

SUMMARY REPORT OF THE SIXTH MEETING OF THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION

Held at Hunter College, New York on Wednesday

8 May 1946, at 10:30 a.m.

Present: Mr. Rice (Chairman)
Mr. Campion
Mr. Mahalanobis
Mr. Sauvy

The Chairman called the meeting to order at 10:45 a.m. Consideration was resumed of the draft recommendation on "General Provisions Respecting Statistics to be Incorporated in Agreements Between the United Nations (UN) and Specialized Agencies (SA)". The draft was agreed to with minor modifications and approved as the final text to be incorporated in the Commission's report to the Economic and Social Council.

Consideration was then resumed of relationships with national and international non-governmental organizations in the field of statistics. The view was expressed that the Statistical Commission should take full cognizance of such organizations and utilize them as far as possible in its work. It was suggested that the International Statistical Institute, for example, should be given definite recognition, possibly by some form of representation or collaboration with the Statistical Commission which might be explored later. It was suggested also that if funds were available from national governments, the United Nations or other sources, the Institute might undertake research activities at an advanced level. In any case it was suggested that the Institute should have some continuing activities (excluding collection of statistics), in addition to annual conferences, if it is to serve as an effective instrument in fostering international co-operation in the improvement of statistics.

It was suggested again that the Institute might serve as an International Statistical Academy of the highest order; its membership should be truly international, including all nations whether or not members of the United Nations, and should be non-governmental as well as governmental; it should have no executive functions, but a broad area of competence (for example, in the improvement of standards).

Reference was made to the working paper on the Institute (E/STAT/W.7 - 26 April 1946). The view was expressed that the concept of the Institute as an international statistical academy, suggested on page 7 of this paper, appears to be in line with the Commission's discussion. Objection was raised, however, to the concept of a "court of last resort." It was stated further that the Institute should have some continuing activity such as long-range methodological research at the highest level of competence. The suggestion was made that the United Nations might consider financial aid to the Institute as a token of recognition of the Institute as a world scientific centre.

At this point the role of the International Statistical Institute was compared with that of the Royal Statistical Society in the United Kingdom. This discussion revolved largely around the question of the extent to which the Institute would serve as a forum and to what extent as an entity (for example, to provide technical advice). It was pointed out that the Royal Statistical Society, seldom took action, advisory or other, as a body; in practice, when its advice was sought on a technical problem, the Society would nominate one or more individual technical experts to provide the requested advice and consultation. It was observed that the analogy is not completely appropriate, since it is more difficult in some countries than in Great Britain to find either a forum for consultation or competent technical advice.

The suggestion was made that the Institute might be asked to serve as collecting agent for demographic statistics in the interval

before the United Nations Secretariat is fully established. It was pointed out, however, that the Institute is no better prepared than the United Nations to carry on such work at present.

Discussion turned at this point to the possibility and desirability of bringing such organizations as the Institute into relationship with the United Nations, through UNESCO or otherwise. The Commission was agreed that such action with respect to the International Statistical Institute would ultimately be desirable, but that no definite recommendations should be formulated at this session. The Chairman was asked to explore the question at length with a view to its consideration at a later session. The Chairman in turn requested other members of the Commission to communicate their ideas and suggestions on this matter to him in writing.

The Commission then turned its attention to questions raised in the working paper on the Inter American Statistical Institute (E/STAT/W.12 - 29 April 1946). The observation was made that the material in this paper would be of considerable interest in some European countries in which the rapid development of IASI is not generally known.

It was indicated that the question of most direct concern to the Statistical Commission, in consideration of the organization and role of IASI, pertains to the latter's activities and plans in the collection of statistics i.e., to what extent IASI and similar regional organizations should or might serve as collecting agents for the United Nations. It was observed in this connection that there has been an intensive development of statistics in the Middle East, European countries, and in Africa. It was pointed out that further development of regional organizations, as well as organization along subject-matter lines, might be anticipated, and that the question of the extent to which such organizations might serve as collecting agents for the United Nations has broad implications. It was observed that a

trend toward regional organization also emerges in other connections.

The work of the Inter American Statistical Institute, and specifically the Yearbook compiled by that organization, was further referred to as illustrative of some aspects of the problem. It was observed that for some purposes IASI provides a channel for obtaining data from countries of North and South America more expeditiously than is possible through formal government channels. It was suggested, therefore, that the Institute might be considered as a facilitating mechanism for collection of statistics for United Nations purposes, rather than a "layering" or intermediate agency interposed between the United Nations and national governments.

Objection was raised to any proposed role for IASI or similar organizations which might involve loss of direct contact between the United Nations and national governments. It was pointed out, however, that this view does not preclude utilization of such organizations for methodological research and for certain types of administrative functions. A definite need for regional organizations was recognized and the view was expressed that the Statistical Commission should encourage such groups by giving them recognition and by utilizing them in whatever ways prove practicable. Reference was made in this connection to the Census of the Americas, planned to be taken in 1950. It was pointed out that in such an undertaking the Inter American Statistical Institute, as the central planning agency for the project, would be in a better position than the United Nations Secretariat to interpret and evaluate the results.

The conclusion was reached that no formal action by the Statistical Commission is called for at this session, although the Commission's report to the Economic and Social Council might appropriately give recognition to the value of the contribution which can be made to improvement of world statistics by such regional groups. It was agreed that the following principles should be incorporated in such a statement:

1. The United Nations must maintain direct contact with national governments in the field of statistics.
2. The Statistical Commission welcomes the help and collaboration of regional organizations in the improvement of world statistics.
3. In some instances it may be desirable to collect certain types of data through a regional organization rather than directly from national governments, but such arrangements should be adopted only by mutual agreement between the United Nations and the national governments concerned.

With reference to the third point listed above it was indicated that data needed for monthly publications of the United Nations should be excepted from such arrangements.

A recess was taken at 12:45 to 2:00 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened at 2:07 p.m.

In response to a question by the Chairman whether any topics dealt with in working papers submitted to the Commission had not been disposed of, reference was made to the proposal concerning education and training of statistical personnel (E/STAT/W.10 - 30 April 1946, paragraph 5). It was agreed that this topic is within the competence of the Statistical Commission, but that consideration should be deferred to a later session of the permanent Commission. The Secretary was directed to record the Commission's desire that suitable action on this subject should be taken at a later session, with the reservation that no commitment is implied as to action by the Commission to establish standards of professional qualifications for statisticians.

Reference was made at this point to the "Proposal of the Czechoslovak Delegation to the United Nations for Consideration by the Statistical Commission" (E/STAT/2 - 29 April 1946). It was agreed that this proposal should be referred to the Secretary-General without recommendation, for study by the statistical staff of the Secretariat when it is established, and for such additional action or further reference as the Secretary-General

deems appropriate.

The Commission was reminded of its decision at its first meeting "that any action taken by the Commission may be reviewed and reconsidered when other members arrive subsequently during the first session." In view of the fact that no other members have yet arrived, and in view of the advanced state of the Commission's deliberations, the Commission agreed to rescind its earlier decision on this point. It was agreed further that if other members of the Commission arrive subsequently during the first session, the Chairman and Secretary would review the work of the Commission in detail with such member or members in order to provide opportunity for submission of any divergent views to the Economic and Social Council.

Consideration was then turned to the proposal that establishment of a sub-commission on statistical sampling be recommended (E/STAT/W.10 - 30 April 1946, paragraph 1). It was pointed out that various types of problems are presented in the general field of sampling, and that the choice of problems to be studied would affect the selection of members for the sub-commission. The question was raised whether the sub-commission would be asked to work upon mathematical methods or upon the applications of such methods to particular areas such as agricultural production, the measurement of public opinion, and the like. With respect to applications, it was observed that different groups of experts are involved.

In reply it was indicated that the proposal was not limited to the study of either mathematical methods or applications, although first emphasis should be placed upon the latter. It was suggested that as an initial task the sub-commission might canvass the present extent to which sampling techniques are used in different nations or geographical areas and within different areas of subject matter. It was observed that there would be considerable value from a pooling of experience respecting the methods of application of sampling, which have reached their greatest development in Great Britain, and the United States and in India. It was agreed, however, that the sub-commission should not neglect theoretical

aspects of sampling method, with respect to which important differences have not been resolved.

After some discussion of the size of such a sub-commission and of its method of operation (e.g., whether the sub-commission might establish national sub-committees which would tend to reduce travel requirements), it was concluded that it would be difficult to formulate definitive terms of reference at this session of the Statistical Commission.

Thereupon the Commission agreed to recommend to the Economic and Social Council that it establish a sub-commission on statistical sampling of not more than nine members, having two immediate assignments:

1. to formulate recommendations upon the composition and terms of reference of a permanent sub-commission on statistical sampling;
2. to survey the present status of the methods of application of statistical sampling in different geographical areas and fields of subject matter.

Consideration was then given to the desirability of recommending establishment of additional sub-commissions in other fields. Reference was made in this connection to the several sub-committees of the Committee of Statistical Experts of the League of Nations, and it was pointed out that the Commission has recommended that the functions of these sub-committees be taken over by the Statistical Commission. Agreement was reached, however, that, although the Commission will certainly wish to consider at a later session the establishment of additional sub-commissions in such fields as national income and balance of payments statistics, among others, no further action should be taken on this question at the present session.

The Commission then discussed briefly the form of the draft report which is to be prepared by the Chairman and the Secretary prior to the next meeting. Several suggestions were made for the guidance of the Chairman but it was concluded that no specific instructions are needed. The Secretary, however, was directed to take necessary action to insure

that a French as well as an English text of the draft will be available for consideration by the Commission when it next meets at 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday, 14 May 1946.

A brief discussion followed of arrangements for the next session of the Commission. The Chairman was asked to consult the Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Affairs on the date for the next session and on items to be included in the agenda. With reference to the date for the next session, a preference was indicated for a date in October 1946, preceding a meeting of population experts from various countries which is being arranged to meet in the United States late in October 1946. It was pointed out that the date of the next session of the Statistical Commission may be related to the date set for sessions of the Economic and Social Council, which in turn must be related to sessions of the Assembly.

Some discussion was devoted to questions of co-ordination of the work of the Statistical Commission with that of other Commissions of the Economic and Social Council. The Commission agreed that it would be appropriate for the Chairman to consult the Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Affairs for advice on such points in formulation of the draft report, but the reservation was made that decisions reached by the Commission should govern the Chairman in this connection.

A message to the Statistical Commission was received from the President of the Economic and Social Council commending the importance of the Commission's work and expressing confidence that the Commission's deliberations will greatly assist the Council in solving problems which confront it.

Thereupon the meeting was adjourned at 3:25 p.m. until 10:30 a.m., Tuesday, 14 May 1946.