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SPECIAL ISSUES: MEETING USER NEEDS FOR, AND IMPROVING
THE DISSEMINATION OF, INTERNATIONAL STATISTICS

Meeting user needs for, and improving the dissemination of,
international statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present report has been prepared in response to a request made by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-second session. It contains information on the dissemination of international statistics and on current users, as well as a broad assessment of satisfaction. The report also contains a description of proposals to improve the services provided to users of international statistics and of plans to assess the potential users of such statistics.

* E/CN.3/1985/1.

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INTRODUCTION

1. At its twenty-second session, the Statistical Commission, in approving the agenda for its twenty-third session, 1/ decided that one of the items on that agenda should be that on meeting user needs for, and improving the dissemination of, international statistics. The Commission requested the Secretary-General to submit to it under that item a report on the identification of users and the establishment and development of closer contact between users and producers of international statistics, including the improvement of dissemination of international statistics. The present report has been prepared in response to that request.

I. IDENTIFICATION OF CURRENT USERS

2. The Statistical Office of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, prepares statistics in a variety of fields for a variety of users, the primary group of which is in the United Nations system, including the Secretariat, the specialized agencies, and the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and their subsidiary bodies. A second major group of users consists of the Governments of Member States and various intergovernmental organizations. A third group of users consists of universities, research bodies and not-for-profit organizations. The statistics are also used by non-governmental organizations, private companies and individuals.

3. The Statistical Office has no comprehensive list of users in these various categories. However, various partial lists exist, including the list of chief statistical contacts in each country, the current official list of users to which publications are provided free of charge, and the list of subscribers and those with standing orders for the purchase of publications. Over the past few years, the Office has tried to develop additional lists of users and potential users of its publications. In one instance, as a result of a request made to members of the Statistical Commission in 1981, some lists were provided by their Governments of potential purchasers of publications in their countries. More recently, for a particular market study, (see paras. 6-14 below), a consultant prepared a list of international addresses to which he had dispatched a questionnaire.

4. Attempts made to identify users can only cover them in partial ways. Many users of the publications are not the actual purchasers, the major single group of which are libraries. A certain percentage of sales (approximately 30 per cent) are made to anonymous individuals through booksellers.

5. Some years ago, a reader's card was inserted in a few of the yearbooks as a means of gathering information from readers. The rate of return was low (approximately 10 per cent), a problem that is reported by other agencies undertaking similar surveys. Of the cards returned, 75 per cent indicated that the yearbooks were being used in libraries (of which 10 per cent were public, 32 per cent were college, 23 per cent were corporate and 10 per cent were other) and 25 per cent indicated that they were being used elsewhere.

6. More recently, in 1982, the Statistical Office contracted with the consulting

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firm of John Rhodes and Company to study the characteristics of current users of statistical publications and to identify means of increasing the dissemination of such publications. The first step in this process was to identify users. Several thousand individuals were queried through a mail survey that encompassed 140 countries. Telephone and personal interviews were also conducted.

7. The first major finding of the study confirmed that the major purchasers of United Nations statistical publications were libraries (business, government, public and university libraries). Moreover, the actual decisions on whether to acquire the publications were made more by the librarians than by the end users.

8. A second important finding was that the major reason for acquiring publications was to update prior holdings. This leads to the conclusion that the key to improving dissemination is to ensure the initial acquisition; repeat business follows readily. It might also be observed that the high level of repeat acquisitions is an indication of user satisfaction with the statistical products.

9. The survey revealed that for several publications prepared by the Statistical Office, in particular those containing statistics of special branches of industry (such as coal, chemicals and steel), there is a very low level of consumer awareness in many market segments. In fact, there were instances in which the publications had been provided free of charge to government organizations in which awareness of the publications and their contents was only moderate. This perception is confirmed by the low level of use of the publications reported by the government librarians.

10. In addition to awareness of the existence of the publications, the survey attempted to assess the level of their use. There were several interesting findings. First, the most active use of all of the publications was made in large public libraries, especially those that receive complimentary issues, and in university libraries, regardless of the means of acquisition. Secondly, the lowest level of use was reported by small public libraries (with the exception of the Statistical Yearbook) and by government end users. Thirdly, although the level of awareness of the existence of all of the publications appeared to be high among those government end users receiving complimentary issues, the level of use was reported to be low.

11. The results of the survey have greatly improved the awareness of the Statistical Office of the existing market, the reasons for the acquisition of the publications and the current level of use of the publications in the various market segments. It is important to stress that this was only the first step in a process of establishing contact with users and improving dissemination. A further follow-up to the survey is planned for 1984-1985 (see para. 25 below).

12. In addition to the information on the current market, the survey also provided some information on the users' evaluation of United Nations statistical publications with respect to certain factors that influence their decisions to buy publications. Six factors were considered to be highly important: accuracy of the data, clarity of presentation, completeness of the data, convenience in obtaining the publication, projection of the statistics and timeliness of the data.

13. Users were satisfied or highly satisfied with the Statistical Office's performance with regard to all of the above criteria except for timeliness, for which performance was rated low. This is a commonly recorded complaint and is perhaps the major complaint voiced in regard to international statistical services. Most of the publications that refer to 1984 will be published in 1985. In many of them, only 30 to 40 per cent of the data will refer to 1984. For many items and countries, observations may be three or four years old.

14. In addition to the market for publications in their traditional form, there is a growing market for statistics in machine-readable form. A review of the purchasers of magnetic tapes reveals that the major segment of the market for standard products, in terms of the number of requests, is the private business sector. However, because of a few large special requests received from government agencies, the major segment of the market for magnetic tapes, in terms of sales, is the public sector.

II. IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL USERS

15. Arrangements are currently under way, with the assistance of a consultant, to develop a methodology for comparing potential with actual dissemination in each current market segment. This, in turn, will indicate the value of taking steps to increase dissemination in a particular segment. For new or proposed markets, the estimate of potential market size will indicate the value of pursuing dissemination in those segments.

16. At the end of this process, the Statistical Office hopes to have estimates of the size of each significant potential market segment and of current penetration. Furthermore, the consultant will evaluate current methods of distribution. This will lead to a preliminary recommendation on which market segments to pursue and how to proceed. A proposed further follow-up to this activity will be concentrated on the contents of the publications (see para. 25 below).

17. In addition to the above-mentioned survey which is the first attempt by the United Nations to establish a market framework and methodology for the evaluation of the sale of statistical publications, there has been renewed activity in promotion through the traditional means. This promotion is being conducted in collaboration with the Sales Section of the Publishing Division, Department of Conference Services, United Nations Secretariat.

18. The promotional activity includes various methods that would be employed by a specialized publisher. The budget assigned to this activity is low, representing about 4 per cent of gross income. However, this is not significantly lower than commercial practice, and is supplemented by utilizing the assistance of the United Nations information centres and the representatives of the United Nations Development Programme.

19. As revealed in the market survey, the principal medium used to make the current market aware of publications is the catalogue. Over 200,000 copies, in English, French and Spanish, of a catalogue that covers all United Nations publications, including statistical publications, are distributed from New York and

Geneva. The catalogue is distributed through the publication distributors, with the help of the United Nations information centres.

20. Another important method of reaching new customers is through advertising both in professional periodicals and newspapers and through co-operative arrangements made with distributors. There are also ad hoc advertisements placed in various newsletters and periodicals of the United Nations Association. To a growing extent, the Statistical Office uses the publications it prepares to promote its complete range of products. Consequently, lists of statistical publications and of statistics on microfiche and magnetic tape, together with descriptions and information on ordering, appear in statistical compendia.

21. From time to time, advertising is done by participating in exhibits at book fairs and in displays at professional association meetings. To limit costs, this is usually done in connection with travel on other business and is therefore sporadic. Moreover, statistical publications represent only part of such exhibits.

22. As the limited promotional funds allow, there has been and will continue to be prepared a series of brochures, describing the statistical publications of the United Nations, that are intended to be mailing pieces. The most recent such brochure was produced in mid-1984.

23. Recognizing the very important role played by libraries in the acquisition and use of statistical publications, promotional and other efforts have been concentrated on them. Exhibits have been conducted at the annual meetings of many library associations, including the American Library Association, the Catholic Library Association and the Special Libraries Association. Moreover, talks have been given at those meetings by members of the Sales Section and of the Statistical Office on the subject of statistical publications and machine-readable data.

III. PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE USER SERVICE

24. As part of the follow-up to the market survey of the current and potential user markets, the Statistical Office will be surveying user reaction to various options for improving the contents of statistical publications. In the past, this has been done only on a piecemeal basis. The survey will permit the development of a framework of the market, an extended mailing list and a survey methodology.

25. The initial follow-up to the survey was concentrated on better promotion and improved channels of distribution. A second phase will be concentrated on improvements to the statistical product. This will begin by surveying user satisfaction with the statistical data in so far as accuracy, relevance, comprehensiveness, comparability, timeliness and other aspects of content. Users will also be asked to evaluate various aspects of presentation (clarity, layout, explanatory text, graphics, number of volumes etc.) and of delivery (convenience of purchase, delivery time etc.). In addition to evaluating current publications, users (and potential users) will be asked to identify alternative contents and methods of presentation. The objective is to highlight those areas that the Statistical Office might consider in reviewing the effectiveness of the extent to which the products satisfy the needs of users.

26. The implementation of the results of such a survey, however, must proceed within the constraints of the budget and with the general approval of the Statistical Commission. There can, therefore, be no commitment that even popular changes can be pursued if they are precluded by financial or policy restrictions.

27. Within these limits, however, it is expected that certain improvements will be possible. Current feedback has already resulted in modifications, including an extension of the kind of descriptive summary of global trends that is given in the introduction to the Statistical Yearbook, the inclusion of graphic presentations of major aggregates and trends and improved standardization in areas such as classifications, descriptions, units of measurement, treatment of footnotes and the citation of titles.

28. There have been several developments designed, inter alia, to address the lack of timeliness referred to in paragraph 13 above. There are many good reasons for this lack, namely that:

(a) The data provided by the Governments of some Member States are often old upon receipt;

(b) Data must be checked upon receipt, and are often subject to manual classification and coding before they are entered into the computer system and further processed (conversion of units, aggregation, index number etc.);

(c) The completion of submissions to the printer is often delayed until all or most Governments have responded;

(d) After completion of the submissions to the printer (on magnetic tape, as camera-ready copy or as manuscript), there is a delay whilst waiting for the printing process; when this process is performed in-house, statistical publications must often take second place to printing done for the General Assembly and other United Nations bodies;

(e) After publication, there is a further delay introduced by the channels of international distribution.

29. These delays are, to a certain extent, unavoidable but the Statistical Office has taken several initiatives that are designed to reduce them. For example, there has been a gradual improvement in the timeliness of the data actually reported by the Governments of Member States. Moreover, the amount of data provided in machine-readable form has grown, speeding up their processing. The continued improvement and extension of computerization has also accelerated processing to some extent.

30. There remains a problem with respect to the time lag between the submission of material by the Statistical Office and the release of the publication. In recent years, the delay has been as long as five to six months and even longer in some cases. The Publishing Division has greatly increased the amount of printing done internally and this sometimes leads to conflicts of priority. The Joint Task Force on Statistical Publications (comprising representatives of the Statistical Office and the Publishing Division) was reactivated in 1984 and continued attention has been given to minimizing this problem.

31. It should also be noted that there have been some improvements in the publication process owing to increased use of internal photocomposition. The Statistical Office can now accept data up until the final production of a driver tape, which is not possible when manuscripts or tapes are sent for external typesetting. Thus, computerization has helped to increase the percentage of data in a publication that actually relate to the year cited in its title. For example, in the Statistical Yearbook, there has been an improvement of more than 25 per cent in the more recent issues. Plans to make further increased use of internal photocomposition will continue this improved timeliness.

32. For certain users with an acute need for timely data, the Statistical Office occasionally provides computer print-outs or photocopied tables prior to their incorporation into publications. Data on tape and microfiche are also generally available prior to their appearance in publications, and some users utilize this method of gaining early access to data.

33. An important way in which technological improvements have contributed to providing better services to users is through the establishment of on-line data-base management systems. For example, statistics of international trade are stored and managed by the COMTRADE (Compressed Trade Data) system. This system manages data in a highly compressed and efficient manner that permits the selective retrieval of data. Users can request machine-readable data on just those countries, those items and those years in which they are interested. There are plans to extend and improve this service.

34. The United Nations Statistical Information System (UNSIIS) stores and manages data on a variety of fields other than international trade. It has a number of special features, including those of report generation and photocomposition. It is also possible to link UNSIIS with COMTRADE. There are plans to provide on-line use of UNSIIS and of COMTRADE to other international statistical agencies.

35. The linking of the data bases of the international statistical agencies represents an important development in the services provided to the users of the statistical output of those agencies, and encouragement in this respect was received at the twenty-second session of the Statistical Commission. The Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination established the Technical Working Group on Statistical Data Bases in 1983. This Working Group discusses technical aspects, such as physical formats, protocols, interfaces, standard codes, data-base design and machine-readable catalogues and dictionaries. It also acts as a clearing-house of information reported by the agencies on technical developments in the field of statistical data bases. By sharing the information and by working to remove incompatibilities, the Working Group enhances the ability of the agencies to respond to the community of users of international statistics. In the long term, it is feasible that agencies will not need to duplicate each other's holdings but, rather, will have access to them as required. To a limited extent, such as the direct use by the Statistical Office of the LABORSTA data base of the International Labour Organisation, this process is already under way. It was this kind of development that was envisaged by the Statistical Commission when it endorsed this activity at its twenty-second session.

IV. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

36. Within the modest resources at their disposal, the international statistical agencies continually strive to monitor the satisfaction of users and to ensure that the statistical output meet their needs. Direct contact with end users is, however, difficult and expensive to make. The agencies must rely, therefore, on the guidance of bodies, such as the Statistical Commission, in formulating work programmes, supplemented by the limited activities referred to in the present report.

37. The Statistical Commission may wish, based on a consideration of the activities mentioned above, to suggest new, efficient and effective ways to establish and maintain contact with users and to assess their needs. The Commission may also wish to identify those activities that it considers most likely to be successful in this endeavour.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1983, Supplement No. 2 (E/1983/12 and Corr.1), chap. XIV.
