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Chapter 1: Introduction

A. What is the System of National Accounts?

- 1.1 The System of National Accounts is the internationally agreed standard set of recommendations on how to compile measures of economic activity in accordance with strict accounting conventions based on economic principles. The recommendations are expressed in terms of a set of concepts, definitions, classifications and accounting rules that comprise the internationally agreed standard for measuring such items as gross domestic product (GDP), the most frequently quoted indicator of economic performance. The accounting framework of the System allows economic data to be compiled and presented in a format that is designed for purposes of economic analysis, decision-taking and policy-making. The accounts themselves present in a condensed way a great mass of detailed information, organized according to economic principles and perceptions, about the working of an economy. They provide a comprehensive and detailed record of the complex economic activities taking place within an economy and of the interaction between the different economic agents, and groups of agents, that takes place on markets or elsewhere. The framework of the System provides accounts that are:
- comprehensive, in that all designated activities and the consequences for all agents in an economy are covered;
 - consistent because identical values are used to establish the consequences of a single action on all parties concerned using the same accounting rules;
 - integrated in that all the consequences of a single action by one agent are necessarily reflected in the resulting accounts, including the impact on measurement of wealth captured in balance sheets.
- 1.2 The accounts of the System provide more than a snap-shot of the economy at a point in time, since in practice the accounts are compiled for a succession of time periods, thus providing a continuing flow of information that is indispensable for the monitoring, analysis and evaluation of the performance of an economy over time. The System provides information not only about economic activities taking place within a period but also about the levels of an economy's assets and liabilities, and thus the wealth of its inhabitants, at particular points of time. In addition, the SNA includes an external account that displays the links between an economy and the rest of the world.
- 1.3 Certain key aggregate statistics, such as GDP, that are widely used as indicators of economic activity at the level of the total economy, are defined within the System, but the calculation of such aggregates has long ceased to be the primary purpose for compiling the accounts. In order to understand the workings of the economy, it is essential to be able to observe and analyse the economic interactions taking place between the different sectors of the economy. The System is designed to be implemented at different levels of aggregation: at the level of individual economic agents, or institutional units as they are called in the System; for groups of such units, or institutional sectors; or at the level of the total economy.
- 1.4 The System is designed for economic analysis, decision-taking and policy-making, whatever the industrial structure or stage of economic development reached by a country. The basic concepts and definitions of the System depend upon economic reasoning and principles which should be universally valid and invariant to the particular economic circumstances in which they are applied. Similarly, the classifications and accounting rules are meant to be universally applicable. There is no justification, for example, for seeking to define parts of the System differently in less developed than in more developed economies, or in large relatively closed economies than in small open economies, or in high-inflation economies than in low-inflation economies. Certain definitions, or accounting rules, specified in the System might become superfluous in certain circumstances (for example, if there were no inflation), but it is nevertheless necessary for a general system to include definitions and rules covering as wide a range of circumstances as possible.
- 1.5 Some countries may be able, at least initially, to calculate only a small number of accounts and tables for the total economy with little or no disaggregation into sectors, but a reduced set of accounts or tables does not constitute an alternative system. It is not appropriate to try to lay down general priorities for data collection when economic circumstances may vary so much from one country to another. In practice, priorities can only be established country by country by economic analysts or policy-makers familiar with the particular economic situation, needs and problems of the individual countries in question. It is not useful, for example, to try to specify general priorities for developing countries when they constitute a very heterogeneous group of countries at a world level. Data priorities may vary as much between one developing country and another as between a developing and a developed country or indeed between two developed countries.

B. The conceptual elements of the System

1.6 The System of National Accounts, described in this manual simply as the System, but more generally referred to as the SNA, measures what takes place in the economy, between which agents, and for what purpose. At the heart of the System is the production of goods and services. These may be used for consumption in the period to which the accounts relate or may be accumulated for use in a later period. In simple terms, the amount of value added generated by production represents GDP. The income corresponding to GDP is distributed to the various agents or groups of agents as income and it is the process of distributing and redistributing income that allows one agent to consume the goods and services produced by another agent or to acquire goods and services for later consumption. The way in which the System captures this pattern of economic flows is to identify the activities concerned by recognising the institutional units in the economy and by specifying the structure of accounts capturing the transactions relevant to one stage or another of the process by which goods and services are produced and ultimately consumed. These concepts are sketched below and developed further in chapter 2 and later chapters.

1. Activities and transactions

1.7 The System is designed to provide information about the behaviour of institutional units and the activities in which they engage, namely production, consumption and the accumulation of assets, in an analytically useful form. This is achieved by recording the exchange of goods, services and assets between institutional units in the form of transactions. At the same time, other transactions are recorded that represent the form of payment for the exchange which may be a good, service or asset of similar value but is often some form of financial claim including notes and coins.

1.8 Data on transactions provide the basic source material from which the values of the various elements in the accounts are built up or derived. The use of transactions data has important advantages. The first of these is that the prices at which goods and services are exchanged in transactions between buyers and sellers on markets provide the information needed for valuing, directly or indirectly, all the items in the accounts. Secondly, a transaction that takes place between two different institutional units has to be recorded for both parties to the transaction and therefore generally appears twice in a system of macroeconomic accounts. This enables important linkages to be established in the System. For example, output is obtained by summing the amounts sold, bartered or transferred to other units plus the amounts entered into, less the amounts withdrawn from, inventories. In effect, the value of output is obtained by recording the various uses of that output by means of data on transactions. In this way, flows of goods and services can be traced through the economic system from their producers to their eventual users. Some transactions are only internal bookkeeping transactions that are needed when a single unit engages in two activities, such as the production and consumption of the same good or service, but the great

majority of transactions takes place between different units on markets.

2. The institutional sectors of the economy

1.9 Two main kinds of institutional units, or transactors, are distinguished in the System; households and legal entities. Legal entities are either entities created for purposes of production, mainly corporations and non-profit institutions (NPIs), or entities created by political processes, specifically government units. The defining characteristic of an institutional unit is that it is capable of owning goods and assets, incurring liabilities and engaging in economic activities and transactions with other units in its own right.

1.10 For the purposes of the System, institutional units that are resident in the economy are grouped together into five mutually exclusive sectors composed of the following types of units:

- a. Non-financial corporations;
- b. Financial corporations;
- c. Government units, including social security funds;
- d. NPIs serving households (NPISHs);
- e. Households.

The five sectors together make up the total economy. Each sector may be further divided into sub-sectors; for example, the non-financial and financial corporations sectors are divided to distinguish corporations subject to control by governments or foreign units from other corporations. The System makes provision for a complete set of flow accounts and balance sheets to be compiled for each sector, and sub-sector if desired, as well as for the total economy. The total number of accounts that may be compiled is therefore potentially quite large, depending upon the level of disaggregation that is required and feasible. Only by disaggregation into sectors and sub-sectors is it possible to observe the interactions between the different parts of the economy that need to be measured and analysed for purposes of policy-making.

1.11 Institutional units that are resident abroad form the rest of the world. The System does not require accounts to be compiled in respect of economic activities taking place in the rest of the world, but all transactions between resident and non-resident units have to be recorded in order to obtain a complete accounting for the economic behaviour of resident units. Transactions between residents and non-residents are grouped together in a single account, the rest of the world account

3. Accounts and their corresponding economic activities

- 1.12 This section gives a very brief summary of the accounts of the System. It is impossible to do justice to the wealth of information contained in the System in a short section of this kind, and reference should be made to chapter 2 for a comprehensive overview.

The goods and services account

- 1.13 Fundamental to the System is the identity that goods and services produced in the economy must be consumed, used for capital formation or exported while all goods and services used within the economy must be produced in the economy or imported. From this, once suitable allowance is made for the effect on prices of taxes and subsidies on products, the goods and services account is derived and thence GDP.

The sequence of accounts

- 1.14 This basic identity is elaborated within the System into a sequence of interconnected flow accounts linked to different types of economic activity taking place within a given period of time, together with balance sheets that record the values of the stocks of assets and liabilities held by institutional units or sectors at the beginning and end of the period. Each flow relates to a particular kind of activity such as production, or the generation, distribution, redistribution or use of income. Each account shows the resources available to the institutional units and the uses made of these resources. An account is balanced by introducing a balancing item defined residually as the difference between the total resources recorded on one side of the account and the total uses recorded on the other side. The balancing item from one account is carried forward as the first item in the following account, on the opposite side, thereby making the set of accounts an articulated whole. The balancing items typically encapsulate the net result of the activities covered by the account in question and are therefore economic constructs of considerable interest and analytical significance. Examples of balancing items include value added, disposable income and saving. There is also a strong link between the flow accounts and the balance sheets, as all the changes occurring over time that affect the assets or liabilities held by institutional units or sectors are systematically recorded in one or another of the flow accounts.
- 1.15 The set of accounts just described is referred to as the “sequence of accounts” but it should be noted that, although it is necessary to present the accounts in a particular order, the activities they describe should not be interpreted as taking place sequentially in time. For example, incomes are generated continuously by processes of production, while expenditures on the outputs produced may also be taking place more or less simultaneously. An economy is a general equilibrium system in which interdependent economic activities involving countless transactions between different institutional units are carried out simultaneously. Feedbacks are continually taking place from one type of economic activity to another.

Current accounts

- 1.16 The current accounts record the production of goods and services, the generation of incomes by production, the subsequent distribution and redistribution of incomes among institutional units, and the use of incomes for purposes of consumption or saving.
- 1.17 The production account records the activity of producing goods and services as defined within the System. Its balancing item, gross value added, is defined as the value of output less the value of intermediate consumption and is a measure of the contribution to GDP made by an individual producer, industry or sector. Gross value added is the source from which the primary incomes of the System are generated and is therefore carried forward into the primary distribution of income account. Value added and GDP may also be measured net by deducting consumption of fixed capital, a figure representing the decline in value during the period of the fixed capital used in a production process.
- 1.18 A set of articulated accounts shows how incomes are:
- Generated by production;
 - Distributed to institutional units with claims on the value added created by production;
 - Redistributed among institutional units, mainly by government units through social security contributions and benefits and taxes;
 - Used by households, government units or non-profit institutions serving households (NPISHs) for purposes of final consumption or saving;
 - Available as saving for accumulating wealth.

The income accounts have considerable intrinsic economic interest in themselves. In particular, they are needed to explain the behaviour of institutional units as final consumers, that is, as users of the goods and services for the satisfaction of the individual and collective needs and wants of households and the community. The balancing item emerging from the complete set of income accounts is saving.

- 1.19 The balancing item, saving, is carried forward into the capital account, the first in the System’s sequence of accumulation accounts.

Accumulation accounts

- 1.20 The accumulation accounts are those that record flows that affect the entries in the balance sheets at the start and end of the accounting period. There are four accumulation accounts; the capital account, the financial account, the other change in the volume of assets account and the revaluation account.
- The capital account records acquisitions and disposals of non-financial assets as a result of transactions with other units or internal bookkeeping transactions linked to

production (such as changes in inventories and consumption of fixed capital).

- b. The financial account records acquisitions and disposals of financial assets and liabilities, also through transactions.
- c. The other changes in the volume of assets account, records changes in the amounts of the assets and liabilities held by institutional units or sectors as a result of factors other than transactions; for example, destruction of fixed assets by natural disasters.
- d. The revaluation account records those changes in the values of assets and liabilities that result from changes in their prices.

1.21 The link between the accumulation accounts and the current accounts is provided by the fact that saving must be used to acquire financial or non-financial assets of one kind or another, including cash. When saving is negative, the excess of consumption over disposable income must be financed by disposing of assets or incurring liabilities. The financial account shows the way in which funds are channelled from one group of units to another, especially through financial intermediaries. Access to finance is a prerequisite for engaging in many types of economic activities.

Balance sheets

1.22 The balance sheets show the values of the stocks of assets and liabilities held by institutional units or sectors at the beginning and end of an accounting period. As already noted, the values of the assets and liabilities held at any moment in time vary whenever any transactions, price changes or other changes affecting the volume of assets or liabilities held take place. These are all recorded in one or another of the accumulation accounts so that the difference between the values in the opening and closing balance sheets is entirely accounted for within the System, provided that the assets and liabilities recorded in the balance sheets are valued consistently with the transactions and other changes.

Other accounts of the System

1.23 The System is a rich and detailed economic accounting system that extends well beyond the sequence of accounts to encompass other accounts or tables that either contain

information that cannot be included in the main accounts or present information in alternative ways, such as matrices, that may be more appropriate for certain types of analysis. It is not proposed to list all these various elements at this point, as they are described in chapter 2, but it is useful to draw attention to two specific elements which play a major role in the System.

Supply and use tables

1.24 In addition to the flow accounts and balance sheets described earlier, the central framework of the System also contains detailed supply and use tables in the form of matrices that record how supplies of different kinds of goods and services originate from domestic industries and imports and how those supplies are allocated between various intermediate or final uses, including exports. These tables involve the compilation of a set of integrated production and generation of income accounts for industries by drawing upon detailed data from industrial censuses or surveys. The supply and use tables provide an accounting framework within which the product flow method of compiling national accounts, whereby the total supplies and uses of individual types of goods and services have to be balanced with each other, can be systematically exploited. The supply and use tables also provide the basic information for the derivation of detailed input-output tables that may be used for purposes of economic analysis and projections.

Accounts in volume terms

1.25 The System also provides specific guidance about the methodology to be used to compile an integrated set of price and volume indices for flows of goods and services, gross and net value added and GDP that are consistent with the concepts and accounting principles of the System. It is recommended that annual chain indices should be used where possible.

1.26 Rates of inflation and economic growth appropriately measured by price and volume indices for the main aggregates of the System are key variables both for the evaluation of past economic performance and as targets for the formulation of economic policy-making. They are an essential part of the System when any amount of inflation appears and become increasingly important as inflation increases. The System also recognizes that the growth in the volume of GDP and the growth of an economy's real income are not the same because of trading gains or losses resulting from changes in international terms of trade.

C. Uses of the System

1.27 The main objective of the System is to provide a comprehensive conceptual and accounting framework that can be used to create a macroeconomic database suitable for analysing and evaluating the performance of an economy. The existence of such a database is a prerequisite for informed, rational policy-making and decision-taking. Some of the more specific uses of the System are described in the following sections.

1. Monitoring the behaviour of the economy

1.28 Certain key aggregates of the System, such as GDP and GDP per head of population, have acquired an identity of their own and are widely used by analysts, politicians, the press, the business community and the public at large as summary, global indicators of economic activity and welfare. Movements of such aggregates, and their associated price and volume measures, are used to evaluate the overall performance

of the economy and hence to judge the relative success or failure of economic policies pursued by governments.

- 1.29 National accounts data provide information covering both different types of economic activities and the different sectors of the economy. It is possible to monitor the movements of major economic flows such as production, household consumption, government consumption, capital formation, exports, imports, etc., in both value and volume terms. Moreover, information is provided about certain key balancing items and ratios which can only be defined and measured within an accounting framework, for example, the budget surplus or deficit, the share of income that is saved or invested by individual sectors of the economy or the economy as a whole, the trade balance, etc. The System also provides the background against which movements of short-term indicators, such as monthly indices of industrial production, consumer or producer prices can be interpreted and evaluated. The monitoring of the behaviour of the economy may be significantly improved if at least some of the main aggregates of the System are compiled quarterly as well as annually, although many of the accounts, tables or balance sheets of the System are not usually compiled more frequently than once a year.

2. Macroeconomic analysis

- 1.30 National accounts are also used to investigate the causal mechanisms at work within an economy. Such analysis usually takes the form of the estimation of the parameters of functional relationships between different economic variables by applying econometric methods to time series of data in both value and volume terms compiled within a national accounting framework. The types of macroeconomic models used for such investigations may vary according to the school of economic thought of the investigator as well as the objectives of the analysis, but the System is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the requirements of different economic theories or models, provided only that they accept the basic concepts of production, consumption, income, etc. on which the System is based.
- 1.31 Economic policy in the short term is formulated on the basis of an assessment of the recent behaviour and current state of the economy and a view, or precise forecast, about likely future developments. Short-term forecasts are typically made using econometric models of the type just described. Over the medium- or long-term, economic policy has to be formulated in the context of a broad economic strategy.
- 1.32 Economic policy-making and decision-taking take place at all levels of government and also within public and private corporations. Large corporations such as multinationals have the ability to build their own macroeconomic models tailored to their own requirements, for which they need national accounts data. The investment programmes of major corporations must be based on long-term expectations about future economic developments that require national accounts

data. There are also specialist agencies that provide forecasts for individual clients in return for fees. Such agencies typically require very detailed national accounts data.

3. International comparisons

- 1.33 The System is used for international reporting of national accounts data that conform to standard, internationally accepted concepts, definitions and classifications. The resulting data are widely used for international comparisons of the volumes of major aggregates, such as GDP or GDP per head, and also for comparisons of structural statistics, such as ratios of investment, taxes or government expenditures to GDP. Such comparisons are used by economists, journalists or other analysts to evaluate the performance of one economy against that of other similar economies. They can influence popular and political judgements about the relative success of economic programmes in the same way as developments over time within a single country. Databases consisting of sets of national accounts for groups of countries can also be used for econometric analyses in which time-series and cross-section data are pooled to provide a broader range of observations for the estimation of functional relationships.
- 1.34 Levels of GDP or, alternatively, gross national income (GNI) per head in different countries are also used by international organizations to determine eligibility for loans, aid or other funds or to determine the terms or conditions on which such loans, aid or funds are made available. When the objective is to compare the volumes of goods or services produced or consumed per head, data in national currencies must be converted into a common currency by means of purchasing power parities and not exchange rates. It is well known that, in general, neither market nor fixed exchange rates reflect the relative internal purchasing powers of different currencies. When exchange rates are used to convert GDP, or other statistics, into a common currency the prices at which goods and services in high-income countries are valued tend to be higher than in low-income countries, thus exaggerating the differences in real incomes between them. Exchange rate converted data must not, therefore, be interpreted as measures of the relative volumes of goods and services concerned. Levels of GDP, or GDP per head, in different countries are also used to determine, in whole or in part, the size of the contributions which the member countries of an international organization make to finance the operations of the organization.
- 1.35 Although international organizations use the System in order to be able to collect internationally comparable national accounts data, the System has not been created for this purpose. It has become the standard, or universal, system used with little or no modification by most countries in the world for their own national purposes. National statistical offices and government agencies have a strong vested interest in ensuring that the System meets their own analytic and policy requirements and have taken an active part in the development of the System for this reason.

D. The boundaries of the System

1. Non-monetary transactions

1.36 When goods and services produced within the economy are sold in monetary transactions, their values are automatically included in the accounts of the System. Many goods or services are not actually sold but are nevertheless supplied to other units: for example, they may be bartered for other goods or services or provided free as transfers in kind. Such goods and services must be included in the accounts even though their values have to be estimated. The goods or services involved are produced by activities that are no different from those used to produce goods or services for sale. Moreover, the transactions in which the goods and services are supplied to other units are also proper transactions even though the producers do not receive money in exchange. It is misleading to describe such output as “imputed”. For example, the services of financial intermediaries which are measured indirectly in the System do actually take place; but their values have to be measured indirectly. It is the value, not the transaction that is “imputed”.

1.37 When goods or services are retained for own use, no transactions with other units take place. In such cases, in order to be able to record the goods or services in the accounts, internal transactions have to be recorded whereby producers allocate the goods or services for their own consumption or capital formation and values also have to be estimated for them.

1.38 Thus, estimates and imputations are needed in order to be able to record in the accounts productive activities whose outputs are not disposed of in monetary transactions with other units. Such estimates and imputations should not be interpreted as introducing hypothetical activities or flows of goods and services into the System. Their purpose is the opposite, namely, to capture in the accounts major flows of goods and services actually taking place in the economy that would otherwise be omitted. In order to obtain comprehensive measures, values have to be estimated for all outputs of goods and services that are not sold but disposed of in other ways.

1.39 In practice the System does not record all outputs, however, because domestic and personal services produced and consumed by members of the same household are omitted. Subject to this one major exception, GDP is intended to be a comprehensive measure of the total gross value added produced by all resident institutional units. GDP is confined to outputs produced by economic activities that are capable of being provided by one unit to another. Not all activities that require the expenditure of time and effort by persons are productive in an economic sense, for example, activities such as eating, drinking or sleeping cannot be produced by one person for the benefit of another.

2. The production boundary

1.40 The activity of production is fundamental. In the System, production is understood to be a physical process, carried out under the responsibility, control and management of an institutional unit, in which labour and assets are used to

transform inputs of goods and services into outputs of other goods and services. All goods and services produced as outputs must be such that they can be sold on markets or at least be capable of being provided by one unit to another, with or without charge. The System includes within the production boundary all production actually destined for the market, whether for sale or barter. It also includes all goods or services provided free to individual households or collectively to the community by government units or NPISHs.

Household production

1.41 The main problem for defining the range of activities recorded in the production accounts of the System is to decide upon the treatment of activities that produce goods or services that could have been supplied to others on the market but are actually retained by their producers for their own use. These cover a very wide range of productive activities, in particular:

- a. The production of agricultural goods by household enterprises for own final consumption;
- b. The production of other goods for own final use by households: the construction of dwellings, the production of foodstuffs and clothing, etc.;
- c. The production of housing services for own final consumption by owner occupiers;
- d. The production of domestic and personal services for consumption within the same household: the preparation of meals, care and training of children, cleaning, repairs, etc.

All of these activities are productive in an economic sense. However, inclusion in the System is not simply a matter of estimating monetary values for the outputs of these activities. If values are assigned to the outputs, values have also to be assigned to the incomes generated by their production and to the consumption of the output. It is clear that the economic significance of these flows is very different from that of monetary flows. For example, the incomes generated are automatically tied to the consumption of the goods and services produced; they have little relevance for the analysis of inflation or deflation or other disequilibria within the economy. The inclusion of large non-monetary flows of this kind in the accounts together with monetary flows can obscure what is happening on markets and reduce the analytic usefulness of the data.

1.42 The System is designed to meet a wide range of analytical and policy needs. A balance has to be struck between the desire for the accounts to be as comprehensive as possible and the need to prevent flows used for the analysis of market behaviour and disequilibria from being swamped by non-monetary values. The System therefore includes all production of goods for own use within its production boundary, as goods can be switched between market and non-market use even after they have been produced, but it excludes all production of services for own final consumption within households (except for the services produced by employing

paid domestic staff and the own-account production of housing services by owner-occupiers). The services that are excluded are consumed as they are produced and the links between their production and market activities are more tenuous than for goods production, such as agricultural goods, which households may produce partly for own final consumption and partly for sale, or barter, on the market. The location of the production boundary in the System is a compromise, but a deliberate one that takes account of the needs of most users. In this context it may be noted that in labour force statistics economically active persons are defined as those engaged in productive activities as defined in the System. If the production boundary were extended to include the production of personal and domestic services by members of households for their own final consumption, all persons engaged in such activities would become self-employed, making unemployment virtually impossible by definition. This illustrates the need to confine the production boundary in the System and other related statistical systems to market activities or fairly close substitutes for market activities.

Other production boundary problems

- 1.43 Certain natural processes may or may not be counted as production depending upon the circumstances in which they occur. A necessary condition for an activity to be treated as productive is that it must be carried out under the instigation, control and responsibility of some institutional unit that exercises ownership rights over whatever is produced. For example, the natural growth of stocks of fish in the high seas is not counted as production: the process is not managed by any institutional unit and the fish do not belong to any institutional unit. On the other hand, the growth of fish in fish farms is treated as a process of production in much the same way that rearing livestock is a process of production. Similarly, the natural growth of wild, uncultivated forests or wild fruits or berries is not counted as production, whereas the cultivation of crop-bearing trees, or trees grown for timber or other uses, is counted in the same way as the growing of annual crops. However, the deliberate felling of trees in wild forests, and the gathering of wild fruit or berries, and also firewood, counts as production. Similarly, rainfall and the flow of water down natural watercourses are not processes of production, whereas storing water in reservoirs or dams and the piping, or carrying, of water from one location to another all constitute production.
- 1.44 These examples show that many activities or processes that may be of benefit to institutional units, both as producers and consumers, are not processes of production in an economic sense. Rainfall may be vital to the agricultural production of a country but it is not a process of production whose output can be included in GDP.

3. The consumption boundary

- 1.45 The coverage of production in the System has ramifications that extend considerably beyond the production account itself. The boundary of production determines the amount of value added recorded and hence the total amount of income generated by production. The range of goods and services that are included in household final consumption expenditures, and actual consumption, is similarly governed by the production boundary. For example, these expenditures include the

estimated values of the agricultural products consumed by households that they have produced themselves and also the values of the housing services consumed by owner occupiers, but not the values of "do-it-yourself" repairs and maintenance to vehicles or household durables, the cleaning of dwellings, the care and training of children, or similar domestic or personal services produced for own final consumption. Only the expenditures on goods utilized for these purposes, such as cleaning materials, are included in household final consumption expenditures.

4. The asset boundary

- 1.46 Balance sheets are compiled for institutional units, or sectors, and record the values of the assets they own or the liabilities they have incurred. Assets as defined in the System are entities that must be owned by some unit, or units, and from which economic benefits are derived by their owner(s) by holding or using them over a period of time. Financial assets and fixed assets, such as machinery, equipment and structures which have themselves been produced as outputs in the past, are clearly covered by this definition. However, the ownership criterion is important for determining which natural resources are treated as assets in the System. Natural resources such as land, mineral deposits, fuel reserves, uncultivated forests or other vegetation and wild animals are included in the balance sheets provided that institutional units are exercising effective ownership rights over them, that is, are actually in a position to be able to benefit from them. Assets need not be privately owned and could be owned by government units exercising ownership rights on behalf of entire communities. Thus, many environmental assets are included within the System. Resources such as the atmosphere or high seas, over which no ownership rights can be exercised, or mineral or fuel deposits that have not been discovered or that are unworkable, are not included as they are not capable of bringing any benefits to their owners, given the technology and relative prices existing at the time.
- 1.47 Changes in the values of natural resources owned by institutional units between one balance sheet and the next are recorded in the accumulation accounts of the System. For example, the depletion of a natural resource as a result of its use in production is recorded in the other changes in volume of assets account, together with losses of fixed assets due to their destruction by natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, etc.). Conversely, when deposits or reserves of minerals or fuels are discovered or previously unworkable deposits become workable, their appearance is recorded in this account and they enter the balance sheets in this way.

5. National boundaries

- 1.48 The accounts of the System are compiled for resident institutional units grouped into institutional sectors and sub-sectors. The concept of residence is the same as that used in the *Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual* of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), known as BPM6. An institutional unit is said to be resident within the economic territory of a country when it maintains a centre of economic interest in that territory, that is, when it engages, or intends to engage, in economic activities or

transactions on a significant scale either indefinitely or over a long period of time, usually interpreted as one year.

1.49 The GDP of a country, viewed as an aggregate measure of production, is equal to the sum of the gross value added of all resident institutional units engaged in production (plus any taxes, and minus any subsidies, on products not included in the value of their outputs). This is not exactly the same as the sum of the gross value added of all productive activities taking place within the geographical boundaries of the national economy. Some of the production of a resident institutional unit may take place abroad, for example, the installation of some exported machinery or equipment or a consultancy project undertaken by a team of expert advisers working temporarily abroad. Conversely, some of the production taking place within a country may be attributable to non-resident institutional units.

1.50 When GDP is derived from the expenditure side, allowance has also to be made for goods and services produced by non-residents but consumed by residents as well as for goods and services produced by residents but consumed abroad. For the System to be comprehensive in coverage, all transactions with the rest of the world have to be identified so their impact on measures relating to the resident economy is properly accounted for. The complete set of transactions with the rest of the world in the System matches exactly the set of transactions captured in the balance of payments.

6. Final consumption, intermediate consumption and gross fixed capital formation

1.51 The contents of the accounts are determined not only by the conceptual framework, definitions and classifications of the System but also by the ways in which they are interpreted and implemented in practice. No matter how simple and precise concepts and classifications may appear in principle, there are inevitably difficult borderline cases which cannot easily be fitted into predetermined categories. These points may be illustrated by considering a fundamental distinction in economics and in the System, namely, the distinction between consumption and gross fixed capital formation (or gross fixed investment, as it is often described in other contexts).

1.52 Before considering the difference between consumption and investment, though, it is necessary to look more closely at the nature of consumption. Consumption is an activity in which institutional units use up goods or services, but there are two quite different kinds of consumption. Intermediate consumption consists of goods and services used up in the course of production within the accounting period. Final consumption consists of goods and services used by individual households or the community to satisfy their individual or collective needs or wants. The activity of gross fixed capital formation, like intermediate consumption, is restricted to institutional units in their capacity as producers, being defined as the value of their acquisitions less disposals of fixed assets. Fixed assets are produced assets (such as machinery, equipment, buildings or other structures) that are used repeatedly or continuously in production over several accounting periods (more than one year). The distinction between intermediate consumption and gross capital formation depends on whether the goods and services involved are

completely used up in the accounting period or not. If they are, the use of them is a current transaction recorded as intermediate consumption; if not it is an accumulation transaction recorded in the capital account.

1.53 The general nature and purpose of the distinction between gross fixed capital formation and consumption, whether intermediate or final, is clear. The distinction is fundamental for economic analysis and policy-making. Nevertheless, the borderline between consumption and gross fixed capital formation is not always easy to determine in practice. Certain activities contain some elements that appear to be consumption and at the same time others that appear to be capital formation. In order to try to ensure that the System is implemented in a uniform way decisions have to be taken about the ways in which certain difficult, even controversial, items are to be classified. Two examples are given below.

Human capital

1.54 It is often proposed that expenditures on staff training and education should be classified as gross fixed capital formation as a form of investment in human capital. The acquisition of knowledge, skills and qualifications increases the productive potential of the individuals concerned and is a source of future economic benefit to them. However, while knowledge, skills and qualifications are clearly assets in a broad sense of the term, they cannot be equated with fixed assets as understood in the System. They are acquired through learning, studying and practising, activities that cannot be undertaken by anyone else on behalf of the student and thus the *acquisition* of knowledge is not a processes of production even though the instruction conveyed by education services is. The education services produced by schools, colleges, universities, etc. are thus treated as being consumed by students in the process of their acquiring knowledge and skills. This type of education is treated as final consumption. When training is given by an employer to enhance the effectiveness of staff, the costs are treated as intermediate consumption.

1.55 This treatment of education costs is consistent with the production and asset boundaries of the System but not all users of the System find it satisfactory in all instances. However, as explained below, the System is such that users are encouraged to explore alternative conventions in the form of satellite accounts, described in chapter 29. An alternative treatment for the recording of human capital is one such application.

Repairs, maintenance and gross fixed capital formation

1.56 Another, less familiar, example of the intrinsic difficulty of trying to draw a dichotomy between consumption and gross fixed capital formation is provided by repairs and maintenance. Ordinary maintenance and repairs undertaken by enterprises to keep fixed assets in good working order are treated as intermediate consumption. However, major improvements, additions or extensions to fixed assets, both machinery and structures, which improve their performance, increase their capacity or prolong their expected working lives count as gross fixed capital formation. In practice it is not easy to draw the line between ordinary repairs and major improvements, although the System provides certain recommendations for this purpose. Some analysts, however,

consider that the distinction between ordinary repairs and maintenance and major improvements and additions is neither operational nor defensible and would favour a more “gross”

method of recording in which all such activities are treated as gross fixed capital formation.

E. The System as a coordinating framework for statistics

1. Harmonisation between different statistical systems

1.57 The System has a very important statistical function by serving as a coordinating framework for economic statistics in two different senses: in the first place, the System is seen as the conceptual framework for ensuring the consistency of the definitions and classifications used in different, but related, fields of statistics; in the second, the System acts as an accounting framework to ensure the numerical consistency of data drawn from different sources, such as industrial inquiries, household surveys, merchandise trade statistics, VAT returns and other administrative sources.

1.58 Consistency between different statistical systems enhances the analytical usefulness of all the statistics involved. The System has always occupied a central position in economic statistics because the data from more specialized systems, such as balance of payments or labour force statistics, typically have to be used in conjunction with national accounts data. The need for harmonization of the System and related statistical systems, such as financial statistics or balance of payments statistics, leads to the practice of revising other statistical systems in parallel with, and in close collaboration with, that of the System. This coordination eliminates conceptual differences between them other than a few exceptions that can be specifically justified in terms of the special characteristics of different kinds of data, or the special requirements of different kinds of users. Harmonization between the System and other major systems has proved to be largely successful and has been achieved by making changes to the System as well as to the other systems.

2. The use of micro-data for macro-economic accounting

1.59 The sequence of accounts and balance sheets of the System could, in principle, be compiled at any level of aggregation, even that of an individual institutional unit. It might therefore appear desirable if the macroeconomic accounts for sectors or the total economy could be obtained directly by aggregating corresponding data for individual units. There would be considerable analytical advantages in having micro-databases that are fully compatible with the corresponding macroeconomic accounts for sectors or the total economy. Data in the form of aggregates, or averages, often conceal a great deal of useful information about changes occurring within the populations to which they relate. For example, economic theory indicates that changes in the size of distribution of income may be expected to have an impact on aggregate consumption over and above that due to changes in the aggregate level of income. Information relating to individual units may be needed not only to obtain a better understanding of the working of the economy but also to

monitor the impact of government policies, or other events, on selected types of units about which there may be special concern, such as households with very low incomes. Micro-data sets also make it possible to follow the behaviour of individual units over time. Given the continuing improvements in computers and communications, the management and analysis of very large micro-databases is becoming progressively easier. Data can be derived from a variety of different sources, such as administrative and business records, as well as specially conducted censuses and surveys.

1.60 In practice, however, macroeconomic accounts can seldom be built up by simply aggregating the relevant micro-data. Even when individual institutional units keep accounts or records, the concepts that are needed or appropriate at a micro level may not be suitable at a macro level. Individual units may be obliged to use concepts designed for other purposes, such as taxation. The accounting conventions and valuation methods used at a micro level typically differ from those required by the System. For example, the widespread use of historic cost accounting means that the accounts of individual enterprises may differ significantly from those used in the System. Depreciation as calculated for tax purposes may be quite arbitrary and unacceptable from an economic viewpoint as a measure of consumption of fixed capital. In such situations, it is impractical to try to adjust the individual accounts of thousands of enterprises before aggregating them. Instead the data are adjusted after they have been aggregated to some extent. Of course, the data do not have to be aggregated to the level of the total economy, or even complete sectors or industries, before being adjusted and it is likely to be more efficient to make the adjustments for smaller and more homogenous groups of units. This may involve compiling so-called intermediate systems of accounts. At whatever level of aggregation the adjustments are made, the inevitable consequence is to make the resulting macro-data no longer equivalent to simple aggregations of the micro-data form which they are derived. When the micro-data are not derived from business accounts or administrative records but from censuses or surveys designed for statistical purposes, the concepts used should be closer to those required, but the results may still require adjustment at a macro level because of incomplete coverage (the surveys being confined to enterprises above a certain size, for example) and bias from response errors.

1.61 Most households are unlikely to keep accounts of the kind needed by the System. Micro-data for households are typically derived from sample surveys that may be subject to significant response and reporting errors. It may be particularly difficult to obtain reliable and meaningful data about the activities of small unincorporated enterprises owned by households. Aggregates based on household surveys have to be adjusted for certain typical biases, such as the under-reporting of certain

types of expenditure (on tobacco, alcoholic drink, gambling, etc.) and also to make them consistent with macro-data from other sources, such as imports. The systematic exploitation of micro-data may also be restricted by the increasing concerns about confidentiality and possible misuse of such databases.

- 1.62 It may be concluded therefore that, for various reasons, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve micro-databases and

F. Links with business accounting

- 1.63 The accounting rules and procedures used in the System are based on those long used in business accounting. The traditional double-entry bookkeeping principle, whereby a transaction gives rise to a pair of matching debit and credit entries within the accounts of each of the two parties to the transaction, is a basic axiom of economic or national accounting. For example, recording the sale of output requires not only an entry in the production account of the seller but also an entry of equal value, often described as the counterpart, in the seller's financial account to record the cash, or short-term financial credit, received in exchange for the output sold. As two matching entries are also needed for the buyer, the transaction must give rise to four simultaneous entries of equal value in a system of macroeconomic accounts covering both the seller and the buyer. In general, a transaction between two different institutional units always requires four equal, simultaneous entries in the accounts of the System (that is, quadruple entry accounting) even if the transaction is a transfer and not an exchange and even if no money changes hands. These multiple entries enable the economic interactions between different institutional units and sectors to be recorded and analysed. However, transactions within a single unit (such as the consumption of output by the same unit that produced it) require only two entries whose values have to be estimated.

- 1.64 The design and structure of the System draws heavily on economic theory and principles as well as business accounting practices. Basic concepts such as production, consumption and capital formation are meant to be rooted in economic theory. When business accounting practices conflict with economic principles, priority is given to the latter, as the System is designed primarily for purposes of economic analysis and policy-making. The difference between business accounting and economic theory can be illustrated by the concept of cost of production used in the System.

- 1.65 Business accounts commonly (but not invariably) record costs on an historic basis, partly to ensure that they are completely objective. Historic cost accounting requires goods or assets used in production to be valued by the expenditures actually incurred to acquire those goods or assets, however far back in the past those expenditures took place. In the System, however, the concept of opportunity cost as defined in economics is employed. In other words, the cost of using, or using up, some existing asset or good in one particular process of production is measured by the amount of the benefits that could have been secured by using the asset or good in alternative ways. Opportunity cost is calculated with reference to the opportunities foregone at the time the asset or resource is used, as distinct from the costs incurred at some time in the

macroeconomic accounts that are fully compatible with each other in practice. Nevertheless, as a general objective, the concepts, definitions and classifications used in economic accounting should, so far as possible, be the same at both a micro and macro level to facilitate the interface between the two kinds of data.

past to acquire the asset. The best practical approximation to opportunity cost accounting is current cost accounting, whereby assets and goods used in production are valued at their actual or estimated current market prices at the time the production takes place. Current cost accounting is sometimes described as replacement cost accounting, although there may be no intention of actually replacing the asset in question after it has been used.

- 1.66 When there is persistent inflation, even at moderate levels, the use of historic costs tends to underestimate the opportunity costs of production in an economic sense so that historic cost profit may be much greater than the operating surplus as defined in the System. Profits at historic costs are liable to give very misleading signals as to the profitability of the production processes to which they relate by systematically undervaluing inputs compared with outputs. They can lead to mistaken decisions at both a microeconomic and macroeconomic level.

- 1.67 Current cost accounting has ramifications that permeate the entire System. It affects all the accounts and balance sheets and their balancing items. A fundamental principle underlying the measurement of gross value added, and hence GDP, is that output and intermediate consumption must be valued at the prices current at the time the production takes place. This implies that goods withdrawn from inventories must be valued at the prices prevailing at the times the goods are withdrawn and not at the prices at which they entered inventories. This method of recording changes in inventories is not commonly used in business accounting, however, and may sometimes give very different results, especially when inventory levels fluctuate while prices are rising. Similarly, consumption of fixed capital in the System is calculated on the basis of the estimated opportunity costs of using the assets at the time they are used, as distinct from the prices at which the assets were acquired. Even when the fixed assets used up are not actually replaced, the amount of consumption of fixed capital charged as a cost of production should be sufficient to enable the assets to be replaced, if desired. When there is persistent inflation, the value of consumption of fixed capital is liable to be much greater than depreciation at historic costs, even if the same assumptions are made in the System and in business accounts about the service lives of the assets and their rates of wear and tear and obsolescence. To avoid confusion, the term "consumption of fixed capital" is used in the System to distinguish it from "depreciation" as typically measured in business accounts.

- 1.68 A difference between the System and commercial accounting is that the term “profits” is not used to describe a balancing item in the System. The item entrepreneurial income is a close approximation to before tax profits and disposable income to after tax profits. The use of the term disposable income comes from the fact that the corresponding item for the household sector represents the maximum amount available to a household for purposes of consumption after maintaining its net worth intact, that is the current value of its assets minus the current value of its liabilities. For corporations, since they do not have final consumption, this is the amount available for investment.
- 1.69 Unlike commercial accounting, the System excludes from the calculation of income any assets received or disposed of as a result of capital transfers that merely redistribute wealth between different units, and also any assets received or

disposed of as a result of events not connected with production, such as earthquakes or other natural disasters, or acts of war. Real holding gains or losses on assets or liabilities due to changes in their relative prices are also excluded from income in the System.

1. International accounting standards

- 1.70 A feature of the most recent update of the System is recognition of the increasing use of international accounting standards by corporations and in the public sector. Subsequent chapters make reference to International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) and the International Public Sector Accounting Standards Board (IPSASB) norms. In several cases, notably on pension liabilities and intangible assets, the feasibility of including certain items in the System is dependent on the application of the international accounting standards.

G. Expanding the scope of the System

- 1.71 The System is designed to be sufficiently comprehensive that individual countries, whatever their economic structures, institutional arrangements or level of development, can select from within it those parts of the System that are considered to be most relevant and useful to implement in the light of their own needs and capabilities. The System is meant to be implemented in a flexible manner and the accounts and tables, classifications and sectoring presented in this volume should not be regarded as fixed. For example, classifications of institutional units, transactions and assets may be implemented flexibly by introducing further aggregation or disaggregation in order to adapt them to the data availability and special circumstances of different countries. The flexible use of classifications does not change the basic concepts and definitions of the System.
- 1.72 In some cases, the System explicitly insists on flexibility. For example, two alternative methods of sub-sectoring the general government sector are proposed in chapter 4 without either being assigned priority. Similarly, although the System suggests sub-sectoring the households sector on the basis of the household’s principal source of income, it stresses that this is only one possible criterion for sub-sectoring. In some cases, it may be more appropriate to sub-sector on the basis of socio-economic criteria or the type of area in which the household is located or, indeed, to carry the disaggregation of the

households sector further by using two or more criteria together in a hierarchical manner.

- 1.73 Ways in which the System may be adapted to meet differing circumstances and needs are addressed in chapters 18 to 29. Chapter 29 shows how flexibility may be taken a stage further by developing satellite accounts that are closely linked to the main System but are not bound to employ exactly the same concepts or restricted to data expressed in monetary terms. Satellite accounts are intended for special purposes such as monitoring the community’s health or the state of environment. They may also be used to explore new methodologies and to work out new accounting procedures that, when fully developed and accepted, may become absorbed into the main System in the course of time, in the way that input-output analysis, for example, has been integrated into the System.
- 1.74 Another way in which the System may be implemented flexibly is by rearranging the data in the accounts in the form of a social accounting matrix in order better to serve particular analytical and policy needs. Such matrices should not be construed as constituting different systems but as alternative ways of presenting the mass of information contained in the System which some users and analysts find more informative and powerful for both monitoring and modelling social and economic development.

H. The System and measures of welfare

- 1.75 GDP is often taken as a measure of welfare, but the System makes no claim that this is so and indeed there are several conventions in the System that argue against the welfare interpretation of the accounts. The implications of some of these conventions are outlined briefly in this section.

1. Qualifications to treating expenditure as a welfare measure

- 1.76 In a market economy, the prices used to value different goods and services should reflect not only their relative costs of

production but also the relative benefits or utilities to be derived from using them for production or consumption. This establishes the link between changes in aggregate production and consumption and changes in welfare. However, changes in the volume of consumption, for example, are not the same as changes in welfare. It is widely accepted that, other things being equal, increased expenditure on goods and services leads to increased welfare. The increase in welfare may not, however, be proportionate to the increase in expenditure. Nor is the unit incurring the expenditure necessarily the one that benefits from an increase in welfare. The System makes a distinction between actual consumption, showing the amount of goods and services actually consumed, and consumption expenditure. Household actual consumption is greater than consumption expenditure because it includes expenditures incurred by general government and NPISHs on behalf of individual households.

- 1.77 An increase in consumption of food by someone living in extreme poverty is likely to lead to a greater increase in welfare than a similar increase in consumption by someone already well-fed. The System however, cannot distinguish this because although the rules allow distinguishing which unit incurs the expenditure as opposed to which unit consumes the food, the valuation basis in the System is the price paid for the food with no adjustment for the qualitative benefits derived from its consumption. The most that can be claimed for treating expenditure as a measure of welfare is that it may be a reasonable lower bound on the level of welfare engendered by the expenditure.

2. Unpaid services and welfare

- 1.78 The production boundary of the System is such that the services produced and consumed by households are not included except for the imputed rent of owner-occupied dwellings and the payments made to domestic staff. Similarly, no estimate is included in the System for the labour services of individuals provided without cost to non-profit institutions. In both these cases, the contribution of time increases the welfare of other individuals in the community. The exclusion of these services from the production boundary is not a denial of the welfare properties of the services but a recognition that their inclusion would detract from rather than add to the usefulness of the System for the primary purposes for which it is designed, that is economic analysis, decision-taking and policy-making.

3. The impact of external events on welfare

- 1.79 The level of an individual's and a nation's welfare may be affected by a wide range of factors that are not economic in origin. Consider the effects of an exceptionally severe winter combined with an influenza epidemic. Other things being equal, the production and consumption of a number of goods and services may be expected to rise in response to extra demands created by the cold and the epidemic; the production and consumption of fuels, clothing and medical services will tend to increase. As compared with the previous year, people may consider themselves to be worse off overall because of the exceptionally bad weather and the epidemic, notwithstanding the fact that production and consumption may have increased in response to the additional demand for heating and health

services. Total welfare could fall even though GDP could increase in volume terms.

- 1.80 This kind of situation does not mean that welfare cannot be expected to increase as GDP increases, other things being equal. Given the occurrence of the cold and the epidemic, the community presumably finds itself much better off with the extra production and consumption of heating and health services than without them. There may even be a general tendency for production to rise to remedy the harmful effects of events that reduce people's welfare in a broad sense. For example, production may be expected to increase in order to repair the damage caused by such natural disasters as earthquakes, hurricanes and floods. Given that the disaster has occurred, the extra production presumably increases welfare. However the question remains how changes in welfare should be measured over time; a community that has suffered a natural disaster will have a higher level of welfare if damage is repaired than if it is not, but how does this new level of welfare compare to the situation in the absence of the disaster?

4. The impact of externalities on welfare

- 1.81 Some production activities cause a loss in welfare that is not captured in the System. A factory, for example, may generate noise and expel pollutants into the air or nearby water systems to the extent of causing a loss of amenity and thus a loss of welfare to individuals living nearby. As long as there is no financial penalty to the factory, the consequences go unmeasured in the System. If, in response to government legislation or otherwise, the factory incurs expenditures that reduce the noise or quantity of pollutants emitted, costs will rise and so will welfare but again the match is not necessarily one to one and the level of welfare after the ameliorations may still be lower than it might be if the factory simply closed down.
- 1.82 Environmental externalities are a major cause of concern both as regards measuring welfare and indeed economic growth itself. In response to these concerns, a satellite account of the System has been developed and is being refined to try to answer such questions.

5. Non-economic impacts on welfare

- 1.83 An individual's state of well-being, or welfare, is not determined by economic factors alone. Personal and family circumstances, quality of health, the satisfaction of lack of it derived from employment are just some other factors that affect welfare. It is difficult to imagine an objective way in which factors such as these could be quantified and more difficult to imagine the usefulness of including them in a System designed primarily to facilitate economic analysis

6. Welfare indicators and macro-economic aggregates

- 1.84 Welfare is a wide-ranging concept with many different facets. Some of these may be captured reasonably well by one or more of the key aggregates of the System. Others may be captured by using the basic structure of the System and expanding it in certain directions, perhaps by including unpaid

services and the effects of environmental damage, for example. Yet other aspects are likely to remain forever outside the reach of a system not designed with the measurement of welfare as a prime consideration. It would be foolish to deny this just as it

is unrealistic to expect a system of economic accounts to necessarily and automatically yield a wholly satisfactory measure of welfare.