

United Nations Expert Group Meeting on the UN Demographic Yearbook System
Virtual meeting, hosted by UN Statistics Division in New York City
9 – 12 November 2020

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The Expert Group Meeting was organized by the UN Statistics Division – Demographic Statistics Section and took place virtually from 9 – 12 November 2020. Over seventy experts from twenty-three national statistical offices took part, as well as participants from regional and international organizations. The meeting focused on the overall content and structure of the United Nations Demographic Yearbook, one of the oldest UN publications and data collection systems; the collection and presentation of metadata; dissemination; use of Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) for reporting to the Demographic Yearbook; and the geo-referencing of population statistics as an area of future development.
2. The meeting outlined the importance of the Demographic Yearbook in terms of collecting, processing and disseminating a large range of population statistics on a regular basis. It re-iterated that the Demographic Yearbook is also providing an accurate overview of national statistical capacities to produce comprehensive population statistics on regular basis and thus fulfills a synoptic function as well.
3. The experts concluded that the meeting is taking place at an appropriate time, taking into consideration that countries are increasingly using multi-modal methodologies and techniques to collect and process statistics on population and that this has a peculiar importance in terms of interpreting and using Demographic Yearbook data.
4. The meeting outlined the significance of reporting national population statistics to the Demographic Yearbook as it is a long-standing, reliable and consistent vehicle for collection, processing and disseminating data at the global level. The meeting noted that the Demographic Yearbook data collection relies on a set of questionnaires that are regularly dispatched to all the countries/areas and their respective statistical authorities and it urged national statistical authorities to regularly fill these questionnaires and report data to the UN Statistics Division. In that context, the meeting noted that a sizable number of countries/areas (around 25% of the total) did not report a single figure to the Demographic Yearbook in the past six years. The meeting requested UN Statistics Division to investigate this non-response and to undertake steps to significantly, if not completely, reduce it.
5. The meeting also recommended that UNSD should focus on the analysis of the synoptic tables from the Demographic Yearbook in order to identify the tables with the least response rate and to assess the reasons for low completion in terms of users' needs, availability of requested variables at national level and the overall rationale for collecting these specific statistics.
6. It was also noted that, due to the different arrangements in respect of collecting data for different areas of demographic statistics at national level – oftentimes as a consequence of decentralized systems and procedures for reporting and compiling statistics at provincial or similar level – the response time for replying to the Demographic Yearbook questionnaires is not completely sufficient and, therefore, UNSD should consider extending it. Similarly, the meeting recommended re-visiting the spreadsheets used for data collection in terms of numbering, inserting formulas to check the validity of totals taking into consideration that some totals may not match the sum of categories due to confidentiality protocols.



7. Focusing on compatibility between national and international statistics, the meeting concluded that all efforts should be made to ensure that, specifically, national population estimates correspond to population estimates produced at the international level. In that context, metadata are of particular consequence as they provide a more comprehensive understanding of the methodologies, definitions and coverage used for generating national population statistics.
8. Not in the context of the data collection for the Demographic Yearbook, yet in principle, the experts noted that there are still occasions whereby the national statistical authority receives request for same or similar statistics coming from two regional or international agencies. In that context, national statistical authorities are exploring modernizing access to their data, by, for example, developing applications to allow direct access to national statistical databases.
9. In terms of statistics requested by the Demographic Yearbook questionnaires, the meeting concluded that, depending on national statistical systems, there are occurrences when statistics are not produced at all or are produced only in the wake of the population and housing census - for example, life tables, international migration statistics, population estimates. Furthermore, the meeting outlined that concepts used by Demographic Yearbook do not always match national ones, for example the urban/rural dichotomy, or the definitions of cities and urban agglomerations. In that context, the meeting concluded that UNSD should attempt to develop a set of guidelines – as a separate document - for filling Demographic Yearbook questionnaires.
10. The meeting noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is having adverse impact on the functioning of civil registration and vital statistics and this will be reflected in the data submitted to the Demographic Yearbook for 2020 – hence, there might be a need for additional explanations and metadata that would elaborate on these occurrences and their interpretation (including delayed registration).
11. Turning its attention to the metadata collected and presented in the Demographic Yearbook, the meeting concluded that the current metadata classifications need to be updated based on the number of examples worldwide regarding the use of different approaches for producing small area census-like population statistics: a traditional census, a combination of the use of registers and full enumeration, a combination of registers and ad hoc surveys, using only registers, to name a few. Similarly, experts outlined the need to distinguish between different population bases, such as registered population, usually resident population and de facto (present) population. In terms of coverage of various populations, the meeting outlined that this information is of particular importance, as certain population groups – for example, illegal, irregular or undocumented migrants – fall within the scope of the census, while other may not – for example, refugees and asylum-seekers living in camps.
12. The meeting underscored that the Demographic Yearbook needs to ensure a more effective dissemination of all metadata it compiles and it discussed the possibility and feasibility of extending the Demographic Yearbook metadata collection – in the case of population and housing censuses – on whether post-enumeration survey was conducted and if so, whether the census results were adjusted accordingly, and include information on intercensal and postcensal estimates in the metadata questionnaire. In the case of population estimates, cohort-component method, a gold standard should be included in the list of methods for producing population estimates, including a number of innovative methods such as population registers and administrative data.



13. In the same context, the meeting recommended that UNSD explores the possibility of incorporating additional dimensions when it comes to certain metadata in the Demographic Yearbook vital statistics metadata questionnaire. Specifically, the completeness of registration of births and deaths should move from ranges to more specific numbers and this information regarding the completeness of death registration would significantly benefit from being disaggregated by sex and age, as registering deaths varies between different age and sex groups. Also, questions regarding the existence and depth of the legal framework for civil registration and vital statistics – one of a key components of the UN Legal Identity Agenda – should be considered for inclusion in the DYB metadata collection and dissemination.
14. The meeting concluded that the footnotes and other metadata in the Demographic Yearbook are of particular value, especially from the point of view of the long time series maintained by the Demographic Yearbook system. For the sake of simplifying analytical work on both data and metadata, the experts requested UNSD to explore the possibility of coding some of these metadata and attaching to records, rather than displaying them as footnotes.
15. In terms of dissemination of demographic statistics in general, the meeting concluded that it is imperative to develop interactive applications that would enable custom tabulations and mapping. These applications are proving to be a successful vehicle preferred by many users at national and regional level. The use of social media is also considered a very effective instrument to reach a broader audience.
16. The meeting noted that a number of national statistical offices tailor their dissemination vehicles to the expected usership, with a different level of technical skills and interest being taken into consideration. Similarly, surveying users on a regular basis is another mode of understanding and learning their needs. It was also outlined that the principle of impartial dissemination – i.e. not having preferred users accessing statistics earlier than all the rest – contributes significantly to the credibility of statistical authorities.
17. The meeting noted a series of recommendations aiming at improving the dissemination of the Demographic Yearbook – the need to develop interactive tabulation and map builder, to institute a release calendar, to make customized Excel files available by theme, segment the users' base, moving away from PDF, to name a few.
18. One of the recommendations for the improvement of the Demographic Yearbook referred to exploring the possibility of adopting Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) for collection and exchange purpose and the meeting focused on the use of SDMX in national and regional circumstances. The meeting concluded that a number of countries are developing and using SDMX for national purposes and are outlining its efficiency compared to previous procedures for communicating statistical data.
19. As SDMX is increasingly being implemented for the development of hypercubes that store and retrieve voluminous statistics, such as for population and housing censuses, the capacity and experience for its implementation at national, regional and international level is expanding, allowing for more statistical areas to be included, the experts noted.
20. In that context, the meeting concluded that the Demographic Yearbook needs to consider adopting SDMX standard for data collection and dissemination, especially taking into account the work already invested with Eurostat in building the Data Structure Definition for the joint UNSD/Eurostat data collection for demographic statistics. The meeting also noted that Eurostat's project in developing SDMX platform for demographic statistics would represent a strong foundation for a possible implementation at the global



level – yet, the meeting also noted that substantial additional work, especially in terms of SDMX capacity to effectively store and retrieve growing sets of metadata, would be required. UNSD is also requested to develop specific activities in terms of implementations of SDMX standard for population statistics at national and regional levels.

21. Turning its attention to geocoding of population statistics, the meeting concluded that this is the next step that some of the national statistical authorities participating at the meeting already undertook and documented, setting the path forward and outlining the advantages. The meeting took copious note of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework (GSGF) and its development in recent years. In that context, and also noting the increased coordination between statistical and geospatial authorities as documented during the proceedings, the meeting concluded that the Demographic Yearbook should monitor closely the production and availability of geocoded population statistics at national levels and develop advanced planning for incorporating, collecting and disseminating geocoded data, based on national and regional experiences, taking into full consideration the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in terms of confidentiality of individual records.

