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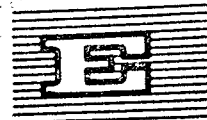
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PROGRAMME OF WORK AND PRIORITIES

PUBLICATIONS OF STATISTICS

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. The General Assembly invited (resolution 2732 (XXV), para. 4) the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) to examine and report to it at its twenty-sixth session on the programme of recurrent publications of the United Nations. The JIU submitted its report on this question to the Assembly at its twenty-sixth session (A/8362, which includes JIU/REP/71/8, a report prepared by Robert M. Macy).
2. In accordance with Assembly resolution 2886 (XXVI), the Economic and Social Council decided 1/ to transmit the relevant recommendations of the report to those of its subsidiary bodies meeting in the first half of 1972.
3. Hence the recommendations of the Inspector's report pertaining to statistics were to be brought to the attention of the Statistical Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination. The Committee requested that its subsidiary bodies transmit their observations to the Council at its fifty-third session. In view of the fact that the Council's fifty-third session is to be held from 3 to 28 July 1972, it was proposed that the observations of the Working Group should be forwarded directly to the Council. The present document, the portions of the Council's report pertaining to the discussion of this item, the report of the Working Group (E/CN.3/420) and the JIU report will be before the Statistical Commission.
4. To facilitate the discussion of the matter by the Statistical Commission, the present document (a) summarizes the recommendations on statistics in JIU/REP/71/8; and (b) furnishes background information concerning the proposals in that report 2/ and describes the implications of the recommendations in connexion with statistical publications.
5. It appeared best to group the material in this report into four main sections, the first of which deals with the general recommendations of the JIU report concerning publications of statistics. The second section describes matters pertaining to individual publications. Matters of data collection and some other recommendations are described in the third section. A summary is offered as the concluding section.

1/ At its 1810th meeting, held on 6 January 1972.

2/ Copies of JIU/REP/71/8 were circulated to the members of the Statistical Commission. The main statistical publications at issue, undoubtedly available to the members of the Statistical Commission in the libraries of their own national offices, are to be on hand for consultation during the Commission session. The Secretary-General's comments on the report of JIU, which were transmitted to the General Assembly at its twenty-sixth session, in document A/8540, also are to be brought to the attention of the Commission.

I. PUBLICATIONS OF STATISTICS: GENERAL ISSUES

6. The general recommendations of the JIU report concerning the publications of statistics are discussed in the following order:

- (a) The United Nations system as a supplier of statistics;
- (b) Timeliness in issuing international data;
- (c) Quality of statistical publications;
- (d) Duplication in the dissemination of statistics.

A. The United Nations system as a supplier of statistics

1. Recommendations of the report

7. This first question posed by the JIU report is:

"How far should the United Nations family go in assuming a 'monopoly' for the collection of basic information about countries and making it available through recurrent publications? Are Member States, other international organizations, and private organizations willing to curtail the use of their customary channels of information - diplomatic missions, correspondence, etc. - and rely more and more on the United Nations for collection and processing?" (para. 13)

8. In reply, the report states:

"It is this inspector's view that the United Nations should become the accepted source for a wide range of basic data on the Member States; and also for other information not so geographically oriented such as various kinds of environmental data that no one is collecting on a world-wide basis today. From a cost/benefit point of view, it makes sense to have these data collected and processed by a central body rather than individually by 130 countries. From another point of view, Member States should prefer to supply one standardized set of information rather than be burdened with many unco-ordinated requests. It seems clear that the Member States support the steps taken so far by the United Nations towards becoming the sole source for certain kinds of country information, as reflected for example in various General Assembly and ECOSOC resolutions authorizing recurrent publications, and in the approval of the establishment of ICC /International Computing Centre/ in Geneva with the enlarged 'central data banks'." (para. 14)

9. The JIU report also deals with certain conditions which should be met:

"However, it is a big and expensive responsibility for the United Nations to seek international agreements on standards and methodology in connexion with collecting information, to establish computer centres for

storage and processing of information, and to distribute the information on a timely basis in a form needed by users at reasonable cost. If the United Nations is to become the sole source of a wide range of basic information on countries, what further steps are necessary to inspire full confidence in others that they can rely on the United Nations for such information? Suggestions are presented below." (para. 15)

2. Comments

10. There can be little doubt that the Inspector's recommendations are in the right direction - a direction long explored by the Statistical Commission and other United Nations bodies and organs. As the Inspector's report suggests, there is wide agreement among Member States, public institutions, private enterprises and other organizations that world-wide, internationally comparable economic and social statistics are needed and that the most reliable, effective and efficient means of gathering, compiling and publishing these data is by the United Nations. They do rely on the United Nations for the statistics; in 1946 the Economic and Social Council charged the Statistical Commission and the statistical services of the United Nations with those responsibilities. For that purpose it is no doubt essential to have internationally accepted standards and methodology, to gather, process, store and disseminate complete data efficiently and issue timely statistics. The Statistical Commission and the statistical services of the United Nations have developed a body of internationally agreed statistical standards and methodologies and the Statistical Office of the United Nations has striven to attain the aforementioned goals.

11. It is also recognized that much of the thrust in the report quoted above - except those on timeliness, costs and centralization - is towards national authorities. Indeed, only the Governments of Member States are in a position to curtail statistical activities which aim at obtaining, processing and publishing international data which could be more efficiently handled by a single international statistical service. It is recognized that in a number of countries such activities are not insignificant. The statistical work of regional organizations outside the United Nations system is even more important.

12. To the degree that the existence of national and regional statistical units dealing with international statistics is considered an essential element for the maintenance of the identity of the national (or regional) organizations concerned, the hope for curtailing such activities is not great. However to the degree that national and regional organizations are willing to review such activities on a cost/benefit basis, a shift to increase the use of the international statistical services by countries and regional organizations is not inconceivable.

B. Timeliness in issuing international data

1. Recommendations of the report

13. The recommendations of the report concerning timeliness are explicit:

"Every recurrent publication approved by the Publications Board must be processed and distributed on or before the end of the next time period. In other words a yearbook for the period 1970 must be distributed before the end of 1971: a quarterly statistical report must be distributed before the end of the following three months; and so on. If it was found to be simply impracticable to compile, process and distribute a given Yearbook for example within 12 months, then it would be necessary to get a new authorization from the General Assembly to issue it every two years or even every three years before such a change could be approved by the Publications Board. The General Assembly might approve such a change, or decide that such a delay would largely destroy its usefulness and terminate the publication." (para. 19)

14. The report also stated that "the net effect of the above proposal over time should be a substantial saving of money as well as more timely issuance of recurrent publications" (para. 20). The report suggests that "if a strong sense of urgency could be injected into the picture" (para. 17) minimum delays (one year for publishing annual data and three months for publishing monthly figures) would be possible.

2. Comments

15. In the case of the Statistical Office of the United Nations, there is a "strong sense of urgency" and there are concerted efforts to issue timely statistics; the view expressed in other parts of the report is that the recurrent publications of the Office are, on the whole, not unduly delayed. It is none the less recognized that the elapsed time between the end of the reference period and the issuance of statistics should be further reduced for certain series. The recommendations in the report that unless recurrent annual publications are processed and distributed on or before the end of the next time period, they should be issued every two years, etc. are, however, unrealistic and counterproductive for some series of data. For example, reliable, detailed national accounting statistics covering a great number of countries are necessarily available much too late after the year of reference for the compilation and issue of figures during the following year. Users of those statistics wish to have the data as soon as they can be published. Lengthening the span between the end of the year of reference and the time of issue from about one and one third years to over two years would greatly reduce the value of the information. The results of population and industrial censuses and similar surveys are other examples of statistics for which the JIU recommendations are clearly inappropriate.

16. The recommendations of the report for increased timeliness and quality in the publications are apparently made in isolation from the users' needs for data. It would appear that the financial implications were considered only from the point of

view of expenditure, while income from publications was not examined. The report's recommendations concerning individual publications are dealt with in section II of this document, but as a case in point the question of the Statistical Yearbook needs to be referred to in the present context as well. This publication was valued very highly in the users' survey described in the JIU report (ranked second out of 84 publications, see para. 49). It is also one of the few net income-producing publications of the United Nations, that is, income from sales are higher than expenditures. Nevertheless, the report suggests that it be issued either "once every three years or that it be terminated" (para. 12(g)), and replaced by another publication. It is submitted that the examination of issues in relation to cost, timeliness and quality should be undertaken only in the context of the concrete requirements on the part of data users (see paragraph 71 below).

17. Adhering to the deadlines for issuing publications suggested in the JIU report - a maximum delay of 12 months for publications with annual data and of three months for monthly data - would be extremely difficult. While national experiences with the issuance of annual data vary, countries generally publish their statistical yearbooks containing data for a given year some time during the second half of the following year. Only a few cases can be cited of national yearbooks issued during the first half of the year, but there are numerous instances where yearbooks appear only towards the end of the following year. It is not very realistic to aim at the issuance of international yearbooks with deadline characteristics of national publications. Replies to questionnaires containing data for the preceding year for the Statistical Yearbook of the United Nations usually begin to arrive at the Statistical Office in August. By the end of October, perhaps 60 per cent of the replies have been received from countries. The material is sent to the printer in batches beginning in November and the actual printing of the yearbook is not generally feasible before the end of April and the issuance before the end of May. It is recognized that much of the delay in issuing this publication is due to the technology applied to its production. If the yearbook were to be computerized, an earlier issuance could be secured. The change-over to computerized publication would require transitional, but not insignificant, investments in programming time and other aspects, but in the long run the savings in time and effort would offset the transitional costs. It is also noted that the aesthetic appearance of the printed yearbooks is better than those of the computerized issues (see paragraph 72 below).

18. On a more general plane, it should be mentioned that statistical experts generally agree that there is an inverse relationship between timeliness and quality of the data produced. The timeliness of statistical information can be increased only at the expense of accuracy, while improvements in quality require a lengthening of the time necessary for their publication. It is also agreed that improvements in the quality of the data generally increase the costs of the information. The advancement of timeliness of the statistical information generally also augments the costs, if the same level of accuracy is required. Data which are known to

be reliable but are issued with a certain time lag are very widely used for analytical and other purposes.

19. National experiences with improved timeliness appear to be relevant to the issue at hand. Recent experience in Canada is described in this way:

"... We started out with what might be called something of a slogan, 'Monthly data before the end of the subsequent month; annual data before the end of the subsequent year'. This has served, in fact, as a long-run goal, from which we are still quite a distance away, but it was not very helpful as a basis for immediate action" 3/

20. To aim at earlier issue of statistics of comparable quality requires a complex effort. In Canada, a three-year programme was adopted:

"... our timeliness goals during the first two years were to speed up the release of the indexes of production, the quarterly accounts, and numerous other current economic statistics. We actually took about two and one-half years to accomplish this. We were hoping that our limited gains would have a general beneficial impact on timeliness elsewhere in Statistics Canada. In fact, little overall gain in the timeliness of our annual data was evident." 4/

The need for additional efforts was realized.

21. The general conclusions reached in Canada are summarized in the following manner:

"Ambitions with regard to timeliness improvement should be pushed to the point where further benefits from improved timeliness are outweighed by a loss in quality as reflected in larger revisions. The first task of those charged with managing a timeliness improvement program is to determine how far the system can be pushed to produce data more quickly without a loss of quality. This is essentially a management problem of optimum resource allocation and resource use although a good deal of research spawned by a timeliness program can contribute to its resolution. The second task is to be able to appraise any loss in accuracy, at least qualitatively if and when it arises so that reasoned decisions can be taken as to its advisability. The Statistics Canada experience during the past few years suggests that the determined pursuit of these efforts can yield fruitful rewards." 4/

3/ S.A. Goldberg, "Some Management and Research Considerations in Improving Timeliness", Statistical Observer (Statistics Canada, Ottawa,) Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 3.

4/ Ibid., p. 5.

C. Quality of statistical publications

1. Recommendations of the report

22. The report contains the following suggestions regarding quality:

"The following approach to improvement of the control and quality of publications should be tested: (a) a procedure should be established whereby prior to the beginning of each fiscal year, those responsible for recurrent publications in each organizational unit of the United Nations (ESA [Department of Economic and Social Affairs] UNIDO [United Nations Industrial Development Organization] etc.) would be required to draft a work plan for each publication spelling out its authority, highlights of the text to be prepared plus probable conclusions and recommendations (if any), proposed method of reproduction, maximum number of pages, specific time-table etc. Each such work plan would be approved in advance by the senior official designated for such purposes by the head of each organizational unit. There could be no deviation from the approved work plan without the signed approval of this senior official. Each person along the line in the editorial and printing sections etc. would use this approved plan as a firm guide in processing the publication; (b) before signing any of the proposed work plans, the designated senior official would have them collectively reviewed from the standpoint of ensuring that their implementation would not exceed the capacity of his organizational unit for such purposes, and that the costs involved were within the approved budget. He would represent his organizational unit in defending its publications programme before the Working Committee of the Publications Board; (c) the regional economic commissions and the offices of the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] resident Representatives would play an expanded role in helping Member States to increase the completeness and accuracy of information about their countries which is used in recurrent publications"(para.3).

2. Comments

23. It is submitted that the Statistical Office has well-defined, effective procedures for the substantive review and control of its recurrent publications. The contents and size - tables and text - of each new publication and the associated questionnaire, instructions and procedures of editing, coding and compiling are detailed and passed on by senior members of the staff beforehand; consultations are held with users of the data; and the purposes, content and financial implications of the publication are considered by the Statistical Commission. The tables, text and questionnaires for recurrent publications are reviewed each year by senior staff members of the Office. The return of questionnaires by national statistical authorities is policed; completed questionnaires are carefully edited and corrected, using the relevant

international standards, internal consistency checks, data submitted for earlier periods, national publications and correspondence with the national offices; and missing questionnaires are, to the extent possible, compiled from national publications and similar sources. The statistical divisions in the regions, technical assistance experts and staff members in the field and intensive correspondence with national offices are used, where necessary, in the work. Many of the activities of the Statistical Office are directed towards assisting Member States in improving and expanding their statistics. The offices of the UNDP resident representatives do not have the expertise required to furnish real assistance in the improvement of the quality of the wanted statistics.

D. Duplication in the dissemination of statistics

1. Recommendations of the report

24. The JIU recommendations concerning duplication apparently assume that processing and storage would be centralized ^{5/} and that "In the future, the IOB [Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems and Related Activities] will be in a good position to confer with the Publications Board, and the members of the ACC [Administrative Committee on Co-ordination] as appropriate, when data are requested for a publication which will seriously duplicate data already published elsewhere. Guidelines should be established for resolving such situations" (para. 105).

25. The recommendations are explicit concerning the publication of statistics by the regional economic commissions. It is suggested that the regional commissions, except ECE, where such data already exist, should concentrate on the following statistics:

"(a) Commodity data on intra-regional trade assembled by countries, for the purpose of action programmes designed to expand such trade; and

"(b) all statistical data now available for countries (except detailed commodity trade data) assembled in one volume for each country in the region" (para. 106).

26. Finally, in the report:

"It is emphasized that the Publications Board is not in a good position to review statistical publications 'substantively', and that the establishment of an ad hoc committee to look for duplication will probably be doomed to failure before it starts. Unless more comprehensive steps are taken along the lines proposed above - steps that are feasible today but not five or even three years ago - it is highly questionable whether duplication of statistical publications can be reduced significantly" (para. 108).

^{5/} The questions of data collection, processing and storage are discussed in section III of the present document.

2. Comments

27. It is recognized that in the case of centralized data storage the organ involved in the maintenance of the stored data could exert pressure on the bodies seeking data for publication. The report appears to favour pressures only against "serious duplications" and obviously is not aimed at the duplicate listing of certain data (for example, the population figures of countries) in a number of publications, which make the use of these individual publications easier. Nevertheless, in the report the discussion of the duplication in statistical series between certain publications of the Statistical Office of the United Nations, and between publications of the Office, on the one hand, and the publications of the regional economic commissions and specialized agencies, on the other, appears to be based on certain misunderstandings (see paragraph 73 below).

28. The fact that it is often essential to duplicate certain series in a publication, the specific subject of which is not the series in question, is not taken into account in the JIU report. For example, it is necessary to do this in order to delineate the setting or the trends in which the data in the publication may be evaluated and analysed or in order to tailor the classification or scope of the series in question to the purposes of the publication. Thus, as is recommended in the report, the Statistical Office of the United Nations has been urging the statistical divisions of ECAFE, ECA and ECLA to concentrate on bringing together and issuing for each country of their region the full range of statistics that the Statistical Office gathers. In general, while the Statistical Office issues the various series of data classified according to country, the series are arrayed in tables or publications devoted to given subjects - such as population, output of products and national accounting series - and not to given countries. In regional publications, tables can be arranged by countries and the inclusion of data for a given country can be considered from the point of view of the importance of the given item within the economic and social context of the country or region (see para. 75 below).

29. There is well-established, effective machinery in the United Nations family for avoiding unnecessary duplication in the publication of data. The Statistical Commission reviews the publications of the Statistical Office and the Commission and the regional conferences of statisticians review the statistical publications of the regional economic commissions. The Statistical Office keeps in close touch with the statistical divisions of the regions and the statistical services of the specialized agencies concerning their publications; and the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities deals with the statistical publications of the United Nations family. The IOB is not charged with responsibilities for statistical publications or the series of data for these purposes and will not be equipped to assist with these questions. With regard to the Inspector's comments on the Publication Board's ability to review statistical publications, it is considered that the responsibility for the "substantive"

review of the publications, similar to the other areas in the United Nations, should remain the task of the appropriate programme organs, in this case, primarily that of the Statistical Commission (see para. 74 below).

II. QUESTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL STATISTICAL PUBLICATIONS

A. Monthly Bulletin of Statistics

1. Recommendations of the report

30. The report states that "according to the User Survey, this publication is widely used, but there appear to be opportunities for reducing its costs" (para. 110) and suggests the following:

"This publication should be put on a quarterly basis in the future, the six-years of historical data should be included only in one quarterly issue each year, and understandings should be sought with FAO to include key statistical data in the field of agriculture" (para. 12(f)).

2. Comments

31. The proposals in the report for reducing the costs of the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics would seriously impair the usefulness of the publication. The Monthly Bulletin is widely used for a number of purposes: for example, in order to watch and account for trends - world-wide, regional and in individual countries - in various aspects of economic and social conditions; in order to obtain the latest available aggregative data for use in market research, financial analyses and other economic and social studies; and in order to prepare newspaper articles, newscasts and other materials for public consumption. For a number of these purposes, it is essential to have the latest available current statistics as soon as possible, conveniently juxtaposed with comparable series of annual data so that trends may be discerned. Issuing the Monthly Bulletin quarterly and leaving out the annual series from the first three issues of a year would markedly delay making current data available and seriously inconvenience the users of the data.

32. The overwhelming national practice is to issue monthly data in monthly bulletins of statistics. The Inspector's recommendation would restrict the issuance of monthly data to only three times per year ("It is proposed that three of the quarterly issues each year be restricted to more current information") and the fourth issue would deal with annual data ("the issue for the fourth quarter [would] include historical data running back several years") (para 110(ii)). On the basis of the arguments in paragraph 31 above, and in view of national experience in this matter, it is submitted that the suggested scheme would seriously reduce the usefulness of the monthly figures collected and would be contrary to generally accepted national experience in handling the issuance of monthly data.

It would also mean the discontinuation of the cultural legacy of the League of Nations in this respect. 6/ (See para. 76 below)

33. The expenses of publishing the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics are largely related to (a) the number of countries covered; (b) the number of subjects covered; (c) the frequency of issue, and (d) production technology. Out of these four factors, the Inspector dealt with only one (aside from his suggestion to increase the subject coverage with the inclusion of agricultural statistics). While reduction in frequency would reduce printing costs, it would not reduce them proportionately. Twelve issues per year do not cost three times as much as the production of four issues per year, and therefore the unit cost per issue would increase. It is not clear what the impact on sales would be. On the one hand, the quarterly issuance of monthly data along with an increase in cost per issue may not appeal to users and may decrease subscriptions. On the other hand, the probable reduction of the annual subscription fee, even if not in proportion to the decrease in frequency, may make the promotion of the bulletin somewhat easier.

34. However, the three other factors which were not dealt with by the report are of considerable importance. They all affect costs and, therefore, should be considered together with the examination of the matter of frequency. In respect of the number of countries for which data are shown, the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics increased its coverage between January 1947 and January 1972 from 66 to 203. The number of subjects covered in terms of tables shown increased from 39 to 74 during the same period. Altogether, the number of statistical series listed in the January 1947 Bulletin was about 1,000 and in January 1972 about 4,000. Finally, the technology of production also exerts a very important influence on the costs of the publication. Therefore, it is suggested that the possible changes in the publication of the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics should be examined in a broader manner and should not be restricted to considerations of frequency alone (see para. 78 below).

35. The JIU report also suggests that the publication of monthly data should be reviewed in the light of the work of the regional economic commission on monthly indicators. 7/ It would appear that this suggestion would also apply to monthly data publications of the United Nations system as a whole.

6/ It should be noted that the publication of the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics and the Statistical Yearbook of the League of Nations was not discontinued even during the years of the Second World War, though their issuance was shifted from Geneva to Princeton.

7/ Though the JIU User Survey indicated mixed reactions to the indicators in Europe.

B. Statistical Yearbook

1. Recommendations of the report

36. The report states that "according to the User Survey, this publication is used more widely than any other United Nations statistical publication. However, a review of its pages suggests opportunities to save money" (para. 111). Its suggestions are summarized as follows:

"It is proposed that this Yearbook either be issued only once every three years or that it be terminated and the issue of the Quarterly Bulletin of Statistics proposed above, which includes the historical data, take its place. If the latter alternative is chosen, certain data should be added to this Quarterly Bulletin that is now in the Statistical Yearbook but not in the present Monthly Bulletin" (para. 12(g)).

2. Comments

37. The Statistical Yearbook is designed to serve as a convenient, coherent summary of all international economic and social statistics. The unique need for this publication is clearly indicated by its high volume of sales - greater than any other recurrent United Nations publication - and by the fact that Governments generally issue such a publication in addition to their monthly statistical bulletins. Publishing the Statistical Yearbook less frequently would certainly not meet the expressed needs of Governments, private businesses etc. for these data. Both on the basis of the very high value users attach to the Statistical Yearbook and on the evidence of financial considerations, it would appear extremely undesirable to carry out the indicated recommendations of the report. It is submitted that the publication of the yearbook only every third year would drastically reduce its usefulness. Since this appears to be a net revenue-earning publication, the curtailment of issue to every third year would reduce revenues more than expenditures and thus, in balance, would contribute to the deterioration of finances. 8/

38. It would appear impractical to publish the Yearbook as the fourth quarterly issue of the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics. In view of the fact that the Yearbook is approximately 800 pages long while the length of the Monthly Bulletin is around 230-240 pages, the implementation of this proposal would simply mean an issuance of a much shorter Yearbook. In fact,

8/ It can be mentioned that two copyright statistical publications of the United Nations are published each year in Japanese against the payment of royalties: the Statistical Yearbook and the Demographic Yearbook. Arrangements to publish the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics in Japanese have also been agreed upon.

there are no reasons to call such an issue the fourth (quarterly) bulletin of monthly statistics. This recommendation, in practical terms, involves the annual issue of three bulletins for monthly data and the publication of one greatly reduced volume of annual data (See para 77 below).

39. The usefulness and cost/benefit aspects of the Statistical Yearbook should be reviewed on the same basis as mentioned for the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics. Consideration should be given to the impact of all the relevant factors, including the requirements of users, the technology of production, the relationship of expenditure to income and to the supply of annual data within the United Nations system as a whole. It would also appear desirable that the JIU proposals concerning data collection, processing and data storage and the Inspector's recommendations in respect of individual publications should be reviewed in an interrelated manner and not in isolation from each other. It is maintained that, for example, the establishment of statistical data banks and multisubject data bases within such banks cannot be reviewed in isolation from the publication problems discussed here (See para 78 below).

C. Other Statistical Office yearbooks

1. Recommendations of the report

40. In this connexion the JIU report contains the following statement:

"Questions can certainly be raised regarding the tremendous amount of detail included in the Demographic Yearbook, Yearbook of National Accounts Statistics, Yearbook of International Trade Statistics, Commodity Trade Statistics and the World Trade Annual. On the other hand, if the United Nations is moving slowly into the position of being the sole source of such data except for publications by the countries themselves, it thereby becomes responsible for making a complete set of data available even if part of it is used very little. Furthermore, all of these publications were found to be very useful by the User Survey" (para. 113).

2. Comments

41. The Demographic Yearbook, the Yearbook of National Accounts Statistics, the Yearbook of International Trade Statistics and the Commodity Trade Statistics furnish internationally comparable, comprehensive annual statistics that are in considerable demand and are put to a wide range of uses by Governments, institutions, private organizations and the offices of the United Nations and other international agencies. Indicative of this is the fact that these publications are all listed as most useful recurrent publications in paragraphs 49 and 50 of the JIU report. No comments on the

JIU evaluation of these publications are offered here (See paragraph 78 below). However, it should be mentioned that their production would also be affected by the implementation of some or all of the major recommendations concerning the collection, processing and storage of statistics along the lines suggested by the JIU report.

D. Statistical publications of the regional economic commissions

1. Recommendations of the report

42. The summary of the JIU recommendations in this respect is as follows:

"There is a lot of unnecessary duplication between statistical publications of the regional economic commissions and ESA headquarters. There are also certain specialized publications of doubtful value. Details on this are presented later in this report. It is proposed that the commissions concentrate on assembling all statistical data for a given country in one volume, whereas today it has to be extracted from a number of publications; that it assemble data showing commodity flows between countries in its region; and that some of the specialized publications be terminated" (para. 114).

2. Comments

43. The statement in the report concerning a "lot of unnecessary duplication" is not demonstrated with examples in the document. The concrete examples all refer to what the Inspector considers excessive detail in some of the publications. As to the general advice that the regional commissions should concentrate on issuing data for their regions on a country basis, the experience gained in the ECAFE region is indeed favourable (See para. 75 below).

44. The recommendations of the report extend to the following 10 regional publications:

- (a) Economic Bulletin for Europe;
- (b) Annual Bulletin of General Energy Statistics for Europe;
- (c) Indices of Concentration in the Coal Industry;
- (d) Transport of Dangerous Goods;
- (e) Statistics on Road Traffic Accidents in Europe;
- (f) Bulletin of Statistics on World Trade in Engineering Products;
- (g) Annual Bulletin of Housing and Building Statistics for Europe;
- (h) Quarterly Bulletin of Steel Statistics for Europe;
- (i) Electric Power in Asia and the Far East; and
- (j) Foreign Trade Statistics for Asia and the Far East.

45. It was suggested that the Working Group of the Statistical Commission should address itself only to the recommendations concerning the last of these 10 publications. It would appear appropriate to consider the questions

raised concerning the nine other publications, if the Council so requests, after the views of the programming bodies of the substantive activities are expressed on these matters.

46. Regarding the Foreign Trade Statistics for Asia and the Far East, while the general reservation mentioned in paragraph 45 above also applies perhaps the following commentary can be offered. Foreign trade data tabulations at the world level, though given in considerable commodity detail do not carry entries below a certain value level (that is, \$100,000). This is dictated by practical considerations and, from the point of view of a great majority of users, is completely appropriate. However, because of this, data for smaller developing nations may not be available unless provided by regional publications. Such publications may set different (lower) limits for showing values for trade in certain items among the countries in the region etc.

III. DATA COLLECTION, PROCESSING, STORAGE AND OTHER QUESTIONS

A. Data collection

1. Recommendations of the report

47. The report very strongly favours centralization in the collection of international statistics:

"It is proposed that the General Assembly consider the adoption of the following programme to reduce duplication in the collection, processing and publication of statistics:

"Agreement would be reached on a uniform schedule of statistics to be collected from the various countries of the world by the United Nations. All of the statistics required by the various parts of the United Nations family would be included in this one schedule. The adoption of this single, comprehensive schedule would sharply reduce the burden on developing countries to provide duplicate information, and would provide a solid starting point in rationalizing statistical activities of the United Nations.

"Copies of data submitted in accordance with this comprehensive schedule would be sent to the regional economic commissions, and regional offices of specialized agencies, for review of the accuracy of the statistical data and the initiation of joint discussions with Governments, where appropriate, before the next country submission. Through seminars and other means these regional offices have been making an important contribution towards improving the quality of statistics in developing countries for many years. It is essential that they continue to assist the Governments in their areas to improve the quality of statistics submitted according to the proposed schedule" (paras. 101-103).

48. The "Summary of recommendations" offered at the outset of the JIU report also refers to this recommendation:

"The General Assembly should consider the adoption of the following programme to reduce duplication in the collection, processing and publication of statistics:

"(a) Duplication of storage and processing by the United Nations family should be avoided through agreement on a single schedule of statistics to be collected from Member States" (para. 9(a)).

2. Comments

49. While due recognition in the report is given to the effective statistical programmes developed by the United Nations family and to the valuable technical assistance rendered to the developing countries in building their statistical systems, the report contains serious errors concerning the question of duplication in the collection, processing and storing of economic and social statistics.

50. Contrary to the statements in the report, there is no duplication in the collection and processing of statistics between the Statistical Office of the United Nations, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UNIDO, the statistical services of the specialized agencies and the statistics divisions of the regional economic commissions. Effective machinery does exist for ensuring that duplication in these respects does not creep in, for example, the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities, frequent consultations between the Statistical Office and the statistical services of the specialized agencies, and the close working relationship between the Statistical Office and the regional statisticians. The responsibilities for collecting the various series of statistics from countries and for processing these data are clearly divided among the Statistical Office and the statistical services of the specialized agencies according to the special sphere of activity of each. The statistics divisions of the regional commissions, UNCTAD and UNIDO do not request any of the statistical series from national statistical offices that are already collected by the Statistical Office or the statistical services of the specialized agencies. In fact, the statistics divisions, UNCTAD and UNIDO gather few, if any, additional series of data directly from national statistical authorities; when this is done, it is only after consultation with the Statistical Office of the United Nations. The Statistical Office furnishes the specialized agencies and the regional commissions with the series of data gathered and processed by the office which they need. For example, the Statistical Office furnishes demographic, external trade and national accounting data to a number of specialized agencies, UNCTAD, UNIDO and all the regional commissions. In turn, the statistical services of the specialized agencies furnish the Statistical Office with certain series of data which they gather and process (See para. 79 below).

51. Efforts, unsuccessful except in the case of a number of industrial and external trade statistics, have been made, and continue in order to eliminate the duplication between the United Nations family and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in collecting and processing data. The OECD does, however, use the same standards and questionnaire as the Statistical Office in gathering national accounting data. Most, and an ever-increasing number, of the statistical bodies of the developed and developing countries rely on the United Nations (for example, on the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics, the Statistical Yearbook, the Yearbook of National Accounts Statistics and magnetic tapes from the data banks of the Statistical Office) for economic and social statistics on other countries, regions, the world etc. instead of gathering and processing the data themselves.

52. In certain cases, the same series (for example, demographic, external trade, price or national accounting aggregates) which usually summarize a given situation, are stored by the statistical services of more than one agency of the United Nations family. This is desirable because each of these agencies must have the series readily available for studying the data and subjects that it is responsible for (See para. 79 below).

53. The proposals in the report concerning the collection and processing of economic and social statistics are apparently founded on the mistaken conclusions that there is duplication in these activities among members of the United Nations family and on an inadequate knowledge of the environments and ways in which the activities must be carried out. Adopting the proposals would result in serious deterioration in the completeness, reliability, standardization, timeliness and usefulness of the economic and social statistics of the United Nations. Furthermore, the proposed shift in responsibilities from the statistical services of the United Nations to the IOB is contrary to the definition of the functions and relationships of these bodies by the Economic and Social Council and other legislative authorities and to the purposes, organizations and staffing of IOB (See para. 80 below).

54. It appears from the report that significant gains are expected from the centralization of data collection, processing and storage of statistical information that would lead to greatly increased efficiency of the resources available to statistics. Apparently part of the resources would be saved, as indicated in annex B of the JIU report, and another portion presumably would be available to foster greater timeliness and improved quality of the statistical publications. In the report, however, this is neither explicitly stated as a policy to be pursued nor proved in any detail from the point of view of feasibility. The relative advantages of centralized and decentralized data collection have been explored at the national level both theoretically and practically for over a century. It would serve little purpose to describe the relative merits of centralized and decentralized solutions in this report. As is well

known, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America have applied decentralized solutions with considerable success over a long period of time. Historically, the statistical systems of the European continent tended to have a higher degree of centralization. The socialist countries - from the establishment of the Central Statistical Board in the USSR in 1918 - have all developed centralized statistical systems (See para. 81 below).

55. The theoretical argument in favour of centralized versus decentralized statistical systems has changed relatively little over the years. As a practical matter, it appears that centralization gained some ground over decentralization in countries where more or less extensive statistical reorganizations occurred (Colombia, Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland etc.). One of the tasks given the President's Commission on Federal Statistics in the United States of America in 1970 deals with this issue:

"What changes in the organization of statistical activities are required to meet present and future needs for quantitative information? Do we need more centralization of Federal statistical activities or do we need changes to obtain more effective integration of present activities while retaining the advantages of decentralization?" 9/

The Commission considered that in the context of the present United States situation "the creation of a fully centralized statistical system was both undesirable and virtually impossible". 10/ Instead the first major recommendation of the Commission was that "the scope of co-ordinating activities should be broadened". 11/

9/ United States of America, letter from the President to the chairman of the Commission on Federal Statistics, Federal Statistics, Report of the President's Commission, (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.), stock number 4000-0269, vol. I, appendix A, p. 38.

10/ Ibid., p. 138.

11/ Ibid., p. 2

56. The Statistical Commission has also been pursuing the integration of international statistical activities by means of strengthened co-ordination rather than recommending the centralization of data collection, processing and publication in the United Nations system. Economic and Social Council resolutions 1306 (XLIV) and 1566 (L) also stressed the importance of the integration of the statistical activities within the system. The establishment of the interagency International Computing Centre (ICC) in Geneva was also considered a measure to foster the integration of international statistical activities.

57. The centralization of data collection for the United Nations system suggested in the JIU report may, at first glance, seem appealing. However, the implementation of this suggestion would be extremely difficult for a number of reasons. First of all, it must be realized that centralized collection of all international statistics would be a useless exercise without combining virtually all the statistical services of the United Nations and the specialized agencies into one secretariat. Collected data must be scrutinized by trained statisticians and only such personnel are capable of preparing the data for electronic data processing, of specifying and checking the computer services required and of dealing with the output. Thus, centralization of data collection within the United Nations system cannot be successful without the centralization of statistical personnel.

58. It must be noted that to achieve centralization of data collection would require substantial changes in the Articles of Agreement on the statistical services between the United Nations and the specialized agencies. (In the agreement, the agencies recognized the United Nations as the central agency for the collection, analysis, publication, standardization, dissemination and improvement of statistics serving the general purposes of the international organizations and the United Nations recognized the agencies' responsibilities for the same in their special spheres of activity.)

59. It has to be emphasized that centralization would probably mean less contact than is now possible between user departments and the statisticians producing the data in the individual organizations. Even if the case for substantial budgetary savings can be proven for a centralized statistical set-up for the United Nations system as a whole the interest of the user departments in retaining the statistical services within the framework of their organizations cannot be easily discarded as a serious consideration.

60. The inclusion of all the statistics required by the various members of the United Nations family in a single standard schedule would result not only in a very long, forbidding questionnaire but also in a serious increase in non-response and in marked delays in gathering, processing and publishing the data. Because the applicable series in the very long schedule would be lost in a mass of inapplicable series, especially in the case of developing countries, these countries may not furnish any of the applicable data; because the various sets of data must frequently be

supplied by different statistical offices of a country and are generally available at different times, and even for different periods of reference, there would be long delays in completing the questionnaire.

61. The JIU report expresses interest in the proper arrangements between the proposed centralized data collection scheme and the supply of data to the regional economic commissions. According to the proposal "copies of data submitted in accordance with this comprehensive schedule would be sent to the regional economic commissions and regional offices of specialized agencies, for review of the accuracy of the statistical data" (para. 103). Thus, the centrally collected data would be checked in the regions and returned for central processing. However, coding, editing and correcting of the long schedules at the regional offices of the United Nations and the specialized agencies would greatly reduce the quality and timeliness of the statistics (See para. 82 below). Because these offices are not responsible for either the formulation of international standards or the tabulation of the data, there would be no uniform appreciation and application of standards and the passage of the long questionnaires through a succession of persons and offices would greatly delay the completion of coding, editing etc. It should be noted that the international standards for purposes of world-wide comparability of data are necessarily developed at the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and at the headquarters statistical services of the specialized agencies and that these offices have had the leading and major role in regional seminars, meetings and other means of assisting Governments in improving and expanding their statistics.

62. In view of the organizational difficulties, the lack of trained personnel and the other reasons stated earlier, the checking of national data by the existing regional units of the United Nations system is hardly a feasible proposal. This is probably one of the reasons why the JIU report couples this suggestion with the recommendation that "the offices of UNDP resident representatives would play an expanded role in helping Member States to increase the completeness and accuracy of information about their countries which is used in recurrent publications" (para. 3(c)). The offices of the UNDP resident representatives, however, already have heavy responsibilities and it is doubtful whether they would have the necessary expertise or time to play a continuing role in the checking of replies to statistical questionnaires (See para. 82 below).

63. In view of these various circumstances, it is submitted that the JIU proposal to centralize collection and processing of statistics coupled with local and regional checking lacks feasibility. It would appear that only in the case of increased regional data processing activities would it be desirable to shift the burden to the regional units. However, the feasibility of regional data processing in the United Nations system at this stage is considered low.

B. Data processing and storage

1. Recommendation of the report

64. The report in this respect proposes the following:

"The Inter-Organization Board (IOB) would have the responsibility for assigning data submitted by countries to 'data banks' of the ICC being moved to Geneva, and also to the 'data banks' in other parts of the United Nations family as considered appropriate. In this way duplication of storage and processing of data collected from countries by the United Nations family could be avoided" (para. 104).

65. The summary of the recommendations of the report also suggest the

"... delegation of responsibility to the Inter-Organization Board (IOB) for assigning data submitted according to this schedule, to 'data banks' of the ICC being moved to Geneva, and also to the 'data banks' of other parts of the United Nations family as considered appropriate" (para. 9(a)).

2. Comments

66. The comments offered above in connexion with the centralization of data collection also have relevance to the matters discussed under this heading. However, it could be argued that the establishment of the interagency ICC at Geneva was actually a step in the direction of centralizing data processing and storage without a corresponding intention for centralization of data collection.

67. The success with centralization of statistical data processing and storage under otherwise decentralized arrangements for statistics depends greatly on the technological possibilities and on accompanying cost/benefit considerations. While the costs of maintaining direct, long-distance links to central data processing facilities are decreasing, the availability of data processing facilities at users' locations at competitive costs can be of decisive importance.

68. The concrete proposal of the JIU concerning the "responsibility ... for assigning data" submitted by countries to the various data banks lacks sufficient clarity. Since it is not clear what the term "responsibility for assigning data" is intended to indicate, it is somewhat difficult to comment on recommendation 9 (a) which suggests the "delegation" of this responsibility to IOB. Generally it would appear impractical, and indeed impossible, to shift decision-making concerning the data to be introduced into the data banks (whether they are held at a central facility or not) from the statistical services collecting the data to some other organ.

69. The report also recommends that the General Assembly should take a stand against the "duplication of storage and processing of data by the United Nations family" (para. 9(a)). In this respect, it is submitted that there is no overlap in the processing of data and furthermore no proof of duplicate work is offered in the report. Concerning duplication of storage, it is proposed that the General Assembly should not take a stand against it. With present-day electronic data processing equipment, the duplication of computer tapes is an inexpensive procedure and the storage of duplicate tapes at different locations (even with the possible additional costs involved in the unlikely cases of parallel retrievals of the same data at the same time at different locations) offers definite advantages over the possible small savings involved in centralized storage. In fact, centralized storage for decentralized users would probably turn out to be the more costly approach . . (See para. 79 below)

IV. SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

70. Though it seems inappropriate to claim a "monopoly" of international statistical activities for the United Nations, as suggested in paragraph 13 of the JIU report, attention might be called to the advantages of avoiding over-lapping and attaining greater co-ordination in such activities as the issue of international standards and the international collection of comparable statistics if these activities were concentrated to a greater extent in the United Nations system.

71. A full-scale review of the recurrent statistical publications, as in the JIU report, should be undertaken from time to time in view of the changes that take place in the priority demands for data. However, the considerations used in the JIU report in order to evaluate the statistical publications of the United Nations are much too restricted in scope and are applied far too rigidly. Disproportionate emphasis is devoted to reducing expenditures on the publications of statistics; little, or no, attention is given to the obligations of the United Nations to satisfy the wide range of requirements for internationally comparable statistics, to the uses to which the data are put, to the circumstances in which the data are gathered and issued, to the interdependence between the quality and the timeliness of statistics, or to the income from the sales of the publications. The mail canvass of the recipients of selected publications was inadequate in coverage and design for purposes of revealing many of the important purposes for which the statistical publications were used.

A. Timeliness and quality of published statistics

72. While the recommendation in the JIU report - that data relating to a given period should be issued by the end of the immediately following period - sets a worthy objective, it is an unrealistic goal in the case

of the international publication of many series of data because a number of countries are unable to supply these data promptly enough. The recommendation has also been applied too rigidly in the JIU report, without taking account of the important related considerations of the completeness and reliability of the data and the requirements of the users of international statistics for as up-to-date figures as can be issued. The timeliness of the data presented in the statistical publications of the United Nations should be reviewed and where appropriate, efforts should be made to improve the situation without unwarranted reductions in the completeness, reliability and usefulness of the data.

B. Duplication in publishing statistics

73. The JIU report stresses that duplication in the series of data presented in the publications of the United Nations should be eliminated, but it is essential that international statistics should be widely disseminated and therefore, a number of series should be issued in more than one publication in order to improve the usefulness of these publications. Furthermore, the costs of publishing statistics are very small as compared to the costs of gathering and processing the data.

74. The Statistical Commission, the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination's Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities, and the working arrangements between the statistics divisions of the United Nations organizations furnish well-established, effective means of ensuring that there is no unnecessary duplication in their publications of statistics. The Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems and Related Activities (IOB) is neither charged with, nor capable of, carrying out this function or the substantive review of the statistical publications of the United Nations. The substantive review of the publications should remain the responsibility of the Statistical Commission and other programming organs.

75. The recommendation in the JIU report that, in general, regional publications should be organized according to countries and world-wide publications should be organized according to subject, merits endorsement.

C. Individual statistical publications

76. The Monthly Bulletin of Statistics should continue to be issued monthly in order to meet the urgent needs of users for a convenient source of the most up-to-date, key economic and social statistics as available. The Bulletin is in wide demand for these purposes. Its timeliness and, therefore, usefulness (but not the cost) would be greatly reduced as would the sales income if, as recommended in the JIU report, the Bulletin were issued on a quarterly basis.

77. The Statistical Yearbook should be issued annually so that it may continue to be a convenient, comprehensive and coherent source of the most

up-to-date annual summary data available. The great demand for this publication is evident from its wide sale and large sales income. If, as recommended in the JIU report, the Statistical Yearbook were to be issued once in three years, these demands would not be met. If the alternative proposal in the JIU report that it should be replaced by a fourth quarter issue of a bulletin of statistics were to be adopted, this would substantially delay the dissemination of key monthly or quarterly data and interfere with the purposes for which the Statistical Yearbook is designed, without improving the timeliness of the annual data or reducing the costs of publication.

78. The Monthly Bulletin of Statistics, the related statistical publications of the regional economic commissions, the Statistical Yearbook and the more specialized yearbooks of Headquarters and the regional commissions should be reviewed in the light of the purposes they are designed to serve, with a view to improving their content, timeliness, rapidity of distribution and realized net income.

D. Collection, processing and storage of data

79. The recommendations in the JIU report concerning the collection, processing and storage of statistics are designed to eliminate the duplication in these activities which is thought to exist between the United Nations agencies. In fact, as a result of the work on the co-ordination of statistical activities by the Statistical Commission, by the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities and by pairs of agencies, there is essentially no duplication between the statistical services of the United Nations agencies in the collection or processing of data. Duplication between the statistical branches in the storage of certain series of data which are gathered and processed by one of them is inexpensive and desirable in order that the statistics are conveniently and readily available.

80. The recommendation of the JIU report that all the statistics sought by the United Nations agencies should be assembled in a single questionnaire under the auspices of the IOB and that the IOB should parcel out these series for storage and publication, is counter-productive and impracticable. Following this recommendation would create major obstacles to the efficient collection of timely and reliable statistics and to the effective use of the data. No Government in the world uses a single questionnaire to gather all the series of data sought. Furthermore, the IOB is neither charged with, nor capable of performing such technical statistical functions. The Economic and Social Council, in resolutions 1306 (XLIV) and 1566 (I), assigned the responsibilities for co-ordinating and integrating the statistical activities of the United Nations agencies to the Statistical Commission.

81. Not only is the IOB an inappropriate body for centralizing the statistical responsibilities mentioned above, but the desirability and feasibility of such centralization are questionable. The Statistical Commission has pursued a number of the objectives of centralization through co-ordinating the statistical activities of the United Nations agencies and formulating integrated international programmes of statistics. Centralization of the collection of statistics by the United Nations family is virtually impossible unless the statistical branches of the agencies are combined into a single organ. This might loosen the close ties and contacts that are now feasible between the users and producers of statistics in each agency. The centralization of data collection would also require changes in the present Articles of Agreement between the United Nations and the specialized agencies concerning statistical matters.

82. Checking and editing questionnaires at the regional offices of the United Nations agencies, as the JIU report recommends, would be more time-consuming and less effective than doing this work at the headquarters offices - the present arrangement - as the regional offices lack the staff and expertise required for these purposes and as the relevant international standards may not be applied uniformly by each region. The offices of the UNDP resident representatives have neither the time nor the expertise required to assist national statistical offices in improving their replies to statistical questionnaires, as proposed in the JIU report.
