



Economic and Social Council

Distr.  
GENERAL

E/CN.3/563  
11 August 1980

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

STATISTICAL COMMISSION  
Twenty-first session  
12-21 January 1981  
Item 12 of the provisional agenda\*

OTHER BUSINESS

Proposals for the future work of the Statistical Commission  
and its methods of operation

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present document was prepared at the request of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination of the Statistical Commission. It contains alternative proposals for the future work of the Commission and its methods of operation. The document indicates why the development of such proposals is timely (para. 2). It presents, for discussion, the view that the Commission might adopt a more future-oriented approach (paras. 6-14) and suggests that it is important to balance the agendas of the Commission sessions to give the necessary continuity to some subjects while still allowing adequate time for the consideration of new topics (para. 15). A number of proposals are presented concerning the documentation and the conduct of the sessions in order to permit the Commission to cover all agenda items adequately (para. 16). The document also outlines possible implications for the Working Group of any changes made by the Commission (para. 17). Points for discussion by the Commission are included (para. 18).

\* E/CN.3/535.

CONTENTS

	<u>Paragraphs</u>	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1 - 2	3
I. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE COMMISSION . . . . .	3 - 5	3
II. ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS FOR THE AGENDAS OF FUTURE SESSIONS OF THE COMMISSION . . . . .	6 - 15	4
A. Adoption of a more future-oriented approach . . .	7 - 14	4
B. Balance in the agendas: continuity <u>versus</u> new topics . . . . .	15	6
III. POSSIBLE CHANGES IN DOCUMENTATION AND CONDUCT OF THE SESSIONS . . . . .	16	6
IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF THE WORKING GROUP . . . . .	17	7
V. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION . . . . .	18	8

## INTRODUCTION

1. In the report on its eighth session, held at Geneva on 29 and 30 October 1979, the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination of the Statistical Commission stated the following:

"In the light of new substantive issues at the national as well as the international level, reflecting changing requirements for statistical information, the Working Group suggested that the Statistical Commission might wish to review its objectives, priorities and methods of operation ... the Working Group decided that the Statistical Office should prepare a document containing alternative proposals for the future work of the Statistical Commission and its method of operation, based on information to be provided by the Working Group members and other members of the Commission." (E/CN.3/536, paras. 6 and 47)

2. Members of the Commission in 1979 were requested to submit their views on this matter to the Statistical Office. The present report is based mainly on those views. Such a review of objectives, priorities and methods of operation is considered timely in view of (a) Economic and Social Council decision 1979/81, in which the Council decided that sessions of its functional commissions (of which the Statistical Commission is one) "should normally have a duration of not more than eight working days", and a number of Council resolutions over the past few years stating that documents cannot exceed 32 single-spaced pages; (b) new substantive issues that are emerging; and (c) technological progress that is occurring and necessitating corresponding adjustment of methodology. Adjustments may be considered desirable by the Commission to accommodate the changed circumstances.

### I. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE COMMISSION

3. The following are the terms of reference of the Statistical Commission as set out in Economic and Social Council resolution 8 (I) of 16 February 1946 as amended by Council resolution 8 (II) of 21 June 1946:

"The Commission shall assist the Council:

"(a) In promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability;

"(b) In the co-ordination of the statistical work of specialized agencies;

"(c) In the development of the central statistical services of the Secretariat;

"(d) In advising the organs of the United Nations on general questions relating to the collection, interpretation and dissemination of statistical information;

"(e) In promoting the improvement of statistics and statistical methods generally."

4. By its resolution 1566 (L) of 3 May 1971, the Council reaffirmed the previous terms of reference of the Commission; stressed the importance of the Commission's co-ordinating function and the need to achieve an integrated system in the collection, data processing and dissemination of international statistics; recognized the interest of the Statistical Commission and the Statistical Office in matters related to the use of computers; and requested concerted action to assist the developing countries in strengthening their statistical systems.

5. Within the terms of the above resolutions, there is flexibility for the Commission to adjust, where necessary, its priorities and methods to meet new requirements. The basic elements of change which might be considered relate to (a) the kinds and number of matters to be considered by the Commission during its sessions and (b) the way to conduct the sessions in order to complete all of the business.

## II. ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS FOR THE AGENDAS OF FUTURE SESSIONS OF THE COMMISSION

6. The international statistical system aims to reflect the central issues of a rapidly changing world and the factors needed to explain and influence development. The Commission, holding a key position in the international statistical system, is well placed to identify and anticipate the issues and to initiate necessary planning and development work to assist the international statistical system to adapt to changing needs.

### A. Adoption of a more future-oriented approach

7. The Commission may wish to concentrate its attention more on the longer-term future development aspects of the statistical system. This would involve identifying new areas which require work by the Statistical Office and the international statistical system generally. In this context the Commission might wish to consider questions about the role and the working modes of the international statistical system in 10 and 20 years and discuss the implications. The issues identified may be included in the working programme for the next two to four sessions. <sup>1/</sup> Some potentially important issues are set out below.

8. One of the most urgent needs for improvement, but also the most difficult, is the establishment and development of closer contact between the users and producers of international statistics. At present, the producers of international statistics know mainly the users institutionally close to them and, even for the identified users, know little about their needs for international statistical information.

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<sup>1/</sup> The practice of the Conference of European Statisticians is relevant. The Conference identifies, several years in advance, a number of special substantive issues for discussion at each session. Member States prepare documentation for the items.

From time to time, matters of special importance have been referred from one United Nations technical body to another, for example, the Committee for Development Planning, the Committee for Natural Resources, the Population Commission. Given that many of the technical bodies represent users of international statistics, a closer collaboration might be expected to provide useful directions in which the international statistical programmes might be developed.

9. A need related to the one mentioned above is to improve the dissemination of international statistics. In view of the fact that international statistics should be available to users all over the world, it is disappointing that the circulation of international statistical publications is less than that of some national statistical publications. There may be several reasons, namely the potential users may not know of the existence of the international statistics, the international statistics available may not be those needed or the technical format and price may discourage use. Which reasons are significant can best be established through the contact with users mentioned above. It is possible that there is need for both better promotion of the international statistical services and an adjustment of the content and the technical form of the services offered.

10. Regional and global information networks based on telecomputer technology are now being established, developed and used. Some networks have even started to exploit international statistics commercially, and that represents a serious challenge to extensive computerization and improvement of the international statistical system. If the system is going to continue to play a role as a distinct decision-support system for policy makers and decision makers, there is a need to develop the system to a global telecomputer-based network for efficient communication between producers and users.

11. A major concern for the Commission in the 1980s may be ways and means of promoting the national implementation of the recommendations, guidelines, standards, classifications etc. adopted or approved by the Commission. The development of "bridges" between various types and levels of classifications, standards etc. may be considered a useful interim step in assisting countries and at the same time producing more standardized statistics for international use. Other approaches, which will lead the international statistical system to develop products that are more widely perceived as desirable by Member States, and consequently more likely to be implemented, may also need to be investigated.

12. It is becoming increasingly important to close the gap between international recommendations on methodology and their implementation. There are at least two aspects to this. The first is to ensure that the statistical services in the developing countries are fully aware of what is recommended by the Commission; this involves getting the information to all the working levels of the statistical organizations in the countries. The second aspect is the improvement and maintenance of the statistical capability of countries. The United Nations and the specialized agencies have for many years provided technical co-operation to developing countries with this objective. In the majority of cases, the efforts have succeeded and such capabilities have remained in the countries for a period of years. In some cases, the capabilities have been reduced after a period of time owing to staff loss and other reasons. Focus might be given in future to developing methods for sustaining those capabilities.

13. Other issues which the Commission might give consideration to include, as areas of special future concern: (a) administrative records as a source of data; (b) computer technology in accessing hitherto under-utilized sources of data; (c) the role of data information in policy making; and (d) more in-depth studies of the more recent subjects of interest such as energy, the environment, marine economic activities, income distribution, locality statistics, social indicators and other areas which generally relate to the measurement of the quality of life. The items in (d) are all relatively new areas of policy interest for the United Nations system, for which an evaluation of the statistical base for policy development is highly desirable.

14. A matter of continuing concern is likely to be co-ordination. The Commission has devoted much attention to this at recent sessions. It is a complex matter, and the Commission may wish to consider whether there may be possibilities for improving the effectiveness of its efforts. Basically, what is important is co-ordination among the international organizations for the purpose of maintaining an effective and unified programme for the development of standards, statistical programmes, guidelines, publications and technical assistance to developing countries, while continuing to limit the reporting burden on countries in supplying data to the international organizations.

B. Balance in the agendas: continuity versus new topics

15. Over a period of years, the agendas for the Commission sessions have covered many matters of importance. For each session, it is essential to identify what is important at that time and to omit from the agenda any subjects that might have been exhausted or adequately covered previously. The importance of continuity and development over time is recognized, but traditional subjects may need to be deleted from the agendas from time to time to make room for the new. This would enable the Commission to deal more thoroughly with topics of importance at each of its sessions.

III. POSSIBLE CHANGES IN DOCUMENTATION AND CONDUCT OF THE SESSIONS

16. If it is accepted that the role of the Commission should develop along the lines described above, or even if the Commission continues in the same way as the past, some changes in the conduct of the sessions will be essential if the discussions and the drafting of the report are to be completed in the limited time available. Over the years, the agenda has expanded and the documentation has become more voluminous. The length of the Commission sessions has been reduced to eight days (see para. 2 above); this is one day less than at the 1979 session and two days less than at other recent sessions. Some adjustments may, therefore, be called for. A number of possibilities are presented below:

(a) The documents for the Commission could be separated into two categories, namely those for discussion and those for information. This practice is followed by the Economic and Social Council, the parent body of the Commission. The first category would include drafts, for the consideration or approval of the Commission, of international recommendations, guidelines, technical reports etc. and reports

on which the guidance of the Commission is sought for future directions of work. The second category would include all progress reports. This should considerably reduce the documentation that the Commission needs to discuss. All documents, whether for discussion or information, would as in the past be issued in English, French, Russian and Spanish.

(b) A considerable amount of time is taken up during the session with an oral introduction of documents and summary of the discussion by the Secretariat. This procedure could be shortened so that in general the oral introduction should only update the document where necessary. All the reports of the Secretary-General begin with a summary, which highlights the major issues raised, and end with points for discussion. The attention of the members of the Commission could be brought to these elements of the documents.

(c) At previous sessions, the agenda has been such that the same topics might be discussed several times, for example, under a substantive agenda item, under co-ordination and under progress reports of the Statistical Office, specialized agencies or regional commissions. Although some work has been done already on rationalizing the agenda, it might be possible to re-group items and documents so that repetitive discussion could be eliminated. Work reported by the specialized agencies and regional commissions on a particular matter could be dealt with at the same time as the substantive item.

(d) Some time could be saved during the sessions by the elimination of some duplication in the documents. Five documents, namely those on international technical co-operation in statistics, the review of achievements in co-ordination in selected areas and in international statistical programmes and the progress reports of the Statistical Office, the specialized agencies and the regional commissions, are interrelated and have some duplication. At the fourteenth session of the Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination ways were considered of providing a better reporting system to meet the needs of the Commission in an integrated and consistent manner and avoiding duplication. The Sub-Committee proposed that the five documents mentioned above be replaced by two. One would provide an over-all review of the work of the international organizations for the preceding two-year period (a progress report) and the other would describe future plans. This proposal would reduce the quantity of documentation and the number of agenda items, thus saving time while still meeting the needs of the Commission.

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF THE WORKING GROUP

17. In order for the above changes to be implemented smoothly, the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination of the Statistical Commission could be given an expanded role. In the past, the Working Group, at the request of the Commission, has finalized the agenda for each session of the Commission. For the future, the Commission may consider entrusting the Working Group with the responsibility of categorizing the various documents as those which need to be discussed and those submitted for information only. The Working Group could also be asked to determine the priorities among the various items. Furthermore, it could be asked to determine, at its ninth session, the content and structure of the two documents proposed in paragraph 16 (d) above.

V. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

18. The Commission may wish:

(a) To review the various proposals made and decide what changes, if any, should be implemented (paras. 6-16);

(b) To determine what additional responsibilities, if any, the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination of the Statistical Commission should be given in relation to any changes that may be introduced (para. 17);

(c) To recommend to the Economic and Social Council, if the Commission decides to give additional responsibilities to the Working Group, that the ninth session of the Working Group be extended from two to four days to allow adequate time for discussion.

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