

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Approved

Meeting of the 2019/2020 Bureau
Aguascalientes, Mexico, 25-26 February 2020

Item 3(a) of the Provisional
Agenda

**STEERING GROUP ON POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUSES:
PROGRESS REPORT**

Note by the Steering Group and the Secretariat

This report presents the work carried out in 2018-2019 by the Steering Group on population and housing censuses and its task forces. The mandate of the Steering Group from the Bureau expired at the end of 2019. New terms of reference for the Steering Group are therefore presented in document ECE/CES/BUR/2020/FEB/6/Add.1. Furthermore, as there have been some delays in the work of the Task Force on measuring the quality of administrative sources for use in censuses, an extension of the Task Force's mandate is requested to be able to finish the work.

The Bureau reviewed the progress report, approved the terms of reference of the Steering Group for the coming five years, and extended the mandate of the Task Force on measuring the quality of administrative sources for use in censuses by one year.

I. BACKGROUND

1. The Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) set up the Steering Group on population and housing censuses in 2003. The Group's objective is to coordinate, provide advice and contribute to the UNECE work programme on population and housing censuses, to support UNECE member countries in preparing and conducting censuses and in disseminating and communicating results in accordance with the *CES Recommendations for Censuses of Population and Housing*.

2. The Bureau has regularly reviewed the Steering Group's work. Its terms of reference have been updated to reflect the developments in census methodology and to correspond to the current stage in the decennial census cycle. The Bureau reviewed the Steering Group's terms of reference most recently in February 2016 and a progress report in February 2018. The mandate from the Bureau expired at the end of 2019. New terms of reference for the Group are therefore presented in document ECE/CES/BUR/2020/FEB/6/Add.1.

3. The Steering Group currently includes representatives of the following countries: Armenia, Canada, France, Georgia, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America. Estonia was represented until the end of 2019. CIS-Stat, the European Free Trade Association, Eurostat, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) also participate. The Group is currently chaired by Canada. The Canadian representative will step down in March and the members of the Group have unanimously chosen the representative of the Netherlands to become Chair as of March 2020.

4. The UNECE Secretariat maintains a wiki site with public information about the Steering Group¹ and a workspace restricted to members, used for planning meeting logistics, drafting documents etc.

II. PROGRESS ACHIEVED

5. The Bureau reviewed progress of the Steering Group most recently in February 2018 (ECE/CES/BUR/2018/FEB/6).

6. The *Guidelines on the use of registers and administrative data for population and housing censuses*, reviewed by the Bureau in February 2018 have since been published² and now serve to guide statistical offices in operational, practical, technical and legal aspects of the use of such sources for censuses.

7. The Steering Group has continued to be active in the areas of methodological development, exchange of experience, and capacity development.

A. Methodological work

(i) *Measuring the quality of administrative sources for use in censuses*

8. Alongside the 2018 progress report, the Bureau approved a proposal by the Steering Group to establish a Task Force building on the earlier work on using registers and administrative sources for population and housing censuses. This was a response to needs identified by the preceding Task Force, who noted that while sources and techniques exist, there remains a lack of guidance for evaluating their quality.

9. The Task Force on measuring the quality of administrative sources for use in censuses was established by the CES Bureau in February 2018, with the aim of developing guidance for national statistical offices on assessing the quality of administrative sources for use in censuses, including guidance on quality criteria.

10. The Task Force is chaired by the United Kingdom and consists of representatives from Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, the United States of America, Eurostat and UNFPA.

11. The Task Force has identified the key areas in which administrative sources are or can be used in censuses, and is focusing its work on approaches to assessing the quality of each of these (namely developing sampling frames; building a population register; adding new variables; question replacement and variable imputation; direct census enumeration; and full administrative data-based censuses). The Task Force is gathering use cases and good practice examples for each of these areas. The work aims to consider how quality assessment for these purposes can fit into existing international quality frameworks.

12. Members of the Task Force met on the margins of the September 2018 and 2019 Expert Group Meetings on Population and Housing Censuses. A dedicated Task Force

¹ See <https://statswiki.unece.org/x/vYjlAw>

² Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=50794>

meeting will take place in Geneva in March 2020, where first drafts of each chapter of the final report will be discussed.

13. The Task Force is progressing with its work. There have been some delays resulting from changes in leadership and membership of the group. **The Task Force requests a one-year extension of its mandate in order to finalise its work and present its report to the February 2021 meeting of the CES Bureau.**

(ii) *Future Censuses Beyond 2020*

14. In February 2018 the Bureau approved a proposal by the Steering Group to conduct an analysis of countries' plans and objectives for censuses after the 2020 round. Many countries plan to move to fully register-based censuses in a long-term; others are shifting to greater reliance on administrative sources; there is a growing recognition that providing data on a decennial basis is no longer acceptable for many users; and there is increasing dissatisfaction with some of the fundamental concepts underpinning the census, such as usual residence. These forces were considered so strong and overarching that the Steering Group should undertake a strategic analysis to assess the need for a paradigm shift in how censuses will be conducted beyond 2020.

15. Informed by a panel discussion on this topic at the 2017 UNECE-Eurostat Expert Meeting on Censuses (Geneva, 4-6 October 2017), the Steering Group conducted a survey of CES countries and has prepared its analysis for consideration by the Bureau at the present meeting (ECE/CES/BUR/2020/FEB/19).

16. The analysis considers changes both in concepts and in methodology necessitated by, for example, new patterns of living, working and migrating; the use of multiple sources; integration of census data with geospatial information both for census operations and for dissemination of results; evolving user needs and changes in the intricate balance of ethics, privacy and public acceptability.

17. Having reviewed a draft of this analysis in September 2019, participants of the UNECE-Eurostat Expert Meeting on Censuses agreed that the need for change identified in the analysis should underpin the approach to updating the *CES Recommendations for the Censuses of Population and Housing* beyond 2020.

B. Exchange of experience

(i) *Meetings of the Group of Experts on population and housing censuses*

18. The annual UNECE-Eurostat Meetings of the Group of Experts on population and housing censuses bring together census experts from national statistical offices across the UNECE region and from other CES member countries, offering the opportunity to share methods, challenges and solutions and to exchange ideas and research findings on a range of topics related to census methodology and content, and on the dissemination, communication and use of census data. The enthusiastic commitment of the Steering Group members has ensured that the Expert Group Meetings continue to attract a large attendance (94 participants in 2019) and that they focus on the most pertinent topics for censuses in the UNECE region. Members of the Steering Group are instrumental in selecting the topic list for the call for papers; identifying and engaging keynote speakers; planning the agenda of the meetings; and guiding discussions and reaching conclusions during the sessions.

19. The Steering Group has aimed to modernize and enliven the format of the Expert Group Meetings in recent years with the introduction of panel debates and keynote speakers, and will continue to explore possibilities for new ways to engage participants and harness their ideas in the future.

20. The Steering Group meets during each Expert Group Meeting to discuss proposals for future work which the Chair then presents to the Expert Group Meeting.

C. Capacity development

21. The Steering Group supports the UNECE Secretariat in conducting capacity development workshops on population and housing censuses. Regional workshops for countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia were held back-to-back with the Expert Group Meetings in 2018 and 2019. Steering Group members from Poland, Georgia, CIS-Stat and UNSD have delivered training sessions in these workshops, on topics including geospatial information for censuses and use of census data for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

22. The Steering Group member from Estonia worked with UNECE in 2018 to provide technical assistance to the national statistical offices of Belarus and Ukraine in the use of technology in their census operations. These advisory missions were carried out under the United Nations Development Account 10th tranche programme on statistics and data.

III. FORTHCOMING ACTIVITIES

23. The proposed terms of reference (ECE/CES/BUR/2020/FEB/6.Add.1) give more detail about the activities outlined below.

24. The principal activity for the Steering Group in the coming five years will be the development of the next edition of the *Recommendations*. A review and reformulation of the *Recommendations* will be informed by the issues identified in the *Future Censuses Beyond 2020* report and from responses to a survey of national practices. The Steering Group is planning to establish a set of task forces on each of these issues, as was the practice in the past. The mandates of these task forces will be discussed at the UNECE-Eurostat expert group meeting in September 2020 and proposed to the Bureau in February 2021.

25. The Secretariat will coordinate country updates to the UNECE census wiki during 2020, in consultation with the Steering Group. An overview of the information provided by countries regarding their current status and experiences in conducting the 2020 census round will be presented to the 2020 Expert Group Meeting.

26. Members of the Steering Group have identified topics to be included in the call for papers for the 2020 Expert Group Meeting scheduled for 30 September – 2 October. The Group will design the agenda and assist the Secretariat to organize the meeting.

27. The ongoing Task Force on measuring the quality of administrative sources for use in censuses will present a progress report to the Expert Group Meeting.

28. A sub-regional capacity development workshop for countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia will take place immediately prior to the 2020 Expert Group Meeting. The workshop will cover topics identified as high priority by census experts from National Statistical Offices across the sub-region.

IV. PROPOSAL

29. The centrality of population and housing census data to countries' ability to fulfil the data needs of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is uncontested. That censuses are essential for sustainable development is manifested by the fact that conducting a census is itself one of the SDG indicators (indicator 17.19.2.a).

30. With the major changes currently occurring in the way censuses are conducted and the even greater changes foreseen for censuses of the future beyond 2020, the need for international coordination in the UNECE region is clear. It is particularly important to coordinate both strategic direction and specific activities with other international organizations active in the region to ensure that duplication is avoided and that efforts in the UNECE region are focused where they are most needed. The continued cooperation with Eurostat, CIS-Stat and UNFPA in the Steering Group is therefore essential. The Secretariat also communicates closely with the census team at UNSD (New York) to ensure coordination of regional activities with those taking place at the global level.

31. There is a proliferation of initiatives within academia, international and non-governmental organizations relating to the use of geospatial information, new data sources and big data for producing population statistics and other social statistics. The role of the Steering Group is therefore essential to guide national statistical offices as they engage in such discussions while maintaining a focus on the census as a source of official statistics abiding by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

32. **The Bureau is invited to**

a) comment on the work accomplished;

b) approve the terms of reference for the Steering Group on Population and Housing Censuses for the next five years, presented in addendum 1; and

c) extend the mandate of the Task Force on Measuring the Quality of Administrative Sources for Use in Censuses by one year (until summer 2021).
