United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Workshop on Population and Housing Censuses

Geneva, Switzerland

18–19 September 2023

Report

Note by the Secretariat

I. Organization and attendance

1. This capacity development workshop on population and housing censuses was organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Financial support for the workshop was provided by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

2. The workshop was attended by participants from the following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Costa Rica, Georgia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Republic of Moldova, New Zealand, Slovakia, Tajikistan, the United States of America and Uzbekistan. The Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-Stat), United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) EECA Regional Office, UNFPA Belarus, UNFPA Republic of Moldova, UNFPA Kazakhstan, UNFPA Kyrgyzstan, UNFPA Turkmenistan, UNFPA Uzbekistan, University of Minnesota (United States of America) and the National Institute of Economic Research (Republic of Moldova) were also represented. Two companies from the private sector, namely the Sensible Code Company and Contour Components, took part in the workshop. An independent census expert attended at the invitation of the secretariat.

3.	The workshop took place immediately before the Meeting of the UNECE Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses (20-22 September 2023).

4.	The workshop programme and the slides used in the presentations are available in English and Russian on the <u>meeting page on the UNECE website</u>.

# II.	Purpose

5.	The two focus areas of the workshop were **dissemination** of census data, and **communication** with users and other stakeholders.

6.	The purpose of the workshop was to develop capacities in these two focus areas by:

   i.	providing participants with the opportunity to share and learn from each other's experiences in dissemination and communication during their censuses of the 2020 round (whether completed or in preparation)

   ii.	offering in-depth case studies from two countries outside the Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) region

   iii.	exploring possibilities posed by partnerships with the private sector for employing technological solutions for improved data dissemination

   iv.	examining and better understanding user perspectives on census data dissemination tools through a practical activity.

7.	The workshop was designed principally to benefit experts working on population and housing censuses in national statistical offices (NSOs) in countries of EECCA.

# III.	Summary of proceedings

A. Census plans and experiences, with a focus on dissemination and communication

8.	In this session, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia presented their plans for their upcoming censuses, and by UNFPA Turkmenistan and Armenia on the experiences of their recent censuses.

### 1.	Upcoming censuses

9.	The pilot census in the **Republic of Moldova** will take place at the end of September 2023. The timing of the census has been planned to avoid overlapping with a period of presidential elections. Some areas have already experienced challenges because of the timing of local elections. Data collection will take place using computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI).

10. In **Georgia** enumeration will begin with ten days of computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI), i.e. online self-response. This will be followed by 21 days of CAPI. Both collection modes will be tested during the pilot census in spring 2024.

11. Both countries have experienced developments in the **legislative basis for the census**. In the Republic of Moldova, the law on Population and Housing Census has been adapted for conducting register-based censuses in the country in the future. A new law on official statistics in Georgia entered into force in August 2023 following the Global Assessment of the Georgian statistical system.

12. Both countries will make use of **administrative data** to support their censuses. The Republic of Moldova will use administrative data at the data processing stage, including cadastre data on dwellings and population register data. They will also use the population register, which is available on a government platform providing data in real time. The statistical office needs to make imputations and estimates, however, e.g. to assign children to addresses. Georgia will use administrative data including border crossing data. They are planning to start developing a statistical population register in the coming year.

13. Both Georgia and the Republic of Moldova stressed **the importance of communication in census preparation**. Communication campaigns have a range of purposes including informing the public of the objectives of the census; the procedures and timing of the census; and what information they will need to provide. Effective communication can increase awareness of the census among the population, especially when targeted at specific groups such as ethnic minorities. This in turn can increase the level of participation. Communication is also a necessary aspect in promoting new methods such as changes in collection mode.

14. The Republic of Moldova will employ a detailed communications strategy with phases ranging from the planning and consultation stage, through informing, motivating and thanking, to the dissemination stage.

2. Recent censuses

15. The census of **Armenia** took place in October 2022 and the first results will be published by the fourth quarter of 2023. For the first time, the census was conducted using register data.

16. The census of **Turkmenistan** took place in December 2022 and initial results were published in July 2023. The census was conducted by enumerators using tablets.

17. Participants discussed the importance of ensuring the quality of registers prior to their use in a census, as well as techniques for assessing the quality of sample data.

18. Discussion also covered the methods of transferring data from enumerators' electronic devices to the central processing location, and the methods of ensuring data security.

19. Participants welcomed the availability of initial census results from Turkmenistan and noted the significance of this achievement. Questions remain regarding the inclusion in the published figures of citizens living outside the country. Further work will be required to foster increased public acceptance of the published results.

B. Dissemination of census results

20. This session began with a presentation from CIS-Stat summarizing the dissemination experiences in the censuses of countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Presentations of country experiences were made by **Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan**, **Kyrgyzstan** and **Tajikistan**, each of which showcased their current census data dissemination products or platforms. An in-depth example from beyond the EECCA region was offered by Mexico. Two case studies on dissemination tools were presented by private providers of data publication software.

21. Most of the CIS countries have already conducted their censuses and are currently entering the stage of dissemination of census results.

22. The 2020 census round in CIS countries can be characterized as a turning point in census methodology. The census model has become more complex. The traditional method, which is now characterized by a mix of modes for direct enumeration, has increasingly been combined with the use of administrative and register data. Alongside such changes, the methods and tools used for dissemination of data have evolved rapidly.

23. Dissemination of highly disaggregated census data has gained a new prominence, due to several influences including the demands of monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Dissemination of data on small territorial units is of particular importance, and in this regard reference was made to a Resolution of the recent *International Forum "Population Censuses: Challenges and Opportunities"*: "The results of the census should be publicly available, including the need to provide information on a territorial basis, including at the district (local) level.". At the same time, the importance was recognized of maintaining strict controls to ensure confidentiality when data are disseminated at this detailed level.

24. Inspired by the presentation from Mexico, participants discussed the importance of employing **a range of dissemination channels**, including websites, paper publications, press releases, press conferences, seminars and other events and interviews with experts. Each channel caters to different audiences and needs.

25. Similarly, offering **a variety of product types** in the mix of dissemination products was noted as a valuable strategy. This can range from thematic reports and visualizations to sample microdata. Making time-series data available from previous censuses can also add value to the disseminated current census data.

26. Discussion also touched on the topic of enumerating citizens who reside outside the country. While not considered usual residents and therefore not included in the population count produced for international comparison, some countries gather such information. Web-based self-reporting can facilitate this. It can have significant policy relevance in countries where a large share of citizens reside abroad, such as Mexico, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

27. The presentations from two software providers highlighted the advantages of using **flexible technology** to produce a very large number of custom-built products, while reducing the need for paper or other static tabulations and publications. A richness of visual and tabular output possibilities is matched by on-the-fly protection of confidentiality.

28. The **business models of partnerships between private sector entities and NSOs** were discussed, raising broader questions around licensing of commercial software, use of open-source code, sharing software among countries, and reuse of common internationally available tools. Participants expressed some concerns around confidentiality and public acceptance, which are likely to evolve as the use of such partnerships with the private sector become more common. It was noted that national statistical offices vary in the size and capacity of their staff, resulting in variation in the need to make use of external resources and skills, and in the need or ability to develop and retain such skills in-house.

29. The discussion led to the future, with questions around the potential for integrating dynamic software tools such as those displayed in the workshop with artificial intelligence chatbots, which could retrieve answers from census databases without the need for the user to manipulate census data themselves. Experts stressed that such developments, while very likely, must be well managed to avoid census data being misrepresented or misinterpreted. A well-managed approach could see census data and other official statistics being harnessed and given a central role in answering relevant queries.

C. Communication with users and other stakeholders

30. In this session a presentation of country experience was given by Belarus, and an in-depth example from beyond the EECCA region was given by the United States of America. A hands-on group

exercise was then conducted to enable participants to view dissemination platforms from the perspective of data users.

31. Belarus has conducted consultations with representatives of a wide range of stakeholder groups, including government bodies, mass media, universities, research centres and IT professionals, among others. One finding from these consultations was that the format and presentation of data, for example as visualizations, is important for improving their usability. Analysis of social media communications has also helped to shed light on the needs of users. Training workshops for statistical experts, who in turn go on to conduct regional training of others, is another useful form of communication.

32. In discussion, participants noted the importance of communicating planned releases dates to manage expectations. A census release calendar is an important communications tool for this.

33. Discussion also noted that while regular meetings with user groups are important, they do not necessarily cover all user groups. Other forms of feedback, including satisfaction surveys, can augment the picture.

34. It was noted that users in some countries continue to favour paper publications and 'official-looking' formats, and that concerted communications efforts are needed to ensure that interactive, online formats are trusted and given equal weight as official statistics by these more traditionally oriented users.

35. Discussing the pay-offs of the intensive communications strategies employed by the United States, participants touched on the complex questions about weighing the cost-effectiveness of communications interventions and, more broadly, the cost-benefit assessment of the resulting statistics. While budgets vary widely, in the United States the impacts of communications campaigns aimed at increasing participation—and especially of social media campaigns—are judged to be sufficiently great that the expense is deemed worthwhile. It was noted that different channels for communication have different impacts which vary by group, location and other factors. For some groups, radio continues to be a key communication channel, whereas movie streaming platforms promise to be central to future campaigns.

36. Participants also discussed the challenges entailed in promoting web-based self-response, and how this can be motivated through targeted communication. Facilitating response by incorporating a direct link from advertisements to the census form itself was key to the success of the US campaign.

37. For the practical exercise, participants were given the opportunity to experience the perspective of data users, by undertaking a task to locate and interpret data from the census dissemination platforms of a country (groups were assigned one country each, for a total of seven

countries). Participants discovered how challenging it can be to locate the information they need, even on some of the most highly regarded national dissemination platforms.

38. Sharing feedback with the rest of the workshop, common observations included the limitations of search functions; an 'overload' of both data and metadata, often making interpretation difficult even for experienced census experts; challenges in producing customized queries or tables that include only the variables of interest and exclude others; and challenges in narrowing the scope of queries to selected geographic areas.

39. Positive comments on some of the platforms related to the ability to download data selections easily; to produce and save customized visualizations such as maps; and the availability of key metadata such as definitions in multiple languages. Common suggestions for improvement across the various groups included presenting information and metadata in layers, to avoid overloading users in the first instance; and offering guidance to users in how to make use of the data.

40. Some participants commented that the practical exercise was useful and could be repeated in an adapted format within countries to aid user-informed development of their own dissemination platforms.

IV. Conclusions

41. Participants considered the workshop to be a valuable opportunity for learning from sharing knowledge and experience. The practical exercise was especially welcomed as a valuable aspect of the workshop. With a majority of the participating countries having conducted their census for the current round, the focus now turns to **ensuring effective dissemination of data**, as well as to **harnessing the learning from this round's experiences** to shape the ground for the 2030 round and beyond.