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Items for information: business registers

Report of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its forty-third session (see E/2012/24, chap. I.A), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers, which is presented to the Commission for information. The Commission is requested to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2013/1.



I. Introduction

1. The 23rd meeting of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers took place from 17 to 20 September 2012, Washington, D.C.,¹ hosted jointly by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics and the United States Census Bureau. The meeting gathered 98 participants from 43 delegations and was organized in eight sessions. The present report provides a brief summary of the themes discussed in each of the sessions.

II. Report of the 23rd meeting of the Wiesbaden Group

2. Session 1 was devoted to the presentation of country progress reports. It is a tradition for the Wiesbaden Group to open the meeting with a review of recent developments in the framework of business registers in each member/country organization. A total of 45 progress reports were presented during this session, while 46 reports had been submitted in 2012. As was the case in the previous meetings of the Wiesbaden Group, this session provided an important opportunity for business register experts and managers across the world to exchange updated information on their ongoing and planned projects aimed at improving the construction, maintenance and use of business registers.

3. Session 2, on “Quality, consistency and dissemination of business register data”, addressed how business registers use quality measures to harmonize content and how business registers evaluate the quality of data sources. The discussions addressed questions of how to compile and disseminate statistics based on business registers, how those data are published and how such data products rival products of other statistical departments. Many issues were put forward by the various presenters, such as the practice of deriving quality indicators for business registers and the example of negotiating an appropriate workshare between register staff and survey departments to assure quality work. Some offices analysed trade-offs between different aspects of quality, such as timeliness versus accuracy, proposed estimation and imputation methods to handle quality issues, or showed ways to make use of administrative sources for quality improvements. Other offices explained chances for more data linkages in business statistics through the use of business registers and showed various fields of statistical analysis based on business register data.

4. The aim of session 3, on “Business register profiling of multinational enterprises”, was to discuss different aspects of international profiling, with special attention to the international cooperation between statistical authorities of different countries. The session focused on addressing the advantages and disadvantages of the use of accounting standards for profiling and on how an agreement is reached on the structure of the profiled units and their use in the statistical system.

5. The Euro Group Register, including profiling, was presented. This provides a single, coherent and complete view of multinational enterprise groups operating in Europe. The Register is a product from an intensive and far-reaching cooperation within and between national statistical institutes. The Register covers the needs for both national statistics and statistics on globalization, while contributing to the

¹ See www.census.gov/epcd/wiesbaden/ for further details.

consistency of European business statistics. The session included a presentation on the use of tax and annual report data in order to profile enterprises using a top-down approach, which emphasized that allocation to industries is difficult when enterprises are involved in more than one industry. Other presentations dealt with the issue of changing the industry allocation of an enterprise unit and the impact that can have on national business statistics.

6. Session 4, on “Metadata and business registers”, addressed the basic role of harmonized metadata in business registers within the scope of statistical production and underlined the importance of such metadata to produce high-quality registers with harmonized outputs. The need for harmonized business statistics metadata, including classifications, variables, terms and identifiers, is triggered by the development of new registers and integrated database systems, by the overlapping work of different business statistics systems and by the need to exchange data between administrative and statistical registers. Harmonized metadata allow an increased use of information technology in the exchange and merging of register data, thereby reducing administrative work considerably. They also make it possible to keep administrative registers more up-to-date and enhance cooperation among public administrations. However, the harmonization of metadata in registers takes a long time and requires a huge effort for the involved parties. Besides the unavoidable juridical bases, the harmonization of procedures, definition of clear responsibilities and ongoing research into better and more efficient technical and organizational solutions are fundamental tasks in this context.

7. Session 5, on “Technology innovation and business registers”, aimed to encourage countries to share with the group interesting examples of technology innovation. All aspects of technology innovation related to business registers were included in the scope of the session. The representatives of Japan presented a new integrated register system incorporating 13 databases, which largely improves the coordination of survey samples and the response control burden.

8. Other innovations included a new integrated register system with electronic data collection and a new two-way business register portal that enables enterprises to provide and retrieve information. With the two-way portal, enterprises can retrieve information on the surveys they have been selected for, thereby enabling them to better manage the response time. Finally, innovations were presented regarding geospatial information, namely, a new geospatial system based on street-level geography allowing more precise location information instead of the old point-in-polygon method. The representatives of Mexico also provided a visualization of their full business register using Google Earth.

9. Session 6, on “Business registers as sampling frames”, addressed one of the important uses of the statistical business register, namely, to provide a frame for business survey sampling. The purpose of the session was to discuss how to develop the statistical business register to meet the growing demands for timely and up-to-date sampling frames and, at the same time, the demands for more detailed information about the units of the register. With the globalization of economies comes a growing demand for international comparable business statistics, including global production arrangements and multinational enterprises. In order to compare business statistics across countries, there needs to be improved international coherence of definitions and concepts of statistical business registers.

10. Survey-based statistics will continue to rely on comprehensive registers and demand still higher quality in terms of timeliness, accuracy and level of detail. The production and provision to users of both frozen and live versions of the registers seems an efficient way of meeting different user needs, even though questions remain on how to ensure comparability among the versions. This requires further discussion and the sharing of good practices. A number of statistical offices have developed user interfaces with which survey statisticians are able to draw samples on a self-service basis. Such service potentially offers efficiency gains. Experiences and good practices should be shared in the future.

11. Session 7, on “Guidelines for business registers”, was organized to receive feedback from the experts of the Wiesbaden Group meeting on the plans and intended content of the international guidelines for business registers. The chair of the task force presented the outline of all nine chapters, namely, introduction, roles of business registers, coverage, units, variables, data sources, maintenance, quality, establishment and development of a register, and glossary. A discussion was organized on each chapter, from which important feedback was provided on many issues concerning all chapters, for example, clarification issues, missing content and switching intended content between chapters. The feedback was gratefully received by the task force members and will be taken into account in the further drafting of the guidelines.

12. Session 8, on “Business registers and business statistics in developing countries”, addressed (a) data sources to establish and maintain a statistical business register; (b) experiences in updating a register with information from different sources; (c) experiences in improving coordination among data-providing institutions; and (d) approaches to cover informal business. Despite the variety of situations and topics addressed, there was a strong common aspect among the presentations, namely, that the development of a statistical business register was seen not only as critical for the construction of sound statistics on businesses, but also as a key element contributing to the economic development of a country.

13. In one of the countries, the economic development plan for the next 10 years includes specific provisions concerning the development of a business register. It is important that statistical agencies, when considering the development of new statistics and indicators, refer as much as possible to existing international statistical manuals and definitions. It is easier to integrate international standards early on in the process, as changing definitions and methods subsequently can be more difficult and costly. The use of harmonized standards for the compilation of statistics facilitates the international comparability of data and responds to policymakers’ interest in comparing situations and performances across countries. In that respect, the international guidelines on business registers currently under preparation will provide a critical tool to countries that are just starting or in the early phases of the establishment of their business register.

14. International cooperation, including through twinning programmes, is a successful way of transferring knowledge and helps to accelerate the process of establishing a well-conceived business register. At a time of budget constraints in most national statistical offices around the world, sharing experiences among countries and agencies assumes a special relevance. It amounts to multiplying available resources by sharing approaches, best practices, experiences and even failures. For countries facing enormous challenges owing to the size of their economy and business sector, experiences from other countries can be a very important resource.