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DRAFT PROVISIONAL AGENDA FOR THE TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION OF
THE COMMISSION

Draft provisional agenda for the twenty-fifth session of the
Commission and other matters concerning the future programme
of work of the Commission

Note by the Secretariat

SUMMARY

The present document contains:

- (a) The draft provisional agenda for the twenty-fifth session of the Statistical Commission (paras. 1-4);
- (b) Current criteria for classifying subjects as special topics (paras. 7-9);
- (c) A list of special topics for possible consideration by the Commission during its next several sessions (paras. 10 and 11);
- (d) A summary of the views of selected members of the Statistical Commission on the direction of the Commission's efforts in terms of a balance between new areas of statistics, new programmes to be commenced and older programmes to be dropped from consideration (paras. 14-28).

* E/CN.3/1987/1.

I. DRAFT PROVISIONAL AGENDA FOR THE TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION OF THE
STATISTICAL COMMISSION

1. The Economic and Social Council, in resolution 1894 (LVII) of 1 August 1974, on the rationalization of the work of the Council, requested the Secretary-General to submit at each session of a functional commission or subsidiary body of the Council, a draft provisional agenda for its following session and to indicate, in respect of each agenda item, the documents to be submitted under the item and the legislative authority for their preparation.
2. Pursuant to Council resolution 1979/41, the draft provisional agenda for its subsidiary bodies, together with the list of requested documentation, is submitted to the Council for its review, in order, inter alia, to establish greater consistency between the documentation of those bodies and the overall documentation requested by the Council and other subsidiary bodies and greater consistency between the requests for documentation and the medium-term plan and the programme budget.
3. In resolution 1982/50 on the revitalization of its work, the Council endorsed the recommendation of the Secretary-General that the documentation and programme of work of the subsidiary bodies of the Council should also be streamlined in order to enable them to perform effectively the functions entrusted to them.
4. The following draft provisional agenda has been prepared on the basis of existing legislative authority. The draft provisional agenda for the twenty-fifth session of the Statistical Commission will be completed at the present session in the light of resolutions and decisions adopted and requests made by the Commission during the session and will be submitted to the Council for review, in accordance with the Council resolution 1979/41.

1. Election of officers.
2. Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters.
3. National accounts and balances.

Documentation

Progress reports on revision of the United Nations System of National Accounts and related national accounts and balances matters (see E/1985/26, para. 33 (a))

4. International economic classifications.

Documentation

Report on the revision and harmonization of international economic classifications; draft of the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities; draft of the Central Product Classification (see E/1985/26, para. 50)

5. Co-ordination and integration of international statistical programmes.

Documentation

Report of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination on its twelfth session

6. Programme objectives and planning.

Documentation

Draft work programme and information on the medium-term plan of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat (Regulations and rules governing programme planning; the programme aspects of the budget; the monitoring of implementation and the methods of evaluation (ST/SGB/204))

7. Draft provisional agenda for the twenty-sixth session of the Commission (Economic and Social Council resolution 1894 (LVII)).
8. Report of the Commission on its twenty-fifth session.

II. SPECIAL TOPICS FOR POSSIBLE CONSIDERATION BY THE COMMISSION
AT ITS NEXT SEVERAL SESSIONS

5. At its twenty-third session the Commission asked its Working Group on Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination to consider the appropriate number of special issues to be included in the agenda of the Statistical Commission for each session. 1/

6. The Working Group discussed the question of special topics on the basis of a restricted note entitled "Consolidated list of special topics", and on information about plans of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES/540). 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 the availability of resources for the preparation of necessary discussion documents (E/CN.3/1987/21, para. 37). 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) a revised, expanded, consolidated list of special topics as an aid for the Commission to review criteria and select the special topics for future discussion (para. 41). 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 (para. 41). The Working Group also asked the Statistical Office to invite current and a selection of former Statistical Commission members to suggest new issues for future consideration (para. 29).

7. While no formal criteria have been established for special topics, the Working Group had agreed that there were two categories: 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 (E/CN.3/1983/24, paras. 49 and 53).

8. The Commission will recall that the following subjects have been covered since the practice of holding discussions on special topics began at the Commission's twenty-second session:

Twenty-second session

Administrative records

Information technology

Publication policy for statistics

Twenty-third session

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

Future direction of work on social indicators

Publication policy for statistics

Twenty-fourth session

Communications between national and international statistical agencies and the development of data bases

Special problems of the statistically least developed among the developing countries

9. From this list it appears that one additional consideration that has guided the Commission in the past in the selection of special topics for discussion is the avoidance of subjects, regardless of their importance, which are recurrent items on the agenda, for example items on particular substantive matters, or reviews of draft classifications or draft recommendations, since a thorough discussion of such subjects is provided for under those recurrent items.

10. The revised consolidated list of proposed special topics for possible future discussion is set out below. It consists of subjects proposed by the Secretariat, subjects proposed by members of the Statistical Commission in response to two sets of inquiries sent by the Statistical Office; one at the request of the Statistical Commission in 1985 ^{2/} and another at the request of the Working Group in 1985 (E/CN.3/1987/21, para. 29), and items suggested by the Working Group.

III. REVISED CONSOLIDATED LIST OF SPECIAL TOPICS

A. Functional organizational topics

1. 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
2. Identification of areas where there should be more effort to standardize definitions, classifications and practices internationally
3. Definition of statistical units
4. Timeliness of issuing revised international classifications to meet national needs
5. Creation and updating conversion keys for international classifications
6. Ways and means of promoting the implementation of international recommendations and guidelines in countries
7. Articulation and identification of what are the critical statistical issues in the 1990s
8. Identification of the critical gaps, by region and kind of economic activity, in the statistical data available for analysing and understanding the economic development process
9. Timeliness and quality of statistical series and relevance of series to current needs and issues of the day
10. Priorities in national statistical offices
11. Cost efficiency of statistical services
12. Statistical organization, managerial problems of statistical offices and the co-ordinating role of central statistical offices
13. New roles for national statistical offices resulting from the systematic storage of masses of data
14. Strategy for enhancing consultations with users and producers
15. Identification of areas where the programmes of the United Nations System could be made more effective by stronger statistical support
16. Statistical improvements that are needed to support planning

17. Priorities at the national level among statistical services and other government services
18. Micro- and mini-computers, their use in national and international statistical services and in technical co-operation and their implications for developing countries
19. Development of data banks and transfer of experience to developing countries
20. Improvement of the data base by application of remote sensing techniques
21. Establishment of the data bases at different levels, their linkage in a common network as well as the links of the statistical information system with the network of data bases
22. Computer technology in accessing hitherto underutilized sources of data
23. Review of statistical education systems especially in developing countries and communication among academics and government statisticians
24. Establishment of statistical training and research institutes in countries
25. Selection and recruitment of professional staff for work in national and international statistical offices (The professional staff of a statistical office require a diverse range of skills if the office's responsibilities are to be carried out effectively and efficiently; the discussion would include a review of the methods used by countries and international organizations to identify and recruit the staff needed)
26. 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?)
27. Desirability of the Statistical Office doing more analysis and interpretation of the data it gathers
28. Need for and new additional requirements for carrying out research and analysis and reporting in national statistical offices
29. Formulation and development of relevant integrated policy-oriented indicators for assessing economic performance
30. Identification of the most effective ways (e.g. expert groups, consultants, deliberations by the regional statistical bodies) for the United Nations to get a broad range of expert advice on statistical issues

31. Population and housing censuses and alternative methods of data collection in place of censuses
32. Development of reporting systems for special fields (e.g. health, education and social security)
33. Registers and their role in longitudinal analysis
34. The reporting burden on countries in replying to international statistical questionnaires
35. Yearly catalogue of the surveys, censuses and other inquiries carried out in a selection of countries
36. International comparisons using an indicator system (This topic could be based on national experiences in the area and would include not only SNA-MPS comparisons but several other fields, such as agricultural statistics, social statistics and environment statistics)

B. Subject matter topics

1. 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.)
2. Statistics for food security (In the recent past, the African countries have experienced droughts and large-scale famines. It has been realized that the traditional agricultural statistics series in these countries have not provided the kind of information needed for quick action in matters of food supply and security. Attempts have been made, and are continuing to be made, to develop food supply information systems. This is an important area in view of the large numbers of populations currently at risk and exposed to hunger and malnutrition.)
3. International trade
4. Energy, including new and renewable sources of energy
5. Environment
6. Marine economic activities
7. Income and wealth distribution and poverty
8. Locality statistics
9. The services sector

10. Savings and investment
11. Public security, law and justice
12. Debt statistics and linkage to other economic statistics
13. Public finance statistics
14. Statistics on technological advances (engineering automation, electronics)
15. Statistics on use of secondary material and waste
16. Technical issues involved in measuring the contribution of household women, especially rural women in economic activities
17. Statistics on quality of life, including a country's infrastructure: hospitals, schools, roads, arts, environmental development etc. ...
18. Manpower statistics
19. Statistics of government activity

11. When the Working Group met in 1985 it had available only a sub-set of the above list of special topics for consideration. From that sub-set, five topics were considered favourably by the Working Group for possible selection by the Commission for future discussion. The five topics were:

Cost efficiency of statistical services (Group A, No. 11);

The statisticians market (Group A, No. 26);

International trade (Group B, No. 3);

Marine economic activities (Group B, No. 6); and

The services sector (Group B, No. 9).

However, the Working Group considered that the final selection of the special topics should be made by the Commission on the basis of the full list.

IV. SUMMARY OF REPLIES RECEIVED FROM CURRENT MEMBERS AND SELECTED FORMER MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION ON THE DIRECTION OF THE COMMISSION'S EFFORTS

12. At its eleventh session, the Working Group "recommended that the Commission, at its twenty-fourth session, might wish to re-examine whether the Commission's efforts were 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 that 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 would take a significant place on the agenda. It was suggested that consideration should 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 to bring the recommendation to the attention of Commission members in advance of the session. In the context of the suggested overall review, the Working Group asked the Statistical Office to invite current Commission members and a selection of former members to set out their views on the matter (E/CN.3/1987/21, para. 29).

13. The Statistical Office requested the then current members and a selection of former members to express their views. These views are summarized below. The attention of the Commission is also called to the report of the Secretary-General on proposals for the future work of the Statistical Commission and its methods of operation (E/CN.3/563 dated 11 August 1980), and the Commission's comments on it. 3/

A. Programmes and priorities

14. Although most of the replies contained specific proposals on how statistical programme planning could be improved, only a few of them provided a general evaluation of recent past practice. Approximately one fourth of the replies indicated that the work programme of the Statistical Office, as reflected in the agenda of the Statistical Commission sessions, had been well balanced and had appropriately taken into account changing priorities in the practices of the national statistical offices.

15. One reply suggested that the statistical work programme might not have proper direction because the Commission was not in a position to react to priorities that had already been more or less firmly established by the Secretariat. According to that opinion, given the way the Commission's agenda was structured, the Commission had very little ability to affect priorities. It was also suggested that while the Commission reacted sufficiently well in responding to new requirements and beginning new programmes within an appropriate time frame, it hesitated in removing older programmes which, in the course of time, had become of lower interest, considering overall international statistical work and priorities. Some of the replies also noted that while the reaction in the programme planning process was sufficiently timely in starting up new projects of general interest, the implementation of those projects was in many cases relatively slow, for example the development of new classification systems, and did not provide necessary assistance in the development of national statistical work. More rapid implementation would be preferable.

B. New programmes to be initiated and old programmes to be dropped (or revised) 4/

16. The substantive discussion of special issues which was initiated in the Statistical Commission sessions of 1983 was welcomed by many respondents and encouraged to continue. It was recommended that the selection of the topics to be discussed should be co-ordinated with the substantive discussions going on in the Conference of European Statisticians. It was suggested that co-ordination with the International Statistical Institute also would be useful.

17. One of the striking features of the replies was that while there were many proposals for new programmes to be started (or ongoing programmes to receive higher priorities), there were few suggestions on which specific topics should be dropped. However, several suggestions were made concerning the principles to be applied when deciding whether an ongoing programme should be continued or not. There was a consensus that the guiding principle should be whether there were current problems in the given field to which international discussion could make an effective contribution rather than whether or not an item had been discussed at previous meetings. Attention was drawn to the point that dropping a topic from the programme did not necessarily mean that the relative importance of that field had diminished. It could simply reflect an assessment that no considerable development was expected from further discussions at that time.

18. There were many proposals on the items to be given special attention, either started as new programmes or continued with higher priority. There was very little overlapping among the various suggestions, and this is another striking feature of the replies. Among the almost 40 subject-matter items proposed only 6 were recommended by two respondents and only 1 was suggested by three respondents. In tracing the possible reasons for this large diversity in proposals it seems that the relative development level of the country plays only a partial role, as indicated by the fact that in most of the cases proposed by two respondents, one was from a developed country and one was from a developing country. Possible causes for the diversity may be that at a given time different countries have different major policy concerns, and that the various sub-systems of statistics are at different stages of development in those countries.

19. About one third of the proposals related to economic statistics. National accounting as such was not mentioned (perhaps because countries are aware that the revision of the national accounting systems is well under way). However, a few closely related subjects were mentioned (debt management, investment and saving and measurement of household work). Among the various branches of statistics, statistics of services was strongly proposed by one reply, and attention to trade, agricultural, government and manpower statistics was also suggested. Price statistics, economic classifications and the links between the System of National Accounts and System of Balances of the National Economy, as well as East-West comparisons in a broader sense were also proposed.

20. Some of the proposals related to both economic and social statistics, or social-demographic statistics alone. The most frequently proposed topic was income distribution and poverty statistics (this was the only item proposed by three

respondents). Other proposals were population and housing censuses, the measurement of "quality of life", and public security, law and justice statistics. High priority for environment statistics was also suggested by two respondents.

21. Data processing and statistical technique subjects were also suggested, including data base development in general, application of remote sensing techniques, possible roles for national statistical offices resulting from their systematic storage of masses of individual data and the use of micro-computers in statistics. Among the more general methodological subjects, timeliness and quality of data, replacement of some comprehensive censuses by surveys and the problems of the statistical units and registers were proposed.

22. Quite a large number of proposals were related to the organizational and functional problems of statistics, such as co-ordination among international organizations, the role of statisticians and statistics in economic and social policy making, research and analysis to be done by the statistical offices themselves, managerial problems in statistical offices and education of statisticians.

23. As mentioned above, there were very few proposals for dropping ongoing subjects and some of these proposals conflicted with others. For example, external trade statistics was proposed for deletion by one respondent (arguing that its well structured system operates well in practice) but was proposed for priority treatment by another respondent at least as far as trade deflators were concerned. Similarly, contrasting views were expressed in respect of energy statistics. Industrial statistics and international migration statistics were proposed to be dropped by one respondent.

24. One respondent questioned whether all of the yearbooks issued by the Statistical Office served the needs of users especially taking into account the time lag in their issuance. A degree of overlapping with publications of other agencies was noted.

C. Structure of the Statistical Commission sessions

25. As indicated in paragraph 14 above, approximately one fourth of the replies showed that the structure of the agenda of the Commission's sessions has been well balanced. However, several proposals were made in respect of the agenda of the sessions and other organizational problems.

26. A number of respondents considered that the agenda of the sessions contained too many items thus making it difficult for the Commission to devote sufficient time to the most important issues. In this connection the Statistical Office was encouraged to continue its practice of highlighting in the summary the main points and the points for discussion of each document. It also was proposed that a distinction should be made between documents for discussion and documents for information. This was done on an experimental basis for the twenty-second session of the Commission, and, based on the experience of that session, was discontinued by a decision of the Working Group at its tenth session (E/CN.3/1985/17 para. 26).

It was also suggested that some items may not require any documentation beyond what was included in the annotated agenda as is the practice of the Conference of European Statisticians.

27. Actions taken by the United Nations over recent years in response to financial constraints (shortening of the length of the session, shortening of the documents) were understood by a number of respondents; however the view was expressed that further limitations in these fields would be counterproductive. It was proposed that the Commission should be informed at each session of the resources available for statistical programmes and on the possible consequences of any shortfalls in resources. It was also proposed that the Commission should discuss priorities also in respect of current activities with the view to allocating appropriately the available resources.

28. The establishment of longer-term plans for the Commission's programme was proposed by one participant. According to another view the Commission should have a broader approach than at present, covering also those statistical items for which other agencies have primary responsibility.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1985, Supplement No. 6 (E/1985/26), para. 48 (b).

2/ Ibid., para 149.

3/ Ibid., 1981, Supplement No. 2 (E/1981/12, paras. 248-261).

4/ The special topics mentioned in this section are incorporated in the revised consolidated list of special topics given in chapter II above.
