

ACC SUB-COMMITTEE ON STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES
Twenty-sixth session
Geneva, 6-10 April 1992
Item 2(a) of the provisional agenda

Background Information
18 March 1992

THE REVIEW OF THE GLOBAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM
AND THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE STATISTICAL SERVICE
IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Extract from the report of the Statistical Commission's
Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and
Coordination, fourteenth session, 17-20 September 1991



Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.3/1993/2
4 December 1991

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

STATISTICAL COMMISSION
Twenty-seventh session
22 February-3 March 1993
Item 14 of the provisional agenda*

COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL
STATISTICAL PROGRAMMES

Report of the Working Group on International Statistical
Programmes and Coordination on its fourteenth session

SUMMARY

At its fourteenth session, the Working Group decided to issue amendments to the Standard International Trade Classification, Revision 3, in the light of the amendments to the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System scheduled for implementation in January 1992 (paras. 4-7), reviewed work under way and planned on the reconciliation of international trade statistics and estimates (paras. 8-11), reviewed progress and plans on the revision of the System of National Accounts and made decisions aimed at ensuring that the timetable for completing the review would be adhered to (paras. 12-19). It followed up on the consideration by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session of the item entitled "Effects of structural adjustment programmes and the debt burden on the work programmes of national and international statistical services" (paras. 20-23), reviewed coordination of the statistical data-collection activities of international organizations (paras. 24-29), considered the question of evaluation of the survey programmes of the United Nations and the World Bank (paras. 30-35), reviewed and finalized the provisional agenda for the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission (paras. 36-46), made recommendations concerning special topics to be considered by the Statistical Commission at its sessions after 1993 (paras. 47-49) and made decisions concerning the documentation for the

* E/CN.3/1993/1.

IX. STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL COOPERATION

72. The matter was discussed on the basis of introductory statements by the Chairman of the Working Group, the Director of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and the representative of the World Bank, and of notes and letters prepared by the Chairman of the Working Group, the Government Statistician of New Zealand, the Director of the Statistics Department of the International Monetary Fund, the Director of the Statistics and Information Systems Division of GATT and the Director-General of the Statistical Office of the European Communities. They had been informally circulated to members of the Working Group and/or made available during the session of the Group.

73. The Working Group recalled that the matter had been referred to it by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session. ^{10/} The Working Group noted the rapid economic and political changes that were occurring in many parts of the world and recognized that they had significant implications for international statistical work. Demands for statistics were escalating, along with demands for more detail, more timeliness, more comparability, and better quality in statistics, both nationally and internationally. Data comparability underpinned by internationally determined classifications and concepts was essential. The situation was made more complex because of changes under way or foreseen in the organization and definition of States in different parts of the world, including the evolution of the European Community and parallel developments, at least in terms of free trade areas and unified statistical practices, occurring or planned among groups of countries in both developed and developing regions. Resource availability for statistical work at both the national and international levels had in many cases been reduced and in virtually all situations was fully stretched. Yet statistical services had to provide for a range of continuing needs while responding to new needs for data. All of those developments placed extra pressure on statistical development at the national and international levels.

74. The Working Group noted a number of significant initiatives in international statistical cooperation in Europe. In particular it noted the initiative taken by the European Community and OECD to strengthen statistical cooperation between the two organizations in the pursuit of developing statistical standards to serve the needs of their member States. It further noted that in the interests of greater coordination and the avoidance of duplication, ECE, OECD and Eurostat would consult and formulate, pragmatically, a common approach to their respective work and harmonize their activities to the greatest extent possible. They intended subsequently to expand the cooperation to ensure that the work was consistent with what was being done in other specialized organizations with responsibility for global statistical standards in particular subject areas. Those initiatives and their possible implications beyond the European region and the membership of the three organizations had been discussed in several forums in Europe in recent months. The Working Group welcomed them as a positive set of actions which would advance coordination among the member countries of those organizations and step up work on statistical standards and methods to meet the special needs of their respective member countries. The representative of EUROSTAT indicated that the results of their efforts would be made available to contribute to development of the world system. The Working Group emphasized that it would be necessary to ensure that global standards remained in place and that those standards take account of the circumstances and needs of all countries, especially developing countries.

75. In light of the many changes that had occurred, including the recent initiatives in Europe and the resulting additional pressures on the international statistical system, the Working Group concluded that it would be appropriate at the current time to carry out a general review of the structure and operation of the global statistical system and of international statistical cooperation and to develop a plan for a global system that would be more responsive to the full range of current and emerging needs. The existing system had been well-established originally and had evolved in response to changing needs. Significant efforts had been made to foster statistical development and international statistical cooperation. However, given the recent changes, the Working Group was of the view that the resources for development and coordination could be more effectively utilized to strengthen the international system in all its aspects. The review was intended to be comprehensive. Although a number of features of the current global system might be retained, it was felt that the best approach would be to carry out a complete general review, based on the needs to be satisfied, and to determine the optimum way to meet those needs.

76. The Working Group considered that the global statistical system, like any system, could be best defined in terms of the units or elements that comprised it and the various interrelationships among them. In such a system, there would be no single hierarchy of units or entities. The Working Group identified the following elements: the Statistical Commission, its Working Group, the regional intergovernmental statistical bodies, the national statistical offices, the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, the statistical services of the specialized agencies of the United Nations system and other international organizations and bodies such as the GATT,

OECD, and EUROSTAT, the statistical services of other parts of the United Nations Secretariat, including the United Nations regional commissions and UNCTAD. The Working Group recognized that there well might be other units in the system as well.

77. A number of observations were made about the desired character of the proposed review:

(a) It should clearly describe the present system and its goals and objectives, mechanisms, mandates and resource issues - i.e., covering and clarifying the roles and relationships of all the involved entities. In particular, it should cover the roles of the Statistical Commission, the intergovernmental statistical bodies of the regional commissions and the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat;

(b) It should take into account the consequences for the future, given present trends and present arrangements;

(c) It should go beyond a listing of shortcomings and then determine what needs to be done: define the structural arrangements, the resources needed, and a time scale for introducing any needed change;

(d) It should not be constrained by pre-conceived ideas or limits on organizational arrangements but should ultimately recognize limitations on resources; consideration of priorities would then be required;

(e) Any new structure should be enduring and dynamic, able to meet future needs including the improvement of statistical capability in countries themselves;

(f) Any new structure should promote the use of resources in the most efficient way to serve the world as a whole. It should be global in scope, integrated and complete in subject coverage. To avoid duplication of effort, it should include coordination. It should reflect needs around the world, take account of developing countries, promote more active participation by developing countries in statistical processes and ensure that countries at all levels of statistical development are consulted at least at the diagnostic stage of the development of revised or new standards so that the full range of needs can be taken into account;

(g) It should recognize the issue of institutional continuity;

(h) It should provide support for revitalizing and raising the strength of national statistical offices, since they are integral parts of the global statistical system;

(i) It should explicitly include inter-agency collaboration and its effectiveness for providing needed services to countries and promoting efficient use of resources;

(j) A pragmatic approach should be adopted for considering any restructuring possibilities.

78. The Working Group welcomed the request made by the Director of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat that an independent review of the role and work of that Office be undertaken, including how work is done, how it could be improved and how the Office could adapt to the new challenges of a rapidly changing world. It agreed that the general review would also cover the requested review of the Statistical Office. However, it stressed that the review would also need to look at the activities of other entities as well.

79. The Working Group also welcomed the Director's offer of a report to be submitted by the Secretariat to the Working Group reviewing the current global statistical system and presenting proposals for its restructuring. The report, to be issued in the name of the Secretary-General, would draw on the ideas and comments of the Working Group and the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities, among others, but it would ultimately reflect the distillation of the Secretariat's thoughts and proposals on the matter.

80. The Working Group requested the Chairman to form a review group consisting of himself and others, to carry out the general review. The group would be comprised of members of the Working Group or others to be chosen by the Chairman. The group was requested to prepare its mandate and provide it to the Director of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat for circulation to all members of the Working Group. The group was requested to complete its study in from six to eight months and prepare a report for the Working Group. The Chairman invited the members and other participants in the Working Group session to send to him, in writing, any further views or comments they might have on the issue.

81. The Working Group decided to include, as one specific aspect of the overall review, the policies and practices in the international organizations concerning the adjustment of nationally supplied statistical data. The Working Group requested GATT to work with the Chairman of the Working Group on preparing a report on the question, with the intention that it be included in the overall review report for the Commission at its next session. The group preparing the review report would examine whether that module should be broadened beyond the subject of international trade statistics. The Working Group also requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to include in its report to the Working Group an indication of existing policies on the matter in the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and an indication of what the Office would like the policy to be, in general terms.

82. The Working Group considered that the general review was of the utmost importance and priority for the Statistical Commission and recommended that the Commission consider it at its session in 1993. The Working Group decided that the most appropriate way to include the matter was to designate it as the special topic (item 3) of the agenda under the heading "Strengthening

international statistical cooperation". It also recommended bringing forward its own next session to review both of the above-mentioned reports and any related materials and, on that basis, prepare a report to the Statistical Commission on the question to facilitate the Commission's review.