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USE OF MICRO-COMPUTERS IN STATISTICAL WORK

Report prepared by ESCAP
Use of micro-computers in the ESCAP secretariat

In the ESCAP secretariat itself, micro-computers are in extensive use by various divisions, but in the field of statistics, this use is still limited to data entry, simple tabulation and database management. The late entry into the micro-computer field by the Statistics Division is mainly a result of inadequate regular budget funding for computing equipment at ESCAP. Even now, the three machines in use have been acquired from extrabudgetary funds, as have most of those utilized by other substantive divisions of the secretariat. It may be stated parenthetically that this situation, along with the lack of a secretariat-wide acquisition policy, had most of the ingredients of a recipe for disaster in terms of compatibility and future data exchange. Fortunately the de facto adoption over the last couple of years of IBM and IBM-compatible equipment as standard has very significantly improved the situation.

The Statistics Division, with around 12 Professional and 20 support staff, has three micro-computers - an IBM PC/AT, a PC/AT-compatible and a PC/XT-compatible. A number of common software packages have been acquired such as LOTUS 123, SYMPHONY, DBASE III PLUS, SPSS, Wordstar and Microsoft Word, but use is at present limited to compilation and presentation of statistical tables, report-making and word-processing. Some basic computation and graphic outputs are made but this type of work is still small in volume.

One micro-computer is being utilized by the Regional Adviser on Data Preparation and Processing of Population Censuses and Surveys whose job is to assist countries of the ESCAP region in the electronic data processing of population data. He is using the PC/AT-compatible to test and familiarize himself with various statistical/demographic software packages in order to be able to advise countries in evaluating and selecting software suitable to country needs. The project donor permitting, it is hoped to acquire a laptop model that the adviser will be able to take with him on his frequent missions. The use of portable micro-computers by other regional advisers and by regular budget staff on mission, whether for report-writing or for substantive statistical work, seems however a long way off. ESCAP would be interested in the experiences of other organizations in this regard.
SYMPHONY is being used very extensively, particularly in the production of the ESCAP Statistical Yearbook which is being computerized for the first time. It has been chosen for its ability to print in French with relative ease, which is a necessary aspect since the Yearbook is a bilingual publication. Moreover, it is a very versatile package encompassing spreadsheet and word-processing capabilities, as well as graphs and data base features. DBASE III PLUS is being used to maintain the Division’s mailing list, while most of the secretarial work is done using Microsoft Word.

It is envisaged that one micro-computer will be entirely devoted to the work of the Statistical Information Services Section in collecting statistical data from countries, compiling and storing them in a database, thereby facilitating quick and easy access to information which is, at present, still substantially manually handled.

Many divisions of ESCAP have initiated or are contemplating their own subject-matter data bases. While such data bases are clearly useful for their sectoral needs, some co-ordination and standardization is necessary to ensure consistency of concepts, definitions and formats. The ESCAP Committee on Statistics, at its seventh session in 1987, gave its strong support to the development of a network of statistical databases in the secretariat. The Statistics Division is assuming the focal role in establishing this network to ensure consistency in the inter-divisional use of information, and again would like to learn from the experiences of other organizations which have been faced with similar tasks. The IBM PC/AT is already linked to the New York Computing Service at Headquarters and ICC (International Computing Centre) at Geneva, through the IBM System/36 minicomputer situated in the Data Processing Section of the secretariat. This allows direct access to data bases at New York and Geneva (in particular to UNSIS – United Nations Statistical Information System), which means interorganizational information sharing and exchange is made possible. These developments are very important and will have far-reaching effects on statistical information collection, access, dissemination and the timeliness of publications.