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INDICATIVE PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTION

Patterns of consumption: qualitative aspects of development:
report of the preparatory meeting for a meeting of a group of
experts, held in Geneva 16 May 1990

Report submitted by the United Nations
Research Institute for Social Development

UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

**Patterns of Consumption: Qualitative Aspects
of Development**

Meeting of a Group of Experts

**Preparatory Meeting
Geneva, 16 May 1990**

MEETING REPORT

The United Nations General Assembly has recognized that, in order to facilitate the search for ways to improve living standards, methods of measuring with greater accuracy the level of satisfaction of socio-economic needs in the developing countries must be found, and that "an accurate assessment of the advances in living standards requires a reliable measuring instrument consisting of a set of indicators related to living conditions, employment and the circumstances underlying them, and the improvement of basic national statistical programmes and capabilities related to food, clothing, housing, education, health care and necessary social services."¹

As a step towards achieving these aims, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) was requested "to explore with the Government of Morocco and other interested organizations, including the World Bank and the Statistical Office, ways and means of convening a meeting of high-level experts on development indicators to review the results of work in progress."² UNRISD has proposed that this meeting take place in Rabat,

1. A/RES/40/179, 23 January 1986
2. E/CN.3/1989/L.4/Add.16

with the aim of reviewing and discussing recent advances made in the field of social development indicators, including identification of appropriate indicators, data-gathering and processing techniques, and the use of socio-economic data for analysis and measurement of social progress and for assessing social change.

The Rabat meeting will serve as a forum for synthesizing national and international experiences and objectives regarding development indicators, and will attempt to formulate some conclusions regarding recommendations for specific, low-cost policy measures that can feasibly be undertaken by countries at different levels of economic development. The emphasis will be on improving the efficiency and utility of present systems of social assessment, as well as on the development of viable new techniques for obtaining, processing, and analysing data. In view of the continuing economic crisis in much of Africa and Latin America, and in parts of Asia, special attention will be paid to the implications of the social and economic structural changes which have occurred in much of the Third World for contemporary social indicator research, as well as to efficient and effective means of monitoring the impacts of the crisis.

In preparation for the meeting of experts in Rabat, an inter-agency meeting was held in Geneva on 16 May 1990. The purpose of this preparatory meeting was to begin a process of dialogue concerning the activities of the major United Nations organizations which will enrich the discussions and presentations of the Rabat conference, as well as to solicit advice from within the United Nations system regarding the specific themes and issues which would be most productively addressed in Rabat, as well as the governments, agencies, and individuals who should participate in the meeting.

Nine international agencies, as well as the Ministry of Planning of the Government of Morocco, were represented by the 18 participants at the preparatory meeting, and the following discussions took place.

The three sets of issues proposed by UNRISD as a framework for the meeting, namely conceptual issues, data gathering and processing, and data analysis, were discussed. It was agreed that this framework was useful, but that the emphasis given to each of these areas in the papers prepared for the Rabat conference should vary according to the focus of each paper. For instance, there were several areas specified in which data analysis was identified as a bottleneck, and hope was expressed that the Rabat conference could contribute towards alleviating this problem. In particular, the importance of finding ways to usefully analyse fragmented information was mentioned.

Other areas were specified in which conceptual work still remains to be done. These included human rights, where work on ways to assess progress is currently being undertaken, and the environment and sustainable development, about which it was mentioned that many data sets exist, but that there has as yet been insufficient work done on the identification of appropriate indicators.

A third set of questions were identified for which data gathering itself remains important, because under rapidly changing conditions, existing data-gathering techniques are insufficient. These included ways to assess conditions in urban slums, the relationship between health and environment, and determining the social dimensions of adjustment programmes. In addition, changing data requirements in Eastern Europe were foreseen. It was also mentioned that a paper discussing the ways to obtain an optimal mix between different types of data-gathering methodologies would make a useful contribution to the Rabat meeting.

Following these discussions, a provisional list of the papers to be solicited for the Rabat conference was drawn up as follows:

- * an overview paper, reviewing the progress made in the use of social development indicators
- * structural adjustment
- * environment/sustainable development
- * human rights, including the position of indigenous and/or "vulnerable" groups
- * health in relation to environment and overall development
- * urban slums
- * developments in Eastern Europe
- * the position of women in society
- * improved use of existing data and low-cost data collection
- * the work done by Morocco's Division of Statistics

It was agreed that these papers would be prepared by both agency and external experts. The participants in the preparatory meeting agreed to provide UNRISD with names of experts or of contact persons who could identify appropriate paper writers in the areas in which they have experience.

It was also decided that, in addition to the paper writers and agencies, policy makers and senior statisticians from 10-15 developing countries would be invited to attend the Rabat conference. The participants in the preparatory meeting also agreed to assist UNRISD in identifying the countries and individuals who should be invited.

The next item of discussion was the agencies' contribution to the Rabat meeting. Several of the agencies present, including ILO, WHO, and the World Bank, agreed

that they would send representatives to the meeting, and the other agencies agreed to investigate this possibility.

In terms of financial contributions, many of the agencies present agreed that they might be able to sponsor the attendance of one or more outside participants to the Rabat meeting should this become necessary.

The last item of discussion was the date of the Rabat meeting. It was agreed that, while it would be preferable to hold the meeting in time to report on the results to the next meeting of the Statistical Commission, such a deadline was not feasible given the desire to have high-quality papers presented. It was tentatively decided, therefore, that the Rabat meeting would take place in the end of April 1991.

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Preparatory Meeting
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