UNITED NATIONS SECRETARIAT
Statistics Division

ESA/STAT/AC.91/15
5 November 2003

English only

Expert Group Meeting to
Review the United Nations Demographic Yearbook System
10-14 November 2003
New York

Review of United Nations *Demographic Yearbook* System: Collection and Dissemination of Cities data

By

Richard Forstall
Consultant
United States of America

Issues related to the *Demographic Yearbook* collection of city data table

1. Although I have been a user of the *Demographic Yearbook* since its first edition, my chief familiarity is with the table of world capitals and cities of 100,000+ (Table 8). First, I have a few comments to offer on other aspects of the *Yearbook*.

2. The United Nations document on the need for improvement in the *Yearbook* describes the current situation well and suggests a number of avenues that could be pursued. The arrangement whereby a European body collected and transmitted data for its member countries is certainly one to be expanded upon wherever possible. It would be especially valuable for regions such as the Caribbean or the Pacific in which there are many very small countries with (presumably) very small statistics staffs.

3. The United Nations often reports coverage of a table, survey, etc., solely in terms of numbers of countries, rather than in terms of (say) population covered. Perhaps this is unavoidable for political reasons; but it can give a decidedly misleading impression of the degree to which the *Yearbook*, or an individual table, falls short of fairly complete coverage. There should more often be coverage statements made both in terms of numbers of countries and in terms of the population covered.

4. In recent years the United Nations has not attempted to apply any international standard to defining the "urban" population, but has simply reported what countries report according to their individual definitions. These data are valuable, since they reflect local opinion as to what "urban" consists of in that country's geographical and social context. However, a single definition applied internationally (such as the 20,000+ cutoff adopted at times in the past) would also provide very useful data, and both approaches should be pursued if at all possible.

5. Regarding dissemination, I suspect that there are many users, notably libraries worldwide and official agencies in smaller countries, who will continue to prefer a hard-copy publication. However, this might not need to include as much detail as current editions, as a survey of a sample of current purchasers could determine.

6. I believe questionnaire specialists could make improvements in the current *Demographic Yearbook* questionnaires. The definition of "urban agglomeration" appears with different wording in different United Nations publications; a single definition, phrased as simply as possible, would be desirable for a questionnaire. Since many countries recognize "metropolitan areas", which by definition are somewhat larger than "urban agglomerations", a brief statement defining and contrasting the two concepts would be helpful in clarifying for respondents what the Yearbook wants.

7. As you know, I made a detailed review of the contents of Table 8 in 2001, on contract with the Statistics Division. The attached memo lists a cross-section of countries whose data at that time were behind, sometimes very far behind, the latest available information. The memo also mentions some cases where the data were incomplete, and some that were misleading or outright incorrect.

8. This points to a situation I think the United Nations Statistics Division is well aware of, a lack of staff with the combination of time and experience to deal fully with the table's problems of currency and accuracy.

9. One reason that these problems exist is that Table 8 is the only *Demographic Yearbook* table that calls for any detailed knowledge or understanding of subnational geography. Tables listing primary divisions of a country that appear in some *Demographic Yearbook* editions can be presented as supplied by the country, since few users expect such geographic areas to be consistent across countries. Likewise, tables of urban/rural data are presented in terms of each country's own definition, and these definitions are specified for *Demographic Yearbook* users.

10. For Table 8, in contrast, many users of lists of "cities" do assume that the definition of such entities across countries is more or less consistent, since "everybody knows what a city is and every country has cities". The last date at which this statement was at all accurate was perhaps 150 years ago, when only a few cities in the world had much suburban development outside their municipal limits; but even at that distant date the "cities" of Italy, Spain, or Brazil were not the same sort of entity as those of France, Germany, or the United States because their populations typically included a sizable rural component living within the municipality but outside the main urban area.

11. This distinction between the "cities" of different countries continues today and has been augmented by additional types of municipal unit. Examples can be found in some Islamic countries, in the countries of the former Soviet Union, and increasingly in Europe as administrative reorganizations have moved to combine medium and small urban centers administratively with some surrounding rural territory.

12. Furthermore, many world cities, including virtually all the larger ones, now have more or less extensive suburban areas outside their municipal limits. Finally, the growth of large urban areas has outpaced that of total population so that there are a great many more cities 100,000+ than there were when the *Demographic Yearbook* commenced publication.

13. A useful way of providing users with some indication of whether two "cities" are roughly comparable entities is to give data on area (km2) along with population. My suggestion to this effect was adopted for Table 8 about 1990, and area data now appear for the cities of many countries. (The statement on p. 24 of *Demographic Yearbook* 2000 that the area data appear at the end of the table was true through the 1998 edition but should have been corrected for 1999.)

14. However, it would also be useful to include more detailed statements about the nature of the entities presented as "cities" by different countries. Unavoidably, this would require a knowledge of local administrative patterns that the *Demographic Yearbook* staff could scarcely be expected to provide.

15. How essential is Table 8 for the *Demographic Yearbook*? There are now excellent online sources for world city populations, and nearly all the major countries have lists of their own urban areas on their websites. However, the *Demographic Yearbook* table provides data for

virtually every country, including some which will probably not have a statistics website in our lifetimes.

16. The suggestion has been made that the table could adopt a new cutoff size like 200,000; but this would cut disproportionately into the data for the smaller countries (such as many in Africa) that have relatively few large cities. (Total cities dropped would, of course, be most numerous in large countries like China, India, and the United States.)

17. Also, the suggestion of shortening the list's coverage appears to be aimed, not at saving space or paper, but at reducing the number of problem situations likely to come up. However, the problems of cross-country comparability of municipal entities will arise almost no matter what the population cutoff; and it is the larger cities that disproportionately offer problems of presentation of special definitions such as urban agglomerations, metropolitan areas, etc.

Major gaps in the United Nations *Demographic Yearbook* city table (table 8)

18. This list is meant to illustrate the lag, sometimes serious, between availability of new population data and its appearance in Table 8. It also mentions some instances of data that more thorough editorial interpretation would have shown to be deficient. Besides the countries listed, many others had not yet included available 2000-round census data, and this is still the case in the current edition of the table in *Demographic Yearbook* 2000.

19. The 2001 memos were based on the 1999 table and an early version of the 2000 table. Changes made for the published table in *Demographic Yearbook* 2000 are noted; otherwise, the 2000 table repeats what appeared in the 1999 edition.

20. When a 2000-round census is referred to, at the time the memos were drafted its results were available, at least in part, on the country's statistics website or in an official publication. By now, of course, 2000-round data have become available for many additional countries.

Algeria - 1987 census; 1998 census not shown. (In *Demographic Yearbook* 2000, 1998 data appear but are for political divisions (wilayas), not cities.)

Australia - 1991 census for urban centers, and 1997 estimates for urban agglomerations; 1996 and 2001 censuses not shown (*Demographic Yearbook* 2000 has 1999 estimates for mixture of cities and urban agglomerations).

Belgium - 1990 and 1991 register data, with some urban agglomerations; register data are available every year for each city (commune) and urban agglomeration.

Brazil - 1998 estimates; 2000 prelim census not shown (both 1998 and 1999 estimates appear in *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

British Virgin Islands - 1960 census; 1970, 1980, and 1991 censuses not shown (but 1992 estimate added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Cameroon - 1983 and 1986 estimates; 1987 census not shown (but was added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Chad - 1972 estimate; 1993 census not shown (but was added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Channel Islands - listed by the UN as a "country" though it has always consisted of two distinct political entities, Guernsey and Jersey, each of which takes and publishes its own censuses.

Denmark - 1996, 1997, and 1998 register data; such data are available every year for each city (commune) and for Kobenhavn urban agglomeration and metropolitan area. (*Demographic Yearbook* 2000 has 1999 and 2001 register data but no larger Kobenhavn definitions.)

Egypt - 1996 census; list of cities 100,000+ apparently not complete.

France - 1990 census; 1999 census not shown.

Ghana - 1970 census; 1984 census not shown (but was added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Guadeloupe - 1967 estimate; 1974, 1982, 1990, and 1999 censuses not shown (data available with census results for France).

India - 1991 census; 2001 prelim census not shown.

Indonesia - 1995 enumeration and 1997 estimates; list of cities 100,000+ evidently not complete.

Iraq - 1987 census, but list of cities appears incomplete and some cities listed are parts of Baghdad per footnote to the table.

Italy - 1995 estimates (from register); 2001 prelim census not shown.

Japan - 1998 estimates; 2000 prelim census not shown (but added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Kenya - 1985 estimates; 1989 and 1999 censuses not shown (but 1989 added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Korea, Rep. of - 1995 census; 2000 census not shown.

Lao Peoples' Democratic Rep. - 1966 estimate; 1985 and 1995 censuses not shown.

Lesotho - 1972 estimate; several later censuses not shown. (1986 census added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000, though not the latest census.)

Libyan Arab Jamahirya - 1973 census; 1984 and 1995 censuses not shown (1990 estimates added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Madagascar - 1971 estimates; 1975 and 1993 censuses not shown.

Mauritania - 1976 census; 1988 and 2000 censuses not shown.

Mexico - 1990 census; 1995 census count (and now 2000 census) not shown.

Morocco - 1993 estimates; 1994 census not shown.

Mozambique - 1986 and 1997 estimates; 1997 census not shown.

Nicaragua - 1979 estimate; 1995 census not shown (but 2000 estimates added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Nigeria - 1975 estimates; 1991 census not shown.

Pakistan - 1998 census; only cities 200,000+ shown (but list completed in *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Philippines - 1995 census; 2000 census not shown, and areas shown (municipios) exaggerate city size in many cases.

Saudi Arabia - 1974 census; 1992 prelim census not shown (1989 estimates added in *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

Spain - 1996 and 1998 estimates; 2001 census not shown; in addition, areas shown for cities (municipios) are 10 times the correct values.

Switzerland - 1998 estimates (from register); 2000 census not shown.

Syrian Arab Rep. - 1994 census, but including "urban agglomeration" data that actually refer to inappropriate political subdivisions.

Thailand - 1999 estimates, but for entire urban population of first-order divisions, rather than for individual cities; 2000 census not shown.

Turkey - 1997 "estimates" (called a census by Turkey); but including urban agglomeration data that actually refer to the urban population total of the province.

Uganda - 1969 census; 1980 and 1991 censuses not shown (but 1991 added for *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

United Arab Emirates - 1980 census; 1985, 1990, and 1995 censuses not shown.

United Kingdom - 1996 estimates, for districts, many of which do not correspond to a single urban concentration and do not contain any urban agglomeration 100,000+; not shown are 2001 census or 1991 census data for urban agglomerations (Urban Areas). The area data shown for districts have one-tenth their correct value (*Demographic Yearbook* 2000 corrected the area data).

United States - 1998 estimates; 2000 census not shown (both 1998 and 1999 estimates appear in *Demographic Yearbook* 2000).

United States Virgin Islands - 1980 census; 1990 and 2000 censuses not shown.