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QUALITY ASSURANCE, ARRANGEMENTS WITH COMMON QUESTIONNAIRES AND CONFLICTING STATISTICS

Note by the
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From its inception more than 50 years ago, the Population Division/DESA of the United Nations Secretariat has been responsible for the preparation of the official United Nations population estimates and projections. The most recent revision currently underway is the *2000 Revision*, which is the seventeenth round undertaken by the Division.

The revision includes estimates and projections of population size and growth for all countries and areas of the world, including the underlying components of levels, trends and (age-sex) patterns of mortality, fertility and international migration. In addition, the Population Division prepares the official United Nations estimates and projections of the population of urban and rural areas and major urban agglomerations for all countries of the world. The data, sources and corresponding analyses are published biennially; the national population estimates and projections during the even-numbered years, and the urban-rural-city estimates and projections during the odd-numbered years.

A more detailed description of the methods behind producing the United Nations official population estimates and projections can be found in Population Division publications (*World Population Prospects: The 1998 Revision*, volume III, New York, 1999; *World Urbanization Prospects: The 1999 Revision*, New York, forthcoming in 2000). A summary is given here. The preparation of each new revision of the official population and demographic estimates of the United Nations involves the incorporation of all new and relevant information regarding the past dynamics of the population of each country or area of the world. The process of updating and revising past demographic estimates entails not only the separate evaluation of the quality of the demographic data available. It also involves the search for consistency among them – past trends of mortality, fertility and migration must be consistent with each other and with changes in the size and age and sex distribution of the population. Similarly, the size and growth of urban and rural areas for each country (as well as the size of urban agglomerations) must be consistent with the size and growth of the total populations.

Where the data are of high quality, like in most of the developed countries, the estimation of consistent past trends has generally been fairly straightforward, although *de jure* – *de facto* definitional differences had sometimes caused problems. However recently, the increased prevalence of international migration for increasing numbers of countries and the inadequacy of

such data have made the estimation of past and current population sizes and age-sex structures less reliable than in the past. Where data are sparse and not of sufficient reliability, such as often the case in the developing countries, demographic modeling and methods of indirect estimation, sometimes in conjunction with special demographic surveys, need to be applied to either directly estimate or to adjust census and vital registration data, in order to obtain consistent estimates of population size and growth and the underlying demographic parameters.

The population estimates and projections along with the sectoral estimates and projections prepared by United Nations agencies provide a consistent and coherent set of data for the United Nations system. The ACC Subcommittee on Demographic Estimates and Projections (ACC/SCDEP) provides a coordination mechanism for the estimates and projections of population/demography prepared by the Population Division, of labour force prepared by ILO, of agriculture population prepared by FAO, of literacy/educational enrolment prepared by UNESCO, and of the burden of disease prepared by WHO.

Although, the population/demographic estimates and projections prepared by the Population Division are accepted throughout the United Nations system, sometimes other agencies may choose to prepare their own population estimate for a specific country due to special circumstances. Examples where an agency might make its own population estimate include insistence by a country to use its own “national” estimate, a different definition of borders, a different definition of population (a need to consider the *de jure* population rather than the usual *de facto* approach), or treatment of refugee populations. In addition, due to the timing of publication, one organization may have more recent numbers than another. Discussion of these issues forms a regular part of the biennial meetings of ACC/SCDEP. Collaboration between the Population Division and specialized agencies, both during and between the regular meetings of ACC/SCDEP has been highly beneficial, in particular coordinating activities, promoting consistency and minimizing differences in figures among the Organizations.

United Nations estimates and projections will also sometimes differ from the national figures prepared by the countries themselves. This is true not just for the population/demographic estimates and projections, but also for the full spectrum of sectoral estimates and projections under the auspices of ACC/SCDEP. This occurs for many of the same reasons given in the previous paragraph. However, there are also other additional issues that come to play here. Under circumstances where data are sparse and of low quality, national experts and United Nations experts may adjust the base data differently. And sometimes, national authorities do not adjust data for incompleteness at all; for example, in many countries legal or constitutional issues may preclude official incorporation of national census office’s own estimates of census undercount.

The transparency of the Division’s population work and its readiness to address possible differences between its estimates and projections and those issued by a country have not only resolved most problems, but have also contributed to improving the quality of our work. The comprehensive United Nations publications relating to a biennial revision provide countries with the sources used, the methodology employed and the assumptions made. Differences of a technical nature are invariably resolved through correspondence. In contrast, differences arising from political considerations in a country often remain outstanding.

Over the last half century, a great deal of progress has been achieved in preparing the official United Nations population estimates and projections and coordinating population and sectoral estimates and projections. While certainly various reasons lie behind this progress, a good

part of the explanation no doubt rests on the common set of principles shared by members of the United Nations system. Particularly noteworthy among these principles is that members of the United Nations system should:

- Cooperate closely, avoid duplication of efforts and respect each other's mandates and contributions;
- Maintain an active dialogue with countries concerning relevant estimates and projections;
- Produce one unique set of population/demographic and sectoral estimates and projections.

In addition to these and related principles, future progress in the area of population and sectoral estimates will require continued commitment, cooperation and collaboration among members of the ACC Subcommittee on Demographic Estimates and Projections.