

Concept Note

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

9-12 February 2021

1. Background information

The economic and social disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has made significant and adverse impact on the implementation of the 2020 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses and on conducting of population and housing censuses worldwide. National statistical offices (NSO) or census agencies are being challenged to produce timely, accurate and reliable small area statistics during the pandemic. Particularly, countries conducting their census with the traditional – whereby every household in the country is approached with a request for information - or combined census methodology are under pressure to develop actions or options for reducing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since WHO's declaration of the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic, UNSD has conducted two surveys in March and December 2020 to assess the impact of the pandemic on the conduct of population and housing censuses planned to take place in year 2020 and 2021. These surveys showed that the majority of the responding countries had to postpone their censuses to a later time in 2020 or 2021, while others carried out their censuses as planned in 2020 but had to extend the duration of enumeration to ensure full coverage of the population. Only a few countries which rely basically on administrative registers for producing census statistics indicated that they do not expect any delay in conducting their census in 2020 or 2021.

The survey results also showed that countries are facing new challenges in conducting population and housing censuses due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The main difficulties in conducting field enumeration include the following : a) requirement to reduce face-to-face interview; b) mobility restriction; c) procurement and distributions of census equipment; d) funding limitations or constraints due to reallocation of government budget for other activities; and, e) finding enough field staff for enumeration of population.

The survey results also indicated that some countries have modified or planned to modify census procedures to reduce the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the main modifications in census procedures include:

- a) Extending the duration of web-interview to reduce face-to-face interview;
- b) Introducing new a mode(s) of data collection such as paper-based self-enumeration or telephone interview;
- c) Changing the initial plan and replacing the census questionnaire with short and/or long forms or reducing questions focusing only on core topics;
- d) Introducing new activities for improving census coverage, such as using administrative registers and collecting data from proxy respondents for households that have not responded to the census.

Conducting field enumeration under the pressure of Covid-19 pandemic have created significant concerns for data quality. Late changes in the design of field operation and extending the duration of enumeration of the population, in most cases longer than six months, have created a high risk for the quality of census

data. Respondents may have difficulty in remembering where they were living and how many people were residing at a given address on the census reference date. In addition, the concept of “usual residence” may have less relevance in the uncertainty unfolding during the Covid-19 pandemic for people who have changed their place of residence. Many people have moved to different addresses when schools and workplaces were closed or changed their place of residence to join another household to receive or provide support to family members during the pandemic. Populations living in institutional places such as dormitories, nursing houses or prisons may have been reduced. All these circumstances will have a negative impact on counting people at their place of usual residence.

Furthermore, during the Covid-19 pandemic, it might be more difficult to reach hard-to-count people, such as people experiencing homelessness, people living in camps, compounds or rural areas. Delays in enumerating these people could also affect the population count.

Population and housing censuses are a primary source of data for producing statistical information on small areas and small population groups that are used to measure changes in a society, and to assess the efficiency of social and economic policies and programs over time and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda. The pandemic may affect some of the census measures in the current round, as migration patterns (both international and internal migration), and labor force and schooling activities were greatly impacted by the various restrictions implemented in most countries. Such impacts could reduce the comparability of census measures in the current round with those from previous rounds.

It is therefore crucial to carry out well-designed quality assessment and data analysis to understand whether population censuses conducted during the pandemic are of reasonably good quality and whether census measures were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The quality assessment would also examine which population groups have a high risk for under-coverage and how these groups are different from historically undercounted population groups. Furthermore, detailed data analysis is needed for communicating with users and making them aware of the impact of the pandemic on census results.

It should be noted that evaluation of the impact of changes in the design of census operations on the census quality will be very useful for understanding challenges in comparing census results with the results of previous censuses. Assessments and evaluations of census operations using appropriate methodologies, such as post enumeration survey and demographic methods, will help to ensure public confidence in the census results and inform future census planning efforts.

2. Objectives of the meeting

The Expert Group meeting aims to discuss potential problems of conducting censuses under the pressure of Covid-19 pandemic and their impact on the quality of census outputs. The meeting will provide a platform for exchanging experience and ideas on the benefits and challenges of redesigning census activities to respond to the effects of Covid-19 pandemic such as the adoption of new data collection modes for decreasing face-to-face interview, increasing the use of administrative data, changing census questionnaires or extending the duration of field enumeration. The meeting will discuss the need for contingency planning to improve the response rate by focusing on population groups that are at higher risk such as populations residing in institutions or collective living quarters and people experiencing homelessness. The meeting will also discuss potential challenges in comparing the results of censuses conducted during the pandemic with the results of previous censuses and the importance of communicating with users for informing them about the effects of the pandemic on census results.

The meeting will bring together census experts from NSOs, census agencies, international and regional organizations to explore good practices, challenges and lessons learned in conducting the 2020 round censuses during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Provisional work programme

Four -day virtual meeting will be held in 9-12 February 2021, scheduled from 8:00 am to 10:30 am New York time. Each day will focus on a specific topic.

DAY 1- THE IMPACT of COVID-19 PANDEMIC on CONDUCTING POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUSES

The results of global surveys on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the implementation of population and housing censuses

UNSD will present the results of the global surveys that were conducted in 2020 to compile information about the impact of the pandemic on census activities. The surveys asked questions on whether countries conducted or will conduct the current round of censuses as scheduled or delay the field enumeration. The surveys also collected information about the main challenges that countries are facing and how original census designs have been modified or are planned to be modified in response to the impact of the pandemic.

Major changes in the design of population and housing censuses due to the Covid-19 pandemic

This session aims to discuss the main difficulties in conducting censuses during the pandemic and how countries have modified the original activities to successfully implement census operation, focusing on census methodologies which require field work. This session will discuss what technologies or procedures used for reducing face-to-face interview and improving population coverage, such as: telephone interview and self-interview methods with online questionnaire or paper questionnaire; benefiting from administrative records; extending the duration of the enumeration; changing census questionnaires and collecting information from proxy respondents for households that are not reached during the field enumeration. This session will have extensive discussions on the benefits and challenges of redesigning census activities.

DAY 2 -DATA QUALITY CONCERNS

Assessment of data quality for censuses conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic

This session will discuss methods or approaches used for assessing the data quality, focusing on data collection and processing phases of census operation and what actions are implemented to improve the quality. Many countries are facing new challenges in enumerating their population. For example, implementation of social distancing rules could discourage people from participating in the census particularly if face-to-face interview is the only option available to them. Recent modifications in census procedures, such as introducing new data collection modes to reduce direct contact or extending the duration of enumeration may increase the risk of under-coverage of certain population groups. Furthermore, it might be more difficult to reach certain population groups such as people

living in institutional places and count people according to agreed definition of population when the duration of enumeration is extended.

This session will address methods or approaches countries have used or planning to use for assessing data quality and actions/procedures used or planning to be used for improve data quality during data collection and processing phases, particularly for improving the quality of the population count and reduce errors caused by the design changes/pandemic protocols. This session will discuss following questions: what methods are used for measuring under/over-coverage; what population groups are at high risk for counting; how countries benefitted from administrative records for improving the quality of the population count; how data collected partly from field work and partly from administrative records are merged; what methods are used for imputing non-responses, and how census reference time can be addressed in quality assessment when the duration of enumeration has been extended for several months.

DAY 3- CONSIDERATIONS FOR DATA ANALYSIS AND COMMUNICATION WITH USERS

Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on data analysis and comparability overtime

This session will discuss the potential challenges when comparing the results of 2020 round of censuses with previous censuses due to the impacts of the pandemic. The pandemic could affect some of census measures such as fertility and mortality, international and internal migration, labor force and schooling activities. Such impacts may create a significant deviation from previous censuses and could reduce comparability of census results over time. Analysis of census results become critically important for informing users about the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on census results. This session will discuss what census topics particularly will be affected and require special attention for data analysis. This session will also discuss the importance of establishing an effective communication programme to inform users about the impact of the pandemic on census measures and key messages targeting different types of census data.

DAY 4- LESSONS LEARNED and RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions and recommendations

This session will summarize the meetings discussions and provide a set of recommendations based on the outcomes of the discussions. Conclusions and recommendations will be drafted by UNSD and will be discussed by participants. The final outcomes of this meeting will be shared with all national organizations responsible for conducting 2020 round of censuses.

Way forward and closing