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Items for discussion and decision: household surveys

Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2022/324 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys. It contains a summary of the recent work of the Group, including: (a) its paper entitled “Positioning household surveys for the next decade”, which will guide the work of the Group in planning its activities and in supporting countries; (b) the activities and outputs of the Group under three major mandated pillars, namely, coordination, methodological development and advocacy; (c) the conclusions of the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Innovative Methods to Measure the Impact of COVID-19 on Mortality through Surveys and Censuses, a joint effort by the Statistics Division and Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and New York University Abu Dhabi, supported by the Working Group; and (d) the proposed programme of work of the Group.

The Commission is invited: (a) to endorse the paper entitled “Positioning household surveys for the next decade”; (b) to review the progress made by the Group in its work and provide guidance on its activities and outputs; and (c) to review and provide guidance on the programme of work of the Group.

* E/CN.3/2023/1.



Report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys

I. Introduction

1. In its decision 46/105, adopted at its forty-sixth session, in 2015, the Statistical Commission endorsed the establishment of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys, under the aegis of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat to foster the coordination and harmonization of household survey activities.

2. In the present report, the Working Group describes its work carried out in 2022. Section II contains a summary of the paper entitled “Positioning household surveys for the next decade”, which will guide the future work of the Group and its support to countries. Section III contains a summary of the activities and outputs of the Group under three major pillars: coordination, methodological development and advocacy and communication. In section IV, the Group provides an update on the conclusion from the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Innovative Methods to Measure the Impact of COVID-19 on Mortality through Surveys and Censuses, a joint effort of the Statistics Division and Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and New York University Abu Dhabi, with support from the Working Group. In section V, the Group outlines its programme of work for 2023. Action to be taken by the Commission is set out in section VI.

II. Positioning household surveys for the next decade

3. As the worrying multitude of overlapping crises, such as climate change, global health and economic crises and conflicts, threaten the progress made in eliminating poverty and in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the need to measure the impacts of shocks on households and individuals and to gain a better understanding of their adaptation strategies and resilience is greater than ever. Nevertheless, national statistical offices in low- and middle-income countries struggle to meet that ever-growing data demand. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) further exposed the vulnerability of household surveys, as almost all countries temporarily stopped data collection in May 2020.

4. To support countries in transforming household survey systems in response to future crises, the Working Group prepared a position paper entitled “Positioning household surveys for the next decade”, in which it identified eight technical priority areas for household surveys to overcome existing challenges, adapt to the changing data ecosystem, meet the ever-increasing demand for data, and increase development policy and research impact in the remaining years under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The priority areas were chosen on the basis of three primary criteria: (a) areas that have been proved to be successful or to have great potential for making a medium-term impact; (b) areas that serve to both build a strong data foundation and expand the frontier for research and development; and (c) areas that are more likely to benefit low- and middle-income countries as the key users of the document.

5. The eight priorities identified are: (a) enhancing the interoperability and integration of household surveys; (b) designing and implementing more inclusive, respondent-centred surveys; (c) improving sampling efficiency and coverage; (d) scaling up the use of objective measurement technologies; (e) building capacity for computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) and mixed-mode

surveys; (f) systematizing the collection, storage and use of paradata and metadata; (g) incorporating machine learning and artificial intelligence for data quality control and analysis; and (h) improving data access, discoverability and dissemination. For each priority area, a short summary of recent developments and advances is provided, based on a review of academic literature and country experiences. Suggestions are offered for next steps, ranging from improving the basic survey data infrastructure for telephone, web and mixed-mode surveys, to conducting experiments to develop and validate improved and scalable innovative survey methods.

6. Although the financial, technological and human resources required to adopt recommendations in each priority area vary across countries, the position paper is intended to guide countries in their weighing of priorities as they pursue innovations for improving and transforming their household survey systems.

7. The paper is also aimed at helping the Working Group to provide guidance and support to countries in producing the data needed to fully implement the 2030 Agenda and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. To that end, the Working Group presents the key elements of enabling environments, at the national and international levels, that can best support household survey systems in producing more and higher-quality survey data that are affordable and responsive to policy needs.

8. A version of the position paper was published in the *Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics* (IAOS).¹ The paper is also available to the Commission as a background document.

III. Work accomplished and ongoing activities

9. The work of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys is carried out through task forces that are organized around three major pillars: (a) coordination; (b) methodological development; and (c) advocacy and communication.

A. Coordination

10. Poor coordination of international support and unpredictable funding of a short-lived and ad hoc nature have been identified as being among the key challenges associated with household surveys (see E/CN.3/2015/10). Failing to address those challenges leads to inefficient use of resources for data collection in a country. The establishment of the Working Group enabled its members to collaborate on and coordinate various activities carried out by the Group. For example, between 2017 and 2019, the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILO) jointly led an extensive pilot programme in collaboration with the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, to undertake a comparative test of results from a labour force survey-type questionnaire and a multi-topic living standards questionnaire, with both designed to apply the latest international statistical standards adopted at the nineteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians. Detailed findings have been published jointly by the agencies along with the related guidance and measurement support tools.²

¹ Calogero Carletto and others, “Positioning household surveys for the next decade”, *Statistical Journal of the IAOS*, vol. 38, No. 3 (August 2022), pp. 923–946.

² See www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_818313.pdf and <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/336141630489348107/employment-and-own-use-production-in-household-surveys-a-practical-guide-for-measuring-labor>.

11. In addition, with the objective of fostering coordination of household survey operations, a task force on survey coordination was established, led by ILO and the Statistics Division. The task force carried out an exercise with five countries (Canada, Costa Rica, Ghana, Ireland and Samoa) and a subregional statistical office (Statistics of Development Division of the Pacific Community) to document good practices in and challenges to building a coordinated and efficient household survey programme at the national and regional levels.

12. The five countries covered in the exercise were selected to ensure as much diversity as possible in the following aspects: (a) geographical distribution; (b) level of statistical development; and (c) the set-up of the national statistical system in terms of the degree of centralization of statistical activities within the country. It is well understood that national statistical systems and household survey systems vary greatly across countries. It is therefore not possible to generalize on the basis of the experiences of only five countries. However, lessons learned from the five countries examined offer some insights on good practices and challenges, as well as on what might help to improve household survey system coordination.

13. As a subregional statistical office, the Pacific Community has been successful in coordinating household survey work with countries in the region. The experience of the Pacific Community could benefit other regional organizations that would like to coordinate household survey activities in their respective regions.

14. The following draft documents were produced by the task force and will be available on the website of the Working Group in January 2023:³ (a) individual reports for each of the participating entities; and (b) a consolidated report, including a set of key lessons learned for countries to move towards a coordinated and harmonized household survey programme. Work carried out by the task force will inform further discussions and work, both within countries and at the global level, on the coordination of household survey activities, through communication and advocacy activities undertaken by the Working Group.

15. Other activities carried out by the task force include: (a) piloting the compilation of a calendar of national household surveys with tentative survey plans to facilitate the coordination of support from international agencies and development partners; and (b) facilitating the discussion of coordinated efforts on household surveys among various partners.

16. The Working Group is also collaborating with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to carry out a project on assessing household survey systems in the following five pilot countries: Indonesia, Namibia, Peru, the Republic of Moldova and South Africa. The project is aimed at assessing existing household survey systems to identify challenges to and priority areas for improving household survey systems so that they can better perform their foundational roles, meet new data demands and increase their impacts on development policy and research for the 2030 Agenda. Such assessments are also an integral part of the “SDG Integration” initiative and pilot implementation project led by UNDP.⁴ A questionnaire has been developed for the project, to guide the conversation with national statistical offices and enable the development of case studies on country experiences on the issues of coordination of household survey systems and data gaps in monitoring progress with regard to the Goals. The final report will be prepared by the end of 2022, to provide a summary of the assessment, lessons learned and emerging good practices and to support the later acceleration dialogues under the initiative for all five countries.

³ See <https://unstats.un.org/iswghs>.

⁴ See <https://sdgintegration.undp.org>.

B. Methodological development

17. With the support of its members and non-member partners, the Working Group has carried out various methodological work, including on survey documentation, survey microdata dissemination, COVID-19 survey responses, respondent-centred survey design and data integration (small area estimation).

Standards and best practices for survey data documentation

18. Many statistical agencies have endorsed the Generic Statistical Business Process Model, under which the production of metadata is defined as an overarching requirement. However, investments in the production, dissemination and use of metadata, and in enabling and promoting the secondary use and repurposing of data, have not been on par with the attention and resources devoted to data collection and production. A survey of national statistical offices conducted in 2021⁵ indicated strong interest in addressing this issue. Most national statistical offices (86 per cent in low and lower-middle-income countries) identified strengthening the compilation and dissemination of metadata as their top priority for supporting the adoption of open data principles and practices.

19. To support countries in better survey documentation, a guidance note on standards and good practices for survey data documentation⁶ was produced by the World Bank for the Working Group. The note is focused on the production, dissemination and use of metadata to ensure the visibility and discoverability of survey microdata, as well as their usability and credibility. The note includes arguments for rich and structured metadata and recommendations to adopt the Data Documentation Initiative Codebook metadata standard, establish a community of practice around open standards and tools and establish a research programme on data discoverability (recommender systems and semantic searchability). An action plan is proposed for the international community to support the broad and rapid adoption of the Codebook, and possibly other metadata standards, and the improvement and harmonization of data documentation and dissemination practices.

Household survey microdata dissemination

20. The value of household surveys increases with the dissemination of microdata. Despite the availability of various tools and manuals on microdata dissemination, microdata from household surveys are not always disseminated – or disseminated following recommended practices. The task force for household survey microdata dissemination has prepared the following four papers, which will be made available on the website of the Working Group in January 2023, on the microdata dissemination environment in low- and middle-income countries and the dissemination activities of international organizations:

(a) **National statistical laws as an enabling environment for survey microdata dissemination.** This paper contains an overview of national statistical laws for more than 160 countries and identifies similarities and differences across countries with regard to data confidentiality and microdata dissemination;

(b) **Microdata dissemination by low- and lower-middle-income countries.** This paper contains a summary of the availability and restrictions on the use of survey and census microdata held in international and national data repositories, with an emphasis on those of low- and lower-middle-income countries;

⁵ See <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/826351643712794722/pdf/Survey-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Cape-Town-Global-Action-Plan-for-Sustainable-Development-Data.pdf>.

⁶ Available as a background document.

(c) **National practices on household survey microdata dissemination.** This paper contains an examination of the practices of and challenges experienced by national statistical offices in disseminating household survey microdata. The paper was prepared in collaboration with the London School of Economics and Political Science, on the basis of desk research and focus group discussions with Costa Rica, the United Republic of Tanzania, Viet Nam and the State of Palestine;

(d) **Microdata dissemination practices of international organizations and other partners.** This paper contains a review of the microdata dissemination and data-sharing practices of international organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Health Organization (WHO), ILO and the World Bank, and of academic, civil society and partnership organizations, such as the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, International, the International Food Policy Research Institute, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

21. In its stocktaking exercise, the task force identified a number of challenges for countries to improve the dissemination of survey microdata, such as a lack of financial resources, a lack of consistent standards and insufficient technical capacity to anonymize and disseminate microdata. The findings of its studies will be summarized in a consolidated paper in which it reviews lessons learned and directions for future work.

COVID-19 and household surveys

22. Through its task force on COVID-19 and household surveys,⁷ the Working Group continues to support countries that have faced significant challenges in household survey operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The web portal,⁸ created in June 2020, has been updated regularly with details of COVID-19 impact surveys from more than 800 surveys supported by Working Group members for 180 countries. The portal has been helpful in facilitating the coordination of COVID-19 impact surveys within countries.

23. In response to national requests and concerns over the quality of remote data collection during the pandemic, the task force, in collaboration with the Statistics Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), produced a document entitled, “Guidance note on assessing and minimizing the impact of a crisis on survey quality approaches learned from the COVID-19 pandemic”. In the note, the task force documents changes that were introduced to national survey operations during the pandemic, including with regard to the mode of data collection and, as a result, to the availability of sampling frames, as well as questionnaire design and other changes, such as training, supervision, quality assurance processes and data collection and processing protocols. Methods to assess and reduce the impact of COVID-19 on survey data quality are also covered.

24. As a key lesson learned from the pandemic, as highlighted in the guidance note, countries are encouraged to start incorporating experimentation and piloting to test the impact of potential changes in data collection as a part of its regular survey operations, in order to tease out the real impact of changing data collection modes. Although the discussions are in the context of COVID-19, the note is relevant in a broader context when survey operations are interrupted by a crisis and need to be

⁷ The terms of reference of the task force is available at <https://unstats.un.org/iswghs/ToR-COVID-TF-Final.pdf>.

⁸ See <https://unstats.un.org/iswghs/BlogDetails/covid-19-impact-surveys>.

adapted, and would help in formulating new ways of thinking, planning and using household surveys on the basis of lessons learned during the pandemic, not only to be prepared for future crises, but also to improve the general operation of the household survey system, for example, by lowering costs through remote data collection. The guidance note is provided as a background document.

25. Under the aegis of the task force, a number of webinars were organized on topics related to COVID-19 and household surveys, in collaboration with various partners, including the Statistics Divisions of ECLAC and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, the World Bank and the Global Network of Data Officers and Statisticians.⁹

26. When changing data collection approaches or innovating towards more novel data collection approaches, such as mobile telephone and web surveys and the expanded use of artificial intelligence, it is crucial to ensure inclusiveness of data collection among marginalized population groups, such as migrants, persons with disabilities and older persons. In that context, the task force will continue its work in offering guidance to support countries in the implementation of more inclusive data collection, to ensure that innovations do not inadvertently result in the exclusion of or harm to the most marginalized population groups.

Respondent-centred design

27. Falling response rates increasingly affect household surveys and undermine data quality; moreover, requests for more inclusive survey processes have increased tremendously. In response, a task force on respondent-centred design, led by the Office for National Statistics of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, has initiated its work on more inclusive questionnaire designs using the innovative respondent-centred design approach. The task force aims to build on the work already conducted by the Office on the topic, while incorporating experiences from countries with different household survey systems. The task force has completed its first round of consultations through focus group discussions to solicit interest and input from countries. Several themes have been identified through the focus group discussions, which included representatives of 26 national statistical offices and six international organizations. Those themes will help to shape the priorities of the task force. A core group with countries representing different regions and levels of statistical infrastructure will take forward those priorities in 2023, with the expectation that different products to help countries to adopt respondent-centred design will be delivered later in the year. More information about the task force and its deliverables is available online.¹⁰

Small area estimation

28. Small area estimation techniques have been proved to be useful in providing reliable disaggregated data for Sustainable Development Goal indicators, such as poverty, food insecurity and undernutrition, health-related indicators and unemployment rates. Guided by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and the Working Group, the Statistics Division has continued to incorporate new case studies and materials into the toolkit on small area estimation for the Sustainable Development Goals,¹¹ which was made available in February 2022.

⁹ See <https://unstats.un.org/iswghs/Events>.

¹⁰ See <https://unstats.un.org/iswghs/TaskForcesDetails/inclusive-survey-rcd>.

¹¹ See <https://unstats.un.org/wiki/display/SAE4SDG/SAE4SDG>.

29. The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in collaboration with the ECLAC Statistics Division and the United Nations Population Fund, is developing an e-learning course on small area estimation for the Sustainable Development Goals. The course will consist of 10 modules with more than 50 videos covering key aspects of small area estimation for Goal-related data disaggregation and materials also covered by the toolkit. The course will offer a combination of technical lessons and hands-on exercises to ensure that trainees gain the capacity to produce small area estimates independently. Trainees will be able to take the course at their own pace or through guided learning, supported by a trainer. The course will be available in English, French and Spanish on the website of the Working Group.

C. Advocacy and communication

30. As indicated in the position paper described in section II, the Working Group is tasked with: (a) fostering the exchange of national experiences and innovative methods through various channels; (b) collaborating with key partners, including national statistical offices, civil society organizations and research institutes, with other communities of data sources, such as geospatial data, citizen-generated data, administrative data and censuses, and with the private sector, in order to stay informed of the latest developments and have access to experts in the field; and (c) organizing meetings and workshops to advocate in favour of innovative approaches. In that context, the Working Group has carried out the activities set out below.

Facilitating the exchange of national experiences and innovative methods

31. With regard to the exchange of national experiences and innovative methods, the Working Group has:

(a) **Organized regular webinars with various partners on innovative approaches to data collection.** Through those webinars, covering such topics as COVID-19 responses, data integration, inclusive survey design, sampling and mixed-mode data collection, expert speakers have contributed to discussions on innovative approaches and fostered conversations among countries; webinars organized by the Group in 2022, in collaboration with its partners, have reached more than 3,000 participants from a diverse range of data communities;

(b) **Provided access to inventory of guidance materials through the Group's new website.** The Working Group is revamping its website to serve as a key entry point for countries to gain access to metadata and related survey methodologies for all household survey-relevant Sustainable Development Goal indicators, which helps to ensure broader outreach of training and guidance materials on household surveys produced by the Group and its members and to facilitate access to methodologies associated with Goal indicators for which data can be collected through household surveys;

(c) **Participated in all major global and regional conferences.** The Working Group has made efforts to be represented at major conferences and forums on topics related to household surveys and the integration of survey data with other data sources. These include, for example, Statistical Commission side events, the United Nations World Data Forum, the World Statistics Congress, the International Forum on Migration Statistics, the Independent Conference of the International Association for Official Statistics and the Small Area Estimation Conference. Its active participation in those events help the Working Group to broaden its advocacy and outreach.

Connecting with Member States

32. In 2021, a survey was carried out with national survey focal points and a larger stakeholder network that Working Group has maintained, to gather their input on the work of the Group, including the Group's communication strategies, the relevance of its work and suggested areas of work for the Group. The results of the survey showed that more than 90 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the frequency and content of communications from the Working Group. Many indicated that the availability of guidance and webinars have helped to keep them abreast of the latest developments in survey methodologies and have fostered networking and the sharing of experiences. Moving forward, respondents would like to see more information on the availability of methodological work and training opportunities. Feedback such as this from countries and the wider community will help the Group in formulating its programme of work.

33. Since 2021, the Working Group has established a network of survey focal points at national statistical offices, with the dual aim of: (a) facilitating communication by the Group with countries on recent developments in survey methodologies, national practices and meetings; and (b) seeking guidance on recent developments and initiatives on household surveys in countries and on capacity-building needs. The network currently has representatives of more than 100 countries. Furthermore, the Group's membership expanded in 2022, with the addition of South Africa and the United Kingdom.

IV. United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Innovative Methods to Measure the Impact of COVID-19 on Mortality through Surveys and Censuses

34. As part of its work on focusing on innovative topics for its methodological work, as set out in the section II of the position paper, the Working Group has agreed to support experimentation and pilot projects with innovative approaches, focusing in particular on data integration. In that context, the Group has collaborated with the Statistics Division, the Population Division and New York University Abu Dhabi to address the need to fill the gap on timely adult mortality data during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the Group supported the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Innovative Methods to Measure the Impact of COVID-19 on Mortality through Surveys and Censuses, held at the Abu Dhabi campus of New York University, from 23 to 25 August 2022, under the guidance of the Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment established by WHO and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and, in particular, its working group 2 on the use of surveys and censuses to fill data gaps, chaired by Stephane Helleringer.

35. Meeting participants covered challenges in the production of timely and reliable data on adult mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic in countries that do not have a well-functioning civil registration system. They also discussed ways to improve adult mortality data collection in terms of quality, availability and timeliness and to generate data from surveys and censuses and by integrating data sources that could be used to measure the impact of epidemics, pandemics and other disasters on adult mortality. Actions and road maps to support countries in implementing new solutions and in adopting innovative approaches were also covered in meeting discussions.

36. Meeting participants highlighted that population censuses and surveys cannot be a substitute for a fully functioning civil registration system.¹² In the immediate term, where civil registration systems are limited, innovative solutions and approaches provided an opportunity to make the best use of data from surveys, censuses and other new data sources to estimate mortality among both children and adults in countries where such systems are still incomplete or unreliable. The final report of the Expert Group Meeting is provided as a background document.

37. As follow-up to the Expert Group Meeting, a community of practice has been established, as a space for: (a) sharing and curating knowledge and experiences through peer-to-peer exchanges and learning in collecting adult mortality data through household surveys, censuses and integrated data for countries without reliable civil registration systems; and (b) identifying areas requiring further methodological development, including testing and piloting; and (c) developing guidance, as needed. The community of practice is open to all experts interested in contribution to this stream of work. Initial in-kind and financial support will be provided by the Working Group, New York University Abu Dhabi and the ESCAP Statistics Division.

V. Programme of work

38. The Working Group will continue to strengthen its work under the three major pillars, coordination, methodological development and advocacy and communication. Work carried out by the Group will follow the principles set out below:

(a) **Setting priorities that are guided by countries.** The Group will continue to strengthen its engagement with national statistical offices and ensure that its work is aligned with national priorities and guided by country needs and best practices at the national level. A new round of surveys was initiated at the end of 2022 with the network of national survey focal points, the outcomes of which will be used to further guide the work of the Group;

(b) **Focusing on innovative topics for its methodological work.** This activity would be guided by the technical priorities set out in the position paper described in section II of the present report. The Group will also encourage and support experimentation and pilot projects on innovative approaches, including data integration, in order to: (a) establish systematic empirical evidence within countries; and (b) serve as a proof of concept for methodological development;

(c) **Fostering the exchange of experiences and innovative methods.** This would be done through webinars, training workshops, conferences and blogs;

(d) **Broadening outreach and collaboration with partners.** Those partners include national statistical offices, civil society and academia, as well as other data communities that address such topics as administrative data, censuses, geospatial data and citizen-generated data. The Group will also further its collaboration with regional commissions and other regional and subregional organizations and establish a technical advisory group, to which it will invite key experts for their strategic advice.

¹² At its fifty-first session, the Statistical Commission urged all countries to fully implement the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, a holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management and the only mechanism to ensure universal registration of all vital events, translated into comprehensive fertility and mortality statistics and conferring legal identity to all from birth to death.

VI. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

39. **The Commission is invited:**

- (a) **To endorse the paper entitled “Positioning household surveys for the next decade”;**
 - (b) **To review the progress of work done by the Group;**
 - (c) **To review and provide guidance on the programme of work of the Group.**
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