
Expert Group Meeting to
Review the United Nations *Demographic Yearbook* System
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Factor Affecting Countries' Ability to Respond to *Demographic Yearbook* Data Requests

(Discussion Note)

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1. The *Demographic Yearbook* is a potentially useful and accessible source of comparative international data on population size, dynamics and structures. However, to maximise the value of this international data, it is important that the data be comparable, accurate and not too dated.
2. There are three basic motivations to provide the data: (a) obligations to the United Nations, (b) international goodwill in providing information to other countries, and (c) perceived value of international comparative data to the donor countries. In each case there is a relationship between the effort to provide the data and the value of the resulting output.
3. Completion of the questionnaires requires substantial resources available at the time of the request. The timing of the request also has an impact on resources and on availability or currency of the demographic data. Both the national statistical organisations and their source agencies are in many instances under-resourced to do this work.
4. Given wide variations in standard terminology and classifications used in international data collections, one has to assess and interpret what data best fits the data requirements of the *Demographic Yearbook*. Often, it is necessary to add explanatory and definitional information. Ambiguities will still exist, for example mid-year may refer to “as at 30 June” or 'mean' population.
5. The *Yearbook* format encourages users to compare population data from a number of different countries. This requires data suppliers to ensure as far as possible that the data is comparable. However, not all countries collect all the requested data or else collect it in an incompatible form. Related to this, availability is an issue both in terms of what is collected and what is current. For example births data by registration may be much later than data by occurrence.
6. There are a number of ways the United Nations Statistics Division may be able to help. The Division may find it advantageous to consider changes in the format of the spreadsheets with a view to making them easier to navigate. It would also help if the United Nations were also to send out the spreadsheets with previous years' data still intact. This would make it easier to check for changes in data and comparability of the new entries. An alternative option would be for the United Nations Statistics Division to be prepared to accept data or links to data in the form in which it is published by the source statistical organisation. The advantage of doing this is that any web-links could then be embedded in the CD-ROM and web versions of the *Yearbook* database – this would improve the value of the electronic version.
7. A simple but very effective way of improving response would be to establish a list of contact names in each agency, perhaps even circulating this with the requests. This has three advantages:

- the United Nations knows specifically who to contact
- the United Nations builds up a dialogue with people at both ends of the process
- the contact list will in itself be of value to contributing countries who often need to talk to each other on related matters.

8. Currently, questionnaires may not arrive and it is not clear whether these have not been sent out or have simply got lost or redirected elsewhere within organisations.

9. Beyond this, there are potential ways of improving the current system to ease the burden on respondents. Much data required is now, in many cases, freely available on websites and this could be compiled and sent out for checking both the data and the understanding of the data.