

like Sweden, Norway, Spain and the United States. In time the census operation evolved from a simple count of people to a survey of their socio-economic characteristics. Present day censuses collect data not just of persons, but often also about their households, and the dwellings and buildings in which they live. This may be expanded to establishments and agricultural holdings.

The traditional census is an expensive operation requiring material and human resources that some have compared to conducting a short war. In the last decades several European countries have been exploring for, and moving to, cheaper and possibly more effective solutions. These new possibilities include the use of administrative registers and other existing data sources for part or all of the required information. Where data continue to be collected from the field, the use of public mail, sampling techniques, and technologically advanced data capturing methods have become common. The process of evolving methodologies - however slow - is quite visible in the current census round.

In the last four to five decades the United Nations have taken a vital role in promoting international coordination, the elaboration of recommendations for each census round, and providing technical assistance. These recommendations have regional versions. In this regard each census round in Europe since 1960 has been guided by UNECE guidelines for this part of the world¹.

While international guidelines work well, they need to leave sufficient space for the particular data collection tradition and information requirements of each individual country. Thus, even in Europe we see a fairly wide range of methods being applied and there certainly is and will be no uniformity. This is true for censuses as well as for other types of statistical enquiries. But the 'common rules' umbrella and the sharing of experience between specialists in many technical forums serves both the rapid dissemination of new ideas and a critical review of national practices. The variety of solutions adopted is among the interesting aspects of population censuses and the production of statistics in general.

Although political events and boundary changes sometimes disturbed the process, the frequency of censuses in Europe is quite high, generally following a 10-year (sometimes 5) interval after the Second World War. The radical political and economic changes occurring in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the nineties resulted in the creation of a number of newly independent national entities. Many of these had to build or rebuild statistical institutions from the bottom up. This process, which is still continuing, was supported by technical and financial assistance from abroad.

¹ More in particular for the European Union countries, Community Census Programmes, following the UNECE recommendations and aiming to synchronise national census dates and to assist the production of comparable tables were prepared for census rounds since 1980. The Community Census Programme for 2001 published by Eurostat in 1999 [EU99a, EU99b] was aimed also at the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) states, as well as at EU Candidate countries.