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SOCIAL STATISTICS

(Memorandum prepared by the Secretary-General)

Introduction

1. The Secretary-General informed the Statistical Commission, at its seventh session, that a general survey of social statistics had been undertaken to give effect to a request of the Economic and Social Council that the Secretary-General take the initiative in arranging for adequate programmes in the various branches of social statistics (resolution 299 F (XI)). This detailed survey, prepared by the Secretary-General has been discussed with the Secretariats of the International Labour Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and is made available to the members of the Statistical Commission.

2. The present memorandum contains a brief review of some of the most important subjects dealt with in the survey, and sets forth certain conclusions that can be drawn therefrom in regard to the work of the Secretariat, as well as a few suggestions concerning the development of national statistics in the field under review.

Purpose and scope of social statistics

3. Generally speaking, the purpose of social statistics can be said to consist in providing a numerical description of the conditions of life and work of populations, and of changes therein, including a description of the differences that exist among socially and economically significant groups, and among countries. Social statistics include, in addition to data which specifically refer to social welfare, many items that are more or less conventionally classified as demographic, economic, medical, educational, etc., but are of specific interest from the point of view of social research and social policies.

4. Social sciences are concerned with a great variety of subjects, including the interrelationship between social, demographic, economic, health and educational factors. Many of these subjects are too specific to be included in official statistics of a current nature, or in nation-wide statistical investigations organized by governmental agencies, which are the main types of statistics dealt with in the survey under review. It is emphasized, however, that official statistics should be collected, tabulated and presented in such a way as to be useful as a frame for further investigations carried out by public and private research institutions. From this point of view, statistics that describe the socio-economic structure of populations, and their family and household composition, as well as changes which take place in these respects, are basic statistics to which primary importance should be attached.

5. The subjects just referred to are of equal importance for social policies, both for general planning and for particular welfare measures of a legislative or economic nature. In addition, these measures require, for well-considered formulation and application, statistical knowledge concerning a whole series of specific subjects, many of which pertain to the conditions of vulnerable groups, such as children, aged people, physically handicapped, labourers in lower-paid occupations and, on certain conditions, to wage earners and other broad groups generally. A great deal of interest is also attached to statistics which show the extent to which such measures are actually carried out, and what changes have resulted.

6. The policy making bodies of the United Nations and the specialized agencies have repeatedly emphasized the need for more and better statistics for the conduct of national and international action that is aimed at raising levels of living and improving the conditions of under-privileged population groups, particularly in less developed countries. In a report to the Social Commission, at its ninth session, outlining a Programme of Concerted Practical Action in the Social Field of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies (document E/CN.5/291), the Secretary-General paid due attention to the role of statistics, in accordance with a recommendation of the Economic and Social Council, at its fourteenth session, recognizing statistics, basic research on standards of living, etc., as essential in the implementation of programmes both in the social and the economic field.<sup>1/</sup>

7. On the basis of these considerations, the survey of social statistics reviews the aim and scope of various types of statistics, and their relevance to social research and social policies, with special reference to the social projects pursued by the United Nations and the specialized agencies. The problems are grouped under the following headings:

Population problems	Educational and cultural problems
Social stratification and social mobility	Conditions of work and employment
Family and household structure	Specific aspects of rural welfare
Distribution of income and wealth	Social security
Family living levels and family welfare	Child welfare
Health problems	Care of aged people
Nutrition	Care of physically handicapped
Housing	Social defense
	Social expenditures.

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<sup>1/</sup> Resolution 451 A (XIV), Annex, paragraph 9 (i).

8. Responsibility for work in the development of statistics in these fields is divided among the United Nations and the specialized agencies, and in some cases two or more organizations share a joint interest. A great deal of responsibility, however, rests with national statistical services and one of the purposes of the survey of social statistics is to draw attention to what types of statistics are required for various objectives and what shortcomings exist among these statistics at the present time.

9. At this session of the Statistical Commission, the Secretary-General is also submitting an expert report on the definition and measurement of levels of living, together with some observations on the organization of family living studies (documents E/CN.3/179 and Add.1). The Commission also has before it a progress report on housing statistics, including certain suggestions for further work in this field (document E/CN.3/187). The present memorandum is confined to three central subjects which are of importance in their own right and as a basis for a systematic development of other branches of social statistics:

- (a) Social stratification (paragraphs 11-15).
- (b) Family and household composition (paragraphs 16-22).
- (c) Distribution of income and wealth (paragraphs 23-28).

10. In regard to other branches of social statistics, which are of special interest to the United Nations from the point of view of its activities in the social field, in particular statistics pertaining to child welfare, the care of aged people and physically handicapped, and social defence, the Secretary-General is continuing, within the frame of available resources, studies aimed at examining their availability and adequacy. These findings will be presented to the Statistical Commission at future sessions.

#### Social stratification

11. Practically all problems dealt with in social research and social policies are related to separate or combined features of the socio-economic structure of populations, as shown by the distribution of population according to various criteria, viz.: type of economic activity, occupation and status, ethnic and religious affiliation, education, income level, and by changes in these

distributions arising out of trends toward industrialization and urbanization. A comprehensive analysis of this structure, in a country, would undoubtedly require that many other characteristics be examined by means of investigations that are undertaken ad hoc. This would seem to be necessary especially when specific sociological and anthropological problems are considered. Similarly, the formulation and application of social policies require very often that special investigations be carried out. However, basic knowledge concerning the socio-economic structure of the population derived from a proper tabulation of population census data has proved invaluable for immediate practical purposes as well as for further research.

12. Various international bodies - the League of Nations' Committee of Statistical Experts (1938), the International Conference of Labour Statisticians, the Population Commission and the Statistical Commission of the United Nations, and the Inter-American Statistical Institute's Committee on the 1950 Census of the Americas - have studied this subject. Standard classifications have been recommended with a view to furthering the collection and tabulation of uniform data concerning branches of economic activities, occupation and status. These recommendations have been made available by the United Nations in a series of publications,<sup>2/</sup> which also contain explanatory statements and examples. In some cases, under the Technical Assistance Programme and otherwise, the Secretary-General has been in a position to give direct help in the actual application of the standard classifications on the occasion of recent population censuses.

13. Although the work thus performed constitutes a major contribution towards clarifying and systematizing concepts and procedures which have long been used in statistically advanced countries, and has undoubtedly been of considerable help to many countries who have recently taken a population census, it deserves to be pointed out that, in certain important respects, the international bodies so far have not reached definite conclusions. This applies to the following points:

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<sup>2/</sup> Population Census Handbook (provisional edition - 1949); Population Census Methods, Population studies, No. 4 (1949); and Application of International Standards to Census Data on the Economically Active Population, Population Studies, No. 9 (1952).

(a) Should occupational data collected on the occasion of a population census refer, by preference, to the usual occupation of the individuals as "gainful workers", or to their activities on census day (or during a stated brief time interval preceding census day) - the "labour force" approach?<sup>3/</sup>  
In the censuses taken in or around 1950 countries tended to choose one or the other of these lines but it may be questionable whether they should be considered as alternatives. From the point of view of employment policies as well as investigations into social stratification, valuable information could undoubtedly be derived from a simultaneous application of both concepts.

(b) What sub-groups should be distinguished in the list of nine principal occupational groups recommended by the Seventh International Conference of Labour Statisticians?<sup>4/</sup> It is usually admitted that, for a study of social stratification, a classification according to occupation is better suited than a grouping according to branches of economic activities, because the former brings out socially significant distinctions, as for example between manual and non-manual labour, skilled and unskilled labour and the like. The importance of the work that is carried on in view of establishing a fully developed standard classification of occupations is therefore evident (document E/CN.3/167 contains a status report of work).

(c) What cross-tabulations are desirable to distinguish socially and economically significant groups? Although various suggestions have been made (contained in the publications noted in paragraph (a) above), international bodies have largely abstained from making definite recommendations on this subject. Many countries may therefore limit their tabulation of recent census data to the minimum suggested as desirable for international comparisons. The tabulations that are undertaken will probably include a cross-classification of branches of economic activities by status, perhaps also, but not with any certainty, a cross-classification

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<sup>3/</sup> Cf. Application of International Standards, etc., pp. 5-7.

<sup>4/</sup> Cf. op. cit., pp. 60-66. There would be ten groups if "armed forces" are counted separately.

of occupation by status, although the latter would be more interesting from the point of view of social stratification. More elaborate tables showing, for example, ethnic characteristics, fertility and literacy within different socio-economic groups, would not seem likely to be forthcoming from numerous countries, which have found difficulties in carrying out even the suggested minimum tabulations.

14. It would seem desirable that the questions involved in items (a) and (b) above be elucidated by the international secretariats concerned so that definite recommendations could be worked out and submitted to the competent bodies in good time before the population censuses to be taken in or around 1960. It might be worth while to examine, in this connexion, to what extent certain concepts referring to occupation, such as employed and unemployed, or "not in the labour force", employer, employee, own account worker, etc. are adequate to describe economics based mainly on subsistence agriculture and handicrafts, where labour relations are governed by social customs and traditions which differ widely from the regimes obtaining in industrialized countries.

15. As to item (c), the question arises, whether it would be possible to make a more intensive use of the census material that has been collected in recent censuses. Although the minimum tabulations in many cases represent an important step forward, it should not be overlooked that a somewhat more detailed knowledge of the socio-economic structure of populations is highly desirable for practical policy and research. This would appear to apply particularly to those countries which are now placing heavier reliance upon modern techniques in the development of their economies. This may result in far-reaching, and sometimes abrupt, social changes which might create a need for different governmental policies. The use of sampling methods if applied to the now available census material, could help to obtain bench-mark data of the greatest value. To some extent such tabulations would have the character of pilot investigations aimed at determining what classifications are best suited for a study of socio-economic structures. Expert advice on the basis of recent country experience in tabulations of census returns for this purpose would no doubt prove of value to countries, whose census returns could be made to yield pertinent information about such structures.

Family and household composition

16. From the point of view of social research and social policies, knowledge of existing family and household composition, and changes therein, ranks equally in importance with knowledge about social stratification. Because of its central position in demographic and social evolution, the family has long been the object of statistical research, especially in countries preoccupied with their population problem as a result of decreasing birth-rates. This research has in the first place been directed towards a study of the fertility. Although of a very great interest for an analysis of the relationships between economic, social and population factors, these studies have by-passed important economic and social functions of the family, because they have been exclusively concerned with the conjugal family group, thus leaving out children and adults who do not belong to any such group (although they may form part of a family household), and disregarding, on the other hand, the fact that a considerable number of conjugal groups are actually more or less dispersed. It is only in recent censuses that increased attention has been paid to the actual composition of private households - family households and others. There are also examples of sample surveys primarily aimed at studying the family and household structure of the population.

17. Investigations of this kind would seem to be particularly important in countries where the undivided "joint family", including married children with their progeny as well as other near relatives, has formed until lately the most common household unit. It is known that under the impact of industrialization and urbanization, to some extent also under the influence of western individualistic conceptions of values and rights, this unit is in many countries in a process of dislocation, with important sequels for practically all social and economic relations. The demand for new housing increases automatically when young married couples set up a separate household instead of staying with the parents. The labour market is affected where family members in greater numbers than hitherto seek employment with a view to earning an individual income. New problems arise concerning the care of aged people, widows, orphans, the sick and physically handicapped, when their needs are not fulfilled by the joint family



to the same extent as before. An evolution of this kind is almost certain to produce strong claims for the organization of social security on a wider basis than that provided by the individual family and this changing situation should be detected and measured by the statistics.

18. In western, industrialized countries, the most common family household normally consists of the conjugal group: father, mother and children, occasionally with the inclusion of one or two near relatives. It is generally recognized that this type of household presents a high degree of fragility, because it is easily exposed to serious economic hardships under conditions of low earning capacity of the breadwinner, illness and unemployment. It is the more fragile as the number of dependent children increases. Similarly, this family in most cases has to face a difficult situation in the upbringing of the children if the conjugal union is dissolved through death, divorce or separation. Any measures intended to reduce the consequences of this fragility of the family, and, in particular, to facilitate its most important social function, viz. the rearing of children, whether these measures take the form of tax reductions, family allowances, rent subsidies, social insurance benefits, day nurseries, visiting home-keeper assistance and similar ones, require a fair knowledge of the actual number and composition of family households, if they are to be conceived and applied on the most efficient and economical basis.

19. A great deal of interest is also attached to households of other types, for example elderly couples and elderly persons living alone, younger and middle-aged unmarried persons who have separated from the family household for various reasons (working place too far away, wish for independence, etc.) The number of these households is said to be increasing in many of the industrialized countries. Besides the increase of people in the higher age groups, an important factor in this evolution is often seen in a continuous loosening of the consanguine ties, that even appears, to a certain degree, in a splitting up of the conjugal family group. Sociologists have studied various aspects of this trend, without being able to give a comprehensive description for lack of statistical data. Such data are needed also for practical reasons, as the development briefly characterized entails far-reaching consequences in the field of social policies, for example in respect of the amount, and the most suitable forms of assistance which has to be given to the old and the handicapped, and in respect to housing policies.

20. Knowledge concerning the family and household composition is also needed for further research. The report on the definition and measurement of levels of living, previously referred to, emphasizes that family living surveys are required in order to obtain a complete and balanced picture of conditions of life. For the purpose of constituting a representative sample of families, the statistician must have recourse to information about the strength of various socio-economic groups, on one hand, and the family and household structure of the population, on the other hand.

21. It is true that, from a technical point of view, unusual difficulties are met with in statistical investigations of family and household composition. This may account for the fact that the problems under review have not until lately been seriously tackled by national statistical agencies. One problem is that of defining households and another is that of distinguishing groups of related persons within households. The League of Nations' Committee of Statistical Experts adopted in 1939 a definition of households for use in connexion with housing censuses and housing surveys<sup>5/</sup>, which might not be quite suitable, however, for more general purposes<sup>6/</sup>. The other problem was discussed briefly by the Population Commission at its third session<sup>7/</sup>, but no conclusions were arrived at. At its fourth session, the Commission recommended that households

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<sup>5/</sup> Housing Statistics. Studies and Reports on Statistical Methods No. 5 - League of Nations, Geneva, 1939, pages 9-12.

<sup>6/</sup> The definition given by the Experts is tied to that of a dwelling-unit, i.e. "any structurally separated room or suite of rooms in permanent buildings used or intended for habitation by family households..." It reads: "The family household should comprise the members of a family forming the nucleus of the household, including resident domestic servants. Other persons sharing the rooms occupied by the family or having separate rooms in the dwelling, but taking their meals with the family, should be counted as members of the family household. Persons living alone and lodgers occupying rooms of their own and not sharing in the meals of the family should be counted as separate family households".

<sup>7/</sup> Report of the Population Commission, E/865, page 91. See also Population Census Methods, op. cit. pages 172-174.

be tabulated according to size, number of dependent children, age, sex and occupation of the household head (E/1313, pages 40-41).

22. In view of the fundamental importance of adequate statistics on family composition it may be hoped that countries will find it possible to carry out these tabulations to the greatest practicable extent. However, they can only be considered as a first step towards more detailed investigations of the composition of households, from the point of view of consanguinity and other relationships between their members. The results recently arrived at in some statistically advanced countries, by means of an intensified study of a sample of the census returns, deserve close attention, and study should be made whether similar methods could be used in less developed countries taking account of the particular problems relating to the joint family.<sup>8/</sup>

Distribution of income and wealth<sup>9/</sup>

23. The interest devoted to income distribution statistics, by the United Nations and the specialized agencies, has been derived hitherto mainly from their concern with economic and fiscal problems particularly in connexion with their efforts to promote economic progress in under-developed areas. Land distribution, which is one aspect of this problem particularly in non-industrialized countries, has been a subject of special study, and the results of the 1950 cycle of agricultural censuses may be expected to throw some light on this problem.

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<sup>8/</sup> It has been pointed out, inter alia, that in many population groups, in those countries, the conventions of authority and ownership allow of several interpretations of the term "household head" and of the terms for "mother", "brother", "sister", etc., so that the broad structure of the kinship system should be known beforehand, in order to avoid confusion, when undertaking investigations of the type envisaged here. (E/CN.3/179 paragraph 58).

<sup>9/</sup> A memorandum concerning income distribution statistics is submitted to the Statistical Commission with reference to item 11 d. of the provisional agenda (document E/CN.3/184). This subject is therefore treated here only with a view to discussing what types of data are of particular interest for a systematic development of social statistics.

24. Although income distribution is not a necessary element for the computation of national income and related totals (consumption, saving, investment, etc.) the data used for this purpose give sometimes certain information in this respect. The method used for national income estimates generally consists in a valuation at factory cost or at market prices of the product originating in various sectors of the economy. On certain conditions, these calculations may also give some information concerning the income received by the corresponding sections of the population. One may also, from data of this type, obtain a crude picture of the apportionment of personal income according to distributive shares (wages and salaries, income from property, income of unincorporated enterprises, etc.).

25. This type of information is far from sufficient, however, to show how income is actually distributed among various socio-economic groups, such as farmers, farm-labourers, other unskilled workers, semi-skilled and skilled wage earners and clerical and salaried professional groups. Data of this kind exist in some countries, but are usually not detailed enough to be of real value from the point of view of social research and social policies. In most cases, they fail to distinguish between income recipients by size of income. They also lack uniformity. They are usually presented as overall estimates of total earnings in the various groups, sometimes based on average earnings computed from wage statistics or income tax returns.

26. From social points of view, statistics of personal income according to size are undoubtedly of greater interest if they relate to different socio-economic groups rather than to all income earners. Such data are unfortunately available only in a few countries. They are then usually based on income tax returns and occasionally on answers to a specific question contained in the census schedule. In the first case, they may not include persons in the lowest income brackets, who are usually exempt from filing income tax returns. Besides, it is natural to expect that income data collected primarily for taxation purposes are more or less subject to under-reporting as well as to other limitations. In many cases, data obtained from the tax returns are insufficient to determine the actual number of income earners and dependent children in a family or household.

27. For the reasons just mentioned, the Sub-Commission on Statistical Sampling, in discussing what types of data are needed for purposes of economic analysis in

connexion with national income estimates, arrived at the conclusion that sample surveys ought to be undertaken in order to collect data on income distribution (E/CN.3/114). Such surveys should be aimed at securing information on family income, and they should be designed to represent all households (the household, or the "spending unit" being defined as any group of persons "who pool their income for all major expenses"). The Sub-Commission emphasized, that "the usefulness of statistics on the distribution by size of family income for purposes of economic analysis would be greatly increased, if they are classified by composition and size, occupation, and other family characteristics".

28. This recommendation would seem to agree almost completely with the desiderata that might be formulated from the point of view of social research and social policies. It deserves to be pointed out, however, that data on income distribution, differentiated in the way the Sub-Commission recommended, are very relevant for the last mentioned purposes, even without considering their usefulness in economic analysis. The methods recommended by the Sub-Commission for the collection of data, correspond also very closely to the points of view that have been advocated and, to some extent, put into practice, in regard to the organization of family living surveys.

#### Conclusions

29. The Statistical Commission, at its seventh session, recommended that greater emphasis should be given to social statistics and stressed the importance of studies, concerning various characteristics of socio-economic groups. The Commission might wish to express, on the present occasion, its opinion concerning studies of family and household composition, and of income distribution, as a basis for a systematic development of social statistics.

30. The Statistical Commission might also wish to recommend that the attention of governments be drawn to (a) the desirability of utilizing available data from recent population censuses for tabulations which are capable of displaying the socio-economic structure of populations, as well as their family and household composition; (b) the possibility of using for this purpose a sample of the census returns; and (c) the desirability of providing competent advice, at their request, to countries who would wish to undertake such tabulations.

31. In regard to other subjects that are treated in the survey of social statistics, and which are not submitted to the Statistical Commission at its present session (see paragraphs 7-10) the Commission might wish to indicate priorities which may serve as a guide to the United Nations and the specialized agencies in preparing reports for the next session of the Commission.

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