

Distr.
GENERAL

CES/AC.61/2003/20
19 June 2003

ENGLISH ONLY*

**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR
EUROPE**

**STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE
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**FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL
ORGANISATION (FAO)**

**Joint UNECE/EUROSTAT/FAO/OECD
Meeting on Food and Agricultural Statistics
in Europe**
(Geneva, 2-4 July 2003)

**ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC
CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT
(OECD)**

**PROPOSAL FOR A SYSTEM OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT STATISTICS
IN IRELAND**

Invited paper submitted by Central Statistics Office, Ireland**

* Due to the late submission of this paper, it could neither be translated nor reproduced.

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I. SUMMARY

1. This paper notes the development of policy on rural development in Ireland; describes the main statistical issues and user requirements in relation to rural development; and sets the requirements in the context of the CSO's recently launched project to maximise the Statistical Potential of Administrative Records (SPAR) across the overall public service.

II. BACKGROUND

2. In 1999 Ireland's Department of Agriculture and Food published a White Paper on rural development

'Providing for the future: a strategy for rural development in Ireland' (1)

3. The White Paper sets out a vision and framework for the development of rural communities in Ireland into the next millennium. It concentrates on defining an overall, strategic direction for Government in this area.

4. The CSO has been considering what type of statistics it could compile to monitor progress and the success or otherwise of that strategy. While the immediate objective was to inform government policy, the CSO also had in mind the increasing interest in rural development at an international level and the likely demands for information, probably required by legislation, which would arise in the next few years.

5. The results of such considerations are outlined in the remainder of this paper. While certain broad guidelines have been adopted as a starting point, the intention is that the CSO should learn from its initial experience and that there should be sufficient flexibility within a system to make it possible to adapt it to guidelines and classifications which may emerge at an international level.

III. THE ISSUES

6. The main issues which arise in setting up a system of rural development statistics are

- The identification of the broad areas of concern for rural areas;
- The choice of geographical unit for data classification and presentation;
- The definition of rural;
- The choice of suitable indicators for each broad area of concern;
- Obtaining data in a cost-effective way.

7. The challenge is to translate users' requirements, often specified in very broad terms, into operational definitions which can be met from existing surveys, new surveys, or by making greater use of administrative data sources. In meeting the challenge posed by users' demands, technical feasibility and cost-effectiveness will be key considerations.

The identification of the broad areas of concern

8. The White Paper identifies a policy agenda which refers to six areas of concern. These are referred to in very general terms in the following extract:

Future Vision and Policy Agenda.

The Government is committed to ensuring the economic and social well being of rural communities, to providing the conditions for a meaningful and fulfilling life for all people living in rural areas and to striving to achieve a rural Ireland in which

- *there will be vibrant sustainable communities with the range of age, income and occupational groups, such as to allow them to adapt to on-going economic, social, cultural and environmental change and to enjoy a standard of living and a quality of life which will make them attractive communities in which to live and work; the maximum number of rural households and especially family farms, will be retained; there will be equity in terms of opportunity both between rural and urban communities and between communities in rural areas; individuals and families will have a real choice as to whether to stay in, leave, or move to rural Ireland;*
- *there will be sufficient income and employment opportunities to allow individuals and families to live with dignity;*
- *rural communities will enjoy access to education, training and lifelong learning and to an adequate level of social and other services and infrastructures;*
- *rural communities will participate effectively in the structures and decision making processes affecting them in an inclusive society based on the principles of equity, particularly in relation to gender balance and social justice;*
- *the cultural identity of rural communities, in particular the language, traditions, heritage and sense of community will be valued and retained;*
- *the rural environment will be respected and development in rural areas will take place in a sustainable manner.*

The choice of geographical unit for data classification and presentation

9. A natural geographical unit for these purposes would be the District Electoral Division (DED).

10. The DED corresponds to level 5 of the EU NUTS geographical classification (The average population per DED in 2002 was about 1,100 persons. The average area was around 2,000 hectares). It has the advantage of already being in use for Census of Population (5-yearly) and Census of Agriculture (10-yearly) data. However, sample surveys are generally

able to provide data only at regional (NUTS-2 or NUTS-3) level. The cost of providing greater detail would be prohibitive.

11. The following list shows the most detailed level of geographical detail available from a number of the major CSO Censuses and Surveys:

Census of Population – DEDs (NUTS-5)

Census of Agriculture – DEDs (NUTS-5)

June Agricultural Survey – Regions (NUTS-3)

December Agricultural Survey - State

Household Budget Survey – Regions (NUTS-3)

Quarterly National Household Survey (i.e. Labour Force Survey, incorporating social modules) – Regions (NUTS-3)

EU-SILC (starting June 2003) – Regions (NUTS-3)

The definition of rural

12. The White Paper suggests a very loose definition of rural for its policy-driven purposes. This essentially defines rural as being not only open countryside and small villages and towns but even small urban centres – everything apart from the five largest urban centres in Ireland. Undoubtedly for some purposes a rather more restricted definition of rural would be appropriate. The Paper itself notes that a frequently used definition of rural areas is spatial units consisting of open countryside or of small towns and villages with populations of less than 1,500 people.

13. A natural geographical unit for defining rural in this way would be the DED. As noted earlier, this has the considerable advantage that it is a unit for which Census of Population data for many variables as well as Census of Agriculture data are compiled.

14. For some indicators, it could also be worthwhile to provide a further breakdown this definition of rural to distinguish whether or not a DED contains a small town above a particular population threshold. The concerns of people living in or near small towns would differ from the concerns of those living in more isolated areas with less access to even basic facilities. In principle, the Census of Population can provide information in respect of towns as well as DEDs.

Suitable indicators

15. A very basic and incomplete list of indicators which might be considered for each of the broad concerns referred to in the White Paper is shown below. In many cases they are data which are already available at the level of DED or which probably could be made available fairly easily.

Broad concerns	Indicator
Range of age and occupational groups; Standard of living	Population by age band; Marital status; Numbers employed in broad occupational categories; Housing stock by age, type, size, facilities; Car ownership.
Income and employment opportunities	Total household income data; Unemployment rate; Farms classified by economic size; Gainful non-agricultural activity on farms.
Access to education, training, social services etc.	Persons in full-time education at first, second and third levels; School class sizes; Expenditure on school transport.
Decision-making processes	Participation rates in national, European Parliament and local elections; Level of Internet access.
Cultural identity, sense of community	Proportion of speakers of the Irish language (in specific regions); Membership of sports clubs.
Environment	Measures of water quality; Amounts of waste collected or recovered; Number of organic farms.

Obtaining data in a cost-effective way

16. Given the limits on resources available to the CSO, it is clear that there is no question of conducting major new surveys for rural development statistics. The only realistic possibility for such surveys would be the addition of some questions on an occasional basis to the CSO Quarterly National Household Survey or to the annual June farm survey and these are already quite wide-ranging sample surveys. The obvious answer seems to be the use of existing administrative data. Normally this is a difficult process since available data have been collected solely for the purpose of managing a scheme. Difficulties arise with definitions, with the classifications used and indeed on occasions with the basic correctness of the data, particularly if the data are not being used for their statistical potential by the administration involved.

17. While administrative data have in the past been analysed by the CSO for statistical potential, this has tended to be on an occasional basis and the effort involved has not always been adequately rewarded by their usefulness as a source of statistics.

18. A recent initiative on the use of administrative records for statistical purposes in Ireland offers possibilities for providing data. This is particularly the case for topics like rural development where a wide range of statistics needs to be collected. This initiative called the SPAR (Statistical Potential of Administrative Records) Project is described below.

The SPAR Project

19. Under Section 31 of the Statistics Act, 1993 **(2)** the Director General of the CSO (with certain exceptions)

‘... may request any public authority to consult and co-operate with him for the purpose of assessing the potential of the records of the authority as a source of statistical information and, where appropriate and practicable, developing its recording methods and systems for statistical purposes, and the public authority shall comply with any such request, in so far as resources permit.’

20. In practice the powers of the CSO described in this Section have rarely been used.

21. However, the need to meet new targets and obligations in the social and equality spheres has increased the demand for statistics relating to such issues. This has become a major challenge to National Statistical Offices in particular.

22. In 2002 the National Statistics Board in Ireland established a Steering Group to undertake a study to determine the scope of requirements for social and equality statistics and the extent to which these are being, or could be met, by existing data holdings in administrative records.

23. The Report of that Steering Group made a number of recommendations which envisaged:

- The devising of a formal data/statistics strategy within each Department (i.e. Ministry) as an integral part of its information strategy;
- More standardisation, co-ordination and classification of data collection in administrative schemes, including the investigation of the expanded use of common identifiers like the Personal Public Service Number or Postal Codes (which could in principle be linked to DEDs);
- That the CSO would take a lead role in the development of the potential of such administrative data.

24. The Report also include recommendations to ensure that the necessary statistical confidentiality standards are applied in the use of administrative data, in accordance with the Statistics Act, 1993.

25. Apart from the obvious statistical potential of standardised and co-ordinated data collection it would also be helpful for the Department involved for the purpose of evidence-based decision-making and this is being reflected in the co-operation being given by Departments in this exercise.

26. The first stage of implementing the Report's recommendations has already started with detailed discussions between CSO teams and officials in six Departments with extensive holdings of social and equality statistics. By the end of the summer, this stage will have been completed and we plan to have a comprehensive inventory of administrative data holdings, identifying their statistical potential. It is envisaged that discussions will be extended later this year to cover the remaining Departments and to widen the scope beyond social and equality statistics.

27. While it is too early to draw final conclusions, this approach to data supply appears to be the most promising one for a system of rural development statistics, as well as for the development of a statistical system which efficiently uses all available sources to provide information which is used to support evidence-based policy.

References

(1) *Providing for the future: a strategy for rural development in Ireland (the White Paper on Rural Development, 1999)*. (<http://www.pobail.ie/en/RuralDevelopment/>).

(2) *Statistics Act, 1993*. (<http://www.cso.ie>).
