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## United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

### Conference of European Statisticians

**Workshop on Measuring Poverty in Pandemic Times**  
Online, 25-26 March 2021

## Report of the Workshop on Measuring Poverty in Pandemic Times

### Note by the Secretariat

#### I. Attendance

1. The UNECE Workshop on Measuring Poverty in Pandemic Times was held online on Interprefy and Microsoft Teams platforms on 25-26 March 2021.
2. The workshop was attended by 32 participants from Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Uzbekistan.
3. Eight representatives of the following organisations participated in the meeting: Eurasian Economic Commission, European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU FRA), Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-Stat), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF).
4. The workshop is part of the United Nations Development Account (10<sup>th</sup> tranche) programme "Data and statistics".

#### II. Organization of the meeting

5. The workshop focused on countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (EECCA). It was held over two consecutive days, for 2 hours and a half each day. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Andres Vikat and Ms. Vania Etropolska of UNECE.
6. The following substantive sessions took place:

**Day 1: New approaches, methods and good practices of survey-taking in the pandemic context**

- Social surveys response to Covid-19: example of the United Kingdom

- Training interviewers in new methods and techniques in remote work conditions
- Methods to improve respondent engagement in online surveys
- Adapting household surveys for better measurement of poverty in the context of the pandemic

**Day 2: Disaggregated data to assess the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable**

- Application of recommendations of Poverty measurement: Guide to data disaggregation
  - Coverage of sampling frames (Recommendation 3)
  - Tailored data collection modes, online and mixed modes design (Recommendation 9)
  - Non-response adjustment and calibration of weights (Recommendation 17)

7. Participants were invited to fill in a short questionnaire prior to the workshop to ensure better understanding of the situation in their country. Work in breakout groups on how to improve coverage of hard-to-reach population took place on the second day of the meeting.

8. The discussion at the meeting was based on presentations available [on the UNECE website](#).<sup>1</sup>

### III. Summary of discussions

#### A. New approaches, methods and good practices of survey-taking in the pandemic context

9. This session consisted of contributions from the United Kingdom and Mr. Rafkat Hasanov (UNECE Consultant).

10. The discussions during the first day focused on the **new approaches and methods of survey taking**, including adaptation to the pandemic times, starting with the example of the United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (ONS). The participants also reflected on the results of the UNECE [study](#), launched in July 2020, on gathering practices of national statistical offices in adapting their household surveys to the Covid-19 crisis situation with respect to poverty measurement.

11. While the usual pre-pandemic format in most EECCA countries was CAPI + direct visits to respondents (face-to-face interviews), the **restrictions on face-to-face** interviews tightened with the deterioration of the epidemic situation. Face-to-face interviewing in the United Kingdom was paused when a national lockdown was declared on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 and for most surveys telephone interviewing started shortly afterwards. The ONS undertook several steps, among which was to adapt their questionnaire to telephone interviewing in consultation with the users and introduce new coronavirus-related questions. Such questions, for example, were on the impact of the Government aid on supporting people with reduced or lost pay during the pandemic, on the changes in the household income

<sup>1</sup> <https://unece.org/statistics/events/workshop/poverty2021>

since the start of the pandemic and the reasons for these changes, and on the time off work due to coronavirus and the pay during that time.

12. The need to collect timely and important **information on the impact of the virus on the society in the surveys** was also identified in other countries participating in the Workshop and concrete steps have been undertaken. In the autumn 2020, Kyrgyzstan deployed a survey on the impact of the pandemic on the households, using the respondents to the household budget survey (HBS). Starting from the 2nd quarter of 2020, the Republic of Moldova introduced a dedicated ad-hoc module to HBS on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the household. Russian Federation included a special chapter into the Panel Income Survey on the size of social support received due to the spread of pandemic. The program of the survey on labour migration in Ukraine, which will be conducted as part of the 2022 Labour Force Survey, mentions Covid-19 as one of reasons to why the respondent stopped traveling abroad and why he/she returned to Ukraine.

13. The ONS have developed **new surveys** in a very short time. For example, the Covid-19 infection survey, which monitors the Covid-19 infection rates in the population and follow people over a year. Another survey was on the experience of people aged 80 and over with vaccination against Covid-19. In addition, the ONS have run self-isolation studies to understand better whether people follow the introduced measures and on the impact of these measures on people's financial situation, work, mental health, etc.

14. **Telephone surveys** started or expanded in countries where they were already in use, although in most cases using the same pre-pandemic electronic questionnaires. Some countries like Armenia were already interviewing households by telephone, so there was no need to do many changes to data collection during the pandemic. Some other, such as Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, have moved to telephone interviewing during the pandemic.

15. Among the **challenges of telephone interviewing**, the experts noted the limited availability of respondents' telephones, the increase in the percentage nonresponse to telephone surveys or interruption of the survey before its completion, and respondents showing lower levels of trust in telephone interviewing. In some EECCA countries, the correspondence has moved via smartphones; data transmission from respondents, in the form of photocopies or scanned copies of paper questionnaires via Viber, WhatsApp, telephone or e-mail to regional NSOs. If telephone numbers of respondents were unavailable, the survey was not conducted, and information was counterbalanced by calibration of statistical weights.

16. The ONS had undertaken an extra effort to **move towards telephone interviews** during the pandemic. For example, they trained their face-to-face interviewers for interviewing over the phone and hired an external company to obtain respondent telephone numbers via administrative records. Once they had the phone number, the interviewers followed the same calling pattern as before Covid-19 - that is, they would try to contact each case 6 times during different times of the day and during different days, this time calling the phone numbers rather than visiting addresses. Texts messages were good to use in addition to interviewer letters due to delay with UK postal services due to Covid-19. Trust may be reduced when conducting phone interviews, therefore the interviewers were also encouraged to inform respondent what number they would call the respondent from and tell respondents that they can call the Head Office to verify the interviewer's work status.

17. The ONS introduced a new method called **knock-to-nudge**. When the interviewers perform knock-to-nudge they would gently encourage respondents to give their phone number or arrange an appointment by knocking on their door. Due to Covid-19 the conversation had to be socially distanced, and the interviewers would have to try to keep the conversation short. The approach is based on behavioural science where a small action could still have a big impact on other people's behaviour, in this case, a knock on the door to influence respondents to give their phone number and take part in the surveys. Seventy-eighty per cent of interviewers reported positive or 'normal' conversations (like before Covid-19) with respondents on the doorstep. This technique, for example, improved the response rate on the Survey of Living Conditions by 13 percentage points.

18. The overall objective is to make the data collection **as inclusive as possible**. It was therefore important for the ONS to observe that interviewing over the phone compared to face-to-face, obtained a large proportion of older people, people owning their own house, people in higher managerial positions and less families. Through knock-to-nudge, they captured more young people, families and people in rented accommodation but still more people in higher managerial positions. This information is used to develop the data weighting strategy.

19. Future data collection is likely to include multiple modes and multiple approaches to meet the respondents needs. The ONS is moving towards large **mixed mode surveys**, where respondents can choose whether to answer the survey online, via telephone or face-to-face. In November 2019, they started their first live online/telephone survey, the Opinions and Lifestyle survey. This survey was used in March 2020 to collect important information on the impact of the pandemic on society in the United Kingdom on a weekly basis. A very large online survey of the labour market was also set up very rapidly as a response to the pandemic in parallel to the current telephone labour force survey.

20. A key part to ensuring respondent engagement, is developing **effective advance materials**, for example invitation letters, instructions or templates of diaries and questionnaires. Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Ukraine and Russian Federation all noted that they send a letter addressing the households or instructions prior to the survey. In addition, the countries often provide information on the receipt of monetary compensation by respondents and on guarantees of protection of confidentiality of all data received from the respondent. Ukraine is sharing with the respondents the main results of the survey for the previous period. This was noted as a good practice example to engage respondents by showing that their response counts and that their contribution is important.

21. The ONS has **adapted their letters** to explain that the interviews would be happening over the phone and that information related to the pandemic would be collected. In the letter, they also asked respondents to provide their telephone number. In most other countries that participated in the workshop, however, the materials have not yet been changed or adapted to the new pandemic circumstances.

22. As in other countries, the **low response rates** in the United Kingdom during the pandemic have been a concern. To counteract the low response rates, the ONS has increased the sample sizes for some surveys. They also reviewed the incentives to encourage response and boost response rates, that is the amount of money or in-kind offers given to survey respondents. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan do not use incentives. Monetary incentives are used in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Russian Federation applies non-monetary incentives, e.g. notebooks, pens and other stationery.

23. Using different approaches, the ONS has **redesigned the questions** asked face to face by an interviewer, **for online mode**. For example, the question: “Did you do any paid work in the week ending Sunday the 21st March, either as an employee or self-employed?” went through 3 rounds of cognitive testing with the public, each time resulting in a slightly different design, before its final version: “Did you have a paid job, either as an employee or as self-employed, in the week Monday 15<sup>th</sup> March to Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2021?”, which led to more accurate replies by the respondents.

24. The session concluded with identifying **directions for further work** on adaptation of the household surveys in the context of the pandemic, including update of the UNECE recommendations on the harmonisation of poverty statistics, redesign of questionnaires and reduction of survey time, ensuring disaggregation on poverty measures, and increasing coverage.

## **B. Disaggregated data to assess the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable**

25. The session consisted of contributions from EU FRA, Austria, Netherlands, and Slovakia. It focused on selected recommendations from the UNECE guide [\*“Poverty measurement: Guide to data disaggregation”\*](#), published in January 2021.

26. EU FRA discussed ways to **assess and improve in practice the coverage for the hard to sample and reach populations groups** (Recommendation 3 of the Guide), such as the Roma, a group defined by ethnicity. The agency promoted the use of the principle of self-identification and noted that the majority of countries use census data as sampling frame for this population, e.g. by including Roma as one of the ethnicities listed in the census question on ethnical affiliation. In Hungary, in addition, there is also a question on the language used at home and the cultural identification. In Spain a non-governmental organization made a country wide mapping of Roma population to identify locations with Roma population. In Greece and Portugal, the sampling frames were based only on estimates made by experts. In countries where such sampling frames do not exist, the involvement of experts from the target population to work directly with the Roma population proved crucial to gain access to this group.

27. A **group exercise** on the coverage of hard-to-reach groups in EECCA countries led to valuable exchanges and findings. Several countries clarified that sampling is done among private households, therefore hard-to-reach groups, such as homeless are not captured. Belarus, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine noted that the high-income population are difficult to include in surveys as they are frequently reluctant to participate and their homes are difficult to access. Armenia, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation and Ukraine referred to complications in interviewing young families or population in big cities that are often not home, lack time, or hesitant to speak to unacquainted visitors. In general, the EECCA countries did not see difficulties in capturing groups defined by ethnicity.

28. The meeting further provided concrete support to countries in implementation of two more recommendations from the Guide: on **tailored data collection modes, online and mixed modes design** (Recommendation 9) and on **enhancing precision of survey results** (Recommendation 17). Statistics Austria shared experience on modernizing their survey infrastructure. The goal was to make it more cost effective and address the continuous decline in response rate (currently 48 % response rate compared to more than 60% only 5 years ago). Statistics Austria started experimenting with the use of mixed modes, including

telephone, media, and internet. They employed a mobile first approach to surveying and designed their work to be used on mobile devices. It was noted however that each mode is group specific and its success depends on the accessibility, motivation, trust, and the measurement error. They would therefore still use for example paper when surveying the elderly.

29. The experts agreed that a higher **response rate** should not be an aim by itself. What is also important is the representativity of the sample and its composition, i.e. if educated people for example are easier to survey, getting more responses from them (more of the same) will not improve the results. Lack of representativity, therefore, remains an issue, and more efforts should be devoted to make sure that people who live in poverty are represented in the survey.

30. Two freely available **practical software tools** were shared, one to help optimise survey designs by adjusting for non-response (presented by the Netherlands) and the another one on calibrating survey weights (presented by Slovakia). Reinforcing the use of such statistical techniques was especially appreciated since the restrictions to psychical contacts during the pandemic has largely affected the sample representativeness and the need to compensate for nonresponse and coverage error.

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