

Statistical Commission  
Thirty-sixth session  
1-4 March 2005

Background document  
Available in English only

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION AND  
PRACTICAL INFORMATION ON ITS FUNCTIONING**

Prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division  
Department for Economic and Social Affairs

13 January 2005

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION  
AND PRACTICAL INFORMATION ON ITS FUNCTIONING<sup>1</sup>

Origin

1. The Statistical Commission's nuclear (establishment) session was held in 1946, and its first session, in 1947.

Terms of reference<sup>2</sup>

2. On the basis of the recommendations of its nuclear session, the Statistical Commission was established and given terms of reference by the Economic and Social Council. The terms of reference as set forth in Economic and Social Council resolution 1566 (L) of 3 May 1971, reaffirming its resolution 8 (I) of 16 February 1946, as amended by resolution 8 (II) of 21 June 1946, state that the Commission shall assist the Council:

"(a) In promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability;

"(b) In the coordination of the statistical work of specialized agencies;

"(c) In the development of the central statistical services of the Secretariat;

"(d) In advising the organs of the United Nations on general questions relating to the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistical information;

"(e) In promoting the improvement of statistics and statistical methods generally."

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared in response to a request of the Statistical Commission, for members of the Commission (E/1993/26, par. 32(b)). This note should be used in conjunction with the "Rules of Procedure of the Functional Commissions of the Economic and Social Council" (E/5975/Rev.1), which has been distributed to all members of the Commission, and which is the authoritative document on the rules of procedure.

<sup>2</sup> See also Annex I.

3. In resolution 1566 (L), the Council stressed the importance of the Commission's coordination function and the need to achieve an integrated system in the collection, processing and dissemination of international statistics; recognized the interest of the Statistical Commission and the Statistical Division in matters related to the use of computers in the United Nations system; and requested the Secretary-General to undertake, in cooperation with the specialized agencies, concerted action to assist the developing countries in strengthening their statistical systems.

#### Items considered

4. The Statistical Commission considers special issues of concern in international statistical development, methodological issues, coordination and integration of international statistical programmes, support of technical cooperation activities in statistics and organizational matters. Within the terms of the above resolutions, there is flexibility for the Commission to adjust, where necessary, its priorities and methods to meet new requirements and maintain a balance between matters of current concern and the longer-term development aspects of the statistical system.

#### Reporting

5. The Commission submits a report on each session to the Economic and Social Council. The report contains an account of the Commission's proceedings and the action taken on each agenda item. The Commission may submit to the Council, in the form of draft resolutions, recommendations to States Members of the United Nations, the Secretary-General or the specialized agencies. Any financial implications of the draft resolutions must be brought to the attention of the Commission and the Council before being adopted and must subsequently be approved by the organs of the United Nations having the necessary authority.

#### Membership

6. The Commission consists of one member from each of 24 member countries of the United Nations elected by the United Nations Economic and Social Council on the basis of an equitable geographical distribution according to the following pattern:

- (a) Five members from African States;

- (b) Four members from Asian States;
- (c) Four members from Eastern European States;
- (d) Four members from Latin American and Caribbean States;
- (e) Seven members from Western European and other States.

7. See Annex II for current membership of the Commission.

#### Term of office

8. The term of office of members is four years.

#### Frequency of meetings

9. In July 1999 the Economic and Social Council decided that the Commission should meet annually for four days each session, starting in the year 2000.

#### Officers of the Commission

10. The officers are the Chairman, 3 Vice-chairmen and the Rapporteur; they are also referred to as the Bureau. In between sessions of the Commission, members of the Commission, the Bureau and the Secretariat consult on the election of the Bureau for the upcoming session. A Bureau is elected for a one year period with the expectation that they will be re-elected to a second one year term if available. Nominations are made by member(s) of the Commission. Elections are held at the beginning of a session. In practice elections have been by acclamation. At its thirtieth session the Commission decided to give the officers of the Commission (if necessary complemented by any others whose participation is deemed useful by the Chairman) more of a steering role.

#### Secretariat support and other participants

11. The sessions of the Statistical Commission are substantively serviced by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and attended by the regional commissions, other United Nations organizations, specialized agencies and related organizations, and non-United Nations international organizations active in international statistical work.

## Dates of the meeting and notification to countries

12. Dates for the sessions of the Commission are proposed by the Commission. The dates are fixed by the Economic and Social Council. The session must be held eight weeks before the Economic and Social Council session which will consider the report of the Commission; the Secretariat normally proposes dates to the Commission taking account of this requirement and of the availability of conference servicing facilities. The Secretariat notifies the permanent mission of each of the member countries of the Commission of the dates, and invites them to notify the Secretariat who their representative (and any other delegation members) will be.

## The agenda and documentation of the Commission

13. Prior to each session of the Commission, the Secretariat prepares a list of items that have previously been established for consideration by the Commission at that session; the list may be based on requests of the Commission at previous sessions, or of other intergovernmental bodies such as the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council and reflect the multi-year programme of work that the Commission develops. During each session the Commission may decide to add additional items to the agenda, based on documentation and discussion at the session, and priorities or problems. At the end of each session the Secretariat provides an updated list reflecting all the decisions and requests, and on the basis of that list, the Commission proposes to the Economic and Social Council, the provisional agenda and documentation for the next session (subject to further review by the Commission's Bureau). The Economic and Social Council considers the proposal at its substantive session (June/July immediately following the Commission session) and approves it. It is finalized, and after review by the Bureau, distributed by the Secretariat in advance of the Commission session. Documentation may be requested by the Commission, from the Secretariat, other United Nations bodies or specialized agencies, intergovernmental organizations or non-governmental organizations active in statistical work, a country or an ad hoc group of countries/organizations.

14. Documents are limited to 16 pages in length and where possible are well below this limit. They are to be concise and action oriented. They are made available in the six official languages of the Commission (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish). They are to be issued well in advance of

the session. Documents are made available on the UNSD Home Page at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/commission.htm>; they are also distributed by airmail/diplomatic pouch.

15. Background documents are also frequently available to the Commission. These contain information from participants and the Secretariat which are of potential interest to the Commission. These documents require clearance by the Secretary of the Commission prior to distribution and adequate copies must be made available by the authors. They can be in any official language(s) and will be circulated only in the language(s) provided by the author. Limited photocopy support can be offered by the Secretariat. The provision of information in the form of documents or background papers is preferred by the Commission in place of lengthy oral statements.

#### Kinds of interventions that are made

16. Members and observers are encouraged to participate fully in the deliberations of the Commission. The Commission has increasingly called for more focused, issue-oriented and succinct interventions by those participating in the discussions. It has also emphasized that detailed expositions of methodology or the reporting of routine activities should not be presented orally but rather be made available as written material as background documents which can be made available to participants.

#### Travel arrangements; air ticket; schedule of sessions; Conference room; admission to the United Nations building

17. Travel, but not subsistence/hotel expenses, for one representative of each member state of the Commission is paid for by the United Nations according to normal United Nations travel standards. Representatives may make their own travel arrangements and claim re-imbusement from the United Nations.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, the United Nations is prepared, upon request, to make the necessary arrangements for issuance and payment of the travel tickets. In those cases, Permanent Missions are requested to provide to the Secretariat an address and the telephone number where the representative can be contacted.

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3 Travel claims should be submitted using the form "VOUCHER FOR REIMBURSEMENT OF EXPENSES"(F.10) duly filled in and accompanied by the used air ticket stubs/passenger receipt, boarding passes, and some form of proof of payment for ticket i.e. cancelled cheque, credit card receipt/statement etc.

18. The first meeting of the Commission sessions normally starts on a Tuesday, at 10:30 a.m. On subsequent days the meetings start at 10:00 a.m. Normally two sessions are held each day; 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. The conference room number where the meetings will be held is available near the entrance to the United Nations Headquarters. Grounds passes for admission to the United Nations building are organized by the Mission of each country to the United Nations.

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## Annex I

### Some notes on the terms of reference of the Statistical Commission

In formulating the terms of reference, the nuclear Commission had certain concepts in mind, as indicated in the following excerpt from its report:

"(a) Promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability.

"This task will be performed in close collaboration with the statistical unit of the United Nations Secretariat. It is a continuing function which requires constant attention ... The Commission should be in a position to advise national governments and the Secretariat on problems which will arise ... The Commission may also establish committees or sub-commissions in various statistical fields.

"(b) Coordination of the Statistical work of specialized agencies.

"The Commission should advise the Council concerning agreements to be reached with the specialized agencies defining their respective areas of statistical activity ... The coordination process is an operating function to be performed by the Secretariat within the framework established by recommendations of the Commission.

"Initially, the Commission contemplates the adoption of a general plan which will recognize the primary statistical interests of each specialized agency. The collection by the latter of data in its primary field must be without prejudice, however, to the right of the United Nations to concern itself with statistics in the same subject area so far as they may be essential for its own purposes or for the instances, when the data are basic to the work of several specialized agencies, provision should be made for their collection centrally by the statistical unit of the Secretariat ... To facilitate cooperative arrangements among the specialized agencies and the Secretariat, the Commission recommends the establishment of a Statistical Coordinating Committee ...

"(c) Development of the central statistical services of the Secretariat.

"It is important that there be one focal point for statistical activities in the Secretariat. The Commission is in accord with the recommendations of the Preparatory Commission that the statistical work of the constituent organs of the United Nations be centralized in a statistical unit in the Department of Economic Affairs, which would also undertake work for the other Departments of the Secretariat ...

"(d) Advising the organs of the United Nations on general questions relating to the collection, interpretation and dissemination of statistical information.

"This function implies that the Statistical Commission will serve as a technical advisory body, not only to the Economic and Social Council and the statistical unit of the Secretariat, but also all organs of the United Nations ...

"(e) Promoting the improvement of statistics and statistical methods generally.

"This function is very broad and should cover adequately any work which the Commission may undertake through the promotion of uniform standards as to kinds of data to be collected, the methods of their collection, and their form of presentation. This will be accomplished in part through the work of committees or sub-commissions to be designated for particular fields as the needs arise. Improvement will also be accomplished through the current work of the Secretariat in its dealings with national governments on statistical matters. It is essential that the Commission and the Secretariat play an active role in promoting continuously the adoption and use of the most valid and reliable statistics and statistical methods ... To further this end, the Commission recognizes the need to provide opportunities for ... education and training in statistics."

## Annex II

### Membership of the Statistical Commission 2005 <sup>1/</sup>

Term expires on 31 December

ALGERIA	2005
CAPE VERDE	2007
CHINA	2008
COLOMBIA	2008
COSTA RICA	2005
CROATIA	2007
CUBA	2007
DENMARK	2005
GERMANY	2008
* GHANA	2005
HUNGARY	2008
IRAN	2007
JAPAN	2008
KENYA	2007
* MEXICO	2008
NETHERLANDS	2008
NEW ZEALAND	2005
* REPUBLIC OF KOREA	2007
* RUSSIAN FEDERATION	2005
SOUTH AFRICA	2005
SPAIN	2005
UKRAINE	2007
UNITED KINGDOM	2008
* UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	2007

- \* Members of the Bureau (Chair, Vice-chair, Rapporteur) up to the beginning of the thirty-sixth session of the Commission, 1 March 2005. New elections for the Bureau will be held at the beginning of the thirty-sixth session on 1 March 2005.