

EXPERT GROUP MEETING on
METHODS FOR CONDUCTING TIME-USE SURVEYS

Report of the meeting
held in New York, 23-27 October 2000

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I. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

1. The meeting was held at United Nations Headquarters, New York, from 23-27 October 2000. The following experts participated: Oladejo Oyeleke Ajayi (Nigeria), Michael Bittman (Australia), Debbie Budlender (South Africa), Gustav Haraldsen (Norway), Andrew S. Harvey (Canada), Diane Herz (United States), Indira Hirway (India), Eivind Hoffmann (International Labour Organisation), Thomas Juster (United States), Patricia Mendez (Mexico), Yandiswa Mpetsheni (South Africa), Iris Niemi (Finland), Yeruugerel Noov (Mongolia), Christina Osterberg (Eurostat), R. N. Pandey (India), David Paton (Canada), Klas Rydenstam (Sweden), Aelee Shon (Rep. of Korea), Diane Steele (World Bank). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was also represented.

2. The meeting was convened as part of the work of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) on time-use statistics under a project funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Development Research Centre/Canada on Gender Issues and the Measurement of Paid and Unpaid Work. It follows up on the recommendations on time-use statistics of the Statistical Commission at its twenty-eight and thirty-first sessions and on the Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women.

3. The meeting discussed methodological guidelines for the conduct of time-use surveys and reviewed the further development of the trial United Nations International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics. The papers prepared for the meeting and the discussion will provide the major input to a methodological publication that the Statistics Division is preparing to assist developing countries in carrying out time-use surveys. The agenda for the meeting and the list of documents are attached in Annex 1 and Annex 2, respectively. Mr. Bittman presided.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS RELATING TO METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES FOR TIME-USE SURVEYS

4. The meeting agreed on the following main points on the development of the methodological publication, "Guide to producing statistics on time-use for measuring paid and unpaid work".

Basic Approach of the "Guide"

5. In recent years developing countries have for the first time begun to conduct national time-use surveys. This experience now shows that national time-use surveys can be conducted successfully in developing countries. Though special considerations come into play in collecting data in populations with low levels of literacy, the main survey design issues are often similar to those of developed countries.

6. The "Guide" will be aimed at providing advice to developing countries interested in undertaking time-use surveys and more broadly, toward harmonizing methods for wide national use. It builds on the recent experiences of developing countries and on the new Guidelines on Harmonized European Time-Use Surveys.

7. The “Guide” will not be prescriptive in nature but will discuss what has been done in countries, the lessons learned from it and the advantages and disadvantages of alternative options. For each aspect of survey design, it will discuss the requirements for good design and what can be done to achieve it. Feasible options or the minimal acceptable requirements will be provided. In addition it will identify the areas which require further methodological work. The “Guide” will focus on aspects of design that are unique to time-use surveys.

8. Agreed points relating to main design issues for development in the “Guide” follow.

Rationale and objectives for conducting time-use surveys

9. The discussion focused on the importance of time-use surveys for both policy and research questions. Experts stressed the need to develop a convincing rationale for use in requests for funds to undertake these surveys. It was recommended that the “Guide” contain examples of how time use statistics have been used to influence government policy.

10. Categories of objectives for undertaking time-use surveys were identified. One cluster refers to the need for statistics for population groups and the other, the individual or household level. Objectives relating to the aggregate or population level include the following issues: i) improvement of national accounts estimates and the preparation of household satellite accounts; ii) gender equality including the measurement of paid and unpaid work, improvement of data on the economically active population, especially on the self-employed and persons in non-standard working arrangements; iii) poverty eradication strategies, including statistics on the provision and need for governmental services as well as the provision of water, fuel and the infrastructure for travel; and iv) social indicators relating to changes in broad categories of economic activity. The second cluster relates to individual or micro-level analysis and includes household division of labour, training as investment in work, consumer behavior, travel patterns and time-use.

11. Governments of both developing and developed countries will be interested in using time-use data for the first set of issues. Micro-level issues will be of interest mainly to the scientific community. The “Guide” will emphasize the importance of a consultative process involving producers and users of time-use data to explore the various interests and data needs and with a view toward identifying potential survey sponsors. It will also explain the need to balance the interests of sponsors with considerations of quality and overall usefulness of the survey data.

12. The “Guide” will need to define specifications in terms of survey objectives. Priority will be given to design considerations relating to improved measurement of work and economic accounting. Broader issues will also be considered.

Survey contents

13. The decision on which context variables and what level of detail are to be included is closely related to the analytical objectives of the data collection. Context variables needed for the proper understanding of activities that have been reported in the diary will also need to be included. Guidance will be provided on how different types of context variables should be collected in the survey instruments and how the collected information should be used for effective coding to the relevant classifications.

14. Recording simultaneous activities is important in identifying specific types of activities particularly childcare. To be able to record simultaneous activities the length of the time interval used in the instrument needs to be considered. The decision as to which of the simultaneous activities is primary is better made by the analyst rather than the respondent.

15. The range of background variables to be included also generally depends on the analytical objectives. A minimum list of variables defined in relation to basic tables on time use includes: age, sex, marital status, household composition, and work situation. Collecting information on household durables is needed for explaining time-use patterns of activities that are related to their presence or absence in the household. Whether and how to collect information about wage rates and/or household income or expenditure or simply indicators of wealth and circumstances will depend on the main objectives of the survey. The extent to which it will be meaningful to identify separately different jobs for the same individual will need to be explored. When formulating questions to be included in the time-use survey one should, wherever relevant, draw on those already in use in the statistical system to make comparisons possible and benefit from the methodological experiences gained.

16. The three-step diary approach wherein the interview sequence starts with an initial short sequence of questions before starting the diary and ends with the background questionnaire should be tested.

Methods of data collection

17. Decisions on the method of data collection are influenced by combinations of factors including survey objectives, the level of literacy of the population, and resources. In particular, the face-to-face recall interview is regarded as the best method for populations with low levels of literacy. The “Guide” will present various options, discuss their pros and cons and provide illustrations of how the methods have been implemented in countries. Key procedures to minimize interviewer effects will be specified.

Survey instruments

18. Options with respect to the use of an open or fixed interval diary, the length of intervals and the interrelation of these features with other aspects of survey design will be considered. These options will be examined in the context of findings relating to the robustness of estimates of time-use at the aggregate level.

19. At the minimum, pre-coded or “light” diaries should exhaust all types of activities and total time spent reported for the pre-coded activities should total 24 hours per day.

Sampling

20. A combination of sampling theory and the structure of costs of field operations supports the option of having more than one diary per respondent. In aiming for the largest possible sample size given resource constraints, obtaining more than one diary per person and collecting diaries from more than one member of the household are better strategies than sampling more households and selecting fewer diaries per person or fewer persons per household. However, nonresponse can become a problem in designs specifying many diaries.

21. Ideally, diary days should be randomly selected. Experience shows, however, that this is generally not achievable but may be approximated. Operational procedures should ensure that the selection of diary days is not left to the discretion of either the interviewer or respondent. The “Guide” will describe possible approaches as implemented by countries.

22. Given the critical importance of time sampling to the success of time-use surveys, the “Guide” will need to provide more detailed information in this section.

Processing of time-use survey data

23. The “Guide” will present the main issues related to ensuring the quality of information collected in time-use surveys. Tools and procedures for effective coding and processing will be discussed. The coding of diaries may be performed either in the field by interviewers or at a central site by coders; the optimal choice will depend on having appropriate coding tools and procedures.

24. The “Guide” will discuss standard edit specifications and quality indicators for evaluating diary data. Advice on file structures and derived variables which can facilitate the production of tables and presentation of results from the survey will also be provided.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS RELATING TO THE DRAFT INTERNATIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF ACTIVITIES FOR TIME-USE STATISTICS

25. The general structure of the draft classification is linked to a major objective for time-use statistics in both developed and developing countries, the improved measurement of paid and unpaid work, particularly of women. A unique component of this classification is a comprehensive categorization of activities associated with household production of goods for own final use and informal sector activities. Agreed points relating to the draft classification follow.

26. The five categories (A to E) covering SNA production and related activities need to be revised with the following considerations:

- Distinctions between normal working hours, overtime and extra hours may be blurred, and might be unnecessary;
- Activities covering “travel related to work”, “seeking employment/ setting-up business”, and “training and studies in relation to work” are separately included in each category but may not be easily separately classified into the categories;

There is also a need to provide a clear definition for institutions included under category A and guidelines for distinguishing formal employment and related activities from informal sector employment.

27. In general, the proposed 3-digit level divisions within the main categories are comprehensive enough and applicable across countries; however, the proposed 4-digit groups in

some of the divisions need to be reviewed to determine whether they should be delineated as such.

28. The proposed classification would need to be sufficiently flexible to allow for adaptation by countries to national circumstances, as necessary. Countries may wish to present more detailed specification of some activities within the categories and divisions; moreover, they may wish to have fewer than the proposed 15 main categories for analytical purposes. Some guidance would need to be provided as to appropriate ways of collapsing the categories.

29. As a next step, countries are encouraged to test the draft classification. Testing could be achieved in two ways: for countries with existing time-use data, a sample of completed diaries could be recoded following the draft classification; and for those planning new surveys the draft classification could be adapted for use in the coding of activities. The draft classification could be reviewed and further refined based on the results of these tests and country experiences.

IV. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

30. The meeting noted that the UNSD web site on time-use surveys published in May 2000 (<http://www.un.org/Depts/unsd/timeuse>) is an effective medium for disseminating information on methods and results of national time-use surveys. It recommended that papers prepared for the meeting be published on the web site.

31. The meeting concluded that the efforts of the UNSD to improve measurement of paid and unpaid work are an important initiative in improving time-use statistics and have provided indispensable technical direction for developing countries that are embarking on time-use studies for the first time. Given the role that the UNSD has played thus far in this work, the meeting recommended that UNSD take on the responsibility for coordinating international work on the development of time-use statistics and urged that the coordination be undertaken in cooperation with other agencies with an interest in this area including UNDP, the International Labour Organisation and Eurostat.