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REPORT OF THE INTER-AGENCY MEETING ON STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES

(Report by the Secretary-General)

1. The Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) at its fortieth session (New York, 18 - 19 October 1965) recommended that an ad hoc interorganization meeting of senior statistical officers should take place in the summer of 1966. The meeting was held in Geneva from 11 to 14 July 1966 and was attended by the following organizations:

United Nations
International Labour Organisation
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural
Organization
World Health Organization
International Monetary Fund
General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

2. In view of the importance of the statistical activities carried out in its region by the Inter American Statistical Institute, the Secretary-General of that organization was invited to participate in the meeting and provide information on the statistical programme of I.A.S.I. An observer from the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development also attended the meeting.

3. In the light of the discussion at the last session of the Commission^{1/}, the following summary account of the inter-agency meeting is presented for the information of the Commission.

^{1/} Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Thirty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 12 paras 171-174.

4. The meeting considered a working paper prepared by the United Nations, setting out the programmes of the various agencies in the different special fields of statistics under the title of "Integrated Five-Year Programme of International Statistics". On the basis of this draft, agencies were invited to submit such amendments and conditions as were necessary to indicate their work programmes over the five years 1966-1971. It was emphasized, however, that these programmes being determined by the needs and decisions of the organizations concerned were not, conceptually, parts of a single international programme. Moreover, none of the organizations, in fact, possessed a definitive programme for more than a year or two ahead and the projects listed must therefore be regarded as tentative and subject to change according to the circumstances in each agency. The participating agencies indicated that they would welcome the comments of the Commission on the programmes and on areas of work which would warrant consideration for the future (see E/CN.3/351 for a revision of the working paper).

5. The meeting discussed the problems and methods of co-ordination. It was recalled that the ACC, in recommending the meeting, had stated that the meeting should consider the subject of co-ordination of the international statistical programme as well as the question of future arrangements for inter-agency consultation on statistical matters. The meeting noted that a Consultative Committee on Statistical Matters, which had existed up to 1962, had been discontinued by ACC because it had not met for a number of years. After a full discussion of the various methods of achieving inter-agency co-ordination, the meeting decided that in the present circumstances there were important reasons for establishing a co-ordinating committee on statistical activities as part of the machinery of ACC. The need for this committee arose from the growth in activities which warranted inter-agency action and from the express desire of the Statistical Commission that "in spite of the difficulties hitherto encountered, it was imperative that positive efforts should be made by the Secretary-General to achieve a co-ordinated international statistical programme."^{2/} Among the fields warranting inter-agency consultations were:

^{2/} Ibid., para. 173.

1. Co-ordination of data collection and work programmes;
2. Duplication of activities between agencies of the United Nations family and other organizations;
3. The growing burdens being imposed on national statistical offices;
4. The need for joint action in such fields as computerization, technical assistance, training and education of statistical personnel, and statistics for economic and social development.

6. In the light of these growing problems, the meeting recommended that a co-ordinating committee on statistical activities should be established and should meet at least biennially to report to ACC. It was felt that if ACC accepted this recommendation, the committee would from time to time find it useful to invite representatives of organizations outside the United Nations family to attend its meetings. It was felt that a meeting would also be necessary in the year 1967, following the Statistical Commission's fourteenth session.

7. The meeting discussed the problem posed by the initiative taken by the Division of Social Sciences of UN SCO in compiling a draft manual entitled, "International Standards for Social Statistics: A Handbook for Research Workers". The draft of this handbook had been circulated to most of the agencies represented. A number of the agencies expressed serious concern at the professional quality of this document. The meeting felt that work of much higher quality could be achieved and that the work of the international organizations in the fields concerned would have appeared to much greater advantage and showed a higher level of expertise if the agencies concerned had been requested to supply material falling within their respective competence. The meeting regarded this case as an indication of the need for more regular machinery for co-ordination which would provide a means of consultation on such projects at a sufficiently early stage. The meeting recommended that UN SCO be requested to reconsider this project or to schedule it in such a way that agencies could provide the material covering their respective fields of activity.

8. The meeting discussed the problem posed by projects undertaken in one agency, involving the co-operation of other agencies. It would be necessary that such

projects should be notified as far in advance as possible and should, where time permitted, be discussed at inter-agency meetings and, in any case, between the agencies concerned. In this connexion, it was felt that the five-year programme of statistical activities should be kept up to date and reviewed at successive inter-agency meetings.

9. The committee saw a need for inter-agency co-ordination in the application of computer methods in the field of international statistics. Interest was expressed, for example, in the generalized programmes being prepared in the International Computing Centre at United Nations Headquarters. A clear need was seen for the inter-change of programmes among organizations and for the inter-change of experience in the recruitment and training of personnel for computer work. Requests were also being received from countries for advice in this field. Possibilities of economies were seen in the drawing up of programmes for the processing of the agricultural and population censuses to be taken about the year 1970.

10. The meeting discussed the problem of co-ordination of international statistical activities in Europe. It noted that, from the consultations undertaken by the Conference of European Statisticians, it appeared that the problem of duplication and overlapping requests arose mainly in certain subject fields such as national accounts, foreign trade, population, agriculture, industry and current economic indicators. The meeting felt that the establishment of a co-ordinating committee on statistical activities under the ACC, as proposed above, would operate to maintain co-ordination within the United Nations family of agencies. The chief problem in Europe, however, is the co-ordination of the work of the organizations outside the United Nations family such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Economic Community and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. The meeting noted that these organizations present reports on their statistical work to the Conference of European Statisticians at its annual sessions, and suggested that the Conference should arrange a series of detailed consultations with these organizations concerning their statistical needs, arrangements and programmes in the fields in which the problem is most serious. Representatives of these organizations should also be invited to meetings of the proposed co-ordinating committee on statistical activities, for discussion of specific problems.

11. The meeting noted that the Conference of European Statisticians had recommended, in this connexion, that (a) a list be drawn up of current international statistical standards; (b) the fields of competence of the different organizations in statistical matters be clarified and (c) a central file of statistical questionnaires be established. The meeting considered that these steps would make only an indirect and perhaps delayed contribution to the solution of the problem of co-ordination in Europe and that the direct consultations recommended above would be more effective. It was agreed, however, that the co-ordinating committee on statistical activities should keep under review the need for and the possibilities of establishing the list of statistical standards and the file of questionnaires suggested.

12. The meeting heard a statement by the observer from the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development concerning the work programme of the Institute. Particular interest was expressed in the Institute's study of measurement of levels of living, which involved components on which statistical work was being done in the various agencies. The meeting welcomed the research work being done on this subject and expressed the view that it would be appropriate that a future inter-agency meeting should be given an opportunity to review the statistical aspects of this work with representatives of the Institute.

13. The meeting discussed a working paper entitled "Relationship between Population and Agricultural Censuses", jointly prepared by the Statistical Office of the United Nations and the Statistics Division of FAO at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirteenth session (see E/CN.3/352 for a revision of the working paper). The meeting came to the following conclusions:

14. It is not possible to resolve the differences between the concepts of "farm population" and "population employed in agricultural work", as used in the agricultural census, and "agricultural population" as identified in the population census. The concepts are distinct and have separate uses. Although the elimination of these differences would facilitate the comparison of some results of the two censuses, it would not in itself make possible the simultaneous use of the results.

15. Simultaneous use is only possible if the two censuses have the same time-reference, i.e., if the enumerations take place simultaneously. With simultaneous enumeration, of course, the differences in concepts are not important because any group of the population can be identified as required for the purposes of either census. However, the drawbacks of simultaneous enumeration preclude the recommendation of the use of this procedure.

16. The consequence of this situation is the necessity it imposes for the collection in the agricultural census of information on characteristics of the population which is also collected in the population census. However, although countries investigate in their agricultural censuses a variety of information on population characteristics, the only three of these characteristics on which data are required for the tabulations recommended in FAO's Program for the 1970 World Census of Agriculture are main occupation of the holder and sex and age of persons connected with agricultural holdings. The two latter topics should not present any difficulties of collection in agricultural censuses. The greatest advantage of relating the results of the two censuses, therefore, lies only in the possibility of eliminating the need for the duplicate collection of data on occupation of economically active persons. Although this is unfortunate, it is no more so than the need to collect duplicate information on this and other topics in population and housing censuses which are not taken simultaneously.

17. The meeting felt that the time and place of the next meeting on the co-ordination of statistical programmes should be decided by correspondence.