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SYSTEM OF SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS (SSDS)

CHARACTER OF A SYSTEM FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Note by the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. The programme of work on a System of Social and Demographic Statistics (SSDS) recommended by the seventeenth session of the Statistical Commission included the preparation of a draft version of a system suitable for use by the developing countries, with the assistance of an expert consultant and in consultation with the interested specialized agencies and national statistical authorities. The Commission considered that the full version of "A system of demographic and social statistics and its links with the system of national economic accounts", (E/CN.3/432) was too complex for use by the developing countries, that some of its concepts and series were not suited to their circumstances and that it was not practicable for them to evolve a number of parts of the full system in the foreseeable future.^{1/} The second session of an Expert Group on the SSDS in April 1973 also recommended that work should proceed on a version of a system which would be suitable to the requirements and statistical capabilities of the developing countries. The Group urged that while the core of the full version of the SSDS presented in "Towards a system of social and demographic statistics (Preliminary version)", (ST/STAT.68), should be retained as far as possible, a version for the use of the developing countries should reflect their special social concerns and their stages of statistical development.^{2/}
2. It has not been possible to prepare a draft version of an SSDS for the developing countries in time for the eighteenth session of the Commission; a paper which is being drafted by a consultant will be available too late for this purpose. Discussions of the full version of a system have however taken place at the eighth session of the Conference of African Statisticians and at a working group of the Economic Commission for Latin America.^{3/} The former meeting emphasized that the full version of an SSDS was much too complex and comprehensive for use by African countries and welcomed the plan to prepare a simplified version. The latter meeting felt that while one Latin American country was engaged in introducing much of the full version of the SSDS, it would not be practical for a number of the countries of the region to develop it in detail in the foreseeable future.
3. In considering the preparation of a version of an SSDS for the use of the developing countries, the following basic questions have arisen. How might international guidelines on a system of social and demographic statistics be useful to the developing countries? Is it appropriate to base an SSDS for the developing countries on the framework and scope of the full version of the system, for example, "Towards a system" (ST/STAT.68); if so, what sort of changes are necessary? To what extent are alterations and modifications required in the concepts, definitions and classifications of the full version of the SSDS? What types of adaptations and changes are needed in the basic statistical series and the social indicators? What aspects of the version of an SSDS should be given priority attention in formulating international guidelines? What steps should be taken for these purposes? This paper sketches various answers to these questions in order to elicit the views of the Statistical Commission on the scope and character of international guidelines on an SSDS suited to the requirements and circumstances of the developing countries and on the steps to be taken and priorities to be assigned in developing the international guidelines.

^{1/} Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 2, (E/5236), para. 116.

^{2/} "Report of the Expert Group on a System of Social and Demographic Statistics on its second session", ST/STAT.69, May 1973.

^{3/} "Report of the eighth session of the Conference of African Statisticians", Economic Commission for Africa, E/CN.14/611, December 1973. "Report of the Working Group on a System of Demographic and Social Statistics", Economic Commission for Latin America, E/CN.12/948, December 1972.

I. USEFULNESS OF INTERNATIONAL GUIDELINES ON AN SSDS

4. As the document "System of social and demographic statistics (SSDS); Potential uses and usefulness" (E/CN.3/449) emphasizes, the fundamental and distinctive characteristics of an SSDS such as is set out in ST/STAT.68, are (a) the bringing together and organizing of data on all the various facets of the living conditions of the population and on the associated social services, (b) the co-ordination of the concepts, definitions and classifications of these statistics and (c) the delineation of linkages between and within the bodies of data on various aspects of social and welfare conditions and the correlative social services. The data concern the state of and trends in the living conditions of various groups of the population, as well as the population as a whole, and in the availability, use, activities and costs of the social services. The system deals with the inputs into it, that is the raw data to be gathered, and the approaches which might be used for these purposes, the organization and compilation of these data into series of statistics and accounts and the outputs from it, for example the compilation of social indicators and the construction of descriptive and analytical models.
5. An SSDS embodying the characteristics mentioned above which at the same time is tailored to the requirements and circumstances of the majority of developing countries, would thus furnish a framework which they can use to develop systematically the collection, compilation and use of co-ordinated, coherent and linked bodies of statistics on social and welfare conditions. In fact, the central statistical authorities of Argentina are using the full version of the SSDS for these purposes. The inventory of statistics needed to portray, to assess and to improve living conditions provided by the framework, would be of assistance in establishing goals and priorities for the orderly development of the data, in the light of their own concerns and statistical costs, resources and problems. The points at which and the manners in which the concepts, definitions and classifications of the statistics are co-ordinated and linked in the SSDS would be instructive in designing the collection and compilation of data which could be used jointly for such monitoring, analytical and planning purposes as describing the levels of living of various groups of the population in the round, analysing the interplay between the various facets of living conditions, evaluating the accessibility and efficiency of the social services, and projecting the demands on the social services and the supply of manpower. For example, international guidelines on an SSDS might be used to define the scope of, and the items of data sought in, inquiries based either on administrative records or on field surveys so that they complement and intermesh with one another and are not inconsistent and overlapping. The standardized classifications of an SSDS, in particular those that are common to all or most of its parts, would furnish powerful means of tying together the various inquiries into living conditions and the social services and combining their results into consistent data for groups and cohorts of the population. An SSDS would be found especially valuable in designing and carrying out a multi-purpose household sample survey programme. The suggestions in the system about co-ordinated and coherent outputs - social indicators, models, etc. - would furnish useful guidance on data and analyses for purposes of socio-economic monitoring, planning and policy making.
6. It is clear that the available statistics of the developing countries must be substantially improved and expanded to furnish the data required to monitor, to assess and to raise the level of social development. For example, the Survey of Economic Conditions in Africa, 1972 (Part 1)^{4/} states:

^{4/} Economic Commission for Africa, United Nations publication, Sales No. E.74.II.K.1, p.3.

"But this awareness of the social implications of development is recent Moreover, there are some flaws which make the review and appraisal of the effectiveness of these policy measures somewhat difficult. Most important among these are the impreciseness of some of the concepts used and the lack of base-line data against which progress may be measured.

While the equitable distribution of income and the elimination of mass poverty are universally acceptable objectives of development, a realistic assessment of the effectiveness of the measures being taken to achieve them demands a knowledge of the extent of inequality and mass poverty at the beginning of the planning period Such information is at present lacking in most of the development plans that have been examined. Similarly, information is lacking on socio-economic groups the improvement of whose conditions of life may be the target of specific measures".

Comparison of the statistics produced with the data called for in the International Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade indicates marked gaps in information on such topics as manpower, the distribution of income and consumption, education and health. Moreover the lack of coherence and co-ordination between the available statistics is a serious obstacle to their joint use in monitoring and analysis. These deficiencies are the consequence of the independent evolution of data on demography, employment, education, health and other aspects of living conditions from administrative activities or from field inquiries.

7. The breadth of scope and the complexities of structure of the full version of the SSDS make it overwhelming and impracticable in the case of most of the developing countries. This however could be overcome by timing and simplifying these, as well as other aspects, of an SSDS to their urgent requirements for data and their practicable possibilities of gathering statistics in the foreseeable future. The international guidelines should emphasize that the SSDS furnishes goals for the gradual evolution of social statistics; the system, as in the case of its full version, should also be flexible so that developing countries may select the portions they wish to focus on in their own work. For this purpose, it may be desirable for the international guidelines to include suggestions on the considerations that countries might take into account in mapping the path they will follow in evolving their social statistics and on the orders of priority they might assign.

8. It has also been said that using an SSDS might divert the scarce statistical resources of the developing countries from their urgent and major task of improving and expanding the collection and compilation of basic social statistics. However an essential part of this work is the planning and design of means and techniques of collection, for example administrative records and reports, questionnaire, tabulations, etc. The suggestions of an SSDS on such matters as sources and means of gathering information and concepts, classifications and series to co-ordinate, to link and to define the data sought and compiled, should furnish the developing countries with a head start in this work.

II. SCOPE AND FRAMEWORK OF AN SSDS

9. The full version of the SSDS is designed to cover practically all phases of living conditions which may be measured objectively. Included are bodies of data on the demographic circumstances of the population, on learning activities and educational services, on earning activities, employment services and the inactive, on the distribution of income, consumption and accumulation, on social security and welfare services, on health and health services, on housing and its environment, on public order and safety, on the use of time and leisure activities and services and on social mobility. While all these topics may be the subject of social concern for the developing countries in the long run, some of them are unlikely to be of major and immediate concern in the foreseeable future in the case of many of the countries. Moreover, it will be impracticable for most developing countries to gather and to compile all of the aforementioned bodies of data. It may therefore be desirable to make an SSDS less overwhelming for most developing countries by reducing its scope to the social statistics which they will effectively require and may be able to gather in the foreseeable future. Perhaps this means omitting from an SSDS for the developing countries, the subsystems listed above on social security and welfare services, the use of time and leisure activities and on social mobility and restricting the subsystems on housing and its environment and on public order and safety to urban areas only. Housing and public order and safety are likely to be subjects of immediate concern and action on which it is practicable to collect data on the urban areas only. It will probably also be necessary to reduce and simplify the content of a number of the remaining bodies of data above.

10. The basic elements of the structure of the full version of the SSDS are (a) its division into subsystems of integrated and closely connected data which do not overlap in scope, (b) matrices or accounts on the gross shifts (flows) of groups of the population from one circumstance (state) to another and accounts on the social services, (c) cross-classifications according to (interactions between) the characteristic classifications of two subsystems or the classifications of the data of one subsystem according to the characteristic classification of another subsystem and (d) the tabulation of practically all the relevant data of each subsystem according to the same set of selected classifications.

11. The division into subsystems reflects the manner in which the aspects of living conditions are usually categorized in identifying social concerns and in studying and dealing with social problems, for example, employment, education, health and distinguishes between these conditions and the catering social services. Thus, the series of data of each subsystem are knit together through their reference to the same object (unit) and social concerns as well as through the use of identical classifications and of matrices and accounts in certain instances. Matrices or accounts are used to integrate sequences of states (called stocks in the SSDS) and of changes (gross flows) within and between selected subsystems - the demographic characteristics of the population, earning activities, learning activities and the inactive. Accounts are also used to integrate sequences of transactions (activities) and holdings (stocks) in the case of the social services, the distribution of income, consumption and accumulation and the use of time. Integration through the means described under (c) above is used when it is thought that the events or states dealt with in two subsystems are highly correlated. Thus, they are generally employed to integrate the data of a subsystem on an aspect of living conditions and the correlative social service. The common classifications of the full version of the SSDS relate to such demographic characteristics of the population as age, sex, geographic location, socio-economic status, size and type of household and such characteristics of the social services as kind of activity, geographic location, institutional sector.

12. While it appears to be valuable to structure an SSDS for the use of the developing countries in the same way as the full version of the SSDS, it may be necessary to simplify the framework in order to make the system easier to comprehend and practicable for them. This may involve less use of, or even omission of, the matrices of the SSDS and streamlining of the accounts. It may also lead to reduction in the extent which cross-classification is employed.

13. The matrices are somewhat complex and call for data on gross flows which are frequently difficult to gather. In the case of data gathered in field inquiries, it is usually necessary to have a programme of periodic surveys and to introduce retrospective queries which are subject to recall errors about the state of affairs at the time of the last survey or to engage in difficult matching and estimating to construct sets of micro-data for population cohorts from the results of the sequence of surveys. In the case of data gathered from administrative records, it is often necessary to establish and maintain a system of records on individuals, etc. and follow them through, or piece the records together for, a given sequence of life, for example, education, economic activity, medical care.

14. It is much simpler and more practicable to gather information on the states of given aspects of living conditions at different times and to compile data on net changes in these states from one time to the next for population cohorts. These data may, of course, also be used to portray differences in states between various population cohorts. This suggests that much more emphasis should be given to data on states and much less emphasis should be given to data on flows in an SSDS for the developing countries than on the full version of the SSDS. This will, however, greatly restrict the information that the former system yields on the circumstances and factors underlying changes in states, for such purposes as projections, planning and policy making. Perhaps it is practicable to retain the data of the full version of the SSDS on gross flows in the case of the size of the population.

15. The accounts of the full system on the production, transfers and finance of the social services cover government, private non-profit and business units which furnish these services. While it may be feasible for many developing countries to compile these data from the operating and accounting records of government units and the reports of private non-profit bodies to government agencies, this may not be so in the case of business enterprises. If so, it may be necessary to omit business enterprises which furnish social services, such as education or medical care, from the accounts. In the case of government and private non-profit units, it will probably be necessary to reduce the detail of classification in the accounts and to restrict them to data in current prices only.

III. CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

16. The concepts of items of data of the full version of the SSDS have been more or less influenced by the statistical experience and possibilities, and thus the institutional arrangements and social patterns, of the developed countries. This may also be so in the case of the definitions of items of data and the schemes of classification of the full system, which have not yet been formulated in most instances. Major differences in institutional arrangements, social patterns and/or statistical possibilities between the developing and developed countries may therefore call for modified or altered concepts and definitions in an SSDS for former countries in the case of at least certain items of data. Modifications or simplifications may also

be necessary in the case of certain classifications. This question is complicated by the significant disparities in institutional arrangements, social circumstances and statistical possibilities between urban areas, on the one hand, and rural or tribal areas, on the other, in the case of developing countries. The situation in the case of the rural areas may not call for significant alterations in the concepts, definitions or classifications, or even other aspects, of the full version of an SSDS. This raises the question of whether the developing countries will find it useful to have two different versions of an SSDS - one for the urban areas and the other for the rest of the country - which are designed to intermesh.

17. Examples of common differences in institutional arrangements between developing and developed countries are the much smaller degree of specialization in household functions and the paucity of organized labour markets. Households often engage in the production of goods and/or services for themselves and for sale which are commonly produced by business enterprises; labour is often furnished on an informal, non-monetary basis, in particular in rural or small-scale production. It has been said that consequently the usual concepts of the labour force, unemployment and even employment are not useful or applicable. Similar questions have been raised about concepts of income and consumption. It has also been suggested that emphasis should be placed on measurement in physical terms instead of monetary terms because monetary transactions and markets are uncommon in certain areas in the case of a number of developing countries.

IV. BASIC STATISTICAL SERIES AND SOCIAL INDICATORS

18. It is already indicated above that in an SSDS for the developing countries, it may be essential to concentrate on basic data on states and to omit most of the basic data on gross flows, in order to tailor the system to most of their statistical capabilities in the foreseeable future. For the same purpose, it may also be necessary to replace some of the more complex data on states which call for difficult field inquiries by less comprehensive proxy series which may be compiled from the operating and administrative records of government and private non-profit bodies. Series of data on the incidence and severity of all illnesses, injuries and other disabilities which are bed confining or otherwise activity restricting are probably an example of this. The source of those data generally are relatively difficult queries in periodic household sample surveys. If it is impracticable to undertake such surveys at early or even moderate stages of statistical development, use might be made of much less comprehensive substitute series of indicators, such as on infectious diseases, occupational injuries and the like registered with government authorities, on admissions to and stays in public and private non-profit hospitals and on visits to their out-patient clinics.

19. Required modifications or changes in concepts and definitions will, of course, also lead to alterations in the relevant basic data. In some instances, this may involve the introduction of quite different new series.

20. Simplifications and alterations in basic series of data and in classifications of the full version of an SSDS will of course be reflected in the outputs of social indicators. Additional streamlining may be required in the social indicators to make it practicable for developing countries to compile and issue them in good time. It may be that the international guidelines on the outputs of an SSDS for the developing

countries should concentrate on social indicators. In any case, if the use of gross flows and matrices is substantially restricted in an SSDS for the developing countries, the possibilities of constructing analytical and projection models will be quite limited.

V. STEPS TO FORMULATE AN SSDS FOR THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

21. The programme of international work on an SSDS for the use of the developing countries might concentrate first on assisting them to improve and expand their basic statistics on those aspects of welfare and living conditions to which they assign priority.

22. The following steps might be undertaken to carry out the first stage of the work on an SSDS for the use of the developing countries.

(a) Completion of the paper that has been undertaken on the relevance and feasibility of adapting the full version of an SSDS for use in the developing countries.

(b) Study of any efforts that have been undertaken to evolve coherent, co-ordinated and linked bodies of social and demographic statistics in the case of developing countries.

(c) Preparation of a paper, based on the comments of the Statistical Commission on the questions raised in this paper, the paper mentioned in (a) above and the study of the national efforts mentioned in (b) above and further research on the subject.

(d) The convening of an Expert Group on A System of Social and Demographic Statistics in order to consider the materials listed above.

(e) Preparation of a paper on a draft SSDS for the use of the developing countries for consideration by the nineteenth session of the Statistical Commission, based on the conclusions of the Expert Group and further research.

(f) Promotion and assistance of work in developing countries on formulating and evolving coherent, co-ordinated and linked bodies of social and demographic statistics. The establishment of programmes of continuous multi-purpose household sample surveys would play an important part. It would be advantageous to obtain the co-operation of at least one country in each of the developing regions to organize and carry out demonstration projects to evaluate a draft SSDS and to furnish an exchange of experience and training. The convening of a workshop in each of the developing regions would also be valuable for those purposes.

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