United Nations Expert Group Meeting on the Scope and Content of Social Statistics
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Summary Report of the Expert Group Meeting*

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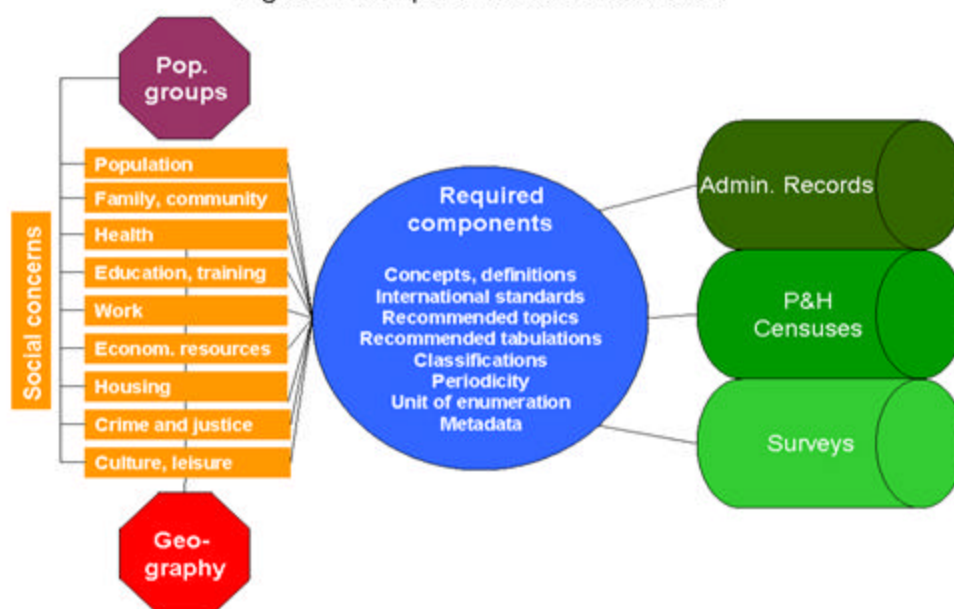
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I. General framework for social statistics

1.   It is considered an advantage having a well-developed, coherent, and homogenous framework for social statistics that will apply, essentially, a bottom-up approach, starting from specific and well-defined social concerns that are universally pertinent, such as population, family and communities, health, education and training, work, economic resources, housing, crime and justice, and culture and leisure.

2.   In essence, such a framework would have for each social concern an accompanying statistical data collection system that includes relevant concepts and definitions, international standards, recommended topics, recommended tabulations, defined periodicity, and sources of data. Collected data would also need to be disaggregated by population groups (young, elderly, and women, to name a few) and by geographical levels.

3.   Ultimately, each of the components of social statistics should be clearly and unambiguously described in terms of: (1) a social concern it addresses (e.g., health, housing, learning and education and so forth); (2) sources of statistics (administrative records, population and housing census, household and other surveys); (3) statistical data collection and its components (existence and applicability of international standards in terms of the statistical method, definitions and concepts, recommended topics and core questions, recommended tabulations, classifications, periodicity); (4) different population groups (population groups should be defined in terms of age, sex, socio-economic, ethnic and disability status); and (5) geographical level of presentation of statistics. This framework, therefore, may be described as clusters of social statistics unified through common methodologies.

Figure 1. Components of social statistics

4.   Putting together such a framework with the inventory of existing international standards and classifications would allow identifying gaps and subsequently addressing them in a consistent and strategic manner.

5.   In addition, there is a need to address issues related to the quality of data and their dimensions, as follows:

Figure 2. Dimensions of data quality

Efficient use of resources

Validity and reliability

Consistency over time, space and across sources

Relevance to policy

Clarity and transparency

Accessibility and affordability

Interpretability

Comparability through standards

Timeliness and punctuality

Potential for disaggregation

Coherence across sources

6.   Addressing policy and decision -making needs in timely and accurate fashion is a *sine qua non* of official statistics in general and social statistics in particular, given a host of social issues that are a specific concern of policy makers at all levels. The pressure from policy makers in terms of their needs for monitoring and quantifying social phenomena needs to be anticipated well in advance if meeting these needs is to be successfully achieved. Thus, there is a need to monitor the substantial development in many different social areas.

7.   Indicators, defined as derived values as opposed to data elements (variables), represent a particularly important part of the process of establishing successful social statistics, especially in the phase of data dissemination. Ensuring the availability of timely and reliable indicators significantly increases the relevance of collected statistics, as does the existence of analytic measures.

8.   The systems of statistically and systematically measuring and monitoring well-being in several countries illustrate a feasibility of such approaches at a national level. Yet, it has to be noted that in developing systems and frameworks, complexity and applicability of universal concepts, definitions, and classifications remain a particular concern; similarly, undertaking development of a social statistics framework within a national statistical office needs to be assessed from the point of

view of how such a development may transform the office itself in terms of staff and organizational profile.

9.   Achieving a functioning and universal similar framework at the international level, however, is not considered feasible because there are significant differences in social constructs and fabrics of contemporary societies. Hence, the approach in developing social statistics is based on a template of clusters of social concerns/statistics as presented above. The major conclusions related to individual areas that were considered are presented below.

II.   Population, migration, and family

10.   When it comes to measuring population, the overall conclusion is that, from the conceptual methodological perspective, this specific social concern does not appear to contain any significant deficiency. Despite that fact, national practices are documenting practical difficulties in measuring the size of the population, due to definitional inconsistencies regarding resident, non-resident, and service populations, as well as undercounting, over counting, and avoidance of counting altogether. Sources of statistics for population are well defined in terms of traditional, register-based, or combined-techniques such as a population census coupled with population estimates and projections. However, in many developing countries, such sources are often incomplete, inaccurate or otherwise present problems of consistency. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen and further develop the basic data collection systems, in particular improving the coverage and quality of population and housing censuses, vital registration, and demographic, health and other surveys that include demographic variables.

11.   Similarly there is a need to improve the availability and comparability of statistics on internal and international migration. Some issues related to international migration, documented and undocumented, are of high policy significance and, when not measured accurately, also tend to hamper the accuracy of population counts. There is a need to measure the different forms of mobility on the basis of the national definitions regarding short-term, temporary, and long-term migrants, as well as changing status between work and study.

12.   As a general note, contemporary life and living arrangements are becoming more complex and social constructs, such as families, are appearing in more varieties than ever before: blended families, same sex relationships, couples living apart, children moving between parents, and so forth. Similarly, there is a need to re-visit the definition of a household, another statistical construct that requires updating.

III.   Economic resources

13.   Wealth, inequality, and poverty are social phenomena that are difficult to measure in a comprehensive and internationally comparable fashion. To that end,

common frameworks and small area statistics are of crucial interest as a number of emerging issues are of particular significance to different population groups (a list of examples of emerging issues is presented under the title "International plan of action" below).

14.   The Canberra Report (the output of the Canberra City Group) has a critical role in allowing more precise comparative work on household income, although it may be subject to revision related to the concept of non-standard households and irregular income flows. Aside from that, a substantial challenge lying ahead refers to moving beyond household income as <u>the</u> measure of economic resources as there is a pressing need to include in-kind benefits and services, other non-cash income flows, and household wealth, as well as to develop direct measures of household consumption and deprivation.

IV.   Culture and leisure

15.   The more culture and leisure gain in importance in terms of need to adequately quantify them, the more apparent the lack of statistical guidelines to that effect at national, regional, and international levels. There is no consensus on a single agreed definition of culture among researchers, experts, and policy makers. In addition, the interest in culture tends to be associated more with generating economic gains rather than social phenomenon relevant to the spiritual well-being of individuals and families.

16.   UNESCO's draft framework for culture appears to address issues in a satisfactory manner; being a draft still offers opportunities to enhance its reach and relevance to statistics as well, particularly from the point of view of defining all the different aspects related to indigenous culture.

17.   Time-use surveys are intended to capture leisure, among other phenomena. Due to differences in the concept of leisure across cultures and societies, especially from the point of view of distinguishing paid and un-paid work, there is still a need to address pertinent methodological issues.

V.   Crime and justice

18.   While crime is a global and omni-present social phenomenon, statistical methods to measure it accurately and routinely show considerable room for improvement. While statistics generated by the law enforcement system more-or-less reliably describe the functioning of the system in operational terms, overall measurement of incidence of crime requires the deployment of additional statistical instruments, such as victimization surveys.

19.   From the methodological point of view, the lack of an international classification of crimes has an adverse impact in establishing more elaborated

international statistical guidelines. However, this is difficult to achieve in the light of differences in legal systems.

20. For example, this is especially valid in attempting to measure violence against women, as the perception of violent behaviour varies from one society to the other. Irrespective, there is a clear necessity to develop methodological guidelines to assist countries in measuring topics such as violence against women and children and to provide an accurate rendering of these phenomena.

VI.   Education

21. The scope and content of education statistics are changing markedly. In this regard, one of the key challenges in the measurement of education statistics has been the need to move from measures of quantity to those of quality. This entails going beyond collecting information about education systems and their resources and inputs to individual outcomes and characteristics of home environments as well as education providers and instructional settings. However, it has still remained a methodological challenge to link school-related resources to individual outputs and outcomes.

22. In the field of education statistics, several recent developments are gaining in importance. Home schooling and educational certification outside the formal education system (for instance, certification in the IT sector by companies) are posing challenges since they are not covered by traditional measures of education statistics. There has been a growing shift in emphasis concerning education statistics from quantity to quality and from 'schooling' towards 'learning'. This shift of focus poses a major challenge in terms of the selection of indicators since the information to be collected is not any more just about the education system and their resources and input but also about individual outcomes such as student performance. Other recent developments that are expanding the policy agenda include life-long learning and learning provided at the boundaries of the formal education system including early childhood education and vocational training.

23. It is essential that stakeholders endorse a broader view of education indicators, for example in terms of school entry, progression, completion, and transition. The harmonization of measurement concepts and maintaining standards across different data sources is also important. Central to setting a measurement agenda for monitoring is the development of a broad vision for education statistics that addresses the full scope of data quality, together with national and international stakeholders in a joint, coordinated, and systematic manner. Some of the key issues that remain to be addressed are related to maintaining international standards, especially the International Statistical Classification of Education (ISCED) and related classifications and their application to household survey data; and methodological development, especially in terms of improving existing and developing new data collections to address priority policy issues.

VII. Work

24. Considerable progress had been achieved in developing international standards for work statistics; this resulted in achieving comparability of concepts, definitions, classifications and methods for data collection, enabling the analysis of labour markets over an extended period of time.

25. Due to changing circumstances in economies and evolving policy needs, additional measures or updating existing standards and furthering development in the field of work statistics can be observed, such as the measurement of underutilization of labour and its three components: people who are employed but work for fewer hours than they desire; people who hold lower skilled and lower paying jobs than they are qualified for; and people who are so discouraged they have stopped looking for work. Other areas identified as requiring further development include the measurement of: new forms of employment related to job outsourcing and subcontracting, unpaid work in households and voluntary service (to be measured separately from employment), decent work, and overwork.

26. Existing measurements do not fully capture the dynamic nature of today's labour markets. Measuring labour dynamics requires a new focus on flows to complement the traditional focus on stocks. Yet, fully adequate statistical instruments in that regard need to be fine-tuned and tested to provide new approaches that take advantage of existing, already-collected administrative data to provide important information to improve decision making and address the concerns and needs of users and producers of labor market statistics.

VIII. Coordination of social statistics at national, regional and international levels

27. In the light of fragmentation of social statistics and the existence of its specific and many clusters/domains, the coordination at all levels of data collection, processing, dissemination, and analysis gains in importance. The process of coordination also directly affects the efficiency of all steps related to developing appropriate standards and methods, agreeing on concepts and definitions, identifying core topics, and adopting classifications and other components of statistical methodology.

28. Given the wealth of national, regional, and international experiences and the variety of approaches in that regard, it would be beneficial to collect, consolidate, and organize relevant national, regional, and international practices in such a manner to provide a source of possible solutions to others.

29. Specific benefits, in the area of social statistics, are provided by effective regional coordination. A number of national statistical authorities benefit from effective regional arrangements that allow them to synchronize their efforts and to take advantage of cooperative activities. There is ample evidence of substantially positive outcomes from regional cooperation.

IX. International action plan for social statistics

30. The expert group meeting recommended as part of an international action plan for social statistics, an immediate and priority activity to produce as exhaustive as possible inventory of:

- Currently existing International methodological standards and guidelines in each area of social statistics
- Availability of social statistics at the global level, including measures of quality
- On-going statistical and methodological activities in social statistics at the international, regional, sub-regional, and national levels

31. This three-prong inventory is a crucial first step in addressing a number of pressing issues in a coordinated and coherent manner. Understanding the complexity of the assignment, the Expert Group requests the United Nations Statistics Division to closely engage and rely on the extensive and comprehensive achievements of international organizations at the global levels, such as the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation for Development, to name a few, as well as regional institutions, e.g., the United Nations Economic Commissions for Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Western Asia, the Statistical Conference of the Americas, and the Conference of European Statisticians and their respective task forces and working groups, and to build on existing work from other networks and the broader statistical community.

32. The existence of the inventory will also allow work by expert groups with specific terms of reference on identifying and assigning core variables for particular clusters of social statistics that would provide significantly enhanced capacities to monitor and quantify social phenomena in a more coherent manner.

33. The inventory will result in identifying gaps in all three of the above-listed areas: existing methodology, data availability, and on-going development of statistical instruments to tackle emerging issues. The resulting follow-up activities could consist of:

a. Filling some gaps in the existence of international standards by developing handbooks and manuals and by establishing training programs aimed at improving national capacities to collect and process relevant and reliable social statistics;

b. Initiating data collection in some of the different clusters of social statistics where gaps in the availability of international statistics are identified, including measures of quality, e.g., housing, time use, migration, disability, victimization;

c. Supporting and, if necessary initiating, the work of various institutions in developing instruments to capture social statistics and make them more accessible; and

d. Addressing emerging issues, some of which are identified as follows (in alphabetical order):

> Child poverty
> Classification of crimes
> Deprivation
> Economic disadvantage
> Family matrix
> Migration
> Human trafficking
> Quality of education
> Social transfers in kind
> Social exclusion
> Violence against women

34.   The Expert Group Meeting endorsed the introduction and maintenance of a web-site that would reflect the activities mentioned above; it will also have to take advantage of contemporary technology in terms of creating on-line facilities to exchange opinions, expertise, and knowledge among a broad group of statisticians. The experts also recognized the importance of using information and communication technology as part of the social statistics process, rather than considering it solely as a tool.

35.   The Expert Group discussed at some length whether creation of an institutional arrangement to act as a champion for social statistics within the global statistical system, or to oversee the activities that would be undertaken as a result of the work recommended above, was needed. It concluded that such a proposal would be premature in light of the significant time and effort that is first needed to create the inventory of existing standards and ongoing activities, identify the gaps, and recommend priorities for targeted work by expert groups with specific terms of reference.