

Statistical Commission
Forty-ninth session
6 – 9 March 2018
Item 3(d) of the provisional agenda

Background document
Available in English only

Funding Proposal for Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Survey

Prepared by Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Survey

Fostering Methodological Advances and Improving Global Coordination in Household Surveys:

a Funding Proposal for the UNSC Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys

February 2018

I. Background

1. **The Sustainable Development Goals and the United Nations’ call for a ‘Data Revolution’ require a concerted effort by countries and development partners to invest in data production and to better measure key indicators.** The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprise a total of 169 targets and over 200 indicators. The need to monitor progress towards the SDGs calls for a transformation in how countries and the international community invest in data production. Multiple data sources are needed to meet the massive demand that monitoring the development goals places on already overstretched national statistical systems. While countries are responsible for leading their individual efforts towards achieving and monitoring the SDGs, it is a fundamental obligation and a sound investment for international agencies and development partners to support countries in improving the data underlying the SDG indicators and their investment and policy efforts, while also fostering greater coordination at the global level. Especially, the international community has the unequivocal responsibility to scale up its efforts to ensure that global standards and best practices for the collection, calculation and dissemination of SDG data and indicators are developed and adopted by countries in a consistent and equitable manner, particularly for those indicators for which agreed definitions and data collection methodologies do not yet exist.

2. **Household surveys are the only way of monitoring many of the SDG indicators, and are essential for informing development policies and programs.** While statistical systems in developing countries are expected to progressively leverage other sources of data like administrative datasets or Big Data, household surveys will continue to remain a cornerstone of the national and global data architectures to monitor and understand the drivers of poverty and other development outcomes. Statistical sources like household surveys can also provide a unique validation tool for those alternative data sources like Big Data, which often lack statistical representativeness.

3. **At its 46th session in 2015, the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) recognized household surveys as a priority in the global statistics agenda.** Following the presentation of the “Report on improving household surveys in the post-2015 development era: issues and recommendations towards a shared agenda”, the **Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys (ISWGHS)** was established by the UNSC with the mandate to foster the coordination and harmonization of global household survey activities and standards. The objectives of the ISWGHS are the following:

- Promote the development and harmonization of household survey methodologies towards scaling up the collection of SDG data and beyond;
- Foster the use of common standards and methods;

- Encourage documentation and dissemination of survey metadata and data;
- Promote the use of survey data for policy research and for compiling SDGs indicators;
- Develop partnerships for capacity development.

4. **The ISWGHS is a significant step forward for household surveys, and it is meant to be a major contribution to improvements in the quality, accessibility and timeliness of survey data, especially in low-income countries.** Surveys continue to be conducted in an ad-hoc, donor-driven manner. Relevance and timeliness of the data are far from optimal. International standards and good practice are not systematically adopted, resulting in comparability and reliability issues, and many methods remain to be properly tested and established. Innovative solutions are needed to make surveys more cost-effective, and to increase the value of their data by better integrating them with other types and sources of data. Too many datasets are not made publicly accessible and therefore remain under-exploited. Finally, the technical and financial capacity to implement coherent and quality national survey programs is insufficient and not sustainable.

5. **Since its creation, the ISWGHS has primarily been focused on thematic work spearheaded by its member agencies based on their sectoral expertise.** For example, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), in collaboration with the World Bank Group (WBG), is taking the lead on drafting new standards for collecting household survey data on educational expenditures. Meanwhile, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the WBG are collaborating to develop food consumption guidelines under the aegis of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Food Security, Agricultural and Rural Statistics (IAEG-AG). While important in their own right and providing important contributions to the development data agenda, the sectoral topics covered so far neglect to address some of the broader, endemic issues that characterize household surveys and fail to support a true modernization relying on new technologies and methods.

6. **Promoting and harmonizing cross-sectoral methodological issues must be the highest priority of the ISWGHS.** Unfortunately, there has been little progress on cross-sectoral methodological work since the ISWGHS was created over two years ago. Cross-sectoral work requires a higher level of coordination and consensus in terms of planning as well as its technical execution, a function the ISWGHS has been struggling to serve because of inadequate staffing and lack of funding. Individual actors often have little incentives to contribute to the development of true global public goods such as cross-sectoral methodological best practices, resulting in free-riding and uncoordinated efforts. Thus, the ISWGHS Secretariat is seeking financing to overcome these problems and accomplish its primary goals, as mandated by the UNSC, to support the creation of true public good in terms of best practices in household surveys, and ensure that they are adopted in an equitable manner amongst countries. Through improved global coordination and consultation, this proposal will also ensure that the work of the ISWGHS is more responsive to countries needs and reflect their methodological priorities and data gaps.

7. While the he ISWGHS envisions activities and an active program of work from 2017-2030, and proposes to develop a Trust Fund to support these activities, at this stage **only partial funding is being sought for the next 3 years of activities**, in order to quickly demonstrate the value of the initiative and motivate a possible second phase of longer-term support. The approach is driven by a sense of urgency

in spearheading an active program of global standard setting and advocacy on household surveys. In light of the new impetus created by the SDGs and other global, regional and national initiatives to improve countries' data systems, the ISWGHS Management Team has endorsed the preparation of this proposal.

II. Objectives

8. **The main objective of this proposal is to seek funding to strengthen and support the core functions of the ISWGHS towards the improvement of household surveys.** While the vision of the ISWGHS has a much longer time horizon, including the establishment of a trust fund to finance long-term activities, this proposal intentionally covers only activities for the next 3 years. Specifically, this proposal will support activities under three components:

- A. Technical coordination among agencies in the collection and use of household surveys.
- B. Development and adoption of survey standards and methods on cross-cutting issues in the production, processing and dissemination of survey data.
- C. Country consultation and advocacy to seek wide endorsement and uptake of the ISWGHS recommendations.

III. Components

A. Technical Coordination

9. **In line with one of the primary objectives of the ISWGHS, the group establishes task forces to advance research on methods as well as to foster coordination and partnerships among like-minded institutions.** The task forces have limited lifespans and focus on specific topic areas, with the general aim of developing guidance on methods to achieve consistency, reliability and comparability in household surveys. Currently, the ISWGHS has five task forces on the following topics:

- 1) standards for education spending estimates based on household survey data
- 2) measuring food consumption in household surveys
- 3) development and testing of a survey module on SDG 16 indicators for inclusion in ongoing household surveys
- 4) promotion of consistent measurement of paid and unpaid working activities
- 5) standards and best practices for survey data documentation

Furthermore, members of the ISWGHS are working on a mapping exercise to assess the relevance of different types of household surveys to measure and monitor the more than 200 SDG indicators. More than 70 SDG indicators will have to rely on household surveys as a sole or complementary source of data. The mapping exercise is meant to provide an input towards the development of possible recommendations on an integrated system of household surveys and viable coordination mechanisms at the global and country levels, containing elements of a Code of Practice on household surveys.

10. **Funding is needed to support the functioning of a strong technical secretariat** which, with support from the Technical Working Group (TWG), will ensure that the work of the task forces is relevant and meets the desired standards. Additionally, based on availability of funding from component

B, the technical secretariat would commission and review studies by the task forces, lead the preparation of methodological publications and reports to the UNSC, and coordinate the work of the ISWGHS's TWG. The technical secretariat would also arrange consultations with countries, organize meetings with the relevant technical groups, and interface with the ISWGHS Management Team and the UNSC. Specific to its role with respect to the UNSC, the Secretariat will seek its formal endorsement only for those cross-cutting guidelines as approved by the Management Team. In fact, not all deliverables by the task forces will require UNSC endorsement.

B. Development and Establishment of Survey Standards and Methods

11. **Producing methodological standards will involve relying on top expertise to identify the current state of methods across various topic areas and advance the current frontier.** The global community has committed to scaling up the production of a number of SDG indicators coming from household surveys for which no agreed definition and/or data collection methodology exist. Contributing to filling some of the existing methodological gaps and building consensus on several indicators for which agreed definitions and methodologies still do not exist is at the core of the ISWGHS mandate. While the bulk of methodological developments globally, particularly sector-specific advances, will continue to occur beyond the scope of this proposal, the technical secretariat will serve as an incubator for some of these new studies and methodological publications. Examples of cross-sectoral work that could be initiated by the ISWGHS would cover issues like how to reduce non-response rates in household surveys or how to improve sampling in order to better capture marginalized or rare populations, etc. Other potential areas of interest include quality assurance protocols, guidelines on CAPI, protocol and good practices across surveys, disaggregation, collecting data on sensitive topics in household surveys, and use of GIS, *inter alia*. To provide better global standards for countries to address some of these issues would improve the relevance of household surveys, and better address some important issues like the "Leave-no-one behind" agenda. To jumpstart this process, funding is needed to take advantage of existing opportunities and promote new standards for endorsement by the UNSC. Funding will be used for new research and to synthesize available knowledge in the form of technical notes and methodological guidelines.

12. **The cross-sectoral work will follow the same process as the ongoing sectoral work** by the existing ISWGHS task forces. For example, the abovementioned IAEG-AG is serving as a task force for the food consumption work program. Following the drafting of the food consumption guidelines, a consultation process was carried out with two meetings and a presentation at UNSC, leading to a submission to the UNSC for endorsement. The same protocol will be followed by task forces established for cross-cutting issues and being supported under this proposal.

C. Country Consultation and Advocacy

13. **Extensive consultation with countries and other stakeholders will be key to the acceptance and adoption of new standards.** While the execution and publication of methodological studies will be led by task forces which may include representatives from technical staff from member countries, the technical secretariat will coordinate an extensive process of consultation with member countries to seek

final endorsement and ultimate adoption of the standards. Countries should be involved throughout all stages of the technical process to ensure country agreement and to create an environment where the newly established standards will be welcomed and adopted.

14. **While the Technical Working Group is being supported by the member institutions, support is needed to put together and draw from the expertise of a pool of renowned experts to advise the ISWGHS on specific technical issues on an ad-hoc basis.** With inputs from the TWG, the experts would be positioned to review selected guidelines or other outputs produced by the task forces before they are presented to the Management Team and ultimately to the UNSC for endorsement or information. The experts may also be called upon to advise the TWG and Management Team on new directions for methodological inquiry. Funding will be needed to ensure a broad-based participation of experts. .

15. **The technical secretariat must play an important role in promoting the use of survey data and advocating for the adoption of standards.** Towards this end, it will foster partnerships for capacity development and convene events to better position household surveys within the global data agenda. The technical secretariat will also seek coordination with the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training (GIST) initiative to promote the harmonization of training activities on household surveys.

IV. Expected deliverables

16. **The outputs to be produced under the requested funding will be as follows:**

- i. ISWGHS technical secretariat recruitment completed and fully operational within 6 months of signing of the grant.
- ii. A pool of expert is selected and to be consulted in-person or remotely, as needed.
- iii. The paper on mapping of SDG indicators is finalized and submitted to the UNSC; building on this exercise, a paper on a proposal for a coordinated and integrated system of household surveys in countries, containing elements of a Code of Practice, is drafted.
- iv. The work of the five existing task forces is finalized, deliverables produced, reviewed and submitted to the UNSC for endorsement or information. Technical guidelines/notes are published for each.
- v. Two new task forces on cross-cutting issues established and new methodological work initiated, resulting in the production of at least one new output per year.
- vi. Funding proposal for Phase II drafted by the technical secretariat.
- vii. An international conference on household surveys is convened in 2019.

As a longer-term plan, all existing evidence and future work of the ISWGHS will go towards updating the UNSD Handbook on household survey published in 2008.¹ A first revision will probably be started towards the end of the 3-year period of this first phase. All activities of the ISWGHS in the short and medium term

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Statistics Division. 2008. *Designing Household Survey Samples: Practical Guidelines*. ST/ESA/STAT/SER.F/98. New York: United Nations. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/surveys/Series_F98en.pdf.

should be chosen and carried out with the Handbook in mind, which will be a living document with future periodic updates.

V. Budget

17. **The estimated budget for the proposed work program is USD 2.8 million for the first three years.** For the technical coordination component, funds will be used to hire one senior and one junior staff to comprise the technical secretariat. For the methodological component, funds will be used to (co-)fund methodological research and pilot efforts in partner countries, as well as for analysis and publication of reports and methodological studies. For the technical and country consultation component, funds will be used to convene and conduct workshops and other advocacy efforts with countries and stakeholders, as well as to convene the international conference in 2019.

18. **The requested funding is meant to complement the in-kind funding which is already being contributed by the ISWGHS member agencies.** It is intended to serve as seed money to incentivize research on survey standards and to ensure technical rigor through review and coordination of UNSC endorsement. The possibility of establishing matching grants to carry out cross-sectoral methodological work will be explored.

Table 1: Estimated Budget (USD) – Phase I (06/2018-05/2021)

Item	Cost (USD)
Technical secretariat personnel	1,000,000
Methodological research, analysis and publications	1,400,000
Country consultation, workshops	400,000
TOTAL	2,800,000

19. **This proposal covers Phase I (duration: 36 months, including 6 months for recruitment of technical secretariat staff) of a longer-term work program.** One of the tasks of the Secretariat during Phase I will include preparing a funding proposal and work program for the following 5 years. The proposed international conference will also provide a forum to gather inputs for defining a long-term work program and sustainable funding stream for the ISWGHS.