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SPECIAL ISSUES: PUBLICATION POLICY FOR STATISTICS

Publication policy for statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present report is in response to the recommendation of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination that the Economic and Social Council should request the Statistical Commission to review and evaluate the general policy of publication of statistics which are more than three years old. The document contains a review of existing practices in the light of objectives. Points for discussion by the Commission are included (para. 40).

\* E/CN.3/1983/1.

## INTRODUCTION

1. At its twenty-first session, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination recommended that the Economic and Social Council should request the Statistical Commission to review and evaluate the general policy of publication of statistics which are more than three years old. <sup>1/</sup> In its decision 1981/180, the Council endorsed the recommendation of the Committee.

2. The Statistical Office of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs currently publishes data of varying degrees of currency and series of varying length, depending on availability and other factors such as the over-all publication time-table. Availability varies according to countries and type of data. In order to review the practices of the Office, it is necessary to look at its policy objectives in the publication of statistics.

### I. POLICY OBJECTIVES

3. In determining the presentation of data in publications, the Statistical Office has the following policy objectives in mind:

- (a) The widest possible dissemination of statistical data;
- (b) Improving data coverage of developing countries;
- (c) Improving the general quality of data (accuracy, reliability);
- (d) Improving the timeliness of available data;
- (e) Enhancing the comparability of data across countries and over periods of time;
- (f) Improving the usefulness of the figures published;
- (g) Minimizing the cost of publication preparation.

4. These policy objectives are sometimes conflicting. In general, the cost of publications is influenced by the other objectives. Nevertheless, the Office tries to maintain a balance and maximize the satisfaction of all users.

### II. EXISTING PRACTICES

5. The practices followed in producing the major recurrent publications are briefly analysed below.

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<sup>1/</sup> Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/36/38), para. 484 (a).

6. The Monthly Bulletin of Statistics has 69 regular tables, of which 57 (83 per cent) have annual data for seven years, typically accompanied by 18 lines of quarterly and/or monthly data. The currency of data varies slightly from month to month, but most tables have data only 6 to 12 months old for almost all countries. The series in the Bulletin are in fact selected on the basis of figures that are generally available, relatively current and updated regularly. In the January 1982 issue, there were only three tables for which data for one or two countries were not available beyond 1976. The variations in currency depend on data availability. The lengths of series depend to some extent on the space needed to accommodate the numbers presented and the amount of text needed to describe them. There is also a desire to present, in the monthly and quarterly data, enough information to make it possible to discern recent trends.

7. The Statistical Yearbook, the major compendium, shows great variance in publication practices. It has a varying number of tables (around 200) in each issue. The number of years covered in the latest issue (1979/80) varies considerably, from a single (latest available) year in 4 tables to 22 years in the case of regional figures for railway traffic. The largest group, 108 tables (54 per cent of the total), has data for 10 years. The next largest, 20 tables (10 per cent of the total), contains 5 years of data.

8. In the latest issue, published in 1981, data for 1980 were the latest available and published. In fact, in 48 (24 per cent) of the tables, all countries included showed data for 1980. However, in some tables, data for some countries have not been available for some time. In 6 tables (3 per cent), 1970 was the latest year for one or more countries and in 10 tables (5 per cent) 1971 was the latest year for some countries.

9. Although efforts are made in the Statistical Yearbook to ensure a degree of uniformity regarding the periods covered and the number of years shown, in many cases there are other considerations and, therefore, compromise solutions are sought. For example, since the Statistical Yearbook by its very nature contains series which are published elsewhere, at least in some cases the policy has been to focus on major aggregates and totals for a relatively limited number of years with the understanding that longer series furnishing certain additional details can be found in other publications. This approach was thought to be more appropriate for those data which seemed to be less relevant for analysis of trends, for example, data on gross output, value added and wages and salaries expressed in national currencies. Some variations in the years shown for various series stem from the differences in the base year employed in different branches of statistics and from the need to include data for a previous base year in order to ensure the possibility of linking indices.

10. Another reason for variation regarding the number of years shown is the need in some cases to present figures measuring changes occurring over a particular period of time and over the subperiods - to introduce, for instance, average annual rates of growth not only for the period as a whole but for the subperiods as well.

11. Finally, in some cases the length of a series simply depends on the availability of data. For example, data on gross domestic product for selected

countries in international dollars was available in the 1979/80 Statistical Yearbook for only 1970 and 1973.

12. The Demographic Yearbook has two parts - one which contains tables that appear annually and another which contains special topic tables. These tables are somewhat different from other statistical tables. Most of them contain data for only one year - usually the latest available census year. There are 30 such tables (70 per cent of the total of 43). The other tables contain mostly 5-year or 10-year series.

13. Since many countries have not had a census or have not published the results for many years, some of the data published for a particular country by the Statistical Office may be 20 years old. Seven of the tables in the 1979 Demographic Yearbook contained such data for one or more countries. The limitation of most tables to a single year is a practical consideration. Furthermore, since many data are census results, most countries have data for only a few years. Variations in the data years are due to the differing census years.

14. The Yearbook of World Energy Statistics contains 49 tables, of which the 44 country tables contain 10-year series and the 5 regional tables contain data for 25 years.

15. Most of the data are relatively up to date. In almost all tables of the 1979 Yearbook, most countries showed 1979 data for most series. For only two tables was 1978 the latest year available.

16. This publication is very consistent in series length and currency of data.

17. The Yearbook of International Trade Statistics is published in two volumes. Volume I contains data for 163 reporting countries; the data for each are presented in a separate chapter. In addition, volume I contains 14 special tables which show trade and various economic indicators at the world, regional and country levels. In the latest issue (1980), the lengths of the series vary greatly, with 4 tables containing 21 years, 3 containing 20, 3 containing 15 and 4 containing 3 selected years; the rest of the tables are of varying length. Nine of the tables contained data generally over a year old, whereas the other 11 were of data generally less than a year old. Data for all countries were less than 3 years old.

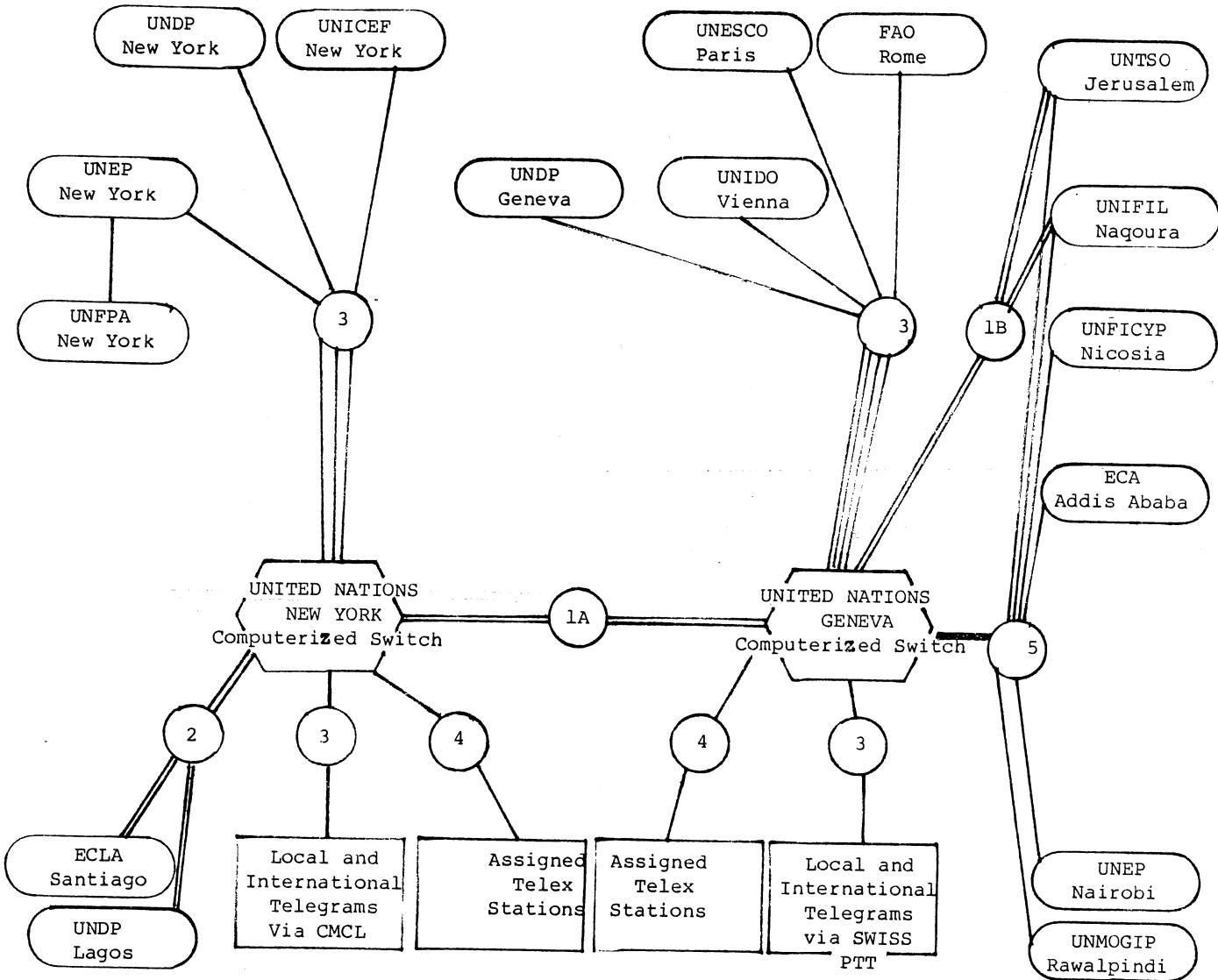
18. This publication contains data which, by international standards, are very recent. Moreover, the data are relatively well-standardized; for the first time, they are classified in volume II according to the three-digit, four-digit or five-digit level of the Standard International Trade Classification, Revision 2.

19. Whereas the variation in the currency of the series depends on data availability, there seems to be no consistent, rational reason for the considerable variation in the length of the series shown.

20. The Yearbook of National Accounts Statistics is published in two volumes. Volume I contains statistics for 12 years for 155 countries. The data for each country are presented in a separate chapter. For countries using the System of

Annex II

EXISTING UNITED NATIONS COMMUNICATION SYSTEM



- Legend:
- 1 A AVD/TTY circuit via INTELSAT Satellite
  - 1 B VOICE/TTY circuit via SYMPHONIE Satellite
  - 2 TTY Satellite leased circuits
  - 3 Dedicated lines
  - 4 Telex circuits
  - 5 H.F. Radio circuits owned and operated by United Nations

National Accounts (SNA), each chapter has up to 70 tables. For countries using the System of Balances of the National Economy (MPS), a maximum of 9 tables is included.

21. In the latest issue (1980), a new format of SNA table presentation was introduced. For 90 countries (58 per cent), data for 1979 were the latest available; for 28 (19 per cent), 1978; for 14 (9 per cent), 1977. The latest year for other countries varied. In cases (less than 0.5 per cent) where no more up-to-date information was available, statistics for the 1960s and the early 1970s were published, since they were the only official estimates for those countries and were useful for analytical purposes.

22. Volume II is composed of 20 analytical tables showing internationally comparable national accounts statistics expressed in a common unit - growth rates, index numbers and percentage distribution of components. In addition to official data, regional totals in these tables include tentative estimates not supplied by the countries themselves.

23. Most of the series in the latest issue of volume II covered up to 20 years. However, because data were not available in a few countries (less than 0.5 per cent), series were limited to three or four years in some tables. For the six tables that included regional totals, the series generally covered the latest year (1979). In two tables, estimates for the statistical base year, 1975, were published for all countries. For other tables, the latest available year was the same as in volume I.

24. The number of years shown in these volumes depends on the space and data available and on what is useful to the reader. However, in future issues, it is planned that all tables will be standardized to cover 12 years, including two decade and two mid-decade years plus the latest in-between years in both volumes I and II.

25. The Yearbook of Industrial Statistics is published in two volumes. Volume I contains general industrial statistics; the data for each country are presented in a separate chapter. In the 1979 edition (published in 1981), there are 93 country chapters. Each chapter provides data on various items classified by industry. The maximum number of items to be reported is 20. Data are requested of developed countries for all 20 items and of developing countries for 11. However, no country chapter in fact contains data for more than 15 items, the minimum being 4.

26. All tables are for the latest five years, except index numbers, which are for the latest nine years. Data for the latest year are generally available for only certain developed countries. For 60 of the 93 countries (65 per cent), data for 1979 are generally not available; for 1978, 40 countries have no data (43 per cent).

27. Volume II contains commodity production data, and each table in general covers the 10 latest years for over 500 commodities and about 200 countries or areas. For some commodities, the data are current, that is, they relate to 1979 for most countries (for example, for hard coal, crude petroleum, ferrous and non-ferrous ores and concentrates, crude steel and electrical energy). For others, the 1979 coverage is only around 50 per cent of the countries reporting and only about

75 per cent in 1978 (for example, for television receivers, bicycles, tinned meat, cotton yarn and biscuits). Regional aggregates are published for all years by estimating the missing data.

28. The two volumes are internally consistent with respect to length of the series, the choice of 5 years for volume I and 10 years for volume II being mainly determined by space considerations.

29. The Statistical Pocketbook (World Statistics in Brief) is a special case. For each country and region in the latest issue, data are shown for three selected years: 1970, 1975 and 1980. In the country tables, of the more than 4,000 series for which data are available, 92 per cent include the latest year (1980, or occasionally 1979), 6.5 per cent show nothing later than 1975 and 1.5 per cent nothing beyond 1970. In the regional tables, the latest data shown are mostly for 1980.

### III. REVIEW OF PRACTICES RELATED TO POLICIES

30. In considering the practices outlined above, there would seem to be a need for continual monitoring and a certain amount of rationalization and standardization of practices. It is obvious from the review that there is wide variation in present practices. Although there may be good reasons for the practices and the variations, there may also have been historical accidents. The Statistical Office believes that there is a need among its readers for the following practices:

(a) Publication of series-making trend analysis possible. In order to establish a trend in annual series, it is considered that data for 7 to 10 years are necessary. Data for 3 years are certainly insufficient. For monthly data, the minimum which should be published is 18 months - the latest 6 months plus a full previous year - in order to be able to identify broad seasonal patterns.

(b) Publication of latest available data. Where reliable data are available, the Office publishes them. For some countries in some tables, this may mean publishing data that are six years old. The Office will still publish such data if they are not available in another publication - on the grounds that some information is better than none. However, when the only available data are more than seven years old, the country may be deleted.

31. The Office tries on a continuing basis to improve the currency of all statistics. This is done by questionnaire, by correspondence, by researching alternative sources and by personal contact during official missions, as well as by continual improvement of the processing and printing methods and procedures used in the Office. It must be recognized, however, that the statistical infrastructure in many countries is still developing and that reliable, up-to-date statistics are simply not universally available.

32. There are requests from time to time for longer series than are published. The Office responds by providing computer listings or, when demand appears to be sufficiently general, a special issue of longer series may be published. Other agencies follow a similar pattern.

33. A review of the practices of other agencies reveals that the policies of the Statistical Office on the length of series, frequency of publication and currency of data do not differ greatly from those of the other agencies.
34. One practice which varies among agencies and even among the publications of one agency is the year cited in the title. This is sometimes the year of the latest data, sometimes the year of publication and sometimes a year in between. This produces considerable confusion among readers and a common policy should be introduced.
35. During the discussions in the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination, the Office was asked to review its policy of publishing data more than three years old. This could have two interpretations.
36. First, if the intention was to suggest limiting the length of time series to three years, the view of the Office is that this would be inadequate for many users. A series of 10 years is generally considered necessary for an analysis of trends. This is especially important when flow data are involved. For certain structural or stock data, a few selected years over a 10-year span may suffice. For the bulk of the series, however, the savings resulting from the reduced size of publications gained by a 3-year limit would not offset the loss of value to users and the cost of the considerable recasting of publications that would be involved.
37. The Commission may wish to consider a guideline of limiting published series to, say, 10 years, with the exception of occasional historical supplements. Ad hoc requests for longer series could be handled by computer listings or by magnetic tapes. This principle, of course, could be modified depending on the nature of the series and the publication. In a general publication, such as the Statistical Yearbook, the purpose of which is to give a relatively broad but sufficiently comprehensive picture of the development of the world economy, certain series could be shown for shorter periods.
38. Secondly, the intention may have been to prevent data more than three years old from being published for the first time. The view of the Office is that this would, as seen from the above review, affect only some countries in some tables and would not lead to significant savings. Moreover, in the absence of any other data, the Office would propose to continue publishing the latest available data, even if three years old or more, on the grounds that they give some basis for gross international comparisons. The Commission may wish to review this policy.
39. Any changes in publication policies, however, need to be considered in the light of practical difficulties which might attach to their implementation.

#### IV. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

40. In view of the above, the Commission may wish to consider whether the following broad policy guidelines are acceptable:



(a) Time series in recurring publications should be limited to 10 years for annual data and 2 years for monthly or quarterly data; this would lead to a net reduction in the size and cost of the present publications;

(b) Where the latest available data for a country are more than seven years old, they should not be published;

(c) Demand for series longer than outlined in (a) above should be satisfied by special computer listings or by the occasional issue of historical supplements; this would be an extension of existing practice and the cost should be offset by the savings referred to in (a) above;

(d) Tables should not be published on a monthly or quarterly basis unless a significant percentage of the data changes;

(e) The year cited in the title of a publication should be the year of the latest data.

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