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HANDBOOK OF SAMPLE SURVEYS OF
FAMILY LIVING CONDITIONS

(Methodological guide for multi-subject
household inquiries)

(Memorandum prepared by the Secretary-General)

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Working Party on Statistics for Social Programmes at its first meeting recognized that most household surveys inevitably extend to more than one subject and that the Working Party could make a useful contribution by developing a handbook of household surveys, based on technical contributions from the various agencies. As requested by the Working Party the United Nations Statistical Office prepared a draft outline of purpose and nature of contents for the handbook and sent it to the members of the Working Party for their comments and suggestions. This memorandum incorporates suggestions received to date.

2. The usefulness of sample surveys has been stressed by the Statistical Commission on many occasions and the feasibility of such surveys has been demonstrated by the experience of many countries and projects sponsored by the

United Nations and the specialized agencies as reported in several documents.^{1/} Sample surveys can be used to collect information on almost every aspect of living conditions, social and economic environment and human behaviour. The purpose of household inquiries and the general features of such inquiries were examined by a Working Group of Experts on Family Living Studies convened by the ILO in 1955.^{2/}

3. Two factors amongst those behind the current interest in family living studies should be mentioned in particular:

(a) The household or family rather than the firm or some administrative unit is the natural unit for collecting many statistics for social programmes, particularly those used for evaluating needs and the satisfaction of needs. Therefore the attention focussed on statistics for social purposes is reflected in interest in the methods used to collect these statistics.

(b) Efforts for the improvement of statistics in less developed countries must take account of the fact that the household is in many cases the producing as well as the consuming unit, so that again the household becomes the natural unit for collecting economic or output statistics as well as "social".

4. The purposes of the handbook will be to set forth the major topics that might be included in multi-subject surveys, the definitions, concepts and approaches to be used and the major questions to be answered by household surveys.

^{1/} United Nations, Department of Social Affairs, Enquiries into Household Standards of Living in Less-Developed Areas, ST/SOA/1, 6 July 1950, Sales No. 1950.IV.7.

United Nations Statistical Office, Sample Surveys of Current Interest (Sixth Report). ST/STAT/SER.C/7, July 1955.

International Labour Office, Report of the Working Group of Experts on Family Living Studies, Doc. FL/20, Geneva, 1955.

Statistical Commission and Economic Commission for Europe, Social Research through Family Living Studies (Discussion paper prepared by International Labour Office), Doc. Conf.Eur.Stats/43/Add.1, 13 June 1956.

Food and Agriculture Organization, Review of Food Consumption Surveys.

^{2/} ILO, Report of the Working Group of Experts on Family Living Studies, Document FL/20, Geneva, 1955.

The handbook will not deal with either the question of sample design (a subject on which a separate manual will be issued this year under the title A Short Manual on Sampling - Elements of Sample Survey Theory) or data processing (on which a series of methodological studies has been issued), and will be restricted to surveys in which the "private household" is a basic sampling unit.

5. In view of the fact that a household survey operation generally includes several topics but that the collection of data, by household interviewers, is usually entrusted to only one agency, the Working Party decided that the handbook should include technical material prepared by specialists regarding each topic, for use by all concerned with household surveys. It will not be the purpose of the handbook to promote a single, uniform international inquiry, since rarely, if ever, could all the topics to be included in the handbook be covered in a single household survey operation, nor is it to include an exhaustive description of specialized surveys such as dietary surveys, labour force surveys, etc. Instead, it is intended that those undertaking a multi-subject household survey may choose among the topics included in the handbook as many as are suitable to the needs and circumstances, but that the concepts used will be substantially the same in all the cases in which the same topic is included. Thus, for example, the definition of a private household might be the same whether the information is collected on housing, morbidity or other subjects.

II. TOPICS TO BE INCLUDED

6. The major topics indicated below are tentative and are listed in an arbitrary order. Information on some of the subjects is normally collected by either a universal census enumeration or could be collected by methods other than a census or household survey. No effort has been made at this stage to indicate the items which might be collected by household surveys more appropriately than by other methods. The handbook would set forth the basic questions to be answered by statistical data concerning each topic, the units of observation applicable in each case, the basic classifications and the final tabulations that would be desirable under general conditions. If possible the handbook would include information which might be considered necessary in

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designing the sample such as relative frequencies, typical distributions, etc. Appropriate methods of interviewing applicable to each topic and the treatment of non-sampling errors would also be explored in the handbook.

7. Below is a list of the major topics that might be included in the handbook:

- (a) Introduction
- (b) Demographic characteristics
- (c) Health conditions
- (d) Food consumption and nutrition
- (e) Education
- (f) Employment
- (g) Housing
- (h) Social Security
- (i) Income
- (j) Expenditure, savings and investments
- (k) Economic activities of the household
- (l) Household facilities

It is expected that draft texts of the contents of the handbook, prepared by the agencies concerned will be available for discussion at the meeting of the Working Party in 1960.

III. STATISTICAL ORGANIZATION FOR HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS

8. The handbook might also contain a chapter on the various types of organizations which the countries have adopted for taking household surveys. The experience of a few selected countries might be used in preparing this chapter. For example, the National Sample Survey of India, the Health Survey in the United States, the Social Survey of Japan and the ad hoc arrangements made in several ECAFE and African countries for taking surveys might provide the background information for a discussion of the statistical organization for household surveys.

9. The needs of important government agencies such as the Central Planning Offices, the Ministries of Health, Education and Economy and the requirements of university research institutes would also need to be considered in discussing

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the types of statistical organization for household surveys that would suit their needs. But the availability of trained and expert personnel on sampling design, methods of interviewing and data processing in general would be a key factor in deciding about the statistical organization for sampling surveys. The handbook might elaborate on the basic factors to be considered in adopting a statistical organization.
