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DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL STATISTICS
(Memorandum prepared by the Secretariat)

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/I. PREVIOUS
E/CN.3/98

I. PREVIOUS RESOLUTIONS OF UNITED NATIONS AGENCIES

1. In the report of the Nuclear Statistical Commission, the necessity for technical assistance to countries in statistics was clearly seen and in its successive meetings the Statistical Commission and other United Nations organs have adopted various recommendations and suggestions calling for a programme of technical assistance in the field. A summary of these previous actions specifically relating to statistics is given below. In addition to the resolutions and recommendations cited, there are resolutions of the Economic and Social Council and of the General Assembly relating to general technical assistance for economic development.

Action by the Statistical Commission

2. Nuclear Statistical Commission (1946) E/39, paragraph 13:

"13. The Statistical Commission recommends to the Economic and Social Council that the Commission's initial terms of reference be stated as follows:

"The Commission shall assist the Council:

(a) in promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability;....."

3. Nuclear Statistical Commission (1946) E/39, paragraphs 36-40:

"Promotion of development and improvement of statistics

"36. The Statistical data required for international purposes will be unavailable or inadequate in many of the United Nations. It should be a function of the Statistical Commission to formulate certain common standards as to kinds of data to be collected by member governments and other agencies and as to the methods of their collection and classification and form of presentation. Only by the formulation and acceptance of desirable common standards concerning statistical methods, concepts, definitions, reporting periods, forms of presentation, etc. will the data of the several member governments become sufficiently comparable for international purposes. It should be a function of the Secretariat to assist the Statistical Commission in formulating and giving effect to such desirable standards.

"37. To the extent practicable, the staff of the Statistical Unit of the Secretariat should be available for consultation and advice with respect to statistical inquiries or analyses proposed or contemplated by any constituent part of the United Nations, specialized agencies, member governments, and other agencies. Its performance of consultative and advisory functions will, in turn, further and facilitate its successful performance of all its other functions.

/"38. In order to

"38. In order to promote the development and improvement of statistics in the most effective manner possible, the Commission recommends that the Secretariat provide a qualified field staff to assist member governments, with their concurrence, in the interpretation and application of desirable uniform statistical standards. It is believed that the mere transmission of recommendations to governments may lead to their misinterpretation or inadequate consideration unless they are reinforced by such direct consultation.

"39. The Commission believes that development and improvement of statistics throughout the world are dependent in large part on the level of training of technical personnel. It therefore recommends that within the limitations of available funds and staff, the Secretariat should provide opportunities for the training of technical personnel of member governments. To the same end, the Secretariat should also provide for the use of its facilities by mature scholars.

"40. The Commission recommends that the Secretariat perform any other functions of contributing to the development and improvement of world statistics which may prove desirable in the light of experience. The Statistical Commission should provide continuing advice to the Secretariat in developing such functions."

4. Third Session (1948) E/795, paragraph 39:

"39. As a related measure the Commission believes that the United Nations should be equipped with a mobile and capable statistical field service. This would enable it promptly to provide advice and assistance upon technical questions of statistical procedure or administration at the request of any Member Government."

5. Third Session (1948) E/795, paragraphs 87, 90:

"87. The needs of many governments for expert assistance have been recognized by the Economic and Social Council. Assistance by the United Nations to its Member Governments seems especially appropriate when the needs for such assistance arise in part from obligations they have assumed to the United Nations"

"90. The Statistical Commission reiterates its hope, first expressed by the Nuclear Commission and vigorously urged again at its third session, that the Statistical Office of the United Nations may soon be able to organize a field service. If it were appropriately organized and assigned, it could provide a means through which the United Nations would be able to respond promptly to requests of Member Governments for expert assistance in statistical matters."

6. Third Session (1948) E/795, paragraph 104:

"104. ... requests the Secretary-General to make adequate provision for the rendering of expert statistical advice and assistance to governments which may request technical guidance in planning and executing their national censuses."

7. Third Session (1948) E/795, paragraph 108:

"108. The Commission recognizes the need of providing technical assistance in sampling to Specialized Agencies and governments, and for adequate secretariat service to its Sub-Commission. It therefore recommends:

That necessary staff be provided in the Statistical Office to deal with work in statistical sampling."

8. Fourth Session (1949) E/1312, paragraph 60:

"60. ... Recommends that the Secretary-General make suitable provision for:

"(a) The creation of a field service to provide technicians to visit and advise countries or groups of neighbouring countries which request assistance in the field of statistics;

"(b) The allocation of fellowships within the existing scheme authorized by the General Assembly to enable individuals from countries which request assistance to undergo a period of statistical training in the institutions of other countries, in the Statistical Office of the United Nations, or in the statistical offices of specialized agencies;

"(c) The conduct of statistical courses under the United Nations and specialized agencies designed to provide, for the areas where such facilities are inadequate, training in statistical methods and in particular subject fields;

"(d) The conduct of demonstration projects designed to afford field experience to statistical officers who do not have access to such training;

"Requests the Secretary-General to present a report to the fifth session of the Statistical Commission on the steps taken to implement this recommendation."

Action by the Population Commission

9. First Session (1947) E/267, paragraph 22:

"22. ... The Population Commission recommends the Economic and Social Council:

"(b) To request the Secretary-General to offer advice and assistance to such Member States as are prepared to take comparable censuses whether by complete enumeration or on the basis of a scientific sample;

10. Second Session (1947) E/571, paragraph 17:

"17. To further the objects of the resolution referred to above, the Commission requests the Secretary-General to:

...

"(e) Invite those Member Governments which desire to send personnel to other countries for the purpose of studying census methods to take advantage of the machinery envisaged by the resolution of the Economic and Social Council (E/437, 51(IV)) regarding the provision of expert advice and assistance to Member Governments."

11. Third Session (1948) E/305, paragraph 20:

"20. ... The Population Commission further requests that, in accordance with Resolution 41(IV) of the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General offers technical assistance to Member Governments planning to take such censuses."

Action (specifically related to statistics) by
the Economic and Social Council

12. Second Session (1946) Journal No. 12, 10 April 1946 Resolution 8(1) ...

"(1) The Economic and Social Council considering that it will require expert advice on statistical matters, establishes a Statistical Commission.

"(2) The Commission shall assist the Council:

"(a) in the co-ordination of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability

...

"(d) in advising the Members and organs of the United Nations on general questions relating to the collection, interpretation and dissemination of statistical information;

"(e) in promoting the improvement of statistics."

13. Second Session (1946) E/76/Rev.1

"... In organizing the Statistical Division in the Secretariat, the Secretary-General is requested to take into special consideration the recommendations of the Statistical Commission concerning:

/"(e) Promotion

"(e) Promotion of development and improvement of statistics in general.

...

"(g) Maintenance of close contact and co-ordination with national governments on programmes of statistical research, submission of statistical data, analysis and publication ..."

14. Fourth Session (1947) Resolution 41(IV)

"... Requests

1. The Secretary-General to offer advice and assistance to such Member States as are prepared to take comparable population censuses, whether by complete enumeration or on the basis of a scientific sample ..."

15. Seventh Session (1948) Resolution 149C(VII)

"The Economic and Social Council

"... Requests the Secretary-General to collect any necessary data on existing statistical deficiencies and possible remedial measures to facilitate early consideration of the problem by the Commission."

16. Ninth Session (1949) Resolution 231D(IX)

"The Economic and Social Council

"Recommends that the Secretary-General, in developing programmes of technical assistance, take into account the recommendations of the Statistical Commission for

"(a) The creation of a field service to provide technicians to visit and advise countries or groups of neighbouring countries which request assistance in the field of statistics;

"(b) The allocation of fellowships within the existing scheme authorized by the General Assembly to enable individuals from countries which request assistance to undergo a period of statistical training in the institutions of other countries, in the Statistical Office of the United Nations, or in the statistical offices of specialized agencies;

"(c) The conduct of statistical courses under the United Nations and the specialized agencies designed to provide, for the areas where other facilities are inadequate, training in statistical methods and in particular subject fields;

/"(d) The

"(d) The conduct of demonstration projects designed to afford field experience to statistical officers who do not have access to such training;

"Requests the Secretary-General to present a report to the fifth session of the Statistical Commission on the steps taken to implement this recommendation."

Other related actions

17. Interim report by the Secretary-General on Expert Assistance E/471/Add.2, 1947

"... The Secretariat of the United Nations is equipped to provide expert assistance or to arrange for the provision of expert assistance in a large number of fields. These include the following subjects:

"... Statistical: including such fields as social, population and vital statistics, the statistics of national income and expenditure, industry, agriculture, trade, transport and finance, the development of adequate national statistical programmes; the organization of national statistical systems and offices, including survey and data collection methods, questionnaire and form design, census and registration procedures, processing and tabulation methods, and the application of statistical methods, including sampling theory and practice.

..."

II. PAST AND PRESENT ACTIVITIES

18. To date, the United Nations programme for the improvement of national statistics and for the improvement of comparability, has proceeded along five major lines, namely:

- (a) development of international standards and exchange of technical information;
- (b) promotion and co-ordination of national and international statistical activities;
- (c) organization of statistical and census training courses in various parts of the world;
- (d) arranging for services of expert consultants in statistics and census methodology to countries who request such assistance;
- (e) granting of fellowships for study in statistical methods and organization to technicians from various countries.

/Development

Development of international standards and
exchange of technical information

19. Many of the activities of the Statistical Commission and other substantive agencies such as the Population Commission, the statistical committees of the Specialized Agencies and the work of various groups of experts have been directed toward the establishment of standard concepts, definitions, procedures, classifications, suggested items to be included in statistical collections, suggested tabulations and recommended techniques for compilation and analysis. These activities of the Commission form the foundation for improved and more comparable statistics.

20. In addition, much of the normal work of the Statistical Office in the collection and publication of international statistics serves to establish standards and provides an indirect exchange of technical information. For example, the circulation of questionnaires, the publication of the Statistical Yearbook, the Demographic Yearbook, the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics and, in particular, the Supplement to the Monthly Bulletin, serve to define national and international needs and standards and thus serve as technical information which is clearly of value in assisting countries to develop their own statistical services.

21. Various other studies or manuals which have been published or are now in preparation have been more specifically designed to facilitate the exchange of technical information.

- a. Population Census Handbook (Statistical Office of the United Nations), Provisional Edition, Lake Success, New York, October 1949. Includes a summary of Studies of Census Methods in addition to new chapters on history, organization and administration of population censuses and, as the main feature, a compilation systematically arranged by subject-matter, of all existing international recommendations regarding population census.
- b. Population Census Methods (now in press). A book containing a revision of material previously included in the series of Studies of Census Methods published by the Population Division of the United Nations and the Statistical Office.

- c. Manual for Compiling and Reporting National Income Statistics (now in preparation).
- d. Methods used for Estimating National Income (now in preparation).
- e. Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods (now in preparation).
- f. Industrial Census Handbook (now in preparation).

Promotion and Co-ordination of Statistical Activities

22. The Secretariat, through visits to various countries and through its regular correspondence, has been co-operating with national statistical offices and other governmental officials in promoting and co-ordinating various efforts for the improvement of statistics at the national level.

23. Among the international agencies, the United Nations has taken an active part with the other agencies in trying to develop a harmonious, co-operative programme. To date, this work has been primarily concerned with population census projects and has involved a number of conferences of staff members of the interested agencies. Also, members of the staff of the Secretariat attended the three sessions of the Census Committee of the Inter-American Statistical Institute, held in Washington, D.C., September 1947, in Rio de Janeiro, February 1949, and in Bogotá, January 1950. At these sessions the United Nations participated actively in the technical discussions and the drafting of working documents and resolutions.

24. Especially close co-ordination has been maintained throughout with the Food and Agriculture Organization, responsible for the promotion of the 1950 World Census of Agriculture programme.

Organization of Statistical and Census Training Courses

25. An important aspect of the programme for technical assistance in the improvement of national statistics has been the organization, in co-operation with FAO, Member Governments and other agencies, of regional training courses in statistics and in methods for population and agriculture censuses. UNESCO assisted with the financial aspects at one centre, the Inter-American Statistical Institute co-operated in another, and the three regional United Nations economic commissions helped in various ways at these centres.

26. The course of study at each of these centres has included a review of basic mathematics and statistics, lectures on population, agricultural statistics, lectures on population and agricultural census methods, definitions and tabulations, actual field practice or observation of census methods, lectures on census organization and administration, and other special subjects such as sampling. The members of the staff at each training centre were supplied by the host government, from the staff of the United Nations or FAO or were recognized experts recruited from national statistical agencies for short-time assignments.

27. The following four statistical training centres, each of 3 to 4 months duration, have been held;

- i. Training Centre on Statistics and Census for Latin America, held in Mexico City, September-December 1948 with 60 trainees from 16 countries.
- ii. Centre of Applied Agricultural and Demographic Statistics for Europe, held in Paris, September-December 1949, with 40 trainees from 10 countries.
- iii. International Training Centre on Censuses and Statistics for Near East, held in Cairo, October-December 1949, with 29 trainees from 5 countries.
- iv. International Training Centre on Censuses and Statistics for South East Asia and Oceania, held in New Delhi, November 1949-February 1950, with 52 trainees from 9 countries.

28. The Statistical Office of the United Nations shared the responsibility with FAO and host governments (and with UNESCO in the Paris centre) for the planning, co-ordination and operation of the four training centres mentioned above. In addition to the work at the centres themselves, a very considerable amount of effort has been given to the compilation and preparation of technical materials, exhibits, etc. used in the instruction courses and made available to the trainees. Reports on the organization, staff, curriculum and other aspects of these training centres have been published or are now in preparation. For example see:

(a) Lectures delivered at the Paris Centre were reproduced and have been distributed. The United Nations Population Census Handbook was used in the training centres conducted during the year 1949.

(b) Statistical Office of the United Nations. Report on the First Latin American Training Centre on Statistics and Censuses. Statistical Papers Series M. No. 2. The reports on the other three centres will be published shortly by the Statistical Office.

29. Heretofore, in organizing training centres, emphasis has been given to population census problems because of the imminence of the 1950-51 national censuses. In 1950 and following years, attention will be given to training centres directed at improving other statistics in various fields.

30. For 1950 a first international training centre in vital statistics and health statistics is planned for Latin America. This centre will be held under the sponsorship of the United Nations and other interested agencies. Considerable work has already been done in the preparation of materials and operating plans.

Expert Consulting Assistance in Statistics and Censuses

31. Expert consulting assistance to date has been limited largely to advising and assisting in organization of population censuses. In this connexion experts have been provided upon request to the following countries for periods of time ranging from one week to four months: Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Bolivia and Iran. In 1950 the work with these countries, as well as with others, will be continued.

32. In the broader fields of general statistical organization and the development of economic statistics one expert was sent to Burma in 1949 for 4 months and this assignment is continuing in 1950. In addition, arrangements have been made to provide expert consulting services for Thailand and several other Far Eastern countries during 1950-1951.

33. In 1950 and following years, there is evidence that there will be an increasing demand for consulting services in a great many statistical fields. A large amount of requests have already been received directly from governments, or through various organs of the United Nations, for individuals to assist in the fields of general statistical organization, national income statistics,

economic statistics, census organization, population statistics, vital statistics, and trade statistics. Some of these requests must be met by the recruitment, for limited periods, of specialists and experts from national statistical organizations. Other requests can be met by assigning a permanent member of the staff of the Secretariat to a consulting project. Other assignments, particularly those involving a brief visit or when intermittent contact over a considerable period is desirable, may be undertaken by members of the field service referred to in part III.

Fellowships in statistics

34. Under the United Nations programme of fellowships in the field of economic development, five fellowships have been granted for the study of statistics. Fellowships have been granted to technicians from Iran, Pakistan, Syria and Thailand and they have carried on their studies in one or more of the following countries: Belgium, France, Netherlands and the United States. In addition, several fellowships in statistics have been granted under the terms of Resolution 58(I).

Experience in the improvement of national statistics

35. The experience gained during the past year in the improvement of national statistics in under-developed countries reveals that methods have been developed which will fulfil a considerable part of the recommendations of the Statistical Commission and of the Economic and Social Council. Several countries have expressed themselves as pleased with the results of the statistical training centres and the expert consulting which have been possible so far under Resolution 200(III). It is unfortunately true, however, that other countries have been disappointed in the scope of the programme to date because available funds did not extend to the immediate fulfilment of all requests for assistance, despite the fact that some considerable part of the regular staff of the Statistical Office has participated in the training centres and consulting projects. It is expected that responses can be made to meet more requests more rapidly in 1950 than was possible in 1949. This will be particularly true if the expanded programme of technical assistance (ECOSOC Resolution 222(IX)) comes into effect.

36. The experience gained so far has provided a suitable basis for an expansion of the programme for assistance in statistics. A number of operational problems have been resolved and a pattern of practical collaboration in the field between the United Nations, the specialized agencies, the regional economic commissions, regional agencies and national governments has emerged. Experience has also shown the need for advance planning of the technical assistance programme in statistics and for some administrative means by which advance arrangements and commitments may be made for an integrated programme of statistical assistance.

37. The operation of statistical training centres has revealed a great need for carefully prepared instructional materials in the different languages. In addition to covering the basic statistical problems of given areas, such instructional materials require to cover methods and procedures for the application of international standards. The operation of the programme, therefore, involves a substantial volume of work in the Secretariat itself, and such work is not normally covered by the technical assistance programme. The experience so far gained has also revealed a shortage of consultants having broad experience in all aspects of statistical work.

38. As is shown elsewhere in the documentation brought before the Statistical Commission, the Secretariat's work in the course of the year 1949 in preparing instructional material is well advanced and it is expected that in the course of the present year this work will be expanded.

39. Taking account of the experience gained during the past year the Statistical Commission may wish to give particular emphasis, in its report to the Economic and Social Council, on the need for expanding the programme in statistics so that it may be possible to provide assistance at a level more nearly commensurate with the great demand. The Commission may also wish to recommend that the Secretary-General develop methods to assure adequate advance work and substantive planning; and that he develop methods to achieve co-ordination of the operating plans of the United Nations and the specialized agencies so that integrated and comprehensive schemes for technical assistance in statistics can be undertaken. The Commission may also wish to refer to the desirability of arrangements for advance commitments by co-operating agencies to

/facilitate

facilitate the most effective collaboration.

III. OPERATIONS SERVICE FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF COMPARABILITY

40. At previous sessions the Commission has also expressed its views upon the need for a comprehensively conceived field or operating service, whose main function would be to assist the Statistical Office in promoting international comparability of statistics.

41. The substance of the work would be the interpretation and application, in varying local circumstances, of desirable common standards concerning statistical concepts, methods and practices, and advice on the implementation of recommendations, classifications and definitions adopted by the Statistical Commission. Examples of these are, at present, the Standard Industrial Classification of all Economic Activities, definitions in national income statistics, and standards for population censuses. Other examples which may be provided as a result of Commission actions at this session are the Standard List of Commodities for International Trade Statistics, definitions and practices in index numbers of industrial production and definitions in transport statistics.

42. Adequate implementation of these standards will require direct operations and consultations with national statistical offices to supplement what can be done by correspondence. These operations will probably take the form of short-term consulting with the appropriate national officers or they may involve meetings of groups of technicians from various countries for particular purposes. In addition, these activities may also include certain other aspects, for example some countries may require advice in assembling and transmitting their statistics to the United Nations. It has frequently occurred that national statistical officers, while entirely willing to collaborate with the international organizations, have not been able to devise suitable methods of complying fully with the requests. In such cases direct consultation has been seen to be desirable.

43. Some work of this kind has been done by the Statistical Office staff as incidental to other duties. The amount has not been large and it cannot be expanded to any appreciable extent with present resources.

/44. The nucleus

44. The nucleus of an operations staff has been set up under the programme of technical assistance in statistics to under-developed countries but this group cannot deal with activities in countries which do not fall within the definition "under-developed". The programme for the improvement of comparability envisaged by the Statistical Commission extends to all countries whether economically or statistically under-developed or not. In fact, in the development and implementation of international standards, many of the more serious questions of comparability arise among countries which are highly developed economically. The importance of ensuring comparability among these countries is in many ways greater than in the case of under-developed countries.

45. The Statistical Commission may therefore wish to consider this problem again and to recapitulate its views on the matter of world-wide comparability, requesting the Secretary-General to make such arrangements as are possible to facilitate this activity in all countries. Taking account of the several subjects for which improved or revised international standards have been adopted, the Statistical Commission may wish to urge the Secretary-General to pursue a programme of field activities in statistics, which would be undertaken at the request of or with the agreement of Governments, and which would not be limited to countries of a specific stage of economic or statistical development.
