

Concept Note

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

12-14 December 2022, New York

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 three surveys since the onset of the pandemic. It also conducted two an expert group meeting in February and November 2021 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 dashboard (launched in May 2021) as an instrument for providing continuous updates on national census-taking during the pandemic.

First Expert Group Meeting

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 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.

Second Expert Group Meeting

The second Expert Group Meeting that was conducted online from 2 to 5 November 2021 and discussed the continuing challenges in conducting population and housing censuses during the Covid-19 pandemic. The meeting provided opportunities to discuss alternative solutions in designing census operations conducted during the pandemic as well as address data quality and comparability issues resulting from pandemic protocols and recent changes in the design of census operations.

This meeting brought together experts from eighteen NSOs along with experts from regional and international organizations.

The meeting addressed the following 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 full set of conclusions from the first and second EGM are available here:

<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2021/egm-covid19-census-20210209/conclusions.pdf>

<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2021/egm-covid19-census-20211102/c-and-r.pdf>

Objectives of the Third Expert Group Meeting

The third Expert Group Meeting aims to continue monitoring the challenges in conducting population and housing censuses during the pandemic. In addition, on day two, the meeting will cover data quality issues that may have arisen due to conducting the census during a pandemic and potential methods to address

data quality concerns. Day three of the meeting will provide an opportunity to take a broader approach and discuss lessons learned from conducting censuses during times of crisis and provide recommendations for improving the resilience of future censuses conducted. It is likely that future census operations will have to contend increasing uncertainty due to natural disasters, health emergencies, political instability, or other unforeseen disruptive events. None of these events can be predicted in advance, but contingency planning for the unexpected will be a vital component of delivering a successful census going forward into the 2030 round.

The meeting will cover three main themes, one theme per day:

1. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on census operations.
 - a. Innovative approaches in designing and adapting census operations during the pandemic, including questionnaire changes, field work, and census management.
 - b. Operational challenges, adaptations, mitigation strategies and contingency planning undertaken by countries during the pandemic.
2. Addressing data quality concerns and the impact of the pandemic on census outputs:
 - a. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on process quality and output quality and methods for assessing the quality of population and housing censuses.
 - b. Potential effects of the pandemic conditions on census measures, such as on international and internal migration, mortality and fertility, and labour force indicators.
 - c. Mitigation strategies during census processing to ensure representation of census data, build trust in the validity of census results and provide comparability across time.
3. Lessons for improving the resilience of the census during time of crisis
 - a. Lessons from the pandemic for future census planning to build resilience in census operations to adapt to unforeseen events (round table/small group discussion)
 - b. Use of technology and alternatives to the traditional census to mitigate the risks of unforeseen events (round table/small group discussion)

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; document data quality concerns in the 2020 round; and discuss the broader issue of improving census resilience and delivering the census during times of crisis and uncertainty.

Provisional work programme

The three-day in person meeting will be held from 12 to 14 December 2022, from 10 AM to 5 PM, New York time each day.

Programme (Broad outline - to be developed further):

Day 1: Impact of covid-19 on censuses

Day 2: Addressing Data Quality and Effects on Census Outputs

Day 3: Lessons for improving the resilience of the census during time of crisis