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Meeting Users Needs: Data Requirements and Gaps

By

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A. Introduction

1. The Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs was invited to prepare a note on its experiences using the *United Nations Demographic Yearbook*. The requested topic was "Meeting Users' Needs: Data Requirements and Gaps". We were asked, in this note, to reflect on our experiences in the use of these data, the concerns emanating from these uses, with respect to the adequacy and completeness of the data and gaps that need to be filled, and what steps can be taken to improve the coverage and completeness of the data and their relevance to users.
2. The Population Division is responsible for providing the international community with up-to-date and scientifically objective information on population and development. The Division undertakes regular studies on population levels and trends, population estimates and projections, population policies, and population and development interrelationships. To undertake its studies, the Division relies heavily on data collected and published by the Statistics Division, particularly the *Demographic Yearbook*.
3. In this regard, the Population Division has very special and fortunate circumstances. Our offices are in the same building and just four floors from that of the Statistics Division. This means that in addition to usual access to the *Demographic Yearbook* in all its formats – hardcopy, CD-ROM and on-line database – we also have access to original questionnaires and most importantly to Statistics Division staff themselves.
4. To prepare this note, we solicited inputs from the substantive Sections in the Population Division – Population Estimates and Projections Section, Population Policy Section, Population and Development Section, Mortality and Migration Section, and the Fertility and Family Planning Section. All Sections rely on data from the *Demographic Yearbook*, although some Sections, such as Population Estimates and Projections, more than the others.
5. What is the over-arching view of our experience: Highly positive. The *Demographic Yearbook*, and its sister publication, *Population and Vital Statistics Report*, are invaluable publications, and the staff of the Statistics Division are invaluable colleagues. This is the main and central message of this note. Concerning gaps that need to be filled, and what steps can be taken to improve the usefulness and accessibility of the *Demographic Yearbook*, comments are presented in what follows. As usual, suggestions for improvement are given under the standard assumption of “unlimited resources”.

B. Points for consideration

6. The following “points for consideration” were compiled from the staff of the Population Division. Again, all emphasized how essential the *Yearbook* and its electronic counterparts are for our work and how the accessibility and usability of the data has improved over the last few years.

- i) The Statistics Division maintains an on-line database of the *Demographic Yearbook* for internal users. This database is extremely useful and its accessibility has improved over time, particularly its user-friendliness. However, it would be helpful if one could select data not just by subject (table) and country, but by other attributes such as year, data status (preliminary, final), location type (urban rural, total), etc.
- ii) For some countries the data in the *Yearbook* are rounded, for example to nearest 1000 persons. I expect this is because the countries are reporting the data to the Statistics Division as rounded numbers. However, such a practice can make it difficult to do further data manipulation. It would be useful if countries could be encouraged to submit un-rounded numbers.
- iii) It is important to ensure consistency of data published, either electronically or on paper, both within time series and between the same indicators that appear in different tables. However, this does not always happen. For example: The total population for Macao in table 8 of the forthcoming *Demographic Yearbook 2001*, referring to the 2001 census, does not equal the total population given in table 7, also referring to the 2001 census. Inconsistencies or breaks of series should be clearly marked/footnoted, if possible.
- iv) As population ageing is progressing throughout the world, it becomes increasingly important to have demographic events and stocks tabulated in greater detail for the oldest-old segment of populations, that is for ages above 80. It would be ideal to have single year breakdowns available, but five-year groups for this age group would be important as well. It would be helpful if national statistical offices could be encouraged to include higher age groups regularly.
- v) The Population Division used the database on “cities” on a continuing basis. It has proven to be very helpful in expediting our work and ensuring that data be transferred without error. Unfortunately, data in electronic form are only available since the early 1990s; earlier data can only be accessed manually through the original questionnaires. We would find it extremely helpful if pre-1990 data could be added to the electronic database.
- vi) Table 4 of the *Demographic Yearbook* presents the population of national capitals and other principal cities. Because of problems with transliteration into English characters, and because a country may indeed have several urban localities with the same or very similar name, it is sometimes difficult to correctly identify the cities. It would be helpful if the relevant administrative subdivision for each country be appended to the city name, so as to better identify it. This is already being done for some countries, for instance, for China, for which the *Yearbook* gives the name of the corresponding province.

- vii) International migration has become a very visible demographic variable in the international arena. Data on international migration has not been presented since publication of the 1989 *Demographic Yearbook*, which has international migration as a special issue. It would be helpful if another special issue on international migration could be undertaken and stock data on migration (usually foreign born) could appear more regularly.

- viii) The *Yearbook's* Historical Supplement on CD (1999) is an excellent source of data. However, using these data for analysis would be facilitated if they were presented in a format in which the data could be manipulated rather than as a mirror copy of tables in the printed version.

- ix) At the United Nations Population Division Workshop on HIV/AIDS and Adult Mortality in Developing Countries (8-13 September 2003), a number of recommendations were made which have relevance for mortality data published in the *Demographic Yearbook*, particularly for a special issue on mortality. In particular, it was recommended that countries regularly collect data in censuses on household deaths by age and sex in the 12 months preceding the census (or other clearly defined reference period) and that such data should be published in the *Demographic Yearbook*.

C. Conclusion

7. The *Demographic Yearbook* and its corresponding electronic databases are excellent and invaluable products. The suggestions in this note are intended only to make an excellent product even better.