-19 appeared as a new risk to the programme. When COVID-19 hit, the Canadian census had approximately 8–10 months to adapt, which required fast workflow which was monitored by a ‘Kanban’ lean management technique. In the penultimate weeks before field operations, an internal audit was requested by the census

manager, to identify all opportunities to strengthen mitigation and contingency plans. Also prior to operations, risk playbooks were developed and walkthroughs with staff were conducted, to condition staff for any possible unforeseen issue that they might have to manage during field operations.

7. Canada also had a plan to manage risks and issues during field operations. Management information systems (MIS) were strengthened prior to operations and used daily throughout. Although a physical ‘command centre’ was developed, it was not used due to the high COVID-19 levels at the start of field operations and the fact that the vaccine roll-out was incomplete at that time. Instead, command decisions to respond to issues were made virtually. When issues occurred, the pre-planned and rehearsed incident management process was activated. Any issue was triaged and classified according to risk and impact, and information was shared live using text messaging and virtual meetings as necessary, to decide all actions to manage the incident.

8. Canada also shared that a ‘statistical contingency’ was developed to use administrative data in the event that COVID-19 or other emergencies prevented the planned traditional enumeration in any part of the country. Although this back-up plan could have been implemented for millions of dwellings in Canada, it was not necessary, thanks to a strong response rate accomplished through on-line self reporting and safe non-response follow-up tactics. About 0.1 per cent of all occupied private dwellings were enumerated using administrative data using the contingencies. COVID-19 did impact accessibility of staff in some parts of the country, as did an active forest fire season in the Western part of the country.

9. At the next meeting, New Zealand (NZ) shared their approach to risk management and contingency planning for their 2023 Census. In NZ, risks are documented in a cloud-based project management tool. In the lead-up to the census in that country, risks are discussed at weekly meetings with census managers and reported regularly at higher levels. Focus is placed on managing the most important risks identified and placed into the register. ‘Heat maps’ are used to assess risk likelihood and impact, as well as resulting residual risk.

10. In NZ, the most significant risks identified prior to field operations were low recruitment, low response, COVID-19 issues, mis/disinformation and cybersecurity breaches. For each of these, a number of options were developed ahead of time, to assist in any adaptations that might be required if the risks became actual issues. In addition to what mitigations to trigger, NZ had pre-defined processes to be used to support decisions to change from the base plan. Before field operations, NZ practices what is referred to as ‘Incident Response Preparation’ in that country. These are exercises designed to practice the management of emergencies at critical points. Incident scenarios were developed to mimic possible incidents during operations, such as a cybersecurity issue.

11. For use during field operations, NZ has an incident management plan. Statistics New Zealand uses a government-wide Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS) as a framework for managing incidents or major high-risk planned events. The CIMS supports the management of operational activities, run from a primary Operations Centre and a virtual one that is available as a contingency. Similar to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, NZ’s incident management process uses four steps: “Notify, Assess, Decide and Act”. Depending upon the assessed severity (graded into severities 1 to 3), different levels of action-types are applied to manage the incident. NZ also has a well-defined governance structure for decision-making and internal communication with pre-defined reporting schedules.

12. Portugal was next to share their experience with managing the COVID-19 emergency. In that country, the pandemic had a significant impact on the preparations of the 2021 census. The pilot test planned for April 2020 had to be suspended for public health reasons. Statistics Portugal evaluated a change in the schedule of the 2021 Census, and after a rigorous analysis of viability, a contingency plan was developed to guarantee census quality and provided the confidence required to proceed with an enumeration of the population that mitigated the risk to the health of census employees.

13. The Portuguese COVID-19 mitigation plan involved the development of Public Health Protocol (Personal Protective Equipment, videoconference-based training, material handling, in-person social distancing, etc), the reinforcement of the internet option, the introduction of CATI, adaptations to the communication programme (focus on safe internet

mode etc) as well as added administrative data to support census fieldwork. Administrative data support changes included improving the quality of the address lists and occupancy status, reinforcing the data validation system, consistency analysis, and imputation for non-response. As a result of all these adaptations, Portugal had a successful 2021 Census, with 87.5 per cent of the responses coming from online self-enumeration and 99.3 per cent of responses being digital.

14. Mexico also presented to the Task Force, on how COVID-19 impacted their 2020 census, as well as on the overall risk management framework used in that country. The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) uses an approach documented and titled “Methodology for Risk Management of INEGI” which is based on the ISO 31000 standard (risk management) and is used to identify, analyze, assess and address risks that could affect the achievement of corporate goals and objectives.

15. In Mexico, the risk management process assesses risk, set actions to manage them, tracks the risk and also has a communication/consultation angle, all while taking into account the context for each risk. The risk identification process is what results in a risk registry. The risk registry in Mexico pays particular attention to risks associated with the execution of a programme, the quality of the information, the security of information generated, human and financial resources, as well as the behaviours of public servants (e.g. fraud and corruption risks). The effects of each risk are also classified – for example, the effect of a risk may be placed into the category of ‘economic’ if that risk might require additional financial resources.

16. The Mexican risk management approach takes known risks and develops ‘controls’ that would either ‘prevent’ or ‘correct’ the risk/issue. Furthermore, they are classified according to the possibility of occurrence and the impact it would have if realized, and placed into ‘low’, ‘moderate’, ‘high’ or ‘extreme’ risk levels. Once assessed, the way that each risk would be managed is determined. More acceptable levels of risk are managed differently than high risks.

17. Mexico pointed out to the Task Force that the inclusion of technologies into their census in 2020 was “undoubtedly” a key factor in completing their census successfully. Another lesson learned was the importance of adequate communication between the statistical office, the Mexican people and the authorities of the country.

### **C. Developing a questionnaire to gather more information on Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning**

18. The work of developing the questionnaire was initially divided up amongst the Task Force members, using the framework in paragraph 4 above. Once integrated and after considering the country experience presentations, the Task Force met to exchange comments and thoughts. The final questionnaire content was provided to UNECE near the end of April.

19. The Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning questions are of two types: 1) a set for Risk Management; and 2) a group of questions on Crisis Management. The content initially proposed to the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Steering Group on Population and Housing Censuses for inclusion in the questionnaire consisted of approximately 40 questions, designed to gather information that will be helpful to the development of the Recommendations. To see where countries need guidance the most, the questions take stock of policies, procedures, documentation, expertise and other aspects of Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning in member countries. The questions will expose where UNECE countries put their resources related to the topic, and where they might not. The questions are designed to cover the framework identified in paragraph 4, although some aspects may be covered more than others.

20. A number of the questions put forward by the Task Force are open ended and provide an opportunity for UNECE member countries to describe their Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning capacities and what they might like in terms of guidance from the Recommendations document. Open-ended questions include descriptions of management techniques, challenges faced, country strengths and areas for improvement. Although no

quantifiable data may be produced using this questionnaire technique, there will be considerable information collected in these parts of the questionnaire that will strengthen the Task Force's capacity to prepare strong Recommendations for the 2030 round.

## **II. Conclusion**

21. The Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning has spent the last six months preparing itself well for the development of Recommendations for the 2030 round. While much has been learned by the Task Force during this phase of the work, more input via the questionnaire and Census Week discussions is required for robust guidance to be developed.

22. Meanwhile, the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) has initiated the process of revising its global guidance contained in the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses for the 2030 round and has established an Expert Group for this purpose. There is a need to ensure consistency between the global guidance and that for the UNECE region on the topic of Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning. The Task Force has membership links to the UNSD initiative, so that lessons learned on each document can be applied to the other, for efficient development of UNECE and worldwide guidance.

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