

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Approved

Meeting of the 2023/2025 Bureau
Geneva, Switzerland, 14-15 February 2024

Item III(c) of the Provisional
Agenda

**STEERING GROUP ON POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUSES: PROGRESS
REPORT**

Note by the Steering Group and the Secretariat

This report summarizes the progress made by the Steering Group and the 13 task forces established in 2021 under its auspices, the objective of which is to develop the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses of the 2030 round. The revised and updated Recommendations are planned to be issued in 2025, following CES endorsement.

The Bureau reviewed and approved the progress report.

I. BACKGROUND

1. The Steering Group was established by the CES Bureau in 2003. Its overarching objective is to coordinate, provide advice and contribute to the UNECE work programme on population and housing censuses, to support UNECE member countries in preparing and conducting censuses and in disseminating and communicating results in accordance with the CES Recommendations for Censuses of Population and Housing (2015) ('the Recommendations').
2. The Steering Group currently includes representatives of the following countries: Armenia, Belarus, Canada, France, Georgia, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America. CIS-Stat, Eurostat, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) also participate. The Group is currently chaired by the Netherlands.
3. The Group's current terms of reference were approved in January 2020 for a period of five years ([ECE/CES/BUR/2020/FEB/6/Add.1](#)). The activities and outputs foreseen in these terms of reference relate primarily to the development of new *CES Recommendations for Censuses of Population and Housing* to guide countries in their censuses of the 2030 round.
4. A work plan ([ECE/CES/BUR/2021/FEB/6](#)) and terms of reference ([ECE/CES/BUR/2021/OCT/5](#)) for a set of task forces through which to undertake this work were approved by the Bureau in February and October 2021, respectively.

II. PROGRESS ACHIEVED

5. The work plan identified four main tasks:

- (a) Establishing the task forces from among the expert community;
- (b) Developing and conducting a comprehensive survey of the practices and experiences of countries in their censuses of the 2020 round;
- (c) Analyzing the results of this survey in terms of their implications for developing the 2030 Recommendations;
- (d) Producing the fully revised edition of the Recommendations by 2025.

6. The first two of these tasks are now complete, in accordance with the planned schedule. Task (c) now forms the focus of activities for the first months of 2024.

A. Task Forces

7. The 13 task forces currently consist of 156 experts representing 34 countries¹, 10 United Nations entities and other international organizations² and two independent academic experts. This very rich diversity brings together not only census experts but also people working in subject-matter areas, such as labour statisticians, gender specialists, communications professionals and experts in geospatial information, data security and technology. This was an explicit goal in establishing the task forces and was the result of targeted and high-level efforts to recruit the necessary expertise to ensure the best possible representation in the groups, recognizing that the content of the Recommendations is not limited to census-specific considerations but covers all areas of the statistical business process.

8. The significant allocation of human resources to this effort is testament to the value being placed on this work (for instance between 9 and 12 representatives each from Canada, Ireland, Italy and Poland; and three task force chairs each from Canada and from Eurostat). The chairs of the 13 groups are representatives of Canada, Israel, Italy, Norway, Poland, United Kingdom (National Records of Scotland), United States, Eurostat and UNECE.

9. Establishing the task forces took some months, given that it coincided with the busiest period for many countries in their census cycle, especially in light of the delays brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The groups were in place and able to begin their work in earnest by the latter months of 2022.

10. All task forces presented a summary of their initial thinking about areas in need of attention, as well as the rationale for the content they each developed for the survey (see item B below), at the [September 2023 meeting of the CES Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses](#). This provided an opportunity to gather the suggestions of the wider census expert community on each of the 13 topics, as well as to seek their reactions to the task forces' proposed areas of focus.

B. Survey on country practices and experiences in censuses of the 2020 round

11. The task forces' first assignment in 2023 was to develop content corresponding to the scope of each group, for inclusion in a survey to be sent to all CES member countries. The task forces

¹ Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Mexico, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, Switzerland, Tajikistan, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America,

² CIS-Stat, Eurostat, International Labour Organization, UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, United Nations Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Eastern Europe and Central Asia Office, UNFPA Kyrgyzstan, UNFPA Moldova, UNSD, World Bank.

based their proposals for survey questions on an analysis of the current situation in their topic areas, taking into account any changes since the previous such survey in 2013.

12. The Steering Group reviewed all the proposed survey content contributed by the task forces and combined it into one questionnaire, which was implemented by the secretariat as an online survey. The Steering Group provided guidance on the overall questionnaire including some areas which are deliberately not covered by any of the task forces (a decision made at the time of selecting the themes for the 13 groups, as these are areas not considered to require an entire dedicated task force). These areas cover matters such as agriculture, educational characteristics, demographic characteristics, disability, census legislation, costs, outsourcing, problems, challenges and lessons learned, among others.

13. The questionnaire was translated into Russian thanks to the kind support of CIS-Stat. This was very valuable as it facilitated the participation of countries in which Russian is spoken, enabling the task forces and Steering Group to gather the experiences of a full range of countries. This will help ensure that the Recommendations are relevant to all parts of the region.

14. The survey was sent to countries at the end of September 2023, with a majority of responses received by early November. A small number of countries requested additional time and some remain willing to provide their responses but have not yet been able to do so. At the time of writing, responses have been received from 58 countries. These include not only UNECE member States but other CES countries, namely Australia, Brazil, Ecuador, Japan, Mexico and New Zealand. Basic information on census dates and main methodology has been obtained from a further four UNECE countries.

III. CURRENT AND FUTURE WORK

A. Analyzing survey results

15. The task forces have begun analyzing the responses to the survey, based on all those received by the end of December 2023. The secretariat has developed a dashboard using PowerBI which offers simple tables and graphical displays of responses to some of the key questions within each topic area. Task forces are also responsible for developing their own tabulations and graphics beyond those included in the dashboard.

16. Each group is tasked with studying the experiences of countries and determining what these experiences imply for the development of the Recommendations. For example, if a majority of countries report having deviated from a practice recommended in the 2020 Recommendations, such as not producing information on certain ‘core’ topics or not applying a classification exactly as specified, this may suggest that the recommended practice needs to be adjusted. The survey gathered information on reasons for departure from the Recommendations, and this information will help the task forces to understand what needs to change in the Recommendations and why.

17. The survey will also reveal whether there are practices followed by countries, or content areas on which census information is collected or produced, that are absent from or in need of expansion in the Recommendations. Two of the task forces—task force 1 on emergency preparedness and contingency planning, and task force 9 on sex and gender—are dealing with topics which are largely absent from the previous edition of the Recommendations. These task forces therefore gathered very detailed information on countries’ experiences, including many open-ended questions, and will be analyzing the responses at length to inform the formulation of entirely new sections of the Recommendations. Task force 11 on geospatial information and

small area statistics also gathered information intended to guide the development of a significantly expanded treatment of this topic in the revised edition.

18. Each task force is preparing a short analytical report on the survey results and the key conclusions they offer. Members of the Steering Group and the secretariat are doing the same for the areas not falling within the scope of any task force. These reports will be combined into one publication.

19. The purposes of the publication are twofold:

(a) First, it will serve as a transparent record of the rationale for changes to the content of the Recommendations as compared to the 2020 edition: it is important that any new, removed or substantially changed content is backed by evidence of why such changes were made. This will help those designing censuses in the future to understand why certain recommendations are made, and will ensure that CES endeavours to revise the guidance in the future are fully informed by an understanding of what has preceded them.

(b) Second, the publication will offer a means for end users to explore the census practices and experiences of countries. The main target audience is census staff in National Statistical Offices. Steering Group members have advised that they consult the previous publication to understand how other countries have tackled challenges similar to their own; to see which countries follow similar practices so that they can make contact and learn from one-another; and to understand trends across the region.

20. While drawing inspiration from the equivalent publication containing analysis of the results of the survey of countries during the last census round ([*Measuring Population and Housing: Practices of UNECE countries in the 2010 round of censuses*](#)), the Steering Group advises that the report should be shorter and less detailed this time, focusing on key messages. Members of the Steering Group shared their experiences in using the 2014 publication, with a view to determining the most suitable content and format for the new edition. It was decided that a paper/pdf publication continues to be essential, but should no longer be the 'primary' format. The PowerBI dashboard will play a central role and the report will be 'online first', with interactive possibilities allowing users to sort, filter and view country summaries.

21. *The Steering Group invites the CES Bureau members to offer their advice on necessary features, format and content of the analytical publication and online platform on country practices in the 2020 round of censuses.*

B. Developing the 2030 Recommendations

22. The task forces will combine their findings from the survey with their expert knowledge, including any changes in demand from policymakers and other users, changes in methodology and technology, new or revised statistical standards or related concepts and definitions, etc., to prepare proposed text for the 2030 Recommendations. Their proposals will be submitted to the 2024 meeting of the CES Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses, to be held in September 2024, where they will be discussed by the wider community of census experts. The Steering Group will do the same for areas not covered by a task force.

23. Feedback from the expert community will be incorporated into the proposals, before final draft Recommendations for the 2030 round of censuses are submitted to CES for the usual endorsement procedures in 2025.

24. As for the analytical report on survey findings, the Steering Group advises that the Recommendations publication should be modernized. While hard copy and pdf formats remain indispensable for users in some contexts, the primary format should be designed with online use at the forefront. Users are likely to expect extensive cross-referencing with hyperlinks to aid navigation; easy links to all concepts and definitions; and a more visually appealing online format. The task forces have also been instructed to prepare simpler text than previous editions, to highlight key points and to give chapters clear structure to better aid readers in locating the information they seek. Task forces have been asked to give each chapter a short abstract noting key recommendations, and to identify all definitions and classifications by including them in boxes. All figures and diagrams will be reviewed and harmonized for improved visual appeal.

25. A simpler linguistic tone will help readers of all languages to better understand what is recommended, and to distinguish observations from recommendations. It will also facilitate accurate translation into Russian and French (which will be prepared by UNECE) and any other language into which countries may wish to translate the Recommendations.

26. The Steering Group invites the CES Bureau members to offer their advice on the style and format of the 2030 Recommendations, including any essential features of an online format, bearing in mind that the Recommendations will continue to be in force until publication of a subsequent revision in 2035.

IV. IMPORTANT POINTS FOR THE ATTENTION OF THE BUREAU

A. Topics generating significant discussion

27. The deliberations so far among the task forces, and the discussions that took place at the 2023 meeting of the Group of Experts, have revealed numerous areas for development in the Recommendations. Noteworthy among these is **the importance of ensuring adequate guidance for all census models**, ranging from full field enumeration to fully register-based, and acknowledging the very wide and growing diversity of models that combine field enumeration with the use of administrative data sources. Task force 3 on enumeration methods is currently engaged in detailed discussions around the classification of different census models, and how best to organize the Recommendations to reflect the chosen typology. There is a feeling that **the current classification of ‘traditional/combined/register-based’** is no longer fully satisfactory, at least if not accompanied by a more detailed second-level classification. Not only are there concerns about the terms used (e.g. it is proposed to refrain from using the word ‘traditional’ as it is not value-neutral), but there are also suggestions that the ‘combined census’ category contains such a large diversity of census models that it no longer serves as a useful category for understanding patterns and trends in census practices among countries.

28. Another topic that has generated notable interest in the task forces’ discussions so far is the matter of **daytime and workplace population counts**. Further areas of discussion include, among others, the **definitions and time period for determining usual residence and place of usual residence**; the relationship between censuses and Labour Force Surveys as sources of data on **economic activity**; the role of censuses in providing information on **migration and mobility**; and the unique challenges for register-based censuses in identifying **households**.

B. Coherence between development of regional and global census guidance

29. UNSD is the custodian of the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, a global guide for censuses in all countries of the world. The revision of this document is also currently underway, following a similar process as the CES work based on expert review

by a series of task teams under the auspices of an Expert Group. This group met in person in December 2023. Recognizing the significant overlap in content between the two documents, UNSD and UNECE are working together closely and participating in each-other's groups. Several Steering Group members and task force members are also represented in the UNSD task teams. The aim of this mutual participation is to avoid duplication of effort as well as to avoid the possibility that divergent conclusions or recommendations are reached in the two processes. Where definitions and classifications are used, where strong recommendations are made, and where countries are urged to produce census information on topics designated as 'core' topics, it could be confusing for the two documents to offer contradictory guidance unless there are clear justifications and explanations of the differences.

30. It is recognized, however, that the CES Recommendations may diverge on some points since the CES region is unique in terms of the distribution of census models (namely the large number of fully and partially register-based censuses), the level of statistical maturity in census-taking and in other statistical areas, and the economic and social conditions of the populations being enumerated. For instance, the Principles and Recommendations contain significantly more detail on the technical processes to be followed for traditional enumeration, and they detail a number of topics which CES countries are unlikely to include in censuses since they have more suitable sources for the information (detailed information on fertility, mortality and nuptiality, housing conditions and agriculture, for example). Hence some topics that are designated as 'core' topics in the global Principles and Recommendations may be absent from the CES Recommendations, or listed as 'non-core'. Conversely, the CES 2030 Recommendations are likely to contain more emphasis on the use of registers and other administrative sources, the use of technology and geospatial information, a more detailed treatment of quality assessment and management, and the use of modern approaches to communication and outreach.

31. The Steering Group is also guided by the need for the CES Recommendations to be coherent with the census requirements applicable to European Union (EU) countries. Every effort will be made to ensure that what is recommended in the CES document will facilitate EU countries in complying with EU census legislation, to the extent possible.

V. ACTIONS REQUESTED FROM THE BUREAU

32. **The Steering Group invites the Bureau to:**

- (a) comment on the work accomplished and underway;**
- (b) comment on the linkages between the regional and global projects to revise and develop census guidance;**
- (c) offer suggestions for the content, format and functionality of the two products: (1) analytical report on country practices in the 2020 round, and (2) 2030 Recommendations.**

* * * * *