United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Statistical Methodology for Delineating Cities and Rural Areas
New York, 28 - 30 January 2019

Concept Note

1. In the context of the fact that, at the level of international official statistics and international statistical standards, there is a lack of harmonized and universally implemented definition of urban and rural areas in general, and the definitions of metropolitan, urban, semi-urban, rural and uninhabited areas in particular, several innovative approaches have been developed in recent years in an attempt to develop statistical methodology that could be generally used across world regions and that is based on identical parameters. These new methodologies are using population grid as a starting point. A population grid can be defined as geographically referenced net of squared grid cells equal in size (usually 1 km^2 and can be smaller) depicting the population residing in each grid. Population grid can be built by geo-referencing population statistics coming from population registers and population censuses; it can also be built using contemporary high-resolution satellite imagery and sophisticated algorithms based on land use and land cover information.

2. The European Commission, in co-operation with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) developed such a methodology for a harmonized definition of cities and rural areas – a methodology that is being tested in a number of countries. This methodology consists of identifying one grid cell of particular population density that is surrounded by grid cells of similar population density thus indicating a certain level of urbanization of that area. Based on the delineation criteria (levels of population density) areas can then be distinguished and categorized in different classes of urban/rural taxonomy.

3. Consequently, using the same delineation criteria throughout all the regions of the world would potentially result in harmonized and universal mapping of cities, urban and rural areas. It has to be outlined that national statistical practices in principle do not rely on only one criterion (population density) for demarcation of urban and rural areas for national purposes; those national definitions take into consideration availability of certain facilities, such as mass transit and infrastructure in general; they also include distinguishing on the basis of prevalent industries, such as agriculture, for example; and there are also administrative boundaries that have to be taken into account when designating a certain settlement urban or rural.

4. In the context of the increasing need for synchronization of statistics at regional and global levels, primarily for the purpose of ensuring harmonized assessment and monitoring of Sustainable Development Goals, introducing a tested and statistically certified methodology for delineating urban and rural areas would certainly add a useful tool. It also had to be outlined that the SDG indicators require a high level of disaggregation on different dimensions, including the urban/rural one; thus, adopting unified methodology would certainly be beneficial for international and regional comparison purposes.

5. The purpose of the expert group meeting is to discuss, in detail, the following points:
   - Assessing the technical comprehensiveness of the methodology as developed by European Commission and partners
   - Assessing the applicability of the parameters for delineation of urban and rural areas in terms of levels of density

- Assessing the employment of the methodology in national circumstances through the presentation and elaboration of national practices and examples
- Elaborating on the suitability of submitting the proposed methodology to the United Nations Statistical Commission for discussion and possible recommendation for the purpose of achieving regional and international comparison and harmonization of urban and rural areas and their statistics.

6. The meeting will invite statisticians from around twenty national statistical offices, both from countries that implemented the European Commission methodology and those that did not, representing all regions of the world, as well as participants from United Nations regional commissions and agencies. The co-organizers of the meeting are the United Nations Statistics Division and the European Commission.

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Srdjan Mrkić
Chief, Demographic Statistics
UN Statistics Division