

EMERGING ISSUES AND PRIORITIES FOR STATISTICAL DEVELOPMENT
Report prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

General

In line with the core of FAO mandate, FAO Governing Bodies and the Director-General continuously emphasize the need for adequate statistical information as a base for formulating development strategies, to review the world food situation, to assist international deliberations and negotiations and to be used also as a base for special studies and assessments inside and outside FAO. All this reflects the recognition that information is one of the basic functions of FAO and for which the Organization is not a passive agent between the national producers of information and the international community but, on the contrary, actively promotes its development both at national and international levels.

FAO plays, for example, a major role in the development and improvement of food and agricultural statistics in countries around the world. Through training activities, technical assistance, organization and participation in international and regional conferences, and project monitoring and support in developing countries, FAO contributes to the growth of statistical programmes. Of particular relevance is the participation of FAO statisticians in country projects which assist in the development of local skills for the entire process of agricultural statistics from formulation of the need for data, through development of the organization which constructs the frame for data collection, processing, analysis and reports preparation, down to dissemination of the world's food and agriculture statistics.

As part of its institutional functions FAO also compiles and maintains data banks on agriculture, fisheries, forestry and nutrition at the international level, collecting information from all countries through communications with the national statistical offices, perusal of official statistics releases, and reports of various agricultural and statistical journals, commodity boards, etc. These sources of information are filtered through well-established procedures and methods for their selection, qualitative analysis and approval.

The above mentioned data banks are used for all the institutional functions of the Organization. In particular they are used to derive such indicators as food balance sheets, index numbers of production, trade and prices, economic accounts for agriculture, estimates of people being at risk of malnutrition, as well as in preparing studies on the world food and nutrition situation, making estimates and projections of demand and supply of commodities, and analysing socio-economic indicators of the status and progress in agrarian reform and rural development.

The World Agricultural Information Centre

These data banks are also used as the source, through selection and editing processes, of the recurrent publications (yearbooks, bulletins, circulars, newsletters, etc.) and ad hoc documents. These are the main means of dissemination so far used by the Organization although, in recent years, the demand for transmission of information on electronic media has been growing very fast. In particular, the on-line access to up-to-date, complete and reliable information becomes every day more critical as mankind moves increasingly to what is called an Information Society.

With the important role that FAO plays as an international body, and the world-wide functions it performs in the mandate areas of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry and Nutrition, the dissemination of information constitutes a very important responsibility of the Organization. The unique treasury of information related to these areas is contained in more than 20 data banks and several related applications of large interest to internal and external users of information. Although the results achieved so far in the dissemination in various forms are highly valued, a number of problems have accumulated:

- part of the FAO information, for which there is a potential interest, is either not at all or only partly accessible to external users; even internal users may not always be aware of the existence of such data;
- there are serious difficulties in accessing the existing databases because they operate in not fully compatible hardware and software environments;
- some redundancy and/or inconsistency has been detected in data structures, codes, classifications, processing and quality standards, etc.;
- some of the data banks are not regularly updated.

These and many other issues were carefully studied before the decision was taken in September 1988 to embark on the establishment of a conceptually consistent corporate data system - the World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT).

The objectives of this project are:

- an improvement of the data management function through the introduction of corporate standards and procedures (including elimination of data redundancy and inconsistency);
- a substantial enrichment of the information available to internal and external users;
- a radical improvement in data processing, retrieval and dissemination based on the use of highly efficient computer technology.

The Corporate Data System requires corporate standards and procedures and implies close coordination within the Organization, as well as improved working relationships with other information sources within and outside the UN system, in order to reduce to the minimum redundancy and inconsistency of information obtained from various sources.

The introduction and enforcement of these basic principles are coordinated by the Steering Committee and Inter-departmental Working Group (IDWG) on the World Agricultural Information Centre. The Director of FAO Statistics Division has been appointed by the Director-General as the Programme Manager.

The process of developing a truly corporate data system is obviously a complex undertaking requiring the development of the corporate database and, at the same time, the updating and improvement of the working systems within an efficient technological environment. The creation of FAO's substantive corporate system will involve most of the technical units, either as producers or as users of information; it will require matching conceptual developments with resource limitations; it will necessitate melding enhancements of existing data with the emerging requirements for information.

Designing the corporate database and the working systems in a technical sense, based on efficient software and hardware technology, is tentatively planned to be accomplished in the summer of 1990; so far the work is well advanced for the selection of the most suitable Database Management System and identification of the hardware and communications environments. The development of the corporate standards has already advanced with the identification of the major working systems and of their common modules; country and commodity classifications are under preparation; standards for quality indicators and statistical methods are going to be proposed to the relevant bodies. A Trade Matrix System to reconcile information on external trade by origin and destination is available and another system for the creation of a data bank for national accounts for agriculture is under development.

Work is well advanced and progressing according to the established programme with the participation of the relevant organizational units. The segment of the project which includes the statistical databases (called FAOSTAT) is expected to be fully operational in time for the 1991 FAO Conference.

FAO Statistics Division attempts at improving its database serving as background for environment statistics. In cooperation with EEC a new questionnaire has been designed for collecting data on pesticides through new channels, i.e. through NGOs. Also for the sake of improving our database on environment, a project is underway aiming at assessing deforestation and forest degradation by using remote sensing results.

Sixth World Food Survey

One of the priorities of the current work programme of FAO Statistics Division is the preparation of the Sixth World Food Survey. Traditionally, the World Food Surveys provide an assessment of the proportion and number of undernourished in the developing countries. The assessment relies on the one hand on the Food Balance Sheets prepared in FAO and on the distribution of households by daily per caput food (calories) consumption on the other hand. For the latter, the Statistics Division launched a large data acquisition programme which envisaged direct contacts with the statistical agencies of developing countries but also a considerable cooperation with UN agencies involved in promoting and assisting household based surveys potentially yielding food distribution data (NHSCP, LSMS, SDA). In an informal meeting with these agencies we were promised to have the household income/expenditure survey data processed, as far as possible, according to our needs.