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CO-ORDINATION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL PROGRAMMES

Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and
Co-ordination: report on the eleventh session

SUMMARY

At its eleventh session, the Working Group reviewed the provisional agenda for the twenty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission (para. 5), made suggestions on the timing and content of the documentation and the use of background papers (paras. 6-36), discussed the special topics that the Commission might wish to consider at future sessions (paras. 37-41) and considered the co-ordination of statistical data-collection activities (paras. 42-46).

* E/CN.3/1987/1.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The eleventh session of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination of the Statistical Commission was held at Geneva from 2 to 4 September 1985. The agenda, as adopted, is contained in the annex to the present report.

2. Pursuant to the decision of the Working Group at its earlier sessions, the officers of the Commission who attended served as officers of the Working Group, with T. P. Linehan (Ireland) acting as Chairman of the session. Other members present were: J. Ceska (Czechoslovakia), E. Oti Boateng (Ghana), I. A. Pogossov (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and Dorothy M. Tella (United States of America).

3. The following were represented: Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), International Labour Organisation (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO) and European Economic Community (EEC).

4. The Working Group reiterated the concern previously expressed at its tenth session, that greater continuity in its membership was desirable, and expressed the view that adequate representation of developing countries at the Working Group sessions was essential to its work.

II. AGENDA AND DOCUMENTATION FOR THE TWENTY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION

5. The Working Group endorsed the provisional agenda that had been approved by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-third session and by the Economic and Social Council at its first regular session of 1985 by its decision 1985/122. The Working Group amended item 3, "Special issues", by merging sub-item 3 (c) entitled "The interrelations between statistical services and the emerging network of data bases" into sub-item 3 (a) entitled "Communications between national and international statistical agencies" to form a new sub-item 3 (a) entitled "Communications between national and international statistical agencies and development of data bases".

6. The Working Group requested that all documents in all languages should be available well in advance of the Commission session. The document entitled "Updated information on the work of the Statistical Office" should be used to provide new information to the Commission which could not be incorporated in the documents issued well in advance. The documentation should be brief and succinct while incorporating the information and addressing problems and issues in such a way as to enable the Commission to carry out its responsibilities. The Working Group considered that provision of supplementary information to the Commission by way of background papers was a useful and desirable development and the value of these would be greatly enhanced if issued in advance of the Commission meeting.

7. The Working Group recommended that, at the time of the twenty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission, Commission members be invited to express their views on the documentation for that session with a view to assisting the Working Group when preparing for the twenty-fifth session.

8. The Working Group approved the outlines of the documents for each agenda item, as set out in a restricted document entitled "Proposals and outlines for documentation for the twenty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission", with the following exceptions and comments:

Agenda item 3. Special issues

(a) Communications between national and international statistical agencies

9. The Working Group agreed that one document should be prepared for this agenda item incorporating relevant elements of the documents originally proposed by the Secretariat for agenda items 3 (a) and 3 (c). The single document should deal with all pertinent issues of communication between national and international statistical organizations, including classifications, methodological issues, technology issues and questions of comparability between national and international organizations. Equally, steps to enhance or improve communications should be addressed in a range of areas, including, but not limited to, technology. The Working Group also agreed that recent experience at the national and international level on the development and use of data bases should also be included in the document. The material proposed for section II of the document for the original agenda item 3 (a) and section III of the document for the original agenda item 3 (c) should not be included. The Working Group recognized that the general question of communication was of concern to virtually all countries, whereas the level of concern and kinds of concerns relating to data bases varied among countries and, consequently, a more thorough review of the development of data bases might be more appropriate and beneficial at a later session of the Statistical Commission.

10. The Working Group requested the Statistical Office to invite national and international organizations with relevant experience to provide information for the report and to submit supplementary background documents for the Commission.

Agenda item 4. Dissemination of international statistics

11. The Working Group agreed that the document should discuss in full detail the nature and severity of the problems faced by the Statistical Office that affect the timeliness and quality of its publications. Information provided should relate, inter alia, to obtaining information from countries (on-time provision, gaps, editing, deviations from international standard definitions, need for follow-ups), processing (computer hardware and software) and publication (translation and printing). The document should also include not only successful initiatives of other international organizations but also their experience in general that may be of value to the Statistical Commission in providing guidance. The document should further include any available national experience in the use of the publications of the Statistical Office. Emphasis should be given to the questions of ways to

improve timeliness of data and where experience of introducing charts and graphs is reported, any effect on timeliness should also be reported. The Working Group also agreed that a schedule of planned publication dates for the publications of the Statistical Office should be included.

12. The Working Group suggested that the schedule of planned publication dates for Statistical Office publications should be sent to all national statistical offices for their information and for them to make available to other national users.

Agenda item 5. National accounts and balances

(a) System of National Accounts (SNA)

13. The Working Group agreed that the coverage of the document should be expanded to include the linking of national accounts concepts and data with industrial statistics, foreign trade statistics, enterprise statistics and statistics based on household surveys, but noted that the main concentration would be on the specialized statistical sub-system of the International Monetary Fund, that is, balance-of-payments statistics, government finance statistics and financial institution statistics. In the light of this the Working Group decided that the document originally entitled "Report on links between the System of National Accounts, balance-of-payments statistics, government finance statistics and financial institution statistics" should be entitled "Report on the links between the System of National Accounts and related specialized sub-systems with particular reference to balance-of-payments statistics, government finance statistics and financial institution statistics".

(b) System of Balances of the National Economy (MPS)

14. The Working Group noted that the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance is planning to provide to the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat any revisions or additions to the "Draft basic methodological provisions for the compilation of the System of Balances of the National Economy" by the end of 1985. The Working Group also noted that volume II of that document, in so far as it contained the System of Indicators of Social Statistics, was relevant also to agenda item 9 (b), Social statistics and indicators.

Agenda item 6. International economic classifications

15. The Working Group agreed that the title of the first document should be "Report on the harmonization of international economic classifications" and that it should concentrate on problems, proposed future work and issues to be resolved (points for discussion), and not dwell on other aspects which have been dealt with in previous reports or are covered by reports of expert groups. The proposed future work should incorporate proposals regarding the degree of harmonization that will be aimed for in the future between classifications in use within the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and those in use by other international organizations. The report should give attention to planned approval dates and possible implementation dates by countries. The Working Group stressed the importance of work progressing in this area on a schedule leading to adoption by the Statistical Commission of the Central Product Classification (CPC) and the revised International Standard Industrial Classification for All Economic

Activities (ISIC) in 1989, as requested by the Commission at its twenty-third session. The Working Group also decided that the title of the second document should be changed from "Draft of the Revised International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities" to "First complete draft of the Revised International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities", and the title of the third document should be changed from "Draft of the Central Product Classification" to "First draft of the Central Product Classification".

16. The Working Group considered it important that work proceed on conversion keys between the classifications of the United Nations and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in foreign trade statistics and economic activities.

Agenda item 7. Price statistics

17. The Working Group decided that if the financial problems for phase V of the International Comparison Project remained severe and threatened the quality of the ongoing Project as a whole the document for the Commission should include an outline of a number of options for the next phase of the Project having different resource requirements, to enable the Commission to make policy recommendations on the future conduct and organization of the Project.

Agenda item 8. Industry, energy and environment statistics

(a) Industrial statistics

18. The Working Group questioned the appropriateness of the contents of the "Draft recommendations for a statistical programme for household and small-scale industries" in terms of the normal content of "Recommendations", as it appeared to include subjects that would normally be included in a handbook or manual or technical report. Discussion also revolved around the relationship of the proposed recommendations to already existing recommendations in the field of industrial statistics and the relevance of the draft recommendations to developed and developing countries separately. Information on the relationship to existing recommendations was provided. The Working Group requested the Statistical Office to provide clarification of these points in the document entitled "Report on draft recommendations for a statistical programme for household and small-scale industries" to enable the Commission to have adequate information for taking action on the "Draft recommendations for a statistical programme for household and small-scale industries".

(b) Energy statistics

19. The Working Group agreed that the document should include in chapter II a consideration of arrangements in place for co-ordination between the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and the regional commissions and other international organizations on data collection from countries. The work of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Energy Statistics, mainly on a classification for energy, should also be included.

(c) Environment statistics

20. The Working Group stressed that it was important to ensure that chapter II contained a well-developed proposed programme of work that was realistically based on regular budget resources and took account of actual and planned work of the regional commissions, UNEP and other organizations and the major emerging issues that those organizations perceive in the field of environment statistics.

Agenda item 9. Demographic and social statistics

(b) Social statistics and indicators

21. The Working Group recommended that the document contain a section in which the various international organizations that produce social statistics and indicators report on their work and on the major issues they currently perceive in their respective areas of social statistics. The document should also report the activities of the Statistical Office in (a) co-ordinating social statistics work within the international system and (b) developing statistics and indicators on population groups of special concern to the United Nations. The Working Group also agreed that indicators of poverty should be given attention in the document.

Agenda item 10. Technical co-operation

22. The Working Group agreed that the document entitled "Report on technical co-operation in statistics rendered by the United Nations system, other international organizations and countries" should include in section IV information on the role of micro-computers and mini-computers in overall data-processing activities in developing countries. The Working Group emphasized the importance of obtaining as comprehensive and detailed a coverage as possible of all technical co-operation in statistics, including that provided by organizations outside the United Nations system and by countries on a bilateral basis. Information on total value of assistance, statistical data-processing assistance, types of hardware and software provided, statistical recommendations provided and work on assisting in developing methodologies should be requested from providers of assistance. In addition, as detailed an analysis as possible should be included in the paper as provided for in the notes to section II and an effort should be made to estimate more comprehensively the training element, although it was recognized that the latter was a difficult undertaking. The Working Group agreed that the maximum possible amount of the detailed information provided by donors for preparation of the report should be made available to countries through a combination of the document for the Commission, supporting background papers and, if the Statistical Office finds it appropriate, future revisions of the Directory of Technical Co-operation Activities.

23. The Working Group agreed that a background paper offered by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on that country's experience in household surveys could be a useful supplement to the document to be prepared by the Secretariat on the National Household Survey Capability Programme.

24. For comments on the "Report containing an assessment of the effectiveness on technical co-operation in statistics", see chapter III below.

Agenda item 12. Programme implementation

25. The Working Group agreed that the document entitled "Overall review of the results of the statistical work of the international organizations" would provide an appropriate vehicle for the international organizations to report to the Statistical Commission on any problems affecting their work programme that any organization felt should be brought to the attention of the Commission.

26. The Working Group also agreed that the document on updated information on the work of the Statistical Office could be used to provide to the Commission information on any important developments in areas of work not already covered by the agenda of the Statistical Commission.

Agenda item 13. Programme objectives and planning

27. The Working Group considered that the report should include as far as possible information on major statistical collection activities by non-statistical bodies of the international organizations. The Working Group also considered that it would be desirable for the Commission to have available to it a report or part of a report showing details of work planned, by all the organizations normally covered by reports under this item, in a given field of statistics such as social statistics or environment statistics. The Working Group recommended that the Commission take this matter up at its twenty-fourth session.

28. The conference room paper on the proposed work programme for 1988-1989 should include an explanation of the United Nations general requirement to specify priorities at the programme element level as a part of the overall programme planning activity.

Agenda item 14. Provisional agenda for the twenty-fifth session of the Commission

29. The Working Group recommended that under this agenda item the Commission, at its twenty-fourth session, might wish to re-examine whether the Commission's efforts are being properly directed in terms of a balance between new areas of statistics, new programmes to be commenced and older programmes to be dropped from consideration. As part of this re-examination the Commission, when reviewing the proposed agenda for its twenty-fifth session, in 1989, might also wish to consider carefully the appropriate size and content of the agenda and the number of documents requested in relation to the time available for adequate preparation and discussion at the session while still ensuring that new issues take a significant place on the agenda. It was suggested that consideration be given by the Commission to a reduction in the load imposed on the members of the Commission by the agenda. The Working Group requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to bring this recommendation to the attention of Commission members in advance of the session. In the context of this suggested overall review, the Working Group asked the Statistical Office to invite current and a selection of former Commission members to set out their views on the matter and to suggest new issues for future consideration. The responses should be summarized and included as part of the document for the Commission containing the draft provisional agenda for the twenty-fifth session of the Commission. The Working Group noted that information already provided by a number of Commission members was relevant to the issue.

III. ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TECHNICAL CO-OPERATION IN STATISTICS

30. The Working Group discussed agenda item 5 on the basis of a restricted note entitled "Review of approaches to an assessment of the effectiveness of technical co-operation in statistics". It contained the results of a review of alternative approaches to the problem of assessing the effectiveness of technical co-operation in statistics. The note included the views on the matter expressed by the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities at its nineteenth session, held at Madrid from 24 to 28 June 1985.

31. The Working Group agreed that a country approach rather than a project approach was appropriate and agreed that the Statistical Office should pursue the country approach by developing a plan for that approach and start to carry it out within available resources and report progress to the Statistical Commission at its twenty-fourth session. The suggestion was made that the Statistical Office should try to find one or more countries which might be interested in participating in an assessment by providing their own personnel and other resources to do it. The Working Group simultaneously recommended that the Statistical Office identify or develop appropriate global indicators of national statistical capability and use those indicators to assess the change in capability on a global scale over a recent period of time. Such indicators might include, for example, the ability to compile national accounts or to carry out surveys, and the availability of statistical data collected, processed, published and used, the number of personnel etc. Such assessments could be done by experienced staff of the international agencies, with general co-ordination by the Statistical Office. The results of this study should be included in the report to the Statistical Commission, along with any relevant experience of the various international or national agencies in assessment. The report should also include, as proposed by the Statistical Office, a full outline of plans and projected costs for the complete country approach and a timetable for future reporting on the matter to the Statistical Commission. The Working Group noted that the results of the interim evaluation of the National Household Survey Capability Programme could be relevant to this matter and should be referred to in the report.

IV. SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN THE STATISTICALLY LEAST DEVELOPED AMONG THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

32. The Working Group discussed agenda item 6 on the basis of a restricted note entitled "Outline of the proposed document entitled 'Special problems in the statistically least developed among the developing countries'". The note proposed an approach and some issues for review and included the views on the matter expressed by the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities at its nineteenth session.

33. The Working Group decided that the report to the twenty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission should incorporate (a) a review of problems and resulting policy conclusions based on an investigation of the situation in several statistically least developed countries and (b) a similar review based on the accumulated knowledge of statistical advisers of a number of organizations. In both cases, the appropriateness of United Nations recommendations for those countries should be considered.

34. Having been informed that funding for a consultant was available, the Working Group agreed that initial material for item (a) above would be prepared by a consultant through visits to two or three countries selected to cover a range of problems. Contact would be made by the consultant with the central statistical organizations of those countries and other national agencies.

35. The consultant's report, along with the review mentioned in (b) above, should be circulated to countries and the specialized agencies for comment and reviewed in any suitable international gathering of representatives of statistical services, particularly those from developing countries, and in a specially established expert group if funding becomes available, in line with the recommendations of the Statistical Commission. Possibilities for funding of an expert group from several potential sources were discussed. The Working Group agreed that the terms of reference of the expert group should be consistent with the views of the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities, namely, to take account of priorities and requirements arising from the Substantial New Programme of Action for the 1980s for the Least Developed Countries. The final report, to be prepared by the Statistical Office for the Statistical Commission, would reflect the original reports as adjusted in the light of the subsequent comments.

36. The Working Group was of the view that the question of definition of statistically least developed countries should not be addressed in the report but that the countries to be studied should be selected from the categories described in the restricted document, namely, (a) the countries that are identified by the General Assembly as least developed countries, (b) small island developing countries and (c) land-locked and other developing countries that have special problems in statistics.

V. SPECIAL TOPICS TO BE TAKEN UP BY THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION DURING ITS NEXT SEVERAL SESSIONS

37. The Working Group discussed agenda item 4 on the basis of a restricted note entitled "Consolidated list of special topics" and information on plans of the Conference of European Statisticians for their discussion of special topics. The Working Group considered that the number of special topics to be taken up at each session of the Commission should be kept flexible at two or three and should be determined by the importance, priority and urgency of issues and available resources to prepare necessary discussion documents.

38. The Working Group was informed of the current criteria previously established by the Statistical Commission and the Working Group for classifying subjects as special topics. The current criteria allow for two categories of special issues, namely, a functional, organizational category and a subject-matter category. For both, the approach to their consideration should be future-oriented and they should be looked at in terms of the desirable future role of the international statistical system. The items in the second category should depend on the flow of work in the world statistical system, that is to say, the issues chosen should be timely and the documents should be responsive to developments by suggesting desirable directions.

39. The Working Group reviewed the topics in the "Consolidated list", modified some of them and suggested additional topics for potential selection, noting that several additional items had been suggested in letters from Statistical Commission members to the Statistical Office. The revised consolidated list of special topics is as follows:

I. Functional organizational topics

- (a) The reporting burden on countries in replying to international statistical questionnaires;
- (b) Ways and means of promoting the implementation of international recommendations and guidelines in countries;
- (c) Micro-computers and mini-computers, their use in technical co-operation and their implications for developing countries;
- (d) Statistics of the informal sector generally. The focus would be on the developing countries, but the study would include the relevant sectors and activities in other countries, including those with centrally planned economies. This is a very broad item, which alternatively could be limited to the non-agricultural informal sector;
- (e) General review of the methodological work of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat: review of past methodological work; dissemination of information on the methodological work of the Statistical Office; the role of the methodological work in relation to technical co-operation; future directions;
- (f) The statisticians market. A number of interrelated questions would be addressed, including: To what extent do policy-makers and executors depend upon or utilize statistics? Has there been a change over a period of time in this dependence or utilization? Should statisticians try to influence the situation and if so what should and can be done by statisticians to increase awareness among policy-makers and executors of the implications of statistics for action? To what groups in a society or economy should statisticians try to deliver a service?
- (g) Cost efficiency of statistical services;
- (h) Priorities in national statistical offices;
- (i) New additional requirements to carry out analysis and reporting in national statistical offices;
- (j) Statistical improvements that are needed to support planning;
- (k) The co-ordinating role of central statistical offices;
- (l) Development of data banks;

(m) Establishment of statistical training and research institutes in countries;

(n) Computer technology in accessing hitherto underutilized sources of data.

II. Subject-matter topics

(a) International trade;

(b) Energy, including new and renewable sources of energy;

(c) Environment;

(d) Marine economic activities;

(e) Income distribution;

(f) Locality statistics;

(g) The services sector.

40. The following topics received favourable consideration by the Working Group:

I (f) The statisticians market;

I (g) Cost efficiency of statistical services;

II (a) International trade;

II (d) Marine economic activities;

II (g) The services sector.

41. The Working Group requested the Statistical Office to submit to the Statistical Commission at its twenty-fourth session a document incorporating (a) the current criteria for classifying subjects as special topics and (b) the revised, expanded, consolidated list of special topics as an aid for the Commission to review the criteria for special topics and to select the special topics for future discussion. This document should be merged with the document requested under agenda item 14 above. The Working Group stressed that it was essential that the intended coverage of each special topic should be made clear before adoption by the Commission.

VI. CO-ORDINATION OF THE STATISTICAL DATA-COLLECTION ACTIVITIES OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

42. The Working Group discussed agenda item 7 on the basis of two restricted notes entitled "Inventory of statistical data-collection activities" and "Co-ordination of statistical data-collection activities".

43. The first note was prepared by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat based on information from the regional commissions, specialized agencies, other intergovernmental organizations active in international statistics and, for the first time, UNCTAD. It contained a summary of the major changes that have occurred in international statistical data-collection activities in the past two years and a brief description of the data collected on magnetic tape from countries. With respect to the co-ordination of activities, the note described the exchange of completed questionnaires among the international organizations and the sharing of data other than by completed questionnaires. It also contained descriptions of current questionnaires, information on dispatch and deadline dates and an indication of the addressees for each questionnaire.

44. The second note was based on responses from central statistical offices to an invitation to them to convey to the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat comments they may have on co-ordination issues. That invitation was extended in conjunction with providing to central statistical offices a copy of the "Inventory of statistical data-collection activities" (E/CN.3/AC.1/1983/R.5 of 4 August 1983). The note also included action taken or planned by the involved international organizations in response to the country comments.

45. The Working Group also was informed that the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities at its nineteenth session had considered the comments of the central statistical offices and reviewed the overall situation relating to data collection from countries. The Working Group was informed that

"The Sub-Committee reaffirmed its concern regarding the statistical reporting burden on countries and the need to avoid unnecessary duplication in statistical data collection. The Sub-Committee agreed that it was essential to (a) follow up on a bilateral or multilateral basis the comments made by the countries, (b) act where possible to remove any duplication that had been identified, (c) reply to the countries and (d) report action taken to the Statistical Commission's Working Group. The Sub-Committee was of the view that as a result of the many years of attention to reducing the reporting burden on countries, which was well documented, it was unlikely that significant duplication in data collection remained. The Sub-Committee considered that no new general initiatives by the international organizations was required on the matter. Several organizations reported that they had succeeded in reducing or eliminating duplicative data requests to countries by having all statistical questionnaires examined by a committee or the statistical unit of that organization" (ACC/1985/15, para. 22).

46. The Working Group noted that the international organizations had started to review the detailed comments from the countries to see what co-ordination action, if any, could be taken. The Working Group was of the view that more complete and detailed information would need to be included in the "Inventory" for it to serve fully as a co-ordination tool for the national statistical offices. Some of the additional detail that would be needed for this purpose would be (a) a specification of the series collected, (b) specification of the national department to which each questionnaire is sent, (c) the list of countries to which each questionnaire is sent and (d) a detailing of all the requests to countries for

statistical data. The Working Group recognized that the "Inventory" was a useful description of the bulk of statistical data collected from countries and served well as a co-ordination tool at the international level.

VII. DATE AND PLACE OF THE TWELFTH SESSION

47. The Working Group recommended that its twelfth session should be held at Geneva for three days in the second half of September 1987.

Annex

AGENDA FOR THE ELEVENTH SESSION

1. Election of officers.
2. Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters.
3. Provisional agenda and documentation for the twenty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission.
4. Special topics to be taken up by the Statistical Commission during its next several sessions.
5. Assessment of the effectiveness of technical co-operation in statistics.
6. Special problems in the statistically least developed among the developing countries.
7. Co-ordination of the statistical data-collection activities of international organizations.
8. Dates and place of the twelfth session.
9. Report of the Working Group to the Statistical Commission.
