

Applying the degree of urbanisation manual - Introduction

Statistics Explained

This article forms part of an online methodological manual, [Applying the Degree of Urbanisation – A methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons: 2021 edition](#) .

A [United Nations \(UN\)](#) Resolution adopted in September 2015, *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN (2015)) includes several indicators for [sustainable development goals \(SDGs\)](#) that should be collected for cities, or for urban and rural areas. So far, however, no global methodology or international standard has been proposed to delineate these areas. The broad array of different criteria applied in national definitions of urban and rural areas poses serious challenges to cross-country comparisons ([ILO \(2018\)](#)). The *Action Framework of the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda* (UN-Habitat (2017)) and the *Global Strategy to improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics* (IBRD-WB (2011)) both highlight the need for a harmonised methodology to facilitate international comparisons and to improve the quality of urban and rural statistics in support of national policies and investment decisions.

This is why six organisations – the [European Commission](#) , the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#) , the [United Nations Human Settlements Programme \(UN-Habitat\)](#) , the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#) , the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#) and [The World Bank](#) – have been working closely together over the past four years to develop a harmonised, simple and cost-effective methodology. This new methodology allows statistics to be compiled by degree of urbanisation, identifying cities, towns and semi-dense areas, and rural areas at level 1 of the classification. By using three classes instead of only two (urban and rural), it captures the urban-rural continuum. To improve the international comparability of urban and rural indicators for SDGs, it is recommended to produce these by degree of urbanisation.

The first level of the degree of urbanisation classification may be extended in two ways. The first extension, called level 2 of the degree of urbanisation classification, is a more detailed territorial typology: it identifies, cities, towns, suburban or peri-urban areas, villages, dispersed rural areas and mostly uninhabited areas. The second extension, defines functional urban areas (otherwise referred to as metropolitan areas), covering cities and the commuting zones around them. In order to produce SDG indicators by level 2 of the degree of urbanisation classification or by functional urban area, it is necessary to use surveys with large samples. As a result, it will not always be feasible to produce SDG indicators for these two extensions.

To highlight the interest and the feasibility of producing SDG indicators by degree of urbanisation, this manual includes examples of indicators from 12 of the 17 goals for a range of countries across the globe. The indicators tend to have a clear urban gradient with cities at one end, rural areas at the other and with towns and semi-dense areas in between. In some cases, cities tend to fare better, for example in terms of access to education, in others, rural areas tend to do better, for example in terms of personal safety.

This methodological manual is meant to complement and not replace the already existing definitions used by NSOs and ministries. Indeed, these national definitions typically rely on a much wider set of criteria which may have been refined to take into account specific characteristics, context and policy objectives.

The manual has been designed principally as a practical guide for data producers, suppliers and statisticians so that they have the necessary information to implement the methodology and ensure coherency and consistency

within their data collections and analyses. It may also be of interest to users of subnational statistics – such as policymakers, the private sector, research institutions, academia – so that they may better understand and interpret official subnational statistics.

The manual was produced at the request of the 51st session of the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC), which 'endorsed the methodology for delineation of cities and urban and rural areas for international and regional statistical comparison purposes, and the UNSC urged the release of a technical report on the implementation of the methodology for delineation of cities and urban and rural areas as early as possible' (see page 22 paragraphs i-j).

A draft of this report was submitted for global consultation. This took place from 5 October 2020 to 5 November 2020. Input/comments were received from 22 individual countries and these were incorporated into the manuscript in November 2020. The authors would like to thank very much all the countries and experts who provided their opinions and comments. These were very enriching and certainly increased the quality of the final manual. Some of the comments received raised questions that went beyond the scope of this manual, in particular, detailed comments and questions on the production of a population grid. These issues should be addressed by a separate manual with global guidelines on how to produce an official population grid.

October 2016	UN-Habitat III conference, Quito The European Commission's Commissioner for Regional and Urban development announced a joint voluntary commitment with the OECD and The World Bank to develop a global, people-based definition of cities and settlements.
March 2017	UN Statistical Commission (UNSC), New York Presentation of the work plan, first results and discussion on next steps in two dedicated side events.
April 2017	UN-Habitat Expert Group meeting, Brussels The Expert Group Meeting on Geospatial Definitions for Human Settlements Indicators of the SDGs concluded that a standard definition of a city is needed for global reporting and monitoring of the SDGs.
November 2017	UN Statistical Division (UNSD) survey The UNSD sent a questionnaire to 20 countries to gather feedback on the proposed methodology. At least three quarters of the respondents stated that the methodology was useful for international comparisons and to compile indicators for the UN's SDGs.
January 2018	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Expert Group meeting, Rome The Expert Group meeting on <i>Improving Rural Statistics: Rural Definition and Indicators</i> reviewed and made recommendations on the methodology.
March 2018	UN Statistical Commission (UNSC), New York The interim results were presented at a side event of the UNSC, which highlighted the interest and support for this global development. Further consultations and communication to raise the awareness and understanding of this new methodology were planned.
December 2018	FAO and the Global Strategy to improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics (GSARS) published its findings on pilot tests FAO and the GSARS tested the definition (at level 1 and level 2) for seven countries in their national contexts. The report also assessed the countries' capacity and capability to report on a subset of core SDG indicators, applying the methodology and using existing data collection mechanisms.
October 2018 – October 2019	UN-Habitat regional workshops UN-Habitat organised seven regional workshops to present the methodology and discuss how it could be improved and applied nationally. A total of 85 countries participated in these workshops (see Figure 10.5 for a complete list).
January 2019	UN Expert Group meeting, New York An Expert Group meeting on the <i>Statistical Methodology for Delineating Cities and Rural Areas</i> (UN (2019)) concluded that both the degree of urbanisation and functional urban area classifications were useful to monitor the SDGs and should be used in parallel with national definitions of urban and rural areas.
March 2019	UN Statistical Commission (UNSC), New York The UNSC welcomed the work on developing the methodology for the delineation of urban and rural areas and the definition of cities based on the degree of urbanisation classification, and requested the submission of the final assessment, to be prepared in consultation with Member States, on the applicability of this methodology for international and regional comparison purposes to the Commission at its fifty-first session (see E/2019/24-E/CN.3/2019/34, Decision 50/118, paragraph (d)).
March 2020	UN Statistical Commission, New York The UNSC 'endorsed the methodology for delineation of cities and urban and rural areas for international and regional statistical comparison purposes'.

Table 1.1: Milestones on the way to the endorsement by the UN Statistical Commission

External links

- FAO and GSARS (2018), [Pilot tests of an international definition of urban–rural territories](#) , Technical Report no. 37, Rome.
- IBRD-WB (2011), [Global Strategy to improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics](#) , International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, Economic and Sector Work, Report No. 56719-GLB, Washington D.C.
- UN (2015), [Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) , United Nations, General Assembly, A/RES/70/1, New York.
- UN (2019), [Expert Group Meeting on Statistical Methodology for Delineating Cities and Rural Areas](#) , United Nations Statistics Division, New York.
- UN-Habitat (2017), [New Urban Agenda](#) , United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), United Nations, General Assembly, A/RES/71/256, New York.
- UN-Habitat (2017), [Expert Group Meeting on Geospatial Definitions for Human Settlements Indicators of the SDGs](#) , Brussels.