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Background document
Available in English only

Items for discussion and decision: Integrated economic statistics

The results of the UNSD survey of country practices in economic census

Prepared by United Nations Statistics Division

I. Introduction

1. At its thirty-seventh session of 2006, the United Nations Statistical Commission endorsed the United Nations Statistics Division's initiative to promote an integrated approach to compilation of economic statistics. It further recommended that good practices in this area be identified, documented and made available to the interested countries to assist in their practical work. In view of these tasks, UNSD carried out a survey to identify countries' general policies with regard to the economic censuses and other approaches to compilation of basic economic statistics. To this end, on 20 June 2006 a brief questionnaire (see Annex 1) was sent to national statistical offices of all countries and territories.

2. This background document contains an overview of the main results of this survey and a brief outline of the UNSD work programme in this area.

3. A total of 114 countries and territories responded to the questionnaire. The response rate was particularly high for developed countries and transition economies (89.5 % for both groupings). Response rate above the average (58.8 %) was observed for small island countries of Oceania.

4. The individual country replies as well as the aggregated results will be posted on the UNSD website. Except for a few corrections that were believed to be due to the misunderstanding or inconsistent answers to mutually exclusive questions, the table with aggregated results presents a summary of the replies as received. Corrections to the answers have been made after they were communicated back and agreed by the country. Selected results are summed up and presented in Tables 1-3 (see Annex 2) to this background note.

Structure of the questionnaire

5. The questionnaire has been designed to provide a synthesized picture of the current country practices in the use of economic census as a source for compilation of economic statistics, while at the same time, allow for comparisons between the practices of countries conducting economic census and those implementing different data collection approaches.

6. The key areas covered in the questionnaire are periodicity of conducted economic censuses; scope in terms of economic activities or sectors included in the census; coverage of units below or above an established threshold. Several more detailed questions allowed to compile information on some additional characteristics of economic censuses. These made possible a general overview of the commonly used approaches to an economic census organization and helped to examine the good practices in this area.

7. The question regarding the compilation of basic information about economic units in cases when an economic census has not been conducted, has been introduced to collect information from the remaining part of countries that moved away from this practice and use different approaches and sources for compilation of economic statistics. The questionnaire provided a list of the most important approaches and asked countries to identify those used by them. Also, countries were given an opportunity to describe their specific approaches, which were not in the prepared list.

8. Additional question was introduced to obtain information about the country's plans to conduct an economic census in the future. This information, together with the provided explanations, allowed for assessment of the country needs for assistance in the organization, conduct and use of the results of economic census as well as for evaluation of the need in preparation of international recommendations on economic census.

Organization of the survey

9. In order to reduce the response burden on countries, 36 of them received pre-filled questionnaires. The information in the pre-filled questionnaires has been gathered mainly from the existing UNSD databases, namely: (i) countries profiles presented at the International workshop on the economic census in Beijing; (ii) countries responses to the UNSD questionnaire on the factors impeding the 1993 SNA implementation. In addition to the internally available information, the official websites of some countries have also been used. Before filling the questionnaires, the information from different sources has been cross-checked and verified.

10. The questionnaire was translated into three the United Nations official languages – French, Russian and Spanish, to increase in the response rate.

11. While responding, some of the countries posed questions requesting UNSD to provide additional clarifications on what economic census is, what is meant by an economic unit, type of data collected through the economic census and others. Those countries received prompt responses during some follow-up activities conducted in July-September 2006.

II. Main conclusions

12. The main findings are summarized below under the following headings: (i) economic census as an approach to compilation of basic economic statistics; (ii) organizational details of economic census; (iii) other approaches to compilation of basic economic statistics.

1. Economic census as an approach to compilation of basic economic statistics

13. The survey confirmed that the economic census is still an important statistical activity. Every third country from those that responded (34.2 %) indicated that they have

conducted an economic census. In their vast majority these are countries from developing regions (see Table 1). The geographical distribution of countries ranges from a maximum of 57.9 % in Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia to a minimum of 15.4 % in Europe.

14. The survey has also confirmed that practices regarding the organization of an economic census vary significantly among countries and show a lack of unified approach. Two principal methods are most often used by countries: (i) conduct of economic census as an economy-wide census; (ii) conduct of economic census for individual economic sectors/activities only (manufacturing, construction, distributive trade etc.).

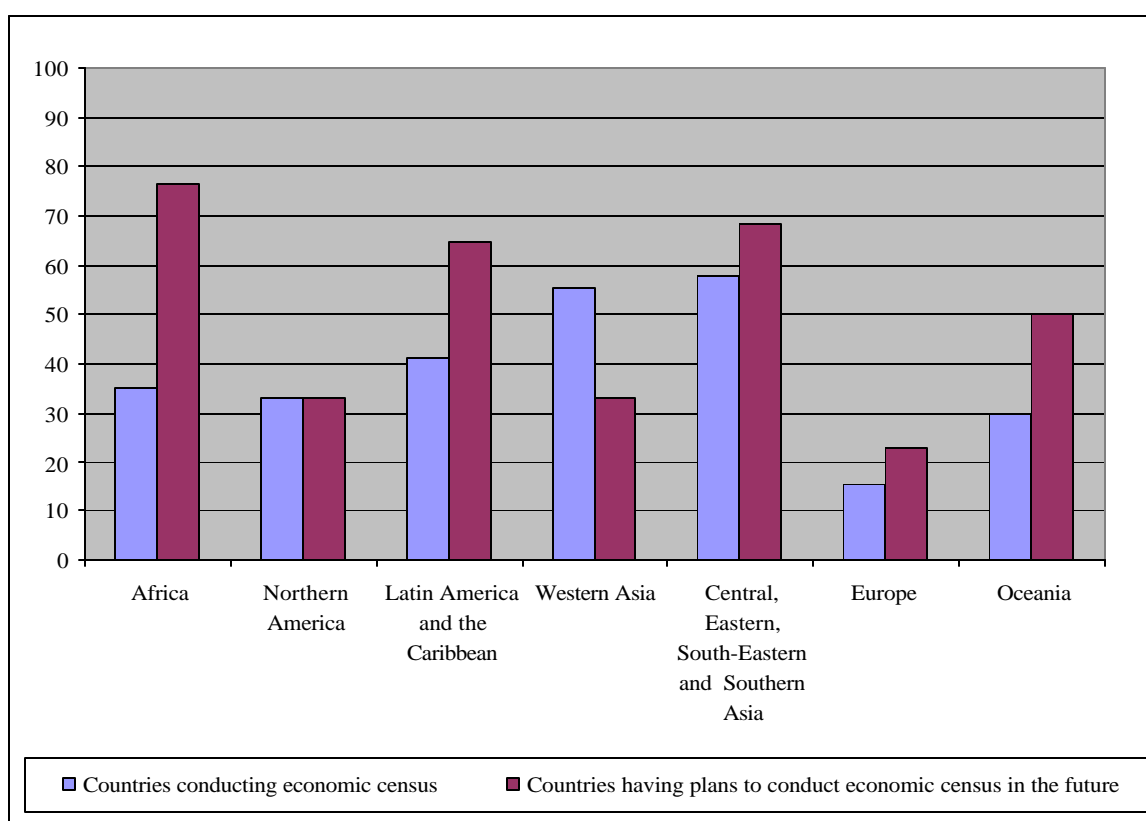
15. It is worth noting that from the responses to the questionnaire and from the follow up correspondence with some countries it became apparent that there are two definitions of economic census in use - a broad definition and a narrow definition. The broad definition of economic census implies a complete enumeration of all economic units in a very large part of the economy (traditional form of the census), while the narrow definition is referring to a complete enumeration of only a “take all” strata in an economy-wide surveys (such as the annual structural business surveys). There are some other inconsistencies in use of terminology which need to be clarified and harmonized in future.

16. Overall, a general tendency to a more frequent conduct of economic census has been observed in country replies. With a few exceptions, the year of the most recent economic census of countries is 2002 or after 2002 as a new round of censuses in the period 2007-2008 has been planned by many of them. This is a very important finding as one of the disadvantages of economic censuses in the past was that they were conducted at long, some times irregular, intervals of time and the census information was quickly becoming outdated.

17. About half of the countries that responded indicated that they have plans to conduct an economic census in the next few years. In general, the number of countries having plans to conduct a census in future exceeds the number of countries that traditionally conduct economic census (countries that gave a positive answer to question 1 of the questionnaire)

in all geographical regions. More specifically, twice more developing countries in Africa indicated that they have such plans and would need assistance to conduct them. Some of the countries tie the conduct of a future economic census with the availability of financial resources or the need to establish a business register.

Chart 1.
Percentage of countries using economic census
for compilation of economic statistics by geographical grouping



2. Organizational details of economic census

(a) Periodicity

18. International statistical standards recommend economic censuses to be conducted at regular intervals of time (five years) in order to establish sound benchmarks of basic economic statistics. More than half of the countries conducting economic census indicated

that they carry them out every 5 years (see Table 2). In Oceania all countries conduct economic census at 5 years intervals and in Asia more than 80 % of countries conduct economic census at 5 years intervals. In Northern American region the USA has a longstanding tradition in carrying out economic census every 5 years.

19. Latin America and the Caribbean region could be noted as an exception to this general pattern. More than half of the countries in that region tend to conduct decennial censuses. Looking at the longer run, this could lead to significant limitations in the usefulness of census information for basic economic statistics as well as in its quality and comparability.

20. A new tendency of conducting yearly economic censuses has been observed among a small number of countries. This might be explained with the departure of countries from the traditional form of economic census organization (broad definition) and its transformation into economy-wide establishment (or enterprise) survey (narrow definition of economic census). However, the conduct of annual economic censuses assumes existence of a well established integrated economic statistics programme based on the use of business register, coordinated economic surveys with different frequencies and administrative data sources.

(b) Scope

21. The scope in terms of units or activities enumerated is an important characteristic of the economic census. On average, the survey responses show that two out of three countries conducting economic census do not include units from agriculture and public administration.

22. Although the figures vary by both the economic groupings and geographical regions, it is understood that agricultural units are observed through separate agricultural censuses. As for public administration, the results differ markedly across the regions – from 45.5 % of countries in Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia at the lower end to 100.0 % of countries in Oceania at the higher end. The inclusion or exclusion of public

administration from economic censuses, however, depends to a higher extent on the organizational structure of countries and scope of activities included in their general government sectors.

23. In addition, countries in every region and grouping indicated individual activities or type of units excluded from the economic census. The most commonly excluded are fishery, financial intermediation and insurance, production activities of households from activities and non-profit institutions, extraterritorial organizations, self-employed persons from units.

(c) Coverage

24. In about half of the countries, the economic census covers all units irrespective of their size in terms of number of persons employed or turnover. The remaining half applies a threshold, as with a few exceptions, this threshold is based on the employment. By regions, countries in Africa tend to apply more often a threshold. Their percentage is twice higher as compared to countries in Oceania and Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia.

25. Again, the practice of countries regarding the coverage of units below the threshold varies substantially. The survey results show that the use of sample surveys is the most commonly applied approach. 44.4 % of countries indicated that units below the threshold are predominantly covered through sample surveys techniques. Use of administrative data sources and ad hoc surveys are also amongst the approaches preferred by some countries. Although all countries indicated that they aim at full coverage of units, it seems that still much challenge poses the coverage of small units and accuracy of data about them.

3. Other approaches for compilation of basic economic statistics

26. The findings of this survey confirm that there are two distinct groups of countries with regard to the compilation of basic economic statistics: (i) countries still relying on an

economic census as a main tool for compiling the economic statistics and (ii) countries using combination of register based information from annual and more frequent surveys and administrative data sources.

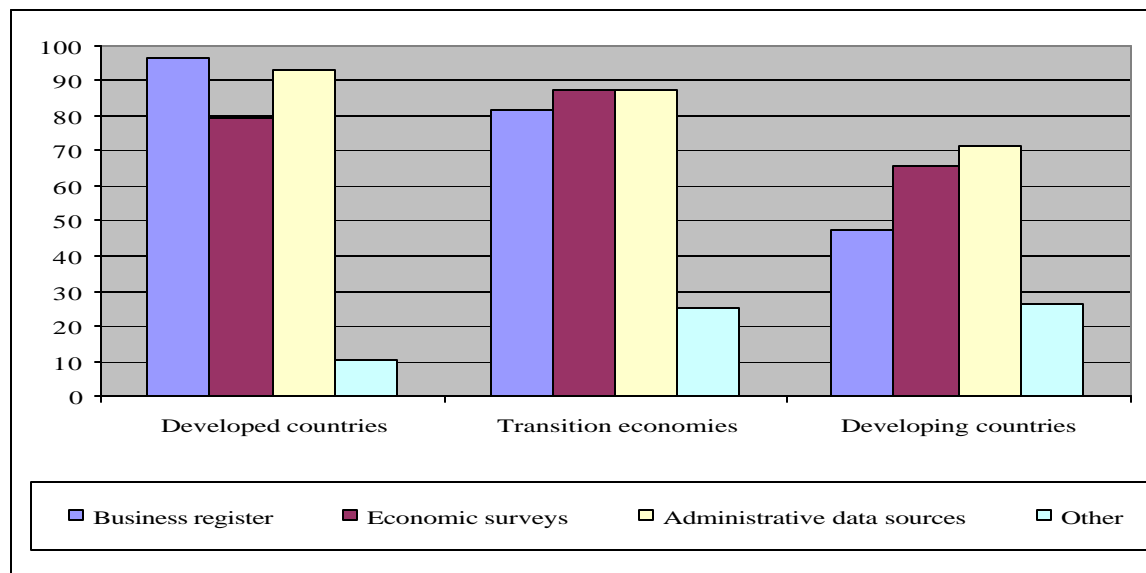
27. Two third of countries that responded to the questionnaire indicated that at present they use other approaches for compilation of basic economic statistics that differ from traditional economic census. In the case of developed countries 90 % use register based survey information and administrative data for compilation of economic statistics. This is a firm tendency for transition economies too, where more than 80 % of countries follow the same approach (see Table 3).

28. Availability of a good business register is considered as an indispensable requirement to ensure establishment of a country capacity to implement an integrated approach to compilation of economic statistics in the future, especially when data collection strategy of this country is based on economy-wide surveys programme and use of administrative data. The countries in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia, however, show considerably low rates of use of business registers information, half or less than half of them have such a practice.

29. Besides the traditionally used regular economic surveys programmes for compilation of economic statistics, the surveys results revealed also that not only developed countries, but many developing countries appreciate advantages of using administrative data sources. On average, 81.9 % of countries indicated them as a source for compilation of basic data on economic units.

Chart 2.

Percentage of countries not conducting traditional economic census by type of approach for compilation of economic statistics and by economic grouping



III. The UNSD work programme on economic census

30. UNSD sees economic census as an important activity which many countries carry out to improve availability and quality of their basic economic statistics and to establish/improve their statistical business registers for organizing more integrated economic survey programme at a later stage. The UNSD country survey revealed that there is a growing interest in economic census and a number of countries have plans to conduct such censuses in future. Many of those countries further indicated that they would need help both in terms of resources and guidance on how to carry out this activity properly.

31. At the same time, it became apparent from survey results that countries that do conduct economic census have differences in terms of its coverage, content and organization. This calls for further efforts in developing more coherent international guidance on the matter. To assist countries in this respect, UNSD is working towards identification and promotion of good practices in economic census. This includes the preparation of a technical report on national practices in economic census focusing on

needs and experience of developing countries of Africa by the end of 2007 and a more comprehensive handbook on good practices in this area in 2008. The handbook will be based on the country responses to the new and more detailed questionnaire as well as on additional research and worldwide consultations. Based on this handbook a technical assistance activity will be conducted.

ANNEX 1

UNITED NATIONS STATISTICS DIVISION
QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE ECONOMIC CENSUS

Country:		
Name and position of the contact person completing this questionnaire:		
E-mail:		
Fax:		
#	Questions	Response*
1	Do you conduct periodic censuses of economic units? <i>If No, please go to question 8</i>	
2	In what year was the first census of economic units conducted in your country?	
3	In what year was the most recent census of economic units conducted in your country?	
4	How often do you conduct censuses of economic units? (<i>e.g., every 5 or 10 years etc.</i>)	
5	In the most recent economic census, units from what kind of economic activity were not covered? <i>Please tick the applicable items:</i>	
	Agriculture	
	Public administration	
	Other (<i>please specify</i>)	
6	Do you apply a threshold (in terms of employment or revenues/turnover) when defining the population of units to be completely enumerated in the economic census? <i>If Yes, please define your threshold..</i>	
7	How do you cover units below that threshold? <i>Please tick the applicable items:</i>	
	Using information from the sample surveys (incl. household types surveys)	
	Using information from the most recent population census	
	Using administrative sources of data	
Other (<i>please specify</i>)		
8	If you conducted the economic censuses in the past, what was the year of the last census?	
9	If you do not conduct an economic census, how is the compilation of the basic information about economic units organized in your country? <i>Please tick the applicable items:</i>	
	Using the systematically updated statistical business register	
	Using results of regular economic surveys programme	
	Using administrative sources of data	
Other (<i>please specify</i>)		
10	Do you have plans to conduct an economic census in the future?	

Please provide the address of your website where we can access materials describing your country practices in economic census:

Table 1
General information on the survey of country practices with regard to economic census

	<i>Number of countries</i>	<i>Number of countries that responded to the Questionnaire</i>	<i>Overall rate of response (%)</i>	<i>Number of countries conducting Economic Census</i>	<i>Percentage of countries conducting Economic census</i>	<i>Number of countries with plans to conduct Economic Census</i>	<i>Percentage of countries with plans to conduct Economic Census</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)=(2)/(1)	(4)	(5)=(4)/(2)	(6)	(7)=(6)/(2)
All Countries and Territories	210	114	54.3	39	34.2	55	48.2
<i>Economic Grouping:</i>							
Developed	38	34	89.5	6	17.6	6	17.6
Transition economies	19	17	89.5	2	11.8	7	41.2
Developing	153	63	41.2	31	49.2	42	66.7
<i>Geographical Grouping:</i>							
Africa	54	17	31.5	6	35.3	13	76.5
Northern America	3	3	100.0	1	33.3	1	33.3
Latin America and the Caribbean	43	17	39.5	7	41.2	11	64.7
Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia	32	19	59.4	11	57.9	13	68.4
Western Asia	17	9	52.9	5	55.6	3	33.3
Europe	44	39	88.6	6	15.4	9	23.1
Oceania	17	10	58.8	3	30.0	5	50.0

Table 2
Organizational details of conducted economic censuses

	<i>Periodicity</i>				<i>Scope</i>			<i>Coverage</i>				
	<i>Percentage of countries conducting Economic census:</i>				<i>Percentage of countries excluding the following units from the scope of Economic census:</i>			<i>Percentage of countries applying a threshold</i>	<i>Percentage of countries by different approaches of covering units below the threshold</i>			
	<i>Each year</i>	<i>Every 5 years</i>	<i>Every 10 years</i>	<i>Less frequently</i>	<i>Agriculture</i>	<i>Public Administration</i>	<i>Other</i>		<i>Sample Surveys</i>	<i>Population Census</i>	<i>Administrative data sources</i>	<i>Other</i>
<i>(1)</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>(3)</i>	<i>(4)</i>	<i>(5)</i>	<i>(6)</i>	<i>(7)</i>	<i>(8)</i>	<i>(9)</i>	<i>(10)</i>	<i>(11)</i>	<i>(12)</i>	
All Countries and Territories	12.8	56.4	25.6	5.1	64.1	64.1	46.2	46.2	44.4	16.7	22.2	22.2
<i>Economic Grouping:</i>												
Developed	33.3	50.0	16.7	...	100.0	50.0	66.7	66.7	25.0	...	25.0	25.0
Transition economies	50.0	50.0	...	...	100.0	100.0	...	...	...	...	...	...
Developing	6.5	58.1	29.0	6.5	54.8	64.5	45.2	45.2	50.0	21.4	21.4	21.4
<i>Geographical Grouping:</i>												
Africa	...	33.3	33.3	33.3	83.3	66.7	66.7	83.3	40.0	20.0	20.0	40.0
Northern America	...	100.0	...	...	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	...	...	100.0	...
Latin America and the Caribbean	14.3	28.6	57.1	...	71.4	57.1	71.4	57.1	75.0	25.0	25.0	25.0
Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia	9.1	81.1	9.1	...	36.4	45.5	18.2	36.4	50.0	...	...	...
Western Asia	...	60.0	40.0	...	60.0	80.0	40.0	...	...	...	...	...
Europe	50.0	33.3	16.7	...	100.0	66.7	33.3	50.0	33.3	...	...	33.3
Oceania	...	100.0	...	...	33.3	100.0	66.7	33.3	...	100.0	100.0	...

Table 3
Survey results about countries implementing approaches for basic economic statistics compilation that differ from economic census

	<i>Number of countries not conducting Economic Census</i>	<i>Percentage of countries not conducting Economic Census</i>	<i>Approaches for compilation of basic economic statistics</i>			
			<i>Percentage of countries using:</i>			
			<i>Systematically updated statistical business register</i>	<i>Regular economic surveys programme</i>	<i>Administrative data sources</i>	<i>Other</i>
	<i>(1)</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>(3)</i>	<i>(4)</i>	<i>(5)</i>	<i>(6)</i>
All Countries and Territories	75	65.8	71.1	74.7	81.9	20.5
<i>Economic Grouping:</i>						
Developed	28	82.4	96.6	79.3	93.1	10.3
Transition economies	15	88.2	81.3	87.5	87.5	25.0
Developing	32	50.8	47.4	65.8	71.1	26.3
<i>Geographical Grouping:</i>						
Africa	11	64.7	50.0	50.0	66.7	33.3
Northern America	2	66.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	...
Latin America and the Caribbean	10	58.8	40.0	80.0	70.0	20.0
Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia	8	42.1	54.5	100.0	72.7	36.4
Western Asia	4	44.4	83.3	66.7	83.3	...
Europe	33	84.6	88.6	77.1	88.6	11.4
Oceania	7	70.0	71.4	57.1	100.0	42.9