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Outcome of the in-depth review of household survey methods

In-depth review of household survey methods

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This note informs the Conference of European Statisticians of the outcome of the in-depth review of household survey methods conducted by the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians in November 2011. The in-depth review was based on a paper drafted by Canada with input from Australia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

The updated in-depth review paper is available in document ECE/CES/2012/4 and an overview of household survey methods in selected countries in document ECE/CES/2012/4/Add.2.

I. Introduction

1. The Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) reviews each year selected statistical areas in depth. The purpose of the reviews is to improve coordination of statistical activities in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), identify gaps or duplication of work, and address emerging issues. The review focuses on strategic issues and highlights concerns of statistical offices of both a conceptual and coordinating nature.

2. The paper entitled “In-depth review of household survey methods in different countries” provided the basis for the in-depth review by the Bureau in November 2011. It was drafted by Canada, with inputs from Australia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The Bureau also considered a note on household survey methods in Ukraine, a note on international initiatives and efforts relating to household survey methods by Eurostat and written comments on the in-depth review paper by UNECE. All these documents are available at the following website:

<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2011.11.bureau.htm>.

II. Conclusions of the in-depth review paper

3. The main purpose of the in-depth review paper was to identify issues for household survey methods in the UNECE region where further international coordination efforts would be beneficial. The paper described some of the distinctive features of household surveys, the issues and challenges that national statistical offices (NSOs) face in carrying them out, and the related international initiatives. A summary of the household survey methods used in selected countries is provided in a separate document.

4. The paper identified three key challenges related to household surveys: the effects of declining response rates on cost and quality, the deterioration of telephone frames due to rapid technological changes, and the increasing demands from data users. The automation of survey operations, the development of better address lists, the emergence of the Internet as a collection mode and the increasing availability of high quality administrative data were all identified as promising ways to address these challenges.

5. The paper invited the Bureau to consider establishing a task force to develop a work programme to address cross-cutting issues, update existing handbooks and to improve the sharing of information among NSOs and researchers on household survey methods.

III. Summary of the Bureau discussion

6. At the November 2011 meeting of the Bureau, the following points were raised in the discussion:

(a) One of the main challenges related to household surveys is their integration with other data sources. Surveys are no longer discussed as individual tools but as part of a data collection system. Eurostat and many NSOs are currently working in this direction. Another opportunity to discuss the issues related to household surveys is provided by the international fora on data collection methods, such as the High-level Group for Strategic Developments in Business Architecture in Statistics (HLG-BAS) and the first expert meeting on data collection to be organised by UNECE in autumn 2012;

(b) Integration of surveys and administrative sources raises new issues that deserve attention, such as the different treatment of data and new methods and information technology (IT) tools needed to integrate the data from different sources. Furthermore, census data are becoming an increasingly important benchmark against which survey results are verified. All this has implications for the improvement of knowledge of staff and organization of work;

(c) Development of guidelines or handbooks is a slow process while the area is changing rapidly. Reviewing handbooks is also considered of low priority for developed countries. Establishing a wiki on household survey methods looks more promising as it would permit identification of the gaps where to focus further efforts;

(d) Official statistics should make use of the important advances on household survey methods in academic research. There is room for closer cooperation with academia in this area;

(e) Many countries have progressed quickly with new methodologies such as web surveys and could share their experience and software. The modern approaches to household surveys could be further explored;

(f) It was noted that the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization and, until recently, the United Nations Statistics Division have been developing materials on survey methodology, primarily for less developed countries. There is a continuing need for guidance on traditional household survey methods in countries where labour cost is low while the cost of new IT tools is high.

IV. Conclusion

7. Household surveys are important building blocks of national statistical systems and they need to be better integrated with other sources. Some resources that allow further exploration of this integration already exist, but there is no single repository or entry point that links to all relevant resources. For the data collection expert meeting in 2012, the secretariat will prepare a list of available resources on this topic, such as web sites and international events, contacting the International Association of Survey Statisticians, the World Bank and other organizations as necessary.

8. UNECE is organizing a meeting on data collection in autumn 2012, which should deal with data collection through household surveys, among other topics. A decision on further activities related to household survey methods is therefore postponed until the end of 2012 when the meeting on data collection has taken place.
