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DEMOGRAPHIC AND HOUSING STATISTICS
PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEM

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Summary of comments on document E/CN.3/411

1. At its fifteenth session, November 1969, the Population Commission had before it the English text of the "Principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system" (E/CN.3/411). Since no translation of that document into the official languages was available at the time, the Commission decided to defer consideration of the draft. As soon as the translations became available, they were circulated among the representatives of the Commission for comments, which are summarized below. Included among these comments are those of the United Nations Office at Geneva, prepared by the Working Group on Social Demography at its meeting in June 1969.
2. Most of the comments refer to the definitions of vital events and topics, to assignment of priorities to the various topics, and to the need of treating separately recommendations for the developed and for the developing countries (see paragraphs 45-48 below).
3. Titles and paragraph numbers given below refer to document E/CN.3/411.

INTRODUCTION

Paragraph 6

4. France suggested that the French translation of the term "record-linkage" should be "couplage des données" rather than "rapprochement de documents", which appears several times in the text, especially in paragraphs 414-416.

5. France also expressed the opinion that the passage at the end of paragraph 6, which reads "... which may perhaps in the future make the present outlook on data collection seem outmoded" seems to be overstated. The Secretariat feels that this passage may be revised to read, "Although much further development in this direction would be necessary, it is perhaps not premature to give thought to the possible effect of the introduction of the new computer techniques on data collection systems."

I. USES OF VITAL RECORDS AND VITAL STATISTICS

A. Vital records

Paragraph 12

6. France pointed out that vital records not only make it possible to establish certain rights of the individual, but that it should also be mentioned that they sometimes imply obligations (as in the case of military service) or loss of rights (such as the age limit provided by numerous laws governing employment, retirement, etc.).

7. This comment, it is felt, is already taken into account by paragraph 310 under the heading Incentives to registration.

B. Vital statistics

Paragraph 28

8. India offered the comment that, since especially in populous countries one of the uses of vital statistics is for formulating population control programmes and for evaluating the effectiveness of such programmes, specific mention of these uses might be made in paragraph 28.

II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEM

A. Definition of a vital statistics system

(1) Priorities

Paragraphs 39-42

9. India agreed with the recommendation assigning first priority to collecting information on live births and deaths, second priority to information on marriages and divorces and only a low priority to foetal deaths. As to the even lower priorities assigned to registration of annulments, judicial separations, adoptions, legitimations and recognitions, India expressed fear that it might be difficult for developing countries to include these items in their vital statistics system.

B. Definition of each vital event for statistical purposes

Paragraph 44 (1)

10. India drew attention to a suggestion by the ECAFE Seminar on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (1968) that WHO evolve a simplified definition of live-birth for application in developing countries, and proposed that the definition to be prepared by WHO be included in the final version of the document. 11. Foot-note 3 states that "consideration is being given by WHO to a revision of the definition to make it more adaptable to less advanced medical conditions". As soon as the revised definition becomes available, the Secretariat proposes to incorporate it into the "Principles and recommendations".

Paragraph 44 (3)

12. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, felt that the recommended definition of foetal deaths, although having the merit of simplicity, was not adequate for purposes of social research and action in Europe, where some countries are experiencing a noticeable increase in foetal mortality from various causes, among which is quite probably the growing number of induced abortions. The Working Group, therefore, felt that a clear distinction should be made between early and late foetal deaths, since most countries already register stillbirths (late foetal deaths) and will continue to do so in the future but will hardly register early foetal deaths (spontaneous or induced).

13. The comment of the Working Group referred to in the preceding paragraph seems to be in agreement with the principle underlying the recommendations which, in paragraph 41, state that "... registration of all foetal deaths irrespective of gestational age is a desirable goal to be attained as soon as possible..."

14. As to distinguishing early and late foetal deaths, such a distinction is suggested in foot-note 5, where late foetal deaths are clearly identified as being "foetal deaths of twenty-eight or more completed weeks of gestation".

C. Principles for collection and compilation of vital statistics

Paragraph 49

15. The United Kingdom offered the following remarks on the fourth sentence: what matters is that vital events figures should be commensurate with the figures corresponding to the population base. It cannot be assumed that events occurring to non-residents can be easily distinguished, because the possibility of making such a distinction depends on the amount of detail of the information recorded at registration.

III. TOPICS TO BE INVESTIGATED IN A VITAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM, THEIR
DEFINITION AND SPECIFICATION

A. Topics to be investigated and methods of investigation

TOPICS TO BE INVESTIGATED BY CIVIL REGISTRATION

Paragraph 68a

16. Two kinds of comments were made: (a) comments on general problems of priorities and (b) comments on suggested priorities of specific topics.

(a) Comments on general problems of priorities

17. India came to the conclusion that the "Principles and recommendations" contained an excessive number of high-priority topics. This, it was pointed out, appeared to be at variance with the recommendations of the ECAFE Seminar (see paragraph 10 above), which agreed to distinguish three categories of topics for vital events by adding a third-priority category to the first two, thus apparently assigning relatively fewer first-priority topics and more lower priorities.

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18. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, seemed to feel that European countries could readily cope with additional topics should an expansion be suggested.

19. France offered the suggestion that in the over-all arrangement of topics, it would be preferable to list separate groups of related topics rather than following an alphabetic order.

(b) Comments on suggested priorities of specific topics

(1) LIVE-BIRTH, pp. 34-35 (English version) and (3) FOETAL-DEATH, pp. 38-39 (English version).

20. The United States pointed out that, in some cases, items which should be included on both the live-birth and the foetal-death certificates appear in the "Principles and recommendations" only on one or the other. The Secretariat will correct these errors.

(i) Characteristics of the event (child)

Gestational age

21. France proposed that "gestational age" should be a first-priority topic.

Weight at birth

22. The United States commented that, according to WHO recommendations, "weight at birth" provides a measure of "immaturity" rather than "prematurity"; the term "prematurity" is used in connexion with gestational age. The Secretariat will correct this error.

23. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, drew attention to the fact that it unanimously recommended that "weight at birth" be included among the first-priority items in the questionnaire on births, infant deaths and late foetal deaths (stillbirths).

(ii) Characteristics of mother and father

Date of marriage; if not available, duration of marriage (for legitimate births)

24. The United States stated that it should be made clear whether first marriage or current marriage is desired. First marriage is most often used in studies of fertility; it was also suggested that, in many countries, it might be useful to distinguish between legal and consensual marriages.

Children born alive to mother during her entire lifetime

25. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, expressed the desire that the number of children born alive to the mother from her present marriage be included as a first-priority item in order to enable the analysis of marital fertility.

Economic characteristics and Educational attainment

26. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, felt that, "educational attainment" and "status" are far more important than "occupation" for pertinent analysis; therefore, both items should be added to the list of first-priority topics. "Occupation" might then be considered as a second priority.

Interval since last previous live birth to mother

27. France mentioned that it would be useful to know if there were previous abortions.

28. The United States noted that the quality of reporting could be improved in most developed countries if date of last previous live birth were to be ascertained rather than "interval since last previous live birth". The latter could be derived from the former.

29. The United States also felt that consideration should be given to the inclusion of an item on the date of the last foetal death. This addition would permit the computation of pregnancy intervals as well as of live-birth intervals.

Place of usual residence of mother

30. The United Kingdom indicated that a child's "place of usual residence" (by definition taken to be the residence of mother) should be considered a derived characteristic of the child rather than a characteristic of the parents.

Children born dead (foetal deaths) to mother during her entire lifetime

31. France commented that the question was correctly put in the French version of the document, but that there was the danger that it might not be understood correctly, because the term "mort-né" generally refers to foetal deaths of full-term pregnancies (late foetal deaths).

(2) DEATH, pp. 36-37 (English version)

32. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, recommended that deaths under one year of age be investigated separately as is done in many countries. Infant deaths should, therefore, become a separate item in paragraph 68a and should include the topics listed under foetal deaths, since the analysis of infant mortality is not possible without appropriate information about biological characteristics of the infant at birth (e.g., type of birth, weight) and characteristics of mother and father.

33. On the other hand, the United States noted that items relating specifically to infant deaths could be derived from linking birth and death records. Where such a possibility exists, it may be desirable to perform such linking of records rather than to include items on the death records that relate specifically to birth characteristics of the infant.

(i) Characteristics of event

Attendant at birth

34. France suggested that the question of "attendant at birth" be asked only for deaths under three months of age.

(ii) Characteristics of decedent

Children born alive during lifetime and still living (for females of child-bearing age and over)

35. The United Kingdom expressed the opinion that the number of "children born alive during lifetime and still living" of a deceased woman should not be a priority topic, because the person reporting the death may have no knowledge of the descendant's life and no time before carrying out the registration to ascertain the facts. The information is, therefore, likely to be inaccurate.

Place of birth (geographic)

36. France recommended that "place of birth (geographic) should be given first priority in preference to "place of residence at a specified time in the past."

(5) DIVORCE, pp. 41-42 (English version)

(ii) Characteristics of divorcees (husband and wife separately)

37. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, suggested that the total number of "children born alive during marriage" should be included as a first-priority item in the divorce registration form.

B. Definition and specification of topics to be investigated

Paragraph 88

38. The United Kingdom raised the question whether the child-bearing age could not be defined as 15-44 years. Births, of course, do occur above and below this age range, but in most countries they constitute a relatively small number of births, which is likely to continue to decline.

Paragraphs 94-95

39. The United Kingdom advised that the definitions should recognize that "birth order" can be appropriately used to cover live births plus late foetal deaths (stillbirths).

Paragraph 125

40. France drew attention to the fact that the term "naturalization" cannot be extended to all cases of change of nationality, since it has a precise legal meaning, and proposed the following revision of item (a): "citizens, including citizens by birth and persons who have acquired citizenship after birth (through naturalization, option, marriage, declaration, etc.)".

IV. THE TABULATION PROGRAMME

B. RECOMMENDED TABULATIONS

(1) FOR DATA COLLECTED BY THE CIVIL REGISTRATION METHOD

Paragraph 40a, p. 38 (English version)

LE-9 LIVE BIRTHS CROSS-CLASSIFIED BY LIVE BIRTH ORDER* AND BY
INTERVAL SINCE LAST PREVIOUS LIVE BIRTH* TO MOTHER.
p. 93 (English version)

Use of tabulations

41. The United Kingdom pointed out that the justification for measuring birth intervals needs to be strengthened. Such information can be of as fundamental importance as other data mentioned in measuring the considerable effect of acceleration or postponement in births on short-term fertility. Patterns of family formation can vary significantly between different cohorts even when final family size remains comparable and knowledge of this is very important for making projections from current data.

V. THE CIVIL REGISTRATION METHOD AS A SOURCE OF DATA FOR VITAL STATISTICS

B. The characteristics of the civil registration method

Place where registration is to be made.

Paragraphs 346, 348 and 349

42. The United Kingdom pointed out that on the basis of recent experience in Scotland, registration of vital events at place of residence seems to have certain practical advantages. Therefore, the paragraphs might be suitably modified.

VI. THE ROLE OF SAMPLING IN COLLECTING AND PROCESSING OF DATA FOR VITAL STATISTICS

A. Collection of data for vital statistics

(1) WHERE A COMPREHENSIVE CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEM EXISTS

(a) Investigation of ancillary topics

Paragraph 407

43. France stated that, although the suggested methods for the investigation of supplemental topics listed in paragraph 407 would seem to be convenient for the statistician, they would complicate the work of the civil registration office.

GENERAL COMMENTS

44. Some comments were received voicing the desire that the "Principles and recommendations" be sensitive to the particular needs of countries, especially needs resulting from the fact that different countries find themselves in different stages of economic and social development.

45. India felt that for developing countries the uses, priorities and topics concerning vital statistics were different from those for the developed countries and, therefore, believed that developing countries would require a modified version of the document.

46. The United States pointed to the desirability of making a distinction between developed and developing countries when determining priorities of topics concerning vital events. In many cases, the two sets of priorities would be quite different. For example, in connexion with live birth the priority of "weight at birth" and "hospitalization" would probably be as high as "attendant at birth" in most countries with well-developed registration systems. On the other hand, the topic "literacy status" would probably have a very high priority in a developing country but would be hardly of any value for a developed country.

47. The Working Group on Social Demography, United Nations Office at Geneva, disclosed a preference for having the United Nations issue separate recommendations for European countries, because their social and demographic problems differ very much from those of the developing countries. It pointed out, on the other hand, that there may be problems of particular importance for Europe, which may be of significance for developing countries in the later stage of their development, so that the analysis of subjects of importance primarily for Europe may also become relevant for developing countries.

48. In this connexion, the Commission may be interested to know that consideration is being given to the preparation of a regional variant of the "Principles and recommendations" for Asian countries and that the advisability of similar variants for the African and American countries will also be explored.

49. Some further comments were offered, but it is felt that the majority did not properly belong in a statement of recommendations. Among these is one by India suggesting that it would be useful if there were added to the document a chapter on "Adaptation of the principles and recommendations by countries where the civil registration is lacking or deficient"; it was pointed out that a similar adaptation of recommendations can be found in A System of National Accounts.^{1/}

50. It would seem that there are merits to this suggestion but that such an addition would be more appropriately placed in the planned revision of the Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods.^{2/}

^{1/} United Nations publication, Sales No.: E.69.XVII.3, chap. IX.

^{2/} United Nations publication, Sales No.: 1955.XVII.1