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Statistical Commission**Thirty-second session**

6-9 March 2001

Item 2 of the provisional agenda*

Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters**Clarification of the issues raised by the Observer for Nigeria
(on behalf of the Group of 77 and China) during the
discussion by the Economic and Social Council, at its
substantive session of 2000, of the report of the Statistical
Commission on its thirty-first session****Note by the Secretariat***Summary*

The Economic and Social Council considered the report of the Statistical Commission on its thirty-first session at its substantive session of 2000. During that discussion, the Observer for Nigeria (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China) raised issues concerning the part of the report of the Statistical Commission dealing with the accuracy of statistics in the United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report*. The Council took note of the report of the Commission and requested the Commission to provide clarification on the issues raised, as reflected in the summary record (E/2000/SR.41). The present report provides clarification of the issues raised.

* E/CN.3/2001/1.



1. At the 41st meeting, on 26 July 2000, at the substantive session of 2000 of the Economic and Social Council, the representative of Nigeria (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China) had requested clarification on the following issues (see E/2000/SR.41):

(a) The Statistical Commission had taken a decision on the two articles concerning the *Human Development Report* which had been distributed in limited numbers, in English only, to the delegations present at the meeting of 29 February 2000. Thus, many delegations and capitals had not seen the articles before they had been discussed and action had been taken on them;

(b) The *Human Development Report* had not been placed on the Commission's agenda in advance, as required by its rules of procedure;

(c) The Commission had decided to take action based on the allegations of an author who was unknown to most of its members, and had decided, without verifying that author's findings, to appoint a group of experts to prepare a report on the accuracy of the statistical information in the *Human Development Report*;

(d) The representative of Nigeria had participated in the Commission's session as an observer and had twice requested that the Commission delay action on the articles in question;

(e) The Commission had taken a decision based on allegations by Mr. Castles in his article, which had not been endorsed by Australia. The decision had resulted in action taken without recourse to the rules of procedure of the Council;

(f) The text adopted by the Commission, as contained in paragraph 42 of its report, did not reflect the Commission's proceedings; and

(g) The representative also asked how the group of experts would be financed and what rules of procedure had been followed.

Clarification on issues raised and of actions taken by the Commission

2. At the 498th (opening) meeting of the thirty-first session of the Commission, held on 29 February, the representative of Australia proposed a new item (item 14) on the provisional agenda for the session, entitled "United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report*". The Commission subsequently adopted, as orally amended, the provisional agenda, in accordance with rule 8 of the rules of procedures of the functional commissions (E/5975/Rev.1).

3. At the same meeting, the representative of Australia¹ referred the Commission to the two background papers authored by Ian Castles,^{2,3} which were made available in English only and placed on tables in the back of the conference room. The Commission had on many occasions in the past provided background papers on various topics of its agenda in English language only, which represented the established practice of the Commission.

4. At its 502nd meeting, on Thursday morning, 2 March, the Commission took up item 14, entitled "United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report*". The Observer for Canada made a statement and read out a text of a draft proposal, which was thus orally interpreted into all other official languages and the

text had been distributed to the Commission, in English only. The text had been made available to the Commission 24 hours before action was to be taken. Several members and observers supported the draft proposal introduced by the Observer for Canada (application of rule 69 of the rules of procedures on participation of non-Members of the Commission), while some other members and observers expressed reservations and suggested revisions.

5. The Secretary made a statement concerning the procedure on the proposals before the functional commissions (rule 52) and advised the Commission that if it wished to proceed with the draft proposal, interested delegations should discuss the text in informal consultations with the Observer for Canada and try to reach an agreement on it. The agreed text would then, time permitting, be translated into all official languages (rule 32) and submitted to the Commission for adoption the next day.

6. Subsequently, the Observer for Canada convened a meeting of interested delegations, including the representative for UNDP. The group agreed on the final text to be recommended for adoption by the Commission. Owing to the lack of time, however, the Secretariat could not translate the text into all official languages. It is to be noted, however, that it had been the established practice of the Commission in the past to consider and adopt texts in English only if time did not permit for their translation. Also, no member had raised any objection to this established practice before the Commission.

7. On Friday, 3 March, at the last (503rd) meeting of the session, the final text was read out by the Observer for Canada and thus orally interpreted into all other official languages and distributed in conference room in English only. The Commission agreed by consensus to include the text in the draft report on its thirty-first session (for the full text of decision 2000/228, see annex).

8. During the discussion, a question was raised about the Commission's decision to act on the observations published in the two papers by an author (Ian Castles) who was unknown to most of its members, without first verifying his findings.

9. Several delegations and observer organizations provided information that showed that the issues raised in the papers had been raised in several forums previously, going back as far as 1990. For example:

(a) The ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities had discussed these concerns in 1990 with a representative of UNDP present; further discussion took place in the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities in September 1999 and this was reflected in its report, which had been issued in advance as a document of the thirty-first session of the Statistical Commission (see E/CN.3/2000/19);

(b) The ESCAP Working Party on Statistics, at its meeting in November 1999, had expressed reservations with regard to the human development index contained in the *Human Development Report*;

(c) Two representatives related their own experience in recent years by bringing to the attention of UNDP their concerns about the statistical data in the *Human Development Report* relating to their own countries;

(d) Lastly, one of the "background documents" had been published in the December 1998 issue of *Population and Development Review*.

10. Moreover, during the discussion of the matter, several delegations and observer organizations considered that the issues were serious and indicated that concerns had been expressed for some years and urged the Commission to take action at the current session rather than delaying it for another year, notwithstanding the serious reservations raised to take such action now. UNDP also indicated its willingness to work with the Commission on the issues raised, and was interested in resolving the matter.

11. Concern had also been expressed about the financing of the group of statistical experts referred to in decision 2000/228. It is to be noted, however, that it has been the established practice of the Commission over the years that various “groups of experts” and “friends of the chair” had been established with no financial implication to the Organization. These groups did not require any provision of conference services. The members of such groups communicate with each other informally by way of telephone, e-mail or fax, hold meetings at their own expense and report back to the Commission or the Bureau. The same established practice had been applied in the case of this particular small group of statistical experts.

Notes

¹ During discussion in the Economic and Social Council, the Observer for Australia confirmed that the issue had been raised by the Government of Australia, not by an individual, and said that when her Government had presented the Castles’ reports, it had expressed concern about the views expressed therein (see E/2000/SR.41, paras. 53 and 58).

² A paper on the *Human Development Report 1997*, prepared by I. Castles, Vice-President of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

³ A paper entitled “Measurement of nations: a review essay on the *Human Development Report 1998*”, prepared by I. Castles and published in *Population and Development Review*, vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1998).

Annex**Text adopted by the Statistical Commission at its thirty-first session related to the United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report*^a**

“Without being able to directly verify the findings of Ian Castles of Australia during its thirty-first session, the Statistical Commission took note of his report on the *Human Development Report*. The Commission is very concerned to ensure that the *Report* is based on valid statistical evidence. The Commission, therefore, requests its Chairman to appoint a small group of statistical experts to prepare, in conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme, a report on the accuracy of the statistical information contained in the *Report*, focusing on the points raised by the room document authored by Mr. Castles. The Group should report to the Bureau not later than June 2000. The Commission authorizes the Bureau to take whatever follow-up steps it deems necessary.”

Notes

^a *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council 2000, Supplement No. 4 (E/2000/24), para. 42.*
