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ILO Model question on volunteer work for Population and Housing Censuses (Version 1)

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This technical note has been prepared by the ILO Department of Statistics¹ to support countries that wish to include measurement of volunteer work participation in their Population and Housing Census.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer work can be a valuable resource for development. Volunteer work helps many people, including those who volunteer and those who benefit from their work. It connects people, helping many to avoid exclusion. It also connects communities, helping to alleviate poverty, building resilience, and contributing to the wellbeing of all.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), calls on governments to work closely with volunteering groups on its implementation.

Specifically, the UN General Assembly resolution on “Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (UN, 2019) recognizes *“that volunteerism can be a powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”* and encourages countries to *“invest in measuring the scale and contribution of people’s voluntary efforts... to support and integrate volunteerism into national strategies and to measure its impact on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”*.

To support the integration of volunteerism in the SDGs, in 2017 the United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) launched a partnership to update existing guidance and develop practical tools on the measurement of volunteer work for use by national statistical offices around the world (ILO, 2017). This technical note is one of the practical resources being produced by UNV and ILO to support member States’ efforts under this initiative.



WHY MEASURE VOLUNTEER WORK IN THE POPULATION CENSUS?

Although not highlighted as a priority topic in the international recommendations for the 2020 Round of Population and Housing Censuses (UN, 2008), the population census can represent an important source of basic information on volunteer work to meet a wide range of data needs for various stakeholders. Census data on volunteer work can serve to:

- Shed light on the characteristics of volunteers, and volunteer participation by different groups of policy interest (women, youth), and/or persons living in different geographic areas, etc.
- Provide basic information on volunteer engagement for local and small areas
- Inform policies aimed at promoting volunteer engagement
- Support informed planning and targeting of household surveys covering this topic in greater detail

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- Support reporting on volunteer engagement (levels and characteristics of volunteers) in the national development process

TOPIC COVERAGE IN THE POPULATION CENSUS

Given the wide range of topics that population and housing censuses must cover, measurement of volunteer work may be limited to capture only participation in volunteering by including a carefully designed question.

More detailed information on volunteer work patterns (for example, the type of volunteering, activities performed, time spent, frequency etc.) should be collected through a household survey, for example a labour force survey (LFS), a general social survey or similar surveys.

Limiting the number of topics included in the census is important to maintain the overall quality of the census operations and results. Therefore, volunteer work should be measured in a census if it represents the only source of data at the national level, or if needed to support the design and implementation of specialized household surveys covering the topic of volunteer work.

WHAT COUNTS AS VOLUNTEER WORK?

Although better known as unpaid help given through NGOs or non-profit institutions in connection with recovery from natural or man-made disasters, the vast majority of volunteer work is done daily by millions of people worldwide to support each other directly and develop their communities.

Making visible this effort through statistical measurement of volunteer work as defined by the latest international standards on work statistics (see Box 1) can support development of more inclusive policies and lead to the establishment of stronger, sustainable partnerships between governments and civil society.

Box 1. Volunteer work as defined in the international statistical standards (ILO, 2013)

37. Persons in volunteer work are defined as all those of working age who, during a short reference period, performed any unpaid, non-compulsory activity to produce goods or provide services for others, where:

(a) “any activity” refers to work for at least one hour;

(b) “unpaid” is interpreted as the absence of remuneration in cash or in kind for work done or hours worked; nevertheless, volunteer workers may receive some small form of support or stipend in cash, when below one third of local market wages (e.g. for out-of-pocket expenses or to cover living expenses incurred for the activity), or in kind (e.g. meals, transportation, symbolic gifts);

(c) “non-compulsory” is interpreted as work carried out without civil, legal or administrative requirement, that are different from the fulfilment of social responsibilities of a communal, cultural or religious nature;

(d) production “for others” refers to work performed:

(i) through, or for organizations comprising market and non-market units (**i.e. organization-based volunteering**) including through or for self-help, mutual aid or community-based groups of which the volunteer is a member;

(ii) for households other than the household of the volunteer worker or of related family members (**i.e. direct volunteering**).

38. Excluded from volunteer work:

(a) community service and work by prisoners ordered by a court or similar authority, compulsory military or alternative civilian service;

(b) unpaid work required as part of education or training programmes (i.e. unpaid trainees);

(c) work for others performed during the working time associated with employment, or during paid time off from an employee job granted by the employer.

Volunteer work refers to any activity performed voluntarily (i.e. without a civil, legal, or administrative requirement) to produce goods or provide services for others, without any expectation to receive a payment.

If volunteer work is done for or through organizations, community, self-help or mutual aid groups, then it is classified as **organization-based volunteer work**. If it is done to offer support directly to households other than the household of the volunteer worker or of related family members, then it is classified as **direct volunteer work**.

Volunteer workers are all persons of working age, who did organization-based or direct volunteer work for at least one hour, in a short reference period (specified/last 4 weeks or 30 days).



MEASUREMENT APPROACH FOR USE IN THE POPULATION CENSUS

Different types of questions have been used by some countries around the world to capture participation in volunteer work in population censuses. In most cases, these rely on an “activity” approach, which consists in asking respondents about willing engagement in unpaid activities for the benefit of others.

An important limitation with this approach is that when a single “activity-based” question is asked, respondents may not consider a wide range of activities that are part of volunteer work. In particular, unpaid help provided directly to friends, neighbours and even strangers (i.e. direct volunteering) is likely to be consistently under-reported, especially when considered by respondents as their “moral duty”.

The most common way in which statisticians cope with this problem in household surveys is to ask a battery of questions on participation in specific activities, aiming to capture the most typical cases. For many reasons, this strategy is not suitable for use in population censuses.

This technical note illustrates how the “activity” approach can be improved to more comprehensively capture volunteer work, including both organization-based and direct volunteering, in line with the latest international standards, set by the 19th ICLS.

The proposed approach is a combination of “activity” and “beneficiary” approaches where respondents are asked about engaging in unpaid work for the benefit of four main groups of beneficiaries: organizations, community, individuals and environment (as shown below). These four categories cover virtually all potential beneficiaries, offering additional important clues to help respondents recall possible unpaid voluntary work. It was developed and tested by ILO Department of Statistics in partnership with UNV to improve the existing guidance on measurement of volunteer work through survey modules. It has been adapted to be suitable for use in population censuses where space limitations require use of short question sequences.

MODEL QUESTION ON VOLUNTEER WORK

The proposed model question uses specific phrases strongly associated with both types of volunteer work in the question text: “voluntary work” (organization-based) and “give unpaid help” (direct). As identified through tests, “giving unpaid help” may sometimes be interpreted by respondents as making donations or gifts. To avoid this and to suggest that the question is about engaging in an activity, the expression “spending any time” is added.

The four types of beneficiaries are indicated, in some cases with examples, to aid in recall as explained above.

QX. In the last (4 weeks/30 days), did (...) do any voluntary work or spend any time giving unpaid help to ...	
<i>Do not count donations or gifts made</i>	
<i>Read each option and check the appropriate answer</i>	
a. organizations, associations, clubs, institutions [(such as NGOs, religious organizations, sports clubs, schools, etc.)]?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> DON'T KNOW
b. (the/your) community?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> DON'T KNOW
c. friends, neighbours, strangers?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> DON'T KNOW
d. nature, wild or street animals [(such as dogs, cats, birds, fish, etc.)]?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> DON'T KNOW

This question is designed to measure volunteer work according to the 19th ICLS standards, by including participation in any unpaid productive activity, organization-based or direct, over the specified/last 4 weeks or 30 days, for the benefit of persons who are not members of the respondent’s household or family. As shown by qualitative tests, when asking this question, it is extremely unusual for respondents to report voluntary work with a total duration of less than one hour during a reference period of 4 weeks or 30 days. Therefore, the “at least one hour” criteria is not explicitly probed.

This approach alone is not sufficient to distinguish volunteer workers by type of volunteer work done (i.e. organization-based or direct volunteering) nor to measure the intensity of volunteering in terms of hours worked.

QUESTION PLACEMENT AND TARGET POPULATION

It is recommended to place this question after the section on economic characteristics of the population. It should be asked to all respondents of working age, irrespective of their labour force status, or other characteristics such as migration status, gender or place of residence.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR NATIONAL ADAPTATION

Guidance to support national adaptation is provided in Annex I. In adapting and translating the model question, care should be taken to not change the underlying meaning and intention of the questions and response categories. Countries are advised to conduct small-scale qualitative and operational tests to validate the question prior to its final inclusion in the national Population and Housing Census.

DERIVED VARIABLE

Answers to the proposed model question will serve to identify persons engaged in volunteer work in the reference period and calculate volunteer work rates (share of persons doing volunteer work).

A generic syntax is included below showing how to construct a variable for participation in volunteer work using the model question. This syntax, however, will not be sufficient to generate census outputs. Countries will need to develop additional code to handle missing answers, introduce quality checks, etc.

Respondent did volunteer work if (a=YES OR b=YES OR c=YES OR d=YES)

Annex I: Explanatory Notes

Question conventions

- Regular text: Indicates text to be read by the interviewer
- *Italics*: Indicates interviewer instructions or aids, not to be read out loud
- CAPS: INDICATES RESPONSE CATEGORIES AND FILTERS NOT TO BE READ OUT LOUD
- (Parenthesis): Indicates that a choice or a substitution must be made
- [Blue text within square brackets]: Indicates text that must be adapted as per national circumstances

QX. Participation in volunteer work

Voluntary participation in any unpaid activity to produce goods or services for or through organizations or directly for the benefit of others in the last (4 week/ 30 days).

Codes

- 1 YES
- 2 NO
- 3 DON'T KNOW

Purpose

- To identify persons engaged in organization-based and direct volunteer work in the last (4 weeks/ 30 days).

National adaptation and implementation

- Ask all respondents of working age.
- Answer categories should be interpreted as follows:
 - organizations, associations, clubs, institutions** [(such as NGOs, religious organizations, sports clubs, schools, etc.)]? refers to all types of units, registered or not, private or public, market-oriented or non-profit. The text of this response option should be adapted to the national context, by providing examples of organizations and interest groups for/through which people often do voluntary work.
 - community** refers to a group of people living within the same area (e.g. village or neighbourhood) and/or who share common interests (i.e. online communities).
 - friends, neighbours, strangers** refers to persons who are not members of the respondent's family or household.
 - nature, wild or street animals** [such as dogs, cats, birds, fish] refers to:
 - cleaning/preventing pollution of public forests, fields, parks, beaches, lakes, etc.
 - taking care of/protecting animals, wild birds in forests, fields, parks, on the streets.
 - taking care of/protecting fish, mammals, reptiles and other life forms living in public lakes, rivers, in sea and oceans. Reference to fish should be kept in this option only if it is relevant in the national context.
- Answer option DON'T KNOW must be used only in cases when a household member cannot be directly interviewed and answers are given by another household member (proxy interview), who is not familiar with the information being requested.
- A specific reference period of 4 weeks OR 30 days must be chosen. Census reference day/dates must fall within this reference period. It is advised to have a consistent approach across the Census questionnaire. For example, if for questions on employment the reference period is the "last week", then for volunteer work it should be the "last 4 weeks".
- Interviewers should be trained to read the question, followed by the first answer option and wait for an answer from the respondent (YES/NO), before reading the next answer option.

- Interviewers should be trained to provide examples for each type of beneficiary, as described above, if asked by the respondent.
- It refers to persons who did volunteer work in the last 4 week/30 days to help individuals, for/through organizations of any kind (registered or not), to help the community, to protect/help nature or wild/street animals, without any expectation to receive a payment for the work done.
- Persons doing volunteer work may receive some stipend or compensation (in cash or in kind). However, this does not represent payment for the work done but a way to facilitate their participation in unpaid activities.
- Do not include unpaid help provided by respondents in family businesses or in paid jobs held by family members (this is employment).
- Do not include help provided in the form of donations only (i.e. gifts, cash donations).

References

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