

Generations and Gender Programme in the Republic of Moldova.

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MOLDOVA CASE STUDY

GGs data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic

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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The Republic of Moldova, like other countries from Central and Eastern Europe, undergoes a demographic transition. This process is characterized by the shift to an ageing society due to the lower fertility rate and gradual increase of life expectancy at birth, which overlapped with the recent economic and political changes.

The population ageing escalates on the background of a population decline that began in 1999, and according to the demographic projections, the population decrease will continue during the following decades, from 2.6 million in 2020 to 2 million in 2035¹.

The demographic changes driven by the population decline, ageing, low fertility, migration of the working-age population and low life expectancy have implications on the overall development of the country.

In response to these demographic challenges, the Government of the Republic of Moldova aims to develop evidence-based and people-centered policies. The lack of disaggregated data on social structure and family changes, the number of children desired and family planning makes it difficult to develop demographic policies that change current demographic paradigm and trends. Also, these data are necessary for the monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and

¹ https://moldova.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/PSA_engleza.pdf, p.19



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FIELDWORK DATA COLLECTION

Data collection within the Generations and Gender Survey in the Republic of Moldova started officially on 29 January 2020 by using traditional face-to-face method of data collection. The fieldwork was conducted by the sociological company [Magenta Consulting SRL](#) under the coordination of UNFPA Moldova CO and the National Bureau of Statistics. A total number of 114 field workers, men and women were trained face-to-face how to use tablets and digital software for data collection (Blaise and ODK). From February through March 2020, the fieldwork was carried out successfully completing around 3000 of questionnaires (collecting approx. 500 per week).

On 7 March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the Republic of Moldova, followed by a continuous increase of COVID-19 cases in the country. Considering the country's situation with COVID-19, the Government of the Republic of Moldova declared emergency situation for the period of 17 March 2020 until 15 May 2020. Consequently, all activities related to data collection under the GGS were temporarily suspended during this period, causing the loss of around 50% of field operators involved in the survey.

The emergency situation was followed by the emergency state in the public health sector established by the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission (CNESP). To limit the spread of COVID-19, the Government of Moldova has established measures that require



the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) Framework. In this context, on 22nd of January 2019, the Moldovan Government signed a memorandum agreement with [UNFPA Moldova Country office](#), the [National Bureau of Statistics \(NBS\)](#) and the [Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute \(NIDI\)](#) regarding conducting the [Generations and Gender Survey](#) in Moldova to address the demographic changes based on robust evidences.

The Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) is an individual-level panel survey conducted so far in 24 countries, being a key data resource on issues of fertility decisions, work-life balance, transition to adulthood, and intergenerational exchanges with a longitudinal perspective. It is a panel survey, which means that it aims to revisit the panel of respondents multiple times, at approximately three year intervals. The current iteration of the Moldova GGS is the first wave. The aim of the GGP is to deliver high quality data for scientific research on population dynamics and family change, relationships between generations, and changes in the social roles of women and men, accounting for economic, social and cultural contexts².

The GGS sample was drawn by the National Bureau of Statistic of the Republic of Moldova based on a complex listing process by using, for the first time, geospatial related technology and digital software. Moldova's experience and lessons learned on building the sampling frame for the Generations and Gender Survey can be accessed [here](#).

² <https://www.ggp-i.org/about/ggp2020/>



the use of face masks on public transport and in closed public areas. There were additional restrictions on the presence of people over the age of 63 years old in public spaces, and the use of playgrounds, stadiums, and parks. The emergency state in the public health sector was extended several times and still continues to be in force due to a huge number of daily confirmed cases.

In these conditions, the field data collection became impossible to be completed by using initial requirements and imposed several changes related to interpersonal relationship between field operators and respondents and use of protection measures. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, several activities were undertaken to ensure the protection measures needed to comply with national legislation and perform the Generation and Gender Survey:

- To assess the COVID-19 impact on the society, the GGS research methodology has been adjusted by integrating a module of questions related to COVID-19, which allows to have a comparative analysis of the situation in the society before and after the outbreak of the pandemic.

- a new methodology guideline on collecting data during the pandemic was developed. According to the guideline, the survey took place outside, respecting the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission. Also, the guideline established that all field operators must inform immediately the coordination team if COVID-19 cases are detected at work or if they have symptoms of acute respiratory illness.
- COVID-19 protection equipment sets, which include reusable face masks, gloves and disinfectant, were provided to all field operators, and disposable protection masks and gloves were offered to all survey participants.
- Online training sessions on how to use the protective equipment and how to collect data during the pandemic period were conducted by an expert in public health from the National Agency for Public Health in Moldova.
- The COVID-19 risks related to data collection were assessed and mitigation measures were established. In this context, a



special team was established to provide support to field operators on how to protect themselves and how to act in case of contact with people suspected of having COVID-19. The designated personnel (regional managers) provided day-by-day information on COVID-19 cases confirmed in the PSUs included in the survey.

- A closer cooperation was established with the National Agency for Public Health in daily monitoring of COVID-19 confirmed cases in the PSUs included in the survey. An updated report on confirmed cases per localities was provided twice per week. In case of an increased number of infections, the fieldwork was suspended temporarily until the situation improved.
- Additional trainings to increase the pool of field operators were conducted in online format. This was the first experience in carrying out trainings on software use in an online format, which implies a series of challenges due to low use of digital devices by field operators and the population in general.

In July 2020, in close consultation with the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection and the National Agency for Public Health, the data collection within the Generations and Gender Survey was restarted in a totally new format, taking into account COVID-19 protection measures and the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO). Initially, the data collection was resumed in 5 rural communities with low number of COVID-19 cases and gradually was extended nationwide.



CHALLENGES

Loss of personnel involved in the data collection process. Even though all protection measures against COVID-19 were provided, more than 60% of field operators refused to continue to work in the field during the pandemic period, thus causing a serious problem of human resources. The main reasons raised by them were the following: fear of becoming infected, mass panic, government restriction related to age limitation for older age field operators, family reasons etc. Continuous loss of personnel involved in data collection became the main challenge the survey team faced. This problem persisted throughout the entire pandemic period, despite many actions and strategies used to increase the team of field workers.

Limited knowledge about protection measures. The majority of field operators didn't know how to protect themselves and how to correctly inform the respondents about the protection measures used by the field op-

erator during the completion of the questionnaire. This made it more difficult to convince respondents to participate in the survey. This issue was defining not only field operators, but also the general population. Because of this, the actions aimed to increase the knowledge on protection measures were addressed to all those involved in the survey.

Low participation rate in the municipality and big cities. The accelerated growth of COVID-19 cases has intensified the population's mistrust and fear of participating in the survey. Many people were afraid to communicate with field operators and therefore refused to participate. The number of soft and hard refusals has increased during the pandemic, especially in municipalities and big cities, where the share of hard/soft refusals and no-contact represent about 54,1%.

Low participation rate of men and young people. Young people and men represents the groups with high refusal rates compared with other socio-demographic groups. Despite many strategies used to increase the level of youth and men's participation, these groups are under-represented in the survey and constitute 22% of respondents aged 15-34 years old and 38,14 % men.

APPLIED SOLUTIONS

Online training of field operators on GGS software and COVID-19 protection measures. To increase the pool of field operators and replace those who refused to continue working in the field, a new series of training sessions were conducted in an online format. From July through September 2020, 10 online 3-days sessions were conducted in small group (up to 5-7 persons per group). A total number of 90 field operators were trained online on GGS software by using their mobile phones, tablets or other available device.

To identify potential field workers, the survey team contacted representatives of Local Public Authorities, social workers, librarians, schoolteachers and other potential groups from the PSUs included in the sample.

An increased number of facilitators per group were involved to make sure that all participants have access to the software and can clarify their questions. The training was an interactive one, each participant was asked to share the screen and show how the questionnaire has to be completed. A series of Quiz tests were developed to check participants' knowledge and identify the gaps in understanding.



1 Quiz- Module 1. General presentation about the project (Ro version)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSchLi_hERJLx6y5XuumsTOJCSyVa4nF4dAF2zQIJzk_b2u1A/viewform?usp=sf_link

2 Quiz- Module 2. ODK app and how to select the respondent (Ro version)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1voPTbocQGpN8Ya8Xusts2Cf9bLI2G7IAVy7CmUJEiAk/edit?ts=5f192f65#response=ACYDBNjqnGmv5JwtlSHmceYZcG5FM31P4T_IWZkgt7Ad_9OGGBRcKrNjposGj2ERQiR4b88

3 Quiz- Module 3. Blaise app, sensible and health questions (Ro version)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1aPI1X7gZd4ZP3EAVXoW5QyXF1IJXEZ_bqp_aXq6g4vE/edit?ts=5f1a7cbb#responses

4 Quiz- Module 4. COVID-19, the use of PPE during the data collection (Ro version)

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1xW69jw3ovT2tmWUCpyvOQS8EaotV0K6O43xM03-b2xk/edit?ts=5f1a7c9b>

Quiz questionnaires were sent by email to all training participants and the results were presented the next day, with a special attention to incorrectly completed questions. The use of Quiz divided the learning process into three stages: presentation by the moderator, completion of the Quiz test to check what participants learned, summary of learned information. The field operators who didn't pass the Quiz were not accepted as field workers.

The training on COVID-19 protection measures was conducted by an expert in Public Health from the National Agency for Public Health, which is the public institution that monitors the cases of infection in the country. To ensure the security of those involved in the survey, the data collection process was conducted in close consultation with the National Agency for Public Health that provided weekly updates on the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per PSU/localities.

Coaching for newly trained field operators. After the training, a special program of coaching was offered to newly involved field operators in order to support them to use GGS software and deliver all necessary equipment (tablets, power banks, visibility materials, PPE etc.). Experienced field workers conducted in-site visits by using their own transport to offer 2-days coaching

on tablets and software use for GGS data collection. Also, they were responsible to deliver all necessary equipment and PPE sets, which include reusable face masks, disinfectant and gloves. During the coaching period, the field operators could address questions and share their experience. The coaching program brought amazing results and contributed to a quicker integration of new field operators.



Targeted communication campaign on GGS with focus on social media.

To increase respondents' confidence, the communication campaign on GGS was adjusted with focus on protection measures used to ensure the safety of all respondents and survey staff involved in data collection. In this regard, all communication messages and visibility products were adjusted to the COVID-19 context. Up to 30 stories and a short video were developed and posted on Facebook and Twitter informing about the new way of data collection and how the protection measures are put in place.

Switch to the mobile team of field operators.

In the context of Covid-19, more and more field operators gave up working in the field, thus causing an increase in the number of partially completed PSUs. In this regard, mobile teams of field workers were established with the purpose to finalize the completion of fieldwork and close the PSUs. The mobile team was composed of 2-3 field operators with experience in data collection and working with soft/hard refusals. The mobile team used their own transport or taxi.

Increase the communication with respondents through a Call center,

whose role was to inform people regarding the protection measures ensured and other survey-related questions or to schedule a meeting with the field operator. A total number of 7000 flyers were printed and delivered by post to no-contact and those who refused to participate in the survey in order to inform them about the possibility of scheduling the meeting.



Online data collection was tested as an alternative method for collection, which unfortunately didn't produce the expected results. It's important to be mentioned that online and phone collection are not considered to be representative in Moldova, since a large part of the population doesn't have access to the internet or phone. Considering the availability of contact details of the households included in the sample, this method was piloted on a total number of 120 respondents. The Call center was involved to provide support to respondents regarding the online completion of the questionnaire. Despite many calls back and support provided, only 5 out of 120 respondents completed entirely the questionnaire.





CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the fieldwork and caused many challenges in terms of human resources, costs and time, but it didn't make it impossible. After trying different solutions, the survey staff managed to complete the survey in 5 months (July-November 2020) covering more than 10,000 respondents net. Based on Moldova's experience, there are several conclusions and recommendations:

- The Moldova case shows that the face-to-face method worked even during the pandemic period and represents the best way for data collection for the summer-autumn period. The online method of data collection was not found to be a good option, since a large part of the population doesn't have access to computer and internet. Even for those who have computer and internet connection, the online completion wasn't preferred because it takes time and there is no way to clarify questions if any.
- Involve a bigger pool of field workers, since 60% of them refused to work during the COVID-19 pandemic and caused serious problems of human resources needed to be replaced.
- Create partnership with Public Health Agency in order to monitor the COVID-19 confirmed cases at country level and if necessary to suspend temporarily the fieldwork in the localities with an increased number of cases.
- Switch to online training of field operators if physical presence entails high risks of infection. Combine the online training with a coaching program that aims to share knowledge and experience.
- Conduct training on protection measures against COVID-19 and how to correctly use PPE during the data collection process. Involve trainers specialized in Public Health and COVID-19 monitoring from relevant public institutions.
- Use the mobile team of field operators to quickly close/complete the fieldwork in the PSUs.
- Conduct a proactive communication campaign with focus on protection measures used to ensure the safety of all those involved in the survey.