

Concept Note

Second Expert Group Meeting on the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Conducting Population and Housing Censuses and Data Quality Concerns

2-5 November 2021

1. Background information

Since WHO's declaration of the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic, National Statistical Offices (NSOs) have been challenged to conduct population and housing censuses as scheduled and to produce timely, accurate and reliable small area statistics during the pandemic. Particularly, countries conducting their census with the traditional or combined census methodology are under pressure to develop actions or options for reducing the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), as part of its activities to monitor the state of the census taking, has conducted two surveys since the onset of the pandemic.¹ It also conducted an expert group meeting in February 2021² in order to assess the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the 2020 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses. The Division has developed an online dashboard³ (launched in May 2021) as an instrument for providing continuous updates on national census-taking during the pandemic.

According to the UNSD dashboard, out of 110 national censuses for which data were available and that were scheduled to take place in 2020 and 2021, 71 (65%) are either postponed or with unknown status, while 39 were conducted or are planned to be conducted by the end of 2021, with a number of them significantly extending the census enumeration period. It has to be noted that the decisions related to census-taking at the national level are subject to regular assessment of the pandemic and other relevant conditions in the country.

The first Expert Group Meeting that was conducted online from 9 to 12 February 2021 discussed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the design of census operations and challenges in producing timely and reliable small area statistics during the pandemic. The meeting also addressed data quality issues caused by the pandemic protocols and the effects of the pandemic on census statistics and comparability of census data over time. This meeting brought together over one hundred experts from twenty-four NSOs and regional and international organizations. The main conclusions of this meeting included:

- Many countries conducting their census with the traditional or combined census methodology face challenges to enumerate the population with face-to-face interviews and have used or plan to use more than one data collection mode, with many utilizing online questionnaires for self-enumeration in order to reduce direct contact with respondents. Other countries relying only on administrative

¹ The results of the first survey are available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/COVID-19-SurveyT1/>. The results of the second survey are available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/COVID-19/>.

² Conclusions and recommendation of the Expert Group Meeting are available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2021/egm-covid19-census-20210209/conclusions.pdf>.

³ The UNSD dashboard is available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/COVID-19/>

registers for producing census statistics have also encountered problems with receiving administrative records timely during the pandemic time.

- In addition to the adjustments of census procedures, census-taking during the pandemic resulted in the introduction of other actions aimed at minimizing the adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the conduct of population and housing censuses. Such actions included: the use of personal protective equipment (PPEs) for field staff; enhanced publicity campaigns to inform the public, increase awareness and safety about Covid-19, educate the population on new modes of data collection; and, online training for field staff. All of these new actions have made a significant impact on the census budget.
- Conducting field enumeration under the pressure of the Covid-19 pandemic has created concerns in terms of data quality. Changes in the design of field operation to reduce face-to-face interviews and extending the duration of enumeration of the population several times might have a negative impact on data quality.
- Several countries used administrative records (even if they were not universal but of relatively good quality in some areas of a country) as an alternative source for improving census coverage and adjustment of the population count for non-responding households. Administrative records were also used for data quality control and consistency checks for the data collected in the field.
- Building a well-designed quality assessment programme is becoming more important than before to understand whether population censuses conducted during the pandemic are of reasonably good quality, taking into consideration the implications of using new technologies or procedures on the quality of census data.
- Censuses conducted during the pandemic could potentially reveal trends, changes and patterns in society not seen in previous census results, although to what extent those trends/changes would be significant are yet to be seen. Such new trends, changes and patterns will have implications for census data comparability over time.

In that first meeting, experts supported UNSD's initiative to continue documenting the impact of Covid-19 on census-taking around the world and its intention to organize a follow-up expert group meeting.

2. Objectives of the second meeting

The second Expert Group meeting aims at continuing the monitoring of challenges in conducting population and housing censuses during the pandemic. This meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss alternative solutions in designing census operations for producing relevant, timely and reliable statistics from the 2020 round of population and housing censuses.

The meeting will cover four main topics:

- i) potential adjustments in census questionnaires to improve the relevance and quality of census data;
- ii) innovative approaches in designing census operations for reducing the adverse impact of the pandemic;
- iii) assessment of the quality of population and housing censuses concerning the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on process quality and output quality; and,
- iv) effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on data analysis and comparability overtime.

The meeting will bring together census experts from NSOs, census agencies, international and regional organizations to explore challenges, good practices and lessons learned in conducting censuses during the Covid-19 pandemic.